

Transportation Planning Legacies in Philadelphia Communities

Bethany Harding
Temple University
History and Theory of Urban Studies

Introduction

In this paper I will review the historical and theoretical underpinnings of urban transformation in the geographic context of Philadelphia, particularly in regards to the way community advocacy and organizing has responded to and influenced where transportation infrastructure has been planned and implemented. Honing in on the way transportation planning evolved in Philadelphia, I will look at the period of major highway construction and how the early themes of urban studies may have influenced the dialogue around these projects. Then we will consider the collapse of the post-war economy and the move into austerity and disinvestment in the city, which reflect the larger neo-liberal economic forces at play on the city, state, and federal scales. Finally, from this historical context, I will propose that the legacy of neighborhood coalition building and advocacy is crucial for communities to ready to respond to the next wave of transportation revitalizations such as bus route changes, new bike lane infrastructure, and traffic calming and safety measures.

With a perspective informed by the Chicago School of urban theory, engineers and planners applied the universalizing concepts around connecting city centers and suburban areas to fortify the highway expansion projects of the 1950s-60s (Bauman 1990, Burgess 1923). Even as the field of urban studies moved forward into structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, the leading agenda for city planning continued to reflect the out-dated fixes of the Chicago School era. Highways based on traffic alleviation and suburban outer ring access to the city center continued to cut through neighborhoods labeled as slums and areas suffering from “structural deterioration” (Bauman 1990). Simultaneously, the mass transit options in the city languished

from many white residents becoming more reliant upon automobiles, and leaving the neighborhoods which these transit options primarily serviced (Korb 2011). Philadelphia was quickly transforming into city whose central neighborhoods suffered from disinvestment, while economic activity flowed out into the suburbs. However, the central neighborhoods were still actively engaged in and resisting the process of revitalization.

Next, we will look at Philadelphia's community activism through the lens of the emerging social movements in urban areas. Even as the "highways as revitalization" approach gained momentum, a new idea formed around community, brought into the consciousness of many by Jane Jacobs. Her work in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* lauded the type of street network in Philadelphia that many saw as the source of urban traffic woes, as Bauman relates that a 1948 planning pamphlet "reviled the city's ancient gridiron of narrow streets, criss-crossing each other at grade and causing traffic delays or potential accidents at every corner" (Bauman 1990). Another perspective on the neighborhood fabric of Philadelphia would see instead a vibrant community of multiple groups of people sharing space and giving life to the street, in a way that made the neighbors safer and, arguably, more ready to find commonality when things like federal highway projects threatened their homes (Jacobs, 1961).

Building on the framework of Lefebvre, several approaches in the 1980s-90s examine urban life through the geographical lens in which space is the result of dialectical social process, rather than purely a Cartesian point of reference (Lefebvre 1991, Merrifield 1993). Centering community, feminism and the politics of difference crystallized as one way in which the social structure of urban places could be framed (Massey 1997, Martin 2003). In the examples of community

activism which I will analyze, the multiplicity of cultural and political identities factor into the types of coalition building movements that were necessary to leverage local politics and infrastructure planning.

Urban studies and urban renewal

Beginning in the early 1920s, the field of urban studies coalesced around a set of academic theories that came to be known as the Chicago School. The main tenets of the Chicago School were based upon a concentric zone model of urban centers and an evolutionary theory of urban change as an independent logical process. Burgess developed the idea of the central business district surrounded by zones of deterioration, working class neighborhoods, established residential homes, and commuter areas (Burgess 1923). Using the metaphor of metabolism, Burgess examined the process of urban growth through the lens of social organization and disorganization, which he attributed to a change in or lack of structure that would have existed in non-urban society. Park supported an idea of society constructed through “competitive cooperation”, where human ecology is the process of moving from one stable balance of society and population to the next (Park 1936).

