Dionissi Aliprantis:

Welcome to the Program on Economic Inclusion FedTalk series. I'm Dionissi Aliprantis, director of the PEI, here at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. We aim to bring together researchers and practitioners to learn more about economic inclusion. What are the existing obstacles to economic inclusion, what successful strategies are there to overcome those obstacles, and what can we do to build off of those strategies?

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Today's conversation is about how American cities changed after the construction of the Interstate Highway System. Freeways lowered costs to commuting between central cities and suburbs, but also disrupted communities in which they were built, which were often heavily segregated, and community members were often given little input into planning the construction.

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Recent economic research suggests that these freeways served as barriers, isolating communities from the rest of their city and its economy. Revisiting these decisions today, are there lessons we can learn for how to plan cities to foster economic inclusion?

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So today, we're going to have a conversation about freeways and access to economic opportunities. So the construction of the interstate highway system changed American cities. Freeways lowered cost to commuting between central cities and suburbs, but also disrupted communities in which they were built. Communities where freeways were built were often heavily segregated and community members were often given little input into the planning of freeway construction. Recent research and economics suggests that these freeways served as barriers, cutting communities off from the rest of their city and its economy. Revisiting these decisions today, what lessons we learned for how we plan cities to foster economic inclusion. To help us answer this question, we talked to four guests who all have a shared interest in work in the space of urban planning.

Dionissi Aliprantis:
Dave Amos is an assistant professor of city and regional planning at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo as well as the creator of the YouTube video series City Beautiful.

Jeffrey Lin is an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia. His research focuses on cities, regions, and growth. He is also co-executive director of the Philadelphia Federal Statistical Research Data Center, a co-editor of Regional Science and Urban Economics, a co-host of the podcast Densely Speaking: Conversations About Cities, Economics, and Law, and serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Urban Economics.

Amy Stelly is an artist, designer, planner and teacher in New Orleans. She is a co-founder of the Claiborne Avenue Alliance, where her work includes spearheading a recent study of health outcomes for people living or working near urban highways.

And finally, Robert Cervero is a Professor Emeritus of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkley. His work focuses on sustainable transportation policy and planning, with an emphasis on the nexus between urban transportation and land-use systems.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So to get started, we're going to have a little conversation with Dave. So Dave, welcome. We're really happy to have you here. Could you speak a little bit about your professional background? Could you tell me a little bit about how you got interested in these topics?

Dave Amos:

Yeah. So I really got interested in these topics when I was a master's student. I worked on some active transportation research projects, that really got me interested in sort of how we make our choices around transportation and which modes were incentivizing. So, that's where I really got my start. And then I took a detour into consultant land use planning. So I was doing general plans for communities in California for a few years. And that was a great opportunity to see the full spectrum of planning and how we deal with growth and development. And then I went and got my PhD in urban design at UC Berkeley. And now I'm here at Cal Poly, teaching land use and transportation to students here.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay, wonderful. Thank you. So, I was actually curious if we could actually start by saying a few things about why cars are good and what are some of the ways that cars changed our society in some really positive ways. You can think about things like the Model T, what it did, Henry Ford, the wages they paid. You can think about a lot of things, but generally thinking about cars and transportation, can you tell me some of the good things that cars have done for our society?

Dave Amos:

When cars arrived on the scene, at the turn of the last century, in many cities, living conditions weren't all that great. They were extremely dense, oftentimes because people had to live within walking distance of the factory or place that they worked. Of course, at the same time we were seeing electric street cars, but by and large, there's still very dense cities. And only at that time where we were beginning to understand things like municipal sanitation and its relationship to health. So for many people in their psyche, cities were seen as sort of dangerous, disease-ridden places, and the allure of moving out to the countryside was a very strong one.

Dave Amos:

So cars gave people the opportunity to essentially live in a different place from where they worked, which is something that was a bit novel at the time. Again, we had the street cars, but the unprecedented amount of land that cars opened up for new development was truly unique. I mean, with the street car, you really could only develop land within a certain distance from each station or stop, but cars allowed us to branch out and move people into what we now call the suburbs. And again, that sort of fast connectivity to new areas was seen as a huge sea-change in how we organize our cities.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Along with that, I guess, what were some of the early planning responses to the rise of car ownership? So when you think about this new space opening up and all of a sudden, all of this land kind of being on the table in terms of where people can live, how did planning change in response to this?

Dave Amos:

Yeah, a lot of things were happening at once. I think the period of time, especially the interwar period between World War I and World War II were some of the most fascinating periods of time in US history, because we were just rapidly changing with these new transportation technologies. So, I mean, before the car, first of all, we had a network of largely dirt roads in the United States. In 1904, I think 93% of all roads were dirt. So our first planning response in a lot of ways was just improving the roadways as demand increase for these new transportation technologies. When there were all dirt roads, it was fine because there were only like 8,000 cars on the road in 1900 or something. But then the Model T came around in 1908 and changed everything.

