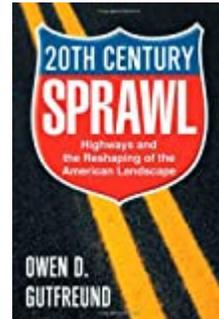




Owen D. Gutfreund. *Twentieth-Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 320 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-518907-0; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-514141-2.



Reviewed by Louise Nelson Dyble (University of California Humanities Research Institute)

Published on H-Urban (January, 2006)

Subsidizing Suburbanization through Highway Policy

“Sprawl” has always been a pejorative, and as its title suggests, Owen D. Gutfreund’s history of American highways and suburban development is highly critical. It opens with an interpretive overview of federal highway policy, followed by three case studies that examine in detail how it plays out on the ground in greater Denver, Colorado, Middlebury, Vermont, and Smyrna, Tennessee. Gutfreund’s analysis is distinguished by its top-down orientation and its attention to the institutionalization of policy. According to Gutfreund, “a dizzying array of interested lobbying groups insinuated their economic interests into the fabric of American political and popular cultures, and into the state and federal legal codes” (p. 8). Gutfreund makes the case that business interests, closely allied with government officials (especially engineers), were primarily responsible for road and highway policies that led to decentralized development and urban decline throughout the nation.

Gutfreund begins by pointing out that the Good Roads movement had corporate support from the beginning, its earliest publications sponsored by a leading bicycle manufacturer. He describes how populist

farmers, who agitated for public road building in the hope of weakening monopolistic, price-gouging railroads, were manipulated by propaganda (written by engineers) aimed at exploiting their concerns. The state road subsidies that resulted, dedicated to connecting towns and villages (rather than developing the roads within them), first codified the “rural slant” of public transportation policy (p. 11). Building upon these observations about the earliest public road policy—that corporate interests were its major proponents and that it heavily favored rural areas—Gutfreund paints a portrait of consistent decision-making at the state and federal level. He ties together a century of policy by pointing to its institutionalization through legal precedent, political culture, and enduring public and private organizations. For example, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1916 established an influential formula for appropriations relying more on geographical area than population, and the Hayden-Cartwright Act of 1934, which required that gas taxes be spent exclusively on highways, inspired twenty states to adopt similar constitutional amendments (pp. 32-33).

Gutfreund stresses that policy was also perpetuated

by the enduring and powerful private sector organizations comprising the “highway lobby.” He notes that the nineteenth-century League of American Wheelmen and its successor, the American Automobile Association, were both “bankrolled” by manufacturers. Other long-lasting, corporate-dominated private organizations include the “strategically misnamed” Automobile Safety Foundation (supported by the Automobile Manufacturers Association), and the National Highway Users’ Conference “clothed as a consumer advocacy group” but led by General Motors’ Alfred P. Sloan and other top industrialists invested in automobiles. Gutfreund also points an accusatory finger at the American Association of State Highway Officials and the civil engineers it represented (including Bureau of Public Roads chief Thomas H. MacDonald) for consistently opposing user fees and for colluding with corporate interests in pushing for ever-greater subsidies to achieve ever more ambitious road-building goals (pp. 16, 31-32).

For Gutfreund, the New Deal was the one hopeful moment in national roads policy, when turnpikes momentarily won federal support and urban roads received some overdue attention thanks to relief programs. For the first time on a significant scale, user fees (other than gas taxes) paid for transportation infrastructure and the rural bias of federal spending was ameliorated. But, this situation did not last long; the corporate- and engineer-dominated “highway lobby” responded by launching an intensive campaign to sanctify “free” public highways through political action and propaganda aimed at the general public, including the famous Futurama exhibit at the 1939 World’s Fair. Congress went along with the program, reasserting its traditional, structural rural favoritism in the post-World War II period. President Eisenhower appointed new automobile industry lackeys to head up federal highway and transportation programs, and to “reconstruct the prewar public-private highway lobbying partnership” (p. 54). According to Gutfreund, these factors combined to ensure that auto-dominated, suburban development continued.

The dynamics that Gutfreund describes in his overview of federal highway policy are neither surprising nor controversial. Gutfreund successfully synthesizes two major themes in transportation history, the influence of corporate interests and the persuasive power of technical expertise, drawing upon the work of scholars including Mark Rose, Stephen Goddard, Mark Foster, Paul Barrett, and particularly Bruce Seely.[1] But unlike these scholars, Gutfreund discounts the grassroots component of transportation policy-making and the broad

popular support for highways, automobiles, and the suburbs that depended on them.