The Chicago School was widely accepted for the following decades, through the post-war period of the 1940s-50s, despite many of the ideas, including the idea of definable urban and commuter zones being unclear in the original works of Burgess and others, much less in later writings that built upon the Chicago School (Harris and Lewis, 1998). The influence of these ideas can be seen upon the ideas of post-war urban renewal, where the evolution of the city from deteriorated

state to renewed activity was seen as a neutral growth process, not considering the systemic reasons for the deterioration, or the social implications of the very real spatial effects of urban renewal. These ideas helped to obfuscate the actual systemic factors at play in the social fabric of urban areas, including segregation, red-lining, and disinvestment. Between large scale clearance of neighborhoods that were deemed as slums, often consisting primarily of Black residents, and the construction of a highway network specifically for the convenience of connecting wealthier white commuters to the “central business district”, the urban renewal of the mid-20th century bore out the racist legacy of earlier urban theories.

Highway planners and engineers were seen as neutral actors following industry guidelines (Clow 1989), a belief that is common today, with the social implications remaining the concern of policy makers and community activists. However, the priorities which continue to motivate highway construction and other transportation improvements reflect their historical mandate of supporting the ease of movement of white populations, investment in areas seen as having potential for “renewal” or gentrification, and the protection of white communities from disruption.

What this privileging of the white experience and view of the urban center resulted in was a particular car-centric, commuter-oriented epistemology of urban planning and infrastructure. As white flight from urban centers continued throughout the post-war era and the “American Dream” reflected a heteronormative consumption-based middle-class structure, the spatial distribution of resources reflected these priorities. City planning reflected the desire to bring tax dollars back into urban cores, reduce traffic for commuters, and create a city plan of insulated

“garden” neighborhoods (Bauman 1990). Ignoring the interconnected nature of city life and uses of space, the plans of highway engineers followed questionable theories of traffic estimates and economic patterns of city growth to justify freeway construction that cut through established neighborhoods, primarily where black and other minority residents lived. Alongside the slum clearance that destroyed large swaths of historic black neighborhoods, red-lining and exclusionary zoning, these new highway projects deepened the economic inequality and alienation experienced by black and minority residents (Karas 2015).

Community resistance

As the highway building projects accelerated into the 1960s, so also did the formation of community resistance. Challenges were organized by residents, community groups, and some planners and architects who began to consider the social ramifications of these large-scale city planning endeavors (Clow 1989). Among these voices was that of Jane Jacobs, whose influence was felt widely in her repudiation of the New York City planning behemoth Robert Moses and his ambitious parkway projects. Jacobs advocated for a type of ground-up community strategy that mobilized commonality to advocate for change at a functional district level. She recognized the ways in which smaller communities, enclaves of minorities and immigrants, were often alienated and destabilized by planners ambitions to create “ideal” city neighborhoods that didn’t take the network of actual social connections into consideration (Jacobs 1961).

Significant highway projects were built in major cities from coast to coast, causing displacement and economic decline in predominantly minority neighborhoods, and spurring a “highway

revolt” that begin in San Francisco and spread to cities including New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Saint Paul, and Chicago. Utilizing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, many activists demanded an environmental impact statement (EIS) which would help them to minimize the impacts of the project upon the neighborhood, but not necessarily stop the plans completely. Procedural requirements facilitated channels for opposition, such as an EIS and an amendment to the Federal-Aid Highway Act that instructed state highway departments to implement a “cooperative, comprehensive, and continuing urban transportation planning process” alongside local governments (Wells 2012). However, these guidelines did not require highway departments to adjust their plan based upon EIS findings or take equity concerns into account.

Even as highway planning and construction continued based upon old ideas of central business districts and commuter zones, reifying the Chicago School theories that were themselves based on unproven ideas of what constitutes the urban, new approaches to ideas of urban space and place were emerging. Henri Lefebvre established a dialectical framework for geographic space, as opposed to the dualistic Cartesian view of space (Merrifield 1993). In this approach, space and place are connected through a process of social production. Space is not an empty physical container for the social processes which constitute place-making, but is understood through and constructed by the ongoing social interplay of various actors in space. This idea of space and place as constitutive of one another is a sharp departure from the empirical view of space as objective background, unaffected by the social structures that have and are continually defining and configuring it.

Building upon this idea of social processes of space and place, Doreen Massey introduces ideas of identity and difference in the relationship with space and power. In her case study of the riots on estates of public housing in Britain, she identifies three intersecting factors whose relationships have changed: gender-dimensions of identity and difference, spatiality, and power (Massey 1997). While Massey particularly highlighted the dimensions of gender and difference as productive of space and place, the construction of identity as formative of space formation was useful to further analysis of community activism in the urban context.