Dave Amos:

So, one of our first responses was just to improve roads, to get people out to those areas. In 19, I think it was 1916, Congress passed the first true Federal Aid Highway Act, and then they've been updating them since then in the 1920s and 30s. And it was really aimed at improving these roads, creating a nationwide network of highways that would then allow people to take those cars and access those new spaces in the suburbs. So, that was the first thing we did, was really sort of, think about how we can actually improve the roads. And then in terms of planning responses, I mean, lots of things were happening at the same time.

Dave Amos:

So we were considering sort of how these cars would change cities, but at the same time, planners were also still responding to some of these negative ills associated with the 19th Century city. So, we saw the rise of The Garden City Movement, where the ideal became somewhere between the farm and the city, but there's sort of this new suburban ideal. And we also had urban farmers thinking that, giving people access to light air and sort of open land was seeing as virtuous, as moral. It's like the best way to raise a family. So, there were lots of things happening. So planners at that time were sort of capturing several zeitgeists at once. And one of the ways they did that was, they thought, "Well, now we can access this land. It's a little bit less dense. We can sort of avoid some of these different problems of having different land uses so close together."

Dave Amos:

In that early city, you had to live over the store or live within walking distance of the factory, which meant that your house was oftentimes in shadow smokestacks, which led all sorts of adverse health effects, for example. But now with this new land opening up in the suburbs, the idea of zoning became something that cities started to play with more. Prior in the 19th Century, zoning didn't make as much sense because everything was mixed use essentially, horizontal or vertical mixed use. But the idea of separating uses, avoiding these sort of nuisances or adverse impacts of having two different land uses together, gained steam.

Dave Amos:

So in the 1920s, 1930s, the federal government started stepping in, especially in the 1930s around the Great Depression, right? So we're having an era where housing isn't being built fast enough. There's not a lot of mortgage finance for new construction because the banks are in trouble. So the federal government started stepping in and saying, "Hey, we should start backing some of these loans, build some more housing, but if we're going to do it that way, let's look at these new ideas around zoning and

subdivision planning that makes these less risky investments and allows for basically a smooth separation of uses."

Dave Amos:

So all of this is happening at once. And again, this would not be possible without the car because all of this new land is opening up for development. So the car, zoning are very much intertwined. One cannot happen without the other, but it again led to the separation of use, and you could then, drive to the store, drive to work, instead of having it all with walking distance.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. Many members of my family, are kind of either country boys or country girls. And you think about them living in the dense city and being in a suburb maybe in between, it feels like being able to kind of organize ourselves in this way, kind of gives them a little bit the best of both worlds, right, so you can see the appeal.

Dave Amos:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So I guess one question then after that would be, when we think about differences in zoning and changes in land use patterns, how did some of these changes contribute to kind of, when we think about freeway construction, how is freeway construction a kind of response to this, to the new ways our cities were being organized?

Dave Amos:

It's two different things. I mean, in the 1950s, we saw the real implementation of the actual Interstate Freeway Network that connects cities. In a lot of that, there was a national defense rationale, but by far, the most users of our Interstate Highways are people commuting within their own metro area, right. It's truly, the suburban commute is how we're using our freeways. So, building these freeways allowed for the continued expansion of suburban life, because again, way back when those were dirt roads, improved to local highways and they could only have a certain capacity. But as more and more people were sort of having access to the American Dream, especially again, in the post-war baby boom years, we needed more capacity, more capacity, more capacity to get people to and from downtown.

Dave Amos:

So absolutely, the freeway again, without sort of adding lanes and building these freeways, what we know now as the suburbs wouldn't really be possible in a lot of ways. So, they're integrally linked. The suburbs created demand for more mobility, which was then fulfilled by freeways and freeways allow for more land to be opened up. So it's a cycle. Some would say virtuous, some would say, not virtuous cycle, right.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I like to maybe, kind of close out with a question that maybe foreshadows some of the later conversations. I'm curious to know ... I think of the car as a little bit like any other technology, right. That you get this new technology and you have to figure out the right way to balance it. So I think of, there's

an analogy for me with whatever revolution was kind of brought about in transportation by the car with kind of communication revolution and smartphones. Like I remember, calling my grandparents overseas when I was a kid and we'd have to wake up early on a Sunday morning and it was for 15 seconds. It was a really big deal because it was really expensive. Now, we're all on our smartphones and it's just a totally different world.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

But I also think, this analogy of smartphones and communications, I think a lot of us now, I'll at least say for myself, are maybe seeing some of the downsides of this new technology and realizing that it's not just good. There needs to be some kind of balance, there's some kind of optimal way to engage with this new technology. And I'm curious how you would kind of just react to that analogy and how you would think about that in terms of the car and urban planning very broadly?

Dave Amos:

Yeah, that's a good question. And I have kids, so I'm often thinking about things like screen time and so how we sort of adapt these new technologies to our daily life. And I think, yeah you hit the nail on the head. I think both the car and some of these digital technologies, they rose to solve a problem. And I think that then made people aware of the benefits very quickly, but the drawbacks were slower to be realized, I think. I think we now, today have a much fuller understanding of the negative externalities associated with infrastructure and car first policy that we didn't understand back then. I think maybe we are in the same position with the internet or smart phones.

