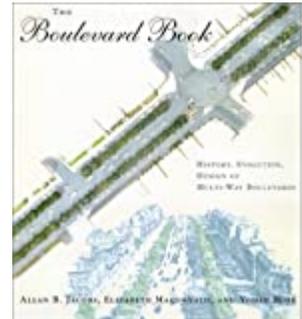




**Allan B. Jacobs, Elizabeth Macdonald, Yodan RofÖ.** *The Boulevard Book: History, Evolution, Design of Multiway Boulevards.* Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2002. x + 243 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-262-60058-3; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-10090-8.



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## A Paean to a Road

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While everyone uses streets, few care about them. However, in many ways, streets define and shape urban space and life and are in return shaped by them. They are urban technologies like many others. The publication at hand makes a plea to rediscover streets as socially significant urban spaces and in particular promotes multiway boulevards as means of regaining urbanity in U.S. cities. While the book's authors and primary audience are architects and traffic planners, urban historians and historians of technology have quite a bit to learn from this work.

Although an unfamiliar term, "multiway boulevards" denotes well-known streets, which readers of this review in Paris, Barcelona, or Brooklyn will all find examples of in their own cities. These streets are not just relatively wide and tree-lined, but also separate through traffic from local traffic with wide medians. The central roadway has at least four lanes for automotive traffic, and parallel to it run one-way streets for local traffic only. Pedestrians stroll on the large and tree-shaded medians separating the through and local roads. In short, a multiway

boulevard is a "mixed-use public way" (p. 6), serving car drivers, bicyclists, and pedestrians. The most prominent and best-preserved examples of this type of road in the United States are Eastern Parkway and Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, New York, which the authors describe rhapsodically as "wonderful, human, community places" (p. 45). The preeminent European examples are in Paris. The Champs Elysees no longer has access roads and therefore does not meet the criteria for a multiway boulevard. Rather, the authors point to lesser-known avenues in the Place d'Etoile neighborhood, such as the Avenue de la Grand Armee.

As the two quotes indicate, Jacobs, Macdonald, and Rof= celebrate these roads as public urban spaces, which are for people using their cars, bicycles, or feet. The "new urbanism" movement in architecture embraces these values as well. However, this very quality of mixed usage had made multiway boulevards the target of considerable criticism by traffic engineers, especially after World War II. They argued that the separation of different modes of traffic, not their combination, would ensure safe and efficient urban circulation. Multiway boulevards, in other

words, became remnants of a bygone era. The book aims at nothing less than redeeming the aesthetic and social value of these roads. Instead of pleasant, but outdated, urban features, the authors argue, these roads should be preserved and built whenever possible in order to rejuvenate streets as common public spaces.

This book, therefore, is not a piece of scholarly inquiry, but of advocacy. Rather than engaging in a detached analysis, Jacobs, Macdonald, and Rof= present more than two dozen shorter examples of multiway boulevards in Europe, the United States, and India. Sandwiched in between is a brief history of these roads. The book ends with practical design guidelines for establishing multiway boulevards in today's cities. Because this reviewer is not adequately equipped to comment on the latter, I will instead summarize the historical section of the book and point to some of the implications for historians.

Based mostly on secondary sources, the authors sketch the development of multiway boulevards, tracing their origins to French allees, tree-lined ceremonial roads built since the seventeenth century. Literally highways, these roads were elevated and originally not integrated into the existing network of streets. The emerging bourgeois classes of Europe began to use these roads more extensively from the 1750s onward; they became fashionable as places for promenading. Commercial traffic was prohibited from the beginning on these roads, thus making them primarily pleasure avenues. The second major period of boulevards is associated with the second half of the nineteenth century, when Paris and other European cities underwent their Haussmannization—a familiar story to readers of this list. Rather than stressing the socially stratifying aspects of these roads, the authors point to the aesthetic gain of building boulevards. The U.S. urban parkways of the nineteenth century, designed by Olmsted and Vaux, were more parklike and suburban in comparison to their European counterparts, according to the authors. The downfall of multiway boulevards came with the efforts of traffic engineers to separate modes of traffic and classify roads as part of these efforts. Multiway boulevards, a hybrid of street and park, were increasingly impugned as unsafe and, especially after World War II, no longer were part of the inventory of urban design.

The narrative is at its most interesting when the authors discuss the relative safety of these roads. Based on their own experience as architects and urban planners, they saw several efforts to build multiway boulevards

thwarted by engineers' claims that these roads were inherently unsafe because of the increased potential for collisions between pedestrians and cars. Jacobs, Macdonald, and Rof= claim that these allegations rest on unproven assumptions. According to the authors, engineers claim to know what constitutes a "safe" street, yet provide no empirical data to prove their view. The authors collected accident and traffic density numbers for eight boulevards in the United States (in New York City, Washington, D.C., Louisville, Ky., and Chico, Calif.) and eleven in Europe (in Paris and Barcelona). For the U.S. boulevards and the ones in Barcelona, the accident data for multiway boulevards are compared to similar non-boulevard streets. Based on an analysis on these numbers, the authors conclude that multiway boulevards are "not less safe" than ordinary city streets of similar traffic volumes and their bad reputation therefore is unfounded (p. 99).

These conclusions open up some questions for further historical research. First, the authors' calculations are based on statistics from the 1990s. It would be fascinating to see whether boulevards and multiway boulevards had actually been identified with higher accident rates when they were planned, built, and used. When discussing the Brooklyn boulevards, the authors concede in passing that their construction was "not without controversy" (p. 88). What exactly were these controversies about? Did safety questions play a significant role, if any?

This leads to a larger issue. While the historical analysis is interesting, it is unfortunate that its findings are not contextualized adequately. Even though the authors are not historians, I wonder how their account might be different had they been aware of McShane's pertinent publications on urban roads.[1] For example, McShane argues that urban parkways were built to ensure a "natural" feel and class segregation at the same time. This kind of literature would have given the *Boulevard* authors the opportunity to suffuse their aesthetic appreciation of these roads with social history.

Finally, I wonder why the authors chose to illustrate their book solely with drawings. In some cases, even historical photographs have been redrawn for the book. Photographs, to be sure, carry their own interpretative baggage, but it seems that the originals rather than drawings based on them would have added to the explanatory potential of this publication.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Boulevard Book* contains provocative and insightful observations. Historians can benefit from using them as starting points for their

own analyses of public space and roads in urban contexts.

Note

[1]. Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York: Columbia Uni-

versity Press, 1994), and “Urban Pathways: The Street and Highway, 1900-1940,” in Joel A. Tarr and Gabriel Dupuy , eds., *Technology and the Rise of the Networked City in Europe and America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 67-87.

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