Martin outlines the helpful concept of collective-action framing within social movement theory. She defines place as “socially constructed through several complex and intertwined elements” (Martin 2003, 731). Using frames as a way to define the site of meaning making and collective experience, Martin analyzes the organizations in Saint Paul, MN to depict how they use territorially bounded identities to motivate actions in their place (Martin 2003). Using the epistemology of collective-action frames to examine the movements in Philadelphia, we are able to see how communities with various geographically situated identities make meaning of their place. Out of this meaning-making, these communities respond in a wide variety of ways to highway construction projects, acting at different scales of power, between neighborhood, city, and state.

Revitalization of Center City

In the post-war era, the reinvigorated Philadelphia Citizen’s Council on City Planning sought to influence a vision of the city in which economic and cultural development would be drawn back

into Center City by a plan of urban redevelopment, housing solutions, and modern expressways designed by Edmund Bacon and Oscar Stonorov (Bauman 1990). Recognizing the movement of primarily white residents out to the surrounding suburbs, in a process known as white flight that was common to major urban centers in that period, city planners began to strategize for how to bring the people and their money back into the city and thus into the tax base of the city's economy. These strategies reflected the thoughts of earlier urban studies theorists who came out of the Chicago School and perpetuated an idea of city development patterns that were the result of individual's personal choices, with a universalizing idea of how a city develops in concentric circles from center out to middle class suburbs (Burgess 1923). City planners took on ideals of grand city plans and architecture to entice the middle class suburban residents back into the city for work, housing, and culture (Clow 1989). Rather than recognizing the political, social, and legal structures that determined who had the freedom to move and where, thus creating the areas labeled as slums and obsolete, the economic inequality within cities was not addressed by the planning strategies of that day (Bauman 1990, Clow 1989).

As the plan for a new Philadelphia developed, the major emphasis on growth and development resulted in the construction of the Schuylkill Expressway and Delaware Expressway, the former inciting some opposition and complaint due to its design and subsequent traffic woes (Bauman 1990). However, the bulk of the energy opposing transportation infrastructure was first dedicated to the Crosstown Expressway, intended to cut east-west across the city along the South Street corridor. Though this element of city renewal had been talked about consistently during the post-war era of the 1940s-50s, it wasn't until the mayoral administration of James Tate in the 1960s that the idea would be more concretely discussed and subsequently opposed (Clow 1989).

In his description of the ideal city design for Philadelphia, Edmund Bacon advanced the ideal of a city of enclave neighborhoods that were not connected to each other in a grid, but were arranged like gardens along sweeping highways (Bauman 1990). Bacon promoted a “clearly expressed movement system” in the *Design of Cities*, which built upon the Chicago School model of a city that is uniformly organized with a clear central district surrounded by outer zones of residential enclaves (Burgess 1923). It was the beginning of the folly of relieving traffic congestion by adding and expanding roads, which we now know creates induced demand.

Resistance to the Crosstown Expressway activated the community to resist the labeling as slums and to champion the value of their neighborhood. In 1967, a diverse base of residents formed the Citizens' Committee to Preserve and Develop the Crosstown Community (Clow 1989) which highlighted the need for resources to counter resident displacement and sought ways to obtain greater investment in the existing physical neighborhood. Significant portions of the area where the Crosstown Expressway was destined to be built were inhabited by black residents. Recent unrest in North Philadelphia had raised the profile of communities facing displacement, which made the Crosstown project a less favorable project for those in local politics. Additionally, in the western portion of the highway's path, wealthy white neighbors had a political legacy in their involvement with the Central Philadelphia Reform Democrats. Finally, some city planners with a new bent towards structural thinking and social issues latched onto the project and debated the architectural sensibility of the plan which disregarded neighborhood input (Clow 1989).