Dave Amos:

I know that I'm trying to limit my kids' screen time, because in some ways I feel like it's an experiment. We don't know what it's like to raise kids in front of screens all the time, and we don't know what that's going to be like to turn out. So I'm a little bit more hesitant, and I think part of it's because I'm aware of the story of the car a little bit and how we have so fully and quickly embraced it. And now, and I think in a lot of ways we're wishing that we didn't do it that way, or we didn't so fully embrace cars. So yeah, I think it's very apt and maybe it's a cautionary tale for screens. I don't know.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Wonderful. All right, thanks so much Dave.

Dave Amos:

Thanks.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So yeah. You'll join back up in a little bit, but for now I think we'll turn to Jeff, Jeff Lin. So Jeff, welcome. It's great to have you on.

Jeffrey Lin:

Great to be here.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. So Jeff, your research is focused on cities, regions and growth. Can you tell me a little bit about your research and just the general topics you tend to study?

Jeffrey Lin:

So, I'm an urban and regional economist. I'm interested in how places change over time, often over longer run time spans of decades, or even centuries. I'm interested in the factors that make places grow or shrink or decline or persist. And I'm kind of interested in what we can learn from these sort of like long run patterns and what they might imply for thinking about policy today.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay, great. So that, well I think, that leads pretty naturally into my next question then, which is, how did you get interested in freeways?

Jeffrey Lin:

You want the short answer or the long one?

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I think the long answer. I think that's what we're here for.

Jeffrey Lin:

Okay. Transportation and transportation infrastructure are key factors in determining spatial structure and the value of different places. And so I think rightfully, it occupies a very central place in urban and regional economics. So there's this famous paper by the economist Nate Baum-Snow that was in the Quarterly Journal of Economics in 2007. And so the paper, is titled, Did Highways Cause Suburbanization? And the key contribution here is in the title. It's about causal inference, right? And so, we have theories that suggest that building highways can cause suburbanization and in those theories, right, the key channel here is reduced commuting costs.

Jeffrey Lin:

What we didn't have much of before Nate's paper was causal inference. So you might be worried that, as we were developing Interstate Highways, that we allocated more highways, we built more highways in places that were expected to suburbanize. So that's going to confound a potential causal interpretation to sort of like a raw correlation between highway building and suburbanization. And so Nate, in this paper, had this clever, instrumental variable that is a source of sort of quasi experimental variation. So some cities got more highways than others because of where they were in the network and how many nearby cities there were, right. And so, in Austin Texas, Austin is between San Antonio and Dallas. And so there's going to be two rays in the plan because there's connecting these two cities. And so that's sort of the kind of quasi experimental variation that Nate exploited in his paper.

Jeffrey Lin:

So, he found that yeah, indeed, right, highways cause suburbanization, right. But there was a little bit of a gap in that paper and I don't want to make it too big of a deal because this is a classic paper, a very important paper, but one thing that's kind of missing in the economic story of highways or was missing was, these really profound declines in central city populations. In the sort of classic urban economics model, right, when you build a highway, the only margin that matters is reduced commuting costs. And

if that's the only margin that highways affect places, then it's a little bit difficult to generate these kind of big declines, right? Like, you're building this highway if you're not creating these negative effects, it's hard to sort of get the result that you're going to see mass disinvestment and de-population of central cities.

Jeffrey Lin:

So that was kind of the standpoint that we were coming from the Econ literature, and obviously there's the basic big qualitative literature across the social sciences on the negative effects of highways. And even in economics, in terms of in the environmental economics literature, evaluating all of the bad things that emissions and PM2.5 do to people. And our kind of entree into this literature was just to combine those two insights and to try to sort of come up with a more complete story and a more quantified story about these negative externalities of highways that we built in central cities and how they affected the geography of our cities.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay, great. Thanks, Jeff. Thanks for the long version. It wasn't too long.

Jeffrey Lin:

Yeah. I could have started way back.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Just how long do you really want?

Jeffrey Lin:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I should maybe mention for viewers or listeners that, you've written, co-authored a paper that I think is a very important paper on this topic, Freeway Revolts. And I'm curious to know, in that research that you've just been talking about, as you said, Nate Baum-Snow has this paper looking at this variation and kind of where highways were planned and where they were thinking about where they actually developed. And I'm curious if you could maybe give a little bit more flavor about, what kind of changes to our cities, your kind of study, your model, your data kind of speak to, in addition to that. And I would be curious to think, especially about kind of racial segregation, especially I'm thinking about this paper, thinking about the increase in segregation in American cities really happened primarily between 1940 and 1970. And so I'm curious if you have some thoughts on that or some comments about that.