Even at the local level, Gutfreund’s analysis remains essentially top-down. While he chooses a few local boosters and entrepreneurs to profile in each of his three case studies, he ignores grassroots politics. Gutfreund’s discussion of Denver is the most compelling, and the only one that provides a truly regional perspective. He describes the decentralization of a major western metropolis and demonstrates the links between regional development patterns, transportation policy, and the fate of a central city. Gutfreund emphasizes the early culpability of Denver city planners, who encouraged policies to support automobility even while they claimed to oppose sprawl. As commuters multiplied, Denver’s property owners were forced to pay for improvements to city streets with special assessments, even though most of the daily traffic originated outside of city limits. In contrast, landowners outside of city limits enjoyed state and federal road-building largesse as well as a variety of other incentives and subsidies for suburban developments that eventually threatened to eclipse Denver in sheer size. Denver leaders managed to maintain its vitality and regional centrality through aggressive planning and because of the absence of competing coherent downtowns. The result was a relatively weak and small Denver anchoring an enormous, virtually anarchic metropolitan region plagued by congestion and a persistent brown cloud of pollution.

In his study of Middlebury, Vermont, Gutfreund highlights the disastrous financial consequences of overambitious road-building policies for a small town in a sparsely populated state. Federal requirements for matching highway funds virtually forced states to overextend their budgets, especially after railroad service came to a halt and there was no other alternative but to cater to automobiles. In Vermont, the greatest burden fell on municipalities, but the state budget also suffered tremendously because of the demands of road and highway building. The results included underfunded social programs, massive public debt, and a crippled economy. Despite Vermont voters’ concern about open space preservation, persistent transportation policies that subsidized automobile use undermined efforts to control or limit decentralized development. Gutfreund emphasizes the rural favoritism of highway policy elsewhere in the book; regarding Middlebury he suggests that even though rural areas got more funding per capita for roads and highways, small communities felt the negative consequences of federal policy almost as keenly as big cities. For Gutfreund, there

is no silver lining in the cloud of twentieth-century highway policy.

The story of Smyrna, Tennessee, the final case study representing the Sunbelt industrial boom, is a classic tale of edge city development. Smyrna's basic infrastructure was initially the result of two federally funded projects, the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Stewart Air Force base. When the base closed in 1970, local boosters used "excess" infrastructure, housing, and abandoned Air Force facilities as an "arsenal" in the battle to attract another major employer (p. 203). Their most important weapon, according to Gutfreund, was the Interstate highway system linking the town to the rest of the country, which was critical in securing a Nissan factory in 1980. Gutfreund also speculates that what Smyrna lacked was as important as what it offered: "property taxes did not have to support debt burdens attributable to an aging infrastructure. Prospective corporate citizens could be confident that their property taxes would support relatively new infrastructure" (p. 210). Nissan executives were able to shape the area to their liking, reaping a bountiful harvest of tax breaks and other incentives in the process. Smyrna's aggressive boosters highlighted these advantages and ensured that every available subsidy was exploited. According to Gutfreund, their access to government resources virtually ensured that a large corporation would have located in Smyrna, as others did in similar Sunbelt suburbs. He observes that even as Smyrna boomed thanks to government and corporate investment, elsewhere (presumably in urban areas) industrial plants were closing. Gutfreund deduces that a "*de facto* industrial relocation policy was at work, driven by the complex web of subsidies that supported some types of privileged infrastructure, in certain types of locales, while neglecting others" (p. 215).

Twentieth-Century Sprawl concludes with a wholesale condemnation of highway building in America: "culture and technology were channeled and focused by the cumulative effect of subsidies that skewed personal and corporate decision making, underwriting sprawl while undermining urban density. Unmitigated by considerations of equity, efficiency, or affordability" (p. 231). In the end, two elements of Gutfreund's analysis stand out as important contributions to American transportation history. He shows that policy often has lasting feedback effects both as precedent and through structural changes in government, a dynamic that is too often underestimated. Pro-automobile measures favoring rural areas became part of the political culture, bureaucracy, and law of the United States. It became harder to change

the orientation of policy as time went on, regardless of political or ideological shifts. Secondly, tax structures are a central subject of this study, and Gutfreund does a good job of highlighting their importance, pointing out that they redistribute wealth "from urbanized areas to rural regions, and from all taxpayers to those who drove automobiles" (p. 27).