These various groups each worked with various frames of meaning-making around the neighborhoods at risk, forming identities both within their place and from various other racial and power dynamics. Their collective-action frames addressed the issues of neighborhood input and determination at different scales, influencing both local politics as well as the regional planning organizations. After the project lost political support and the necessity of the freeway was called into question by city planners, it was finally scrapped in the early 1970s. Although victory could be declared for the neighborhoods saved from demolition, the political machinations in Philadelphia still exerted far more influence over future city planning projects than community activists. The shift in economic investment over the following decades would see more investment in highways and a steady decrease in public transportation, a reflection of the ongoing prioritizing of white residents and suburbanization.

The next struggle of a community against a major highway project began in Philadelphia's Chinatown district with the plan to convert Vine Street Expressway to a widened, sunken freeway project that would have continued the already destructive effects of development upon this community. Located on the northern edge of Center City Philadelphia, Chinatown was already boxed in on three sides by the Commuter Rail Tunnel, Convention Center, and Franklin Square redevelopment. Much of the affordable housing in the area was razed as a result of these projects, displacing residents and disrupting the community (Metraux 1999).

The earliest response was the formation of the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC), which mobilized to advocate for affordable housing in response to what was lost (Acolin & Vitiello 2018). This generation of political activists developed a more

oppositional strategy than that of their elders, and had to work to gain the support of the older generation who believed “you can’t fight city hall” (Yee 2012, 25). Although overlapping geographically, the various groups that cared about the Chinatown neighborhood were approaching the struggle at different scales, with different experiences, and making meaning in a variety of contexts. Not only were they addressing the identity as a community, they were also resisting racial stereotypes of passivity, navigating various socially constructed places as they defined and found power in their collective social action (Yee 2012, Martin 2003).

Resistance coalesced around Holy Redeemer, a church and school that offered space for many community activities. The campus of Holy Redeemer was under direct threat, lying in the path of the proposed expansion of the Vine Street Expressway. A variety of activities that brought people to Holy Redeemer - sports, weddings, and community meetings - while themselves not political, laid the groundwork for common affiliation and experience among the Chinatown residents (Yee 2012). Intergenerational support was brought together through coalition building between community leaders and younger, politically active residents. Elders in the communities, the Sisters at Holy Redeemer, young professionals, and university students came together and were represented in a unified resistance to the Vine Street Expressway project. While not successfully stopping the project, they utilized the strategy of advocating for an environmental impact statement (EIS) which yielded a scaled-down end result that preserved Holy Redeemer (Yee 2012). This geographically isolated neighborhood, cut off on so many sides already, found creative ways to join their common experience into a collective-action frame that built strategies for further activism and political engagement.

Conclusion

The legacies of city planning and highway projects in Philadelphia are grounded in the Chicago School of urban studies. Based on a theory of a central business district surrounded by concentric zones, the plan and development of highways in Philadelphia followed a logic that favored the economic prosperity of white residents who moved into segregated suburban neighborhoods. While claiming neutrality, the city plans and highway projects administered by the state continued to follow the same pattern, even after local city planners began to consider the social implications of these projects.

While most of the highway projects benefitted from local political support, the communities that were affected by them exercised varying levels of opposition. The opposition to the Crosstown Expressway formed a diverse coalition with political advantages. Between shifting political priorities and racial dynamics, that highway project ceased to make geographic or political sense. The reframing of the neighborhood as one that exercised power and formed an identity across several geographic areas brought city planners and legal assistance on board to aid in finally abolishing the Crosstown Expressway plan. While this era was defined by a burgeoning emphasis on community input in city planning, this was not integrated into other scales of transportation infrastructure planning. The impetus to gather community input fell short of giving communities an operational path for halting a project that had met with engineering and political approval.

This limitation to collective action was seen in the resistance organized by Chinatown residents to the Vine Street Expressway expansion. Having already suffered encroachment on three sides of their neighborhood, the community stood to lose their final point of access to their surrounding neighbors. A unique coalition of intergenerational factions unified into an effective resistance, pushing for concessions and consideration in the planning of the Vine Street Expressway. The socially constructed place where their lives, identities, and relationships were geographically centered - in Holy Redeemer Church - enabled them to move into new dynamics of power and identity, reconstituting an identity that challenged the stereotypes and racism in city politics.