Jeffrey Lin:

Yeah. There's a couple questions in there. So what we do in my paper with Jeff Brinkman, develop some new evidence based on census tracks or neighborhoods. And so that's going to be a little bit of an advance over Nate's paper, which looks at more aggregate at geographic units, central cities and their suburbs and aggregate. And that's really going to help us to kind of identify or estimate these negative quality of life effects of highways. And so sort of the central insight here is that, highways create these negative externalities. They're sort of poor places to live near, because of noise and pollution and barrier

effects. And in central cities like that, those negative effects are going to be large, relative to kind of the minimal accessibility benefits that highways are giving to places.

Jeffrey Lin:

So, if you're already in the center of the city and you construct a highway through the city, that's not really going to be a huge access benefit to someone living in the center of the city, because they're already kind of close to where a lot of the job centers are. And so that negative quality of life channel is going to dominate. So, that's going to be important for how we identify these negative externalities. And so what we find is that in central cities, right, we have these big population and price declines close to highways at the neighborhood scale, but that's not true in the suburbs where the relative strength of those channels flips, right? The access benefits are much larger and so it's actually kind of a net benefit to live near a highway in the suburbs.

Jeffrey Lin:

So thinking about racial segregation. So, this is something that I'm extrapolating a little bit from our study here, but I think there are a number of important channels to think about when you're thinking about highways, highway construction in cities and increases in racial segregation. And so, the first channel, I think, builds on some of Dave's discussion, right, which is that cars and highways are technologies that enable people to make different kinds of choices about where to live, right. And in particular, cars are expensive, so they're kind of luxury goods. And so to the extent that white households are richer, have better access to cars, that's going to enable white flight, right. And so that's, I think an important channel to think about in terms of how high contribute to segregation.

Jeffrey Lin:

I think the other dimension or the other kind of set of channels to think about, is something we touched on a little bit in the paper, which is how and where highways were designed and built in cities, right. And so, I'm going to kind of frame it in terms of two channels, right. So, the first is that, highways can be barriers, right and some highways were built to delineate or reinforce the color line in cities. And so that's going to be an important factor. And another factor is, other highways were used as part of slum clearance or urban renewal programs. And so that's going to be another way in which the highway program contributed to racial segregation.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay. Yeah and I guess, we're going to get into to some of this more as we go on, but I guess one other question I was going to ask, we're thinking about economic inclusion, we're thinking about people's ability to participate in the economy. I'm curious if you could speak a little bit more, when you talk about barrier effects, what do you mean by that? What might that mean for something like employment? Yeah, if you could elaborate on barrier effects.

Jeffrey Lin:

Yeah. So, barrier effects are not a novel idea. This is something that shows up in the planning literature. What we have in mind is that, a highway is almost literally like a wall sometimes, right. It increases the cost of travel between neighborhoods that are severed by a highway, and we have some nifty evidence in the paper. We look at a panel of travel behavior. So we observed travel behavior in Detroit in 1953 and then again, in the 1990s, and we can estimate that there are significant declines in central city neighborhoods that are severed by highways and significant increases in travel times between

neighborhoods severed by highways, in the context of Detroit. And I think that intersects with how highways were built in US cities.

Jeffrey Lin:

So it's fairly common. It was kind of a standardized design to sort of surround central business districts with a ring, an inner ring of highways in many large US cities. And that kind of compounds sort of the effects that I was talking about, right. So now, not only, is it that central city neighborhoods are experiencing big declines in quality of life without big increases in access. You're actually cutting off these neighborhoods from the big employment centers downtown.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Thanks Jeff. So I guess, one of the last ... Probably the last question I'll ask you about your research Jeff. So something you found is that, kind of plans and implementation kind of started to diverge more over time. And could you talk about what was behind that?

Jeffrey Lin:

Yeah. So we digitized a set of plans known as the Yellow Book. And so these are the sort of the first national US publication that described the rooting of highways within cities, as opposed to between cities. Now, this was a document that was kind of produced by the Bureau of Public Roads, which was the federal agency, the predecessors to the Federal Highway Administration and the State Highway Departments. And it's a little bit stylized, there's not a lot of detail. It does kind of resemble crayons on a napkin, a little bit.

Jeffrey Lin:

But I think, what's interesting about that is that when we looked at where highways were planted in the Yellow Book versus the 1950 Census characteristics of neighborhoods, if you control for things like distance to city center, the plans actually look pretty race neutral. And it's only later when you look at where highways are actually built, i.e. not the plan, that you start to see a more racial bias in the actual construction of highways, especially in the late 1960s.

Jeffrey Lin:

And I think there's a couple of important channels here. I think one is that, after 1955 and after the Highway Act was passed in '56, control over highway construction and planning went back to the states. And so there was a lot of room for State Highway Departments to change highway plans ...

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So to the states from the cities?

Jeffrey Lin:

No, from the Federal Government to the states, then cities.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

From the Federal Government.

Jeffrey Lin:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay.

Jeffrey Lin:

So there was a delegation of that power and local control often meant local control for purposes of exclusion or slum clearance, or the like.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah.