However, the implications and "fairness" of these tax structures are more subjective than Gutfreund suggests. Throughout the book, Gutfreund asserts that user fees should have paid for transportation infrastructure, and he complains that gas taxes were protected from general usage like no other sales tax. He never acknowledges that both gas taxes and user fees are deeply regressive, falling heavily on the poor and middle class, especially after the decline of mass transit. Other means of funding, including property and income taxes, can distribute the burden of public works more equitably. Gutfreund criticizes their use to pay for public roads as inherently unfair, based on the assumption that those who use roads derive most of their benefits. But, the idea that adequate roads benefit everyone is not entirely unreasonable. Subsidizing transportation infrastructure was a key strategy for American city boosters hoping to encourage commerce, growth and profits with ports, railroads, canals, as well as roads long before the twentieth century. Moreover, city economies are closely connected to their rural hinterlands, and ease of access to urban markets means both profits for farmers and low prices for consumers. Gutfreund also fails to consider that cities had been financing road and street improvements with property taxes since colonial times, based on the idea that property values increase in the vicinity of road and street improvements. This holds true even if more commuters than locals use city streets—without those commuters urban downtowns would suffer even more, and along with them all urban property values. In addition, while Gutfreund points to the institutionalization of policy in the twentieth century, he overlooks some of the older structural and institutional legacies of federalism, including disproportionate representation for rural areas in Congress and in state legislatures. While the highway lobby and government engineers no doubt reinforced it, the tendency to favor rural areas was already written into government. Gutfreund applies his contemporary notion of justice and "fairness" to a century of policy, basing his conclusions on implicit assumptions backed with uneven evidence. In the end, his perspective seems just as subjective as that of the businessmen, engineers, and public officials he blames for avoiding user fees, protecting gas tax rev-

enues, and favoring rural areas.

Gutfreund's dismissal of meaningful or authentically grassroots public support for road and highway building is especially problematic in light of previous scholarship on twentieth-century transportation policy. For the last thirty years, historians have sought to counter the idea that roads and highways, and with them the private automobile, were imposed upon a hapless and helpless public through some grand conspiracy of business interests and corrupt politicians. Scholars including Clay McShane and Scott Bottles have shown that, far from being victims or dupes, voters and consumers embraced automobile and road building with enthusiasm, supporting subsidies and rejecting mass transit alternatives.[2] Gutfreund also glosses over the dramatic sea change in public opinion that occurred in the late 1960s, manifest in upwellings of public protest against sprawl and endless highway construction throughout the United States. For example, he quotes one Denver resident who spent fifteen years attending "meeting[s] on sprawl," yet nowhere are these meetings discussed (p. 127). Nor does Gutfreund represent the views of elites fairly. Instead, he describes their "fanatical" or "crisis-laden" rhetoric, portraying highway advocates as zealots or villains (pp. 15, 52, 144, 145, 152, 155, 230). Actually, most of the people who fought for free roads and encouraged low-density residential development believed in their cause and in the benefits of automobiles and suburbanization. They had rational reasons for their views, even if they seem selfish, naïve or even delusional in hindsight.

Many historians have linked suburbanization directly to the decline of cities in the post-World War II period, but they also recognize that the reasons for it were complex and varied.[3] Uneven road-building subsidies are only a small part of the picture, and Gutfreund fails to contextualize them in a larger story of growth, develop-

ment and metropolitan area change propelled by social and economic forces as well as by policy. Consequently, Gutfreund's narrative leaves the reader with scores of unanswered questions and at least the suspicion that much has been omitted from this tale. Despite its flaws, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl* is forthright, and Gutfreund's case studies are insightful and interesting. The question of who is to "blame" remains central to the history of transportation policy and development in the twentieth-century United States, and Gutfreund provides a brave and thought-provoking answer in this ambitious book.

Notes

[1]. Mark H. Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-1989* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1979); Stephen B. Goddard, *Getting There: The Epic Struggle between Road and Rail in the American Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mark S. Foster, *From Streetcar to Superhighway: American City Planners and Urban Transportation, 1900-1940* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981); Paul Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban Transit: The Formation of Public Policy and Chicago, 1900-1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Bruce E. Seely, *Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

[2]. Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

[3]. For example, Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Louise Nelson Dyble. Review of Gutfreund, Owen D., *Twentieth-Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11059>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.