Using the lens of space and place being dialectically constructed, we can look into the present and future potentials for coalition building among various groups that have geographic commonality. Although new highways are not being constructed with the rapid speed that they were in the post-war era, other vehicles of the same priorities are still being developed today. They take the form of incentives to housing developers through tax abatements, bike lanes that signal safe entry for white populations into historically Black neighborhoods, and funding channeled into car-oriented travel when most of the local public transit customers are low-income residents who don't own an automobile. Neighborhoods and communities have already organized in opposition to some of these efforts, while other projects move forward without significant resistance, enjoying political support from City Council members. Applying a critical geographical analysis to the supposedly neutral strategies of transportation infrastructure is one key to effective understanding of the social processes that create and remake transportation spaces. By elucidating the frames that define residents' experiences and allow for meaning-

making, the possibility arises to again incorporate the work of the community elders, build coalitions, and challenge the white supremacist narratives which define transportation infrastructure planning.

Notes on feedback:

I incorporated some feedback to make the connection between my intro and the conclusion more continuous, specifically the last sentence of my first paragraph. At the end of the second paragraph I added a couple sentences to help with the transition to community activism. I updated some grammar and phrasing throughout the paper. I didn't have the time and space to expound on the effects of public transportation changes on neighborhoods, but I'm definitely going to continue reading and learning about that!

References

- Acolin, A., & Vitiello, D. (2018). Who owns Chinatown: Neighbourhood preservation and change in Boston and Philadelphia. *Urban Studies*, 55(8), 1690-1710.
doi:10.1177/0042098017699366
- Avila, E., & Rose, M. H. (2009). Race, culture, politics, and urban renewal: An introduction. *Journal of Urban History*, 35(3), 335-347. doi:10.1177/0096144208330393
- Bauman, J. F. (1990). Expressways, public housing and renewal: A blueprint for postwar Philadelphia, 1945–1960. *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, 57(1), 44-65. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27773349>
- Burgess, E. W. (2008). The growth of the city: An introduction to a research project. In J. M. Marzluff, E. Shulenberger, W. Endlicher, M. Alberti, G. Bradley, C. Ryan, . . . C. Zum Brunnen (Eds.), *Urban ecology: An international perspective on the interaction between humans and nature* (pp. 71-78). Boston, MA: Springer US. doi:10.1007/978-0-387-73412-5_5 Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-73412-5_5
- Clow, D. (1989). House divided: Philadelphia's controversial crosstown expressway as a planning laboratory.

- Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities* (50th Anniversary, 2011 Modern Library ed.). New York: Modern Library.
- Karas, D. (2015). Highway to inequity: The disparate impact of the interstate highway system on poor and minority communities in American cities. *New Visions for Public Affairs*, 7, 9-21.
- Korb, A. B. (2011). Septa, Philadelphia, and transportation equity in America. *Georgetown Journal of Law & Modern Critical Race Perspectives*, 3(1), 119-[viii]. Retrieved from https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/gjmodco3&id=129&men_tab=srchresults#
- Martin, D. G. (2003). "Place-framing" as place-making: Constituting a neighborhood for organizing and activism. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 93(3), 730-750.
- Massey, Doreen. 1997. *Space/power, identity/difference: tensions in the city*. In A. Merrifield and E. Swyngedouw, eds., *The Urbanization of Injustice*. New York: New York University Press.
- Merrifield, A. (1993). Place and space: A Lefebvrian reconciliation. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, , 516-531.

Metraux, S. (1999). Waiting for the wrecking ball: Skid row in postindustrial Philadelphia.

Journal of Urban History, 25(5), 690-715.

Park, R. E. (1936). Human ecology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 42(1), 1-15. Retrieved from

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2768859>

Row, A. (1961). Transportation in the center city development plan for Philadelphia (). Retrieved

from <http://onlinepubs.trb.org/Onlinepubs/hrbulletin/293/293-006.pdf>

Wells, C. W. (2012). From freeway to parkway: Federal law, grassroots environmental protest,

and the evolving design of interstate-35E in Saint Paul, Minnesota. *Journal of Planning*

History, 11(1), 8-26. doi:10.1177/1538513211424474

Yee, M. (2012). The save Chinatown movement: Surviving against all odds. *Pennsylvania*

Legacies, 12(1), 24-31. doi:10.5215/pennlega.12.1.0024