Jeffrey Lin:

And then the other thing I think is kind of interesting is there's this political economy channel, right? And so-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah.

Jeffrey Lin:

There's a series of reforms in the 1960s, especially in the late 1960s that give more local control to community groups in fighting highways. And I think that there's some evidence out there that these reforms, things like historical preservation, environmental protection, these kinds of reforms were sort of better taken advantage of by high socioeconomic status groups and neighborhoods, in a way that those neighborhoods were better able to fight off plant highway construction.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Thanks so much, Jeff. Great paper, really great to hear some details about it. Okay, so now I'd like to move on to Amy Stelly. Amy, really happy to have you here. And you're a co-founder of the Claiborne Community Alliance. So this is a group doing some of the work kind of just described by Jeff. You're working to change some of the approaches to freeways in New Orleans. I guess, before we get too specific, I was actually curious. So, you're an artist and I was actually curious to hear, if you could tell us a little bit about your professional background, but especially thinking a little bit, how you see the connection between kind of art and beauty and urban planning.

Amy Stelly:

Right, okay. Well actually we're the Claiborne Avenue Alliance. So I have to get that in the record.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Sorry about that.

Amy Stelly:

That's okay. So, I guess to really kind of explain the correlation between art and this work, the Alliance has used art to actually communicate the dangers of the highway and ask people to actually envision a

better future for it. So it became for us a vehicle to really begin opening the conversation with the community. The art piece immediately kind of revealed itself as needing to be street art in order to communicate properly, because we live essentially under the highway almost on Claiborne. It dominates the Avenue and for those who have seen pictures, there's a lot of artwork that community has painted on the columns, just to really recall the trees and things that were lost there.

Amy Stelly:

So we used art as a way to further push that discussion and look at how people responded. It was very interesting. We posted these posters that we created and the posters dealt with things like the economy, affordable housing, the damage to the environment, so on and so forth. So those chapters were pasted in different parts of the neighborhood as posters, and it was very interesting to see which ones were violently torn down, because people didn't like the message and those that were left to actually resonate with people.

Amy Stelly:

The interesting thing about doing that work was using people who are in the neighborhood to communicate the message. I think that was part of what made them angry actually, because I didn't ask permission. I used photographs of people that I took on the street at Second Lines. And I felt that it was important for those people to communicate the message good, bad, nothing was indifferent about it, to other members of the community because in the Black community in particular and in New Orleans, folks who don't look like us are seen as interlopers, intruders, folks who just plop down in the neighborhood, say something and then leave. So I thought we needed to see ourselves and have our own voice.

Amy Stelly:

So art became a good way in my opinion, to communicate that. And I want to say relatively easy, but it actually was not easy, even though the artwork that we produced and you can see it on the Claiborne Avenue Alliance website, seems simple. The input and the angst that actually went with producing that work was pretty tremendous. So I'll give you for instance, the work is divided into visionaries who are the young people who are photographed at the Second Line. There's a warning which began the whole conversation and the idea of putting these posters up and then The Sage.

Amy Stelly:

The Sage, who happens to be my uncle, caused a great deal of consternation because my creative partners in Chicago at Farr Associates thought that a famous person portrayed on these posters would then give them neighborhood the message that, "This is what we lost. We need to protect what we have, et cetera, et cetera." But that's not how it works in the Black Community. And when I used Louis Armstrong, which was their suggestion as a test figure, people were just violently opposed to it and it was Black people and white people. What I realized as a result of that is that you really have to look at culture to communicate messages about environment, especially things about highways. And in the Black Community, The Sage is in the people who are most revered at the elderly.

Amy Stelly:

So I had a picture of my uncle, probably from about the 1950s. He's passed on now, and I used him because I didn't need permission to actually use his picture. I could just use it. But the art really is a great tool, because it can be something that the community rallies around. I wanted to use a figure like Homer

Plessy, who's very popular here. He was a resident of the Claiborne Corridor. In fact, the ramp sits on his old home site.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Wow.

Amy Stelly:

And I'm dying to put a poster right there saying, "Homer Plessy lived here," and I will. And I wanted to use his picture, but there are no pictures of Homer Plessy, and I think that goes back to the threats that he faced as a result of Plessy versus Ferguson. He could not be seen. So when you Google Homer Plessy, you see pictures of Pinchback, who was the first Black governor of Louisiana, very fair, of Creole descent. I used this picture to communicate the wise one and I have to say, members of the Alliance who do not share that Creole heritage, were absolutely opposed to putting someone on the poster who was not fair.

Amy Stelly:

So there was all these different conversations about what it should say, how it should look, who should be there, and the input from community into the art, even though I'm the author and the creator of the images and what you see on those posters, that is a result of broad community input that actually brought us to where we are and delivered the messages that we felt needed to be delivered. So art can play a very valuable part in these conversations.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay. So, I just wanted to cover that base with you given your background, but I guess ... So you're working in New Orleans there.

Amy Stelly:

Yes.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And I'm curious if ... So I'm going to mispronounce the name. It's Treme or ...

