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Modern Mobility Aloft: Elevated Highways, Architecture, and Urban Change in Pre-Interstate America

By Amy D. Finstein. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020. Pp. 289.

Part transportation history and part architectural history, Amy D. Finstein's book *Modern Mobility Aloft* positions urban elevated highways, constructed in the early-twentieth century, as harbingers of modern automobile-focused cityscapes. Beginning with a brief history of the automobile, Finstein shows that the quintupling of automobiles in the US between 1920 and 1945--from 8.1 million to 40.4 million--created traffic problems related to speed and density, and required new infrastructures that included parking spaces, filling stations, and repair shops. Focused on three elevated highways--Chicago's Wacker Drive, New York City's West Side Elevated Highway and Boston's Central Artery--this book projects elevated highways as modern twentieth-century technologies against the backdrop of preexisting nineteenth-century cities, constructed of brick and wood, at the scale of pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages (p. 2). Finstein argues that "[u]rban elevated highways of the 1920s and 1930s developed in response to a complex dialogue among designers, engineers, social scientists, and municipal leaders about how to reconcile automotive freedoms with existing landscapes" (p. 39).

Two themes tied to modernity animate Finstein's analysis of these elevated roadways. First, she uses the vertical transformation of cities, that began in the 1880s to place these highways in the context of utopian, modernist technologies. Following the invention of the skyscraper, the vertically oriented city offered many possibilities for solving urban problems. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, urban designers suggested elevating street railways, crosswalks, pedestrian sidewalks and promenades, parking, and streets and highways. Finstein explains that "large-scale city plans sought to unite, coordinate, and systematically implement changes to multiple layers of urban form" (p. 53). Elevated highways were utopian approaches to constructing automobile-focused cities. Second, Finstein employs privatization as a way to analyze automobile culture as it related to urban design. Earlier technologies such as streetcars brought privatization to public space via corporate ownership and reorganized public spaces to accommodate privately owned vehicles. Automobiles intensified privatization by bringing autonomous drivers into street space and making streets into "arteries serving private automotive interests" (p. 34). Elevated highways, by separating individual transportation interests from adjacent aspects of cities, represented an unprecedented form of privatization.

Three case studies demonstrate Finstein's argument that elevated highways brought modernity into U.S. cities. Chicago's metamorphosis to a modern city produced a revisioning of urban highways. The architects Bennett and Burnham, along with the Chicago Plan Commission, designed Wacker Drive as a double-deck boulevard along the Chicago River that replaced South Water Street. This roadway "transformed South Water Street from a transportation channel to an essential piece of the city's armature. It would act as a building and thoroughfare, connector and border, mediating between the different components of the city's fabric" (p. 95). The development of Wacker Drive helped reimagine highways as architectural features of cities. Treatment of highways as urban architecture continued in New York City with the construction of the West Side Elevated Highway. The city's Board of Estimate hired the firm Sloan and

Robertson, famous for their art deco buildings, “to synthesize modern transportation, modern engineering, and modern architecture into the public realm” (p. 123). Finstein makes clear that the architectural design of the West Side Elevated Highway matched the buildings that defined early-twentieth-century vertical New York City. While engineering priorities dominated the state-sponsored Central Artery in Boston, architectural considerations influenced the design of the highway’s ramps and substructure, which reflected mid-century modern trends emphasizing horizontal stripes and banding (p. 147). Finstein demonstrates that these highways brought modern design as well as automobiles into U.S. cities.

Like many architectural histories, the analysis in *Modern Mobility Aloft* focuses on the aesthetics of the structures, the design decisions that went into these highways, and their legacies. In a few places, Finstein highlights the implications of these highways for the social lives of the people occupying these cities. Discussions about congestion and traffic fatalities, before and after construction of the highways, recur throughout the book. The most significant social analysis focused on two controversies surrounding Boston’s Central Artery: its disruption of the North End, an old mixed-use neighborhood filled with ethnically diverse residents, and the proposed land seizures in Chinatown (pp. 143-6). More of this type of social analysis would improve this strong design-oriented history of elevated highways.

Geoff D. Zylstra is an Associate Professor at New York City College of Technology (CUNY). His work focuses on the nineteenth-century industrialization of urban space.

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