Amy Stelly:

Treme, yes.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Treme. So, Treme I think is a pretty famous neighborhood. I was wondering if you could describe to me kind of the neighborhood, the area around the Claiborne Avenue say in the 1960s and some of the effects that the freeway construction had on the area.

Amy Stelly:

Okay. Well, in the 1960s and before, Claiborne Avenue, it was really the Mecca for the Black Community. It was where Black people shopped. It was where Black people gathered, because the median on Claiborne is a 100 feet wide. It's still under the interstate, so you can actually see the skeleton of it. So it was really a parkway that went through the neighborhood that rivaled what most people know at St. Charles Avenue. We had hundreds of oak trees there, so it was beautiful and it was bustling and really

the seat of Black wealth. And whether the people in New Orleans want to recognize it or not, definitely an economic engine in the city, because it served the Black population and New Orleans is a predominantly Black City.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah.

Amy Stelly:

So when we think of the removal of Claiborne Avenue and what it was, then we have to realize that we removed part of the economic engine of the city. So it was beautiful as a space and vibrant as a community, and very much thriving as an economic center and hub for New Orleans. When the interstate came through that went away, and we ended up like most cities, with disinvestment, ugliness because it was beautiful and a loss of businesses, a loss of homes, a loss of spirit in a lot of ways, and an increase in crime. What went from bright and beautiful is now gray and grimy. And I want to say, it's not oddly enough, but as one might expect, the interstate has become a vehicle for crime.

Amy Stelly:

So everything that goes with these urban highways has impacted Claiborne Avenue and the Seventh Ward. The Seventh Ward is the untold story, I always say, of what highways do because Claiborne was the mixed use corridor. The Seventh Ward was where the housing was totally erased by the interstate, and that is not something we talk about. So Claiborne is really sort of the glamorous poster child, but the real tragedy, one of the real tragedies of highway building in New Orleans is in the Seventh Ward. And as was mentioned earlier in the conversation, I could walk to the Seventh Ward, I should be able to drive to the seventh ward, but I have to go all the way around because the street grid is closed. So what might be a 15 minute walk becomes a 20 minute drive, just to really circumvent all of the barriers.

Amy Stelly:

The other thing that the highway did was gut to a large extent, the historic fabric of the neighborhood, because when the highway was built, we lost places like Homer Plessy's house. So not only did we lose the history in terms of the architectural fabric, we lost the social history of New Orleans too. Those businesses that were on Claiborne eventually went away. The heirs did not want to continue the businesses once their ancestors decided, "This is it. I can't deal with it anymore." So we have a really big loss. It's bigger than what people see.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. I think these things you're describing to me, there are things that are just kind of hard to measure, but it doesn't mean that they're not valuable, right? So you think about social networks, even just the beauty of having a public space where people can come together.

Amy Stelly:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I think the benefits of this can be hard to measure, but I don't think that means that it's not valuable.

Amy Stelly:

True. Well, you know there are colleagues of mine who are trying to measure these things. So when you look at the work of Joe Minicozzi in Urban 3, he's graphically showing what was lost with the highway, in terms of things like property taxes and showing what the benefit would be, if we took them down and then redeveloped these spaces. And in New Orleans, we stand to claim 60 acres of developable land, once the highway is removed, because I think it will be removed. We have to consider removal in New Orleans, because it's aged out. It doesn't have a shoulder, so it's very, very dangerous. If you get a flat tire on the highway, you take your life in your hands, just even waiting for a tow truck because there's literally no shoulder.

Amy Stelly:

So when we talk about fixing these things, a fix in a place like New Orleans would mean more takings. And also we know that the public health impacts are really bad and you can see it, you can hear it. You hear people cough, you know what's going on.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah.

Amy Stelly:

So we would have to build these buffers in, which means even more land would be taken and our urban core would then begin to look very suburban, right, with a wider highway and the landscape buffer to help people cope with living next to an urban highway. So there's a lot to unpack with what happens when these things are built, particularly in urban cores, because they look a lot different in the suburbs.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. Yeah, that's definitely true. So I'd like to finish up, I guess, maybe with two questions at the same time.

Amy Stelly:

Okay.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

But I'll give you a swing at them. So the first one is, I think you were hinting at this, but I'd like to hear maybe, just very explicitly, what are your goals with the Claiborne Avenue Alliance? When you think about what you would like to see in New Orleans and your community, what is that? And then the other question is, I'm curious to hear, if you could give me some sense of how unique is the experience or your objectives in New Orleans, how does that relate to other places across the country? And how unique do you feel like your experience is there and how does it connect with other places?

Amy Stelly:

My ultimate goal is to see the Claiborne Expressway removed, period. We don't need cars there and this city is a city of boulevards, so there are alternatives. So I would really like to see the boulevard return. There are people in the city who want to see a version of the Highline, and I think that's possible, but the ultimate goal is to reduce the number of cars that are coming through the neighborhood and definitely improve the transit. New Orleans was fortunate because it had great transit when I was growing up. I

mean, my dad was a terrible driver, so fortunately we had good transit because we were never able to keep a car, because he was not a great driver, but that opportunity doesn't exist anymore. And I live in the house where I grew up in. I'm very fortunate in New Orleans to be able to have that opportunity.

Amy Stelly:

I live in a great turn of the century house and I'm very proud of it, but the transit now has gone from really, really good to really, really woeful. So I used to be able to get a bus when I was growing up every five to 10 minutes, because I live on the Claiborne Corridor.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah.

Amy Stelly:

I wait an hour now. So that-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Big change, that's a big change.

Amy Stelly:

Yeah. That's a big change. So if you are living away from the core of the city, away from downtown, you don't want to wait an hour for the bus and then have to have an hour's ride into the city. So folks who have been pushed to New Orleans East for instance, have a two hour commute, if they work downtown. They have to wait for the bus and then it's an hour ride because it's a local bus. So that is something that we need to improve in order to make something like removal viable.

Amy Stelly:

In terms of how we look compared to other cities, I think the fight is the same everywhere, and how we repair these things depends on the urban fabric and how they were put in. But I think all of us who are now freeway fighters have the same goal. We want these things removed or reconfigured in a way that is helpful to the neighborhood because people pass through Treme. This is a pass through. The highway does not benefit us to the point that was made earlier. I can walk to downtown. I don't need the highway to go downtown, you know? I can walk to the Seventh Ward. I don't need the highway to get to other neighborhoods. And this is city where a lot of people walk and a lot of people bike.

Amy Stelly:

So we're looking at something that's unnecessary. And I think a lot of cities have found this, but our fight is just like everybody else. We want equity and we want better health outcomes and in New Orleans in particular, that means removal of the cars from the interstate deck.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay, wonderful. Thank you so much, Amy.

Amy Stelly:

You're welcome.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Really appreciate your comments. Okay, wonderful. So, we'll turn now to Robert Cervero who is working in the field of transportation policy and planning. Robert, you bring just kind of this wealth of knowledge to this topic. And so I'm a little nervous to start going with a specific example, but I think that's what we're going to try, if that's all right, and then we'll broaden it up into to tap into your broader knowledge.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So, you've done this study on San Francisco. So I think, there's a bunch of kind of cases of different cities, but I personally think San Francisco is a very interesting kind of case study. The last time I was in San Francisco, I went to go visit a friend at the Ferry Building and we walked around. We got lunch, we just walked around and I was actually shocked when researching for this conversation, that there used to actually be a giant freeway right there and I was just very surprised by that because there's just this beautiful, natural amenity. The waterfront in San Francisco there, is absolutely beautiful and every time I've been to the city, I would imagine I've been there to visit. And so, it's kind of shocking to me, that it was covered up with a freeway.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So I was wondering if we could kind of unpack that and if you could talk a little bit about your work on that specific example, and then we'll kind of zoom out a little bit. Could you tell me about the Embarcadero Freeway in San Francisco? So how did it end up coming down and ... Yeah.

Robert Cervero:

Yeah, happy to. So yeah, that freeway was a monstrosity. It was not only an elevated freeway. It was a double decker elevated freeway. So what that meant is it was like 80, 90 feet high. So you're talking about blocking views and creating a visual eyesore and cutting off places and spewing fumes, because the trucks were high up in the air. That was sort of an extreme. So, it's interesting that the original plan was the Embarcadero Freeway that used to be there connected the Bay Bridge to more or less Chinatown-North Beach in San Francisco. It was only about a one mile stretch, but the original plan was actually to connect the Bay Bridge to the Golden Gate Bridge, the entire waterfront, not only to Chinatown, but to Pier 39 and Fisherman's Wharf and Crissy Field. So, it would've been awful.

Robert Cervero:

So, we had an earthquake in 1989, the Loma Prieta and it crippled these aging elevated structures. So they had to decide, "Are we going to invest hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars of rehabilitating this? Or the other option was to tear it down, to replace it with the surface boulevard and invest heavily in public transport?" So it became really embroiled in a lot of controversy, but when they did the benefit cost calculus and the public officials weighed in, they more or less thought, "Okay, it's going to be most economical, not only in terms of mobility, but also the land use, urban redevelopment effects of tearing it down." So, that's what they did.

Robert Cervero:

So they tore it down in 1990 and it took a good 10 years before the Embarcadero surface street boulevard, which is a four to six lane road, and a boulevard also often has parallel local access roads. So it provides direct property access as well as throughput. So the idea is you can replace some of the car carrying capacity of an elevated grade separated, limited access structure with the boulevard. And it

largely did that, but again, it wasn't just a boulevard. They put in a street car line as well. And it had immediate effects. I mean, a lot of the redevelopment was happening prior to actually the tear down of the freeway, but we did a study and we looked at the effects on population and employment, and changes in land use and industry profiles and it was quite significant. So the research frame, which was about if boulevards or I'm sorry, freeways create these barrier effects and negative or externalities, if you tear them down, do they have the opposite effect? And yes they did.

Robert Cervero:

So, it led to a massive redevelopment, and more or less what it represented was going from a mobility corridor. I mean the whole focus of that swath of real estate was to move suburbanites into the inner city to well paying jobs, who then abandoned the inner city at night and leave this ghostly monstrosity structure. So, when you tore it down, it just opened up the waterfront. The city had turned its back to the waterfront because of the barrier effects. Once they tore it down, then there was a change. Now the changes weren't always, in some people's mind positive. You went from kind of a gritty industrial belt with maritime activities, small little fishermen and activities to large scale stuff and hospitality industries catering to tourists.

Robert Cervero:

So a lot of upscale restaurants came in. The Emporium in ... Exploratorium, I'm sorry, relocated there to take advantage of access, and the Ferry Building got renovated and a lot of high end retailers and tenants came in. But the Embarcadero, our research showed and well not just the Embarcadero, but also the Central Freeway, had some significant displacement effects as well. The kind of working class employees, as well as residents got displaced and it became upscale and it's kind of not unlike any major public amenity, well-to-do folks are going to take advantage of it and they're going to displace long time, often working class people and it had that effect.

Robert Cervero:

Now, a lot of people claim, it led to the opening of what at time was a PacBell Baseball Park. Now it's the Oracle Stadium, but that went from a kind of an outline suburban Candlestick Park location into the inner city and people could access by BART, whereas before they, they had to take cars. And I'll just add a couple of other things, we found it on this research, is that it's not just that elevated freeway and how it created barriers and negative externalities, but it was also these off and on ramps. There was like 16 acres, because these access ramps take a lot of real estate. Engineers are trained to design them with very gentle spiral easements and elevation, so the cars can go very quickly.

Robert Cervero:

So when you took out all these ramps, in addition to the freeway, you opened up a lot of real estate to do meaningful size redevelopment. So, a lot of condo projects and things happened. So the entire dot com much of it, the revolution happened in the 1990s at the time that they tore it down and replaced it with the boulevard and took out those on-ramps and off-ramps and led to some major office redevelopment and housing. And a lot of the people who worked there moved into the condos nearby. So you had a lot of live, work, play kind of things where people took advantage of the Embarcadero Corridor, but also lived and worked. Then you had BART, the Bay Area Rapid Transit having a major station there, providing access.

Robert Cervero:

So anyway, our research showed that it provided tremendous benefits, in terms of population employment, real estate changes and so forth, but the major beneficiaries were higher income folks. So it wasn't necessarily that it meant it was going to help minority or neighborhoods or really promote inclusion, because like any massive major public amenity, well salaried folks kind of moved in and pushed out. Now to San Francisco credit, they've long had an affordable housing mandate program. So like 25% of housing coming in is somewhat below market rate, but still it's had some negative displacement effects.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And what about traffic?

Robert Cervero:

Well, Caltrans predicted, the California Department Of Transportation, when they were going to tear down not only the Embarcadero Freeway, but it was also the Central Freeway, which was a major elevated freeway in the center of San Francisco, which provided a lot of connectivity from the Bay Bridge to the Golden Gate Bridge in Northwestern, San Francisco. That also got torn down and replaced by boulevard, but they predicted it was going to lead to these kind of two hour traffic nightmares and delays, and you would have traffic backed up the Bay Bridge, all the way past Oakland and these insane kind of ... And that never happened.

Robert Cervero:

It was partly because those predictions, I think, scared a lot of motorists from driving, but we and others did surveys showing a lot of the former motorists took alternative routes, but to San Francisco's credit as an older city, having a grid pattern street in much of the downtown area, kind of a more super block grid, but they were able to do kind of a dynamic traffic signalization system, where you could kind of smartly phase the signals to handle a lot of the free-flowing traffic. As a response from that, they invested heavily in public transport, re-striping, lane reassignment, a one way grid, which not necessarily everyone is happy with.

Robert Cervero:

The downside was, and the statistics have warned us out and I think it continues today, is if you take that grade separated, fast moving freeway traffic and put it on the surface street and intermix it with pedestrians and cyclists, fatality rates are going to go up, and indeed they did. In fact, San Francisco, when they opened up the Embarcadero Freeway and took a lot of the elevated structures, its pedestrian and cycling fatality rates really shot up immediately, and it became one of the most dangerous cities at the time. So they've had to slowly phase in a lot of traffic restraint kind of measures and other things to kind of mitigate that negative effect.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay. Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah, the trade offs there. So I guess, I'll shift a little bit here, Robert. As I said, you have a lot of experience around the world on these issues. What I think is maybe one of the most important policy questions here, so I think, we've heard this conversation thinking about some of the negative effects of freeways, that maybe they weren't immediately apparent or appreciated, but I think from a policy perspective, and I think we've also seen that I think they disproportionately affected especially Black communities. But I think from a policy perspective, when we think going into the future,

what I think is a tricky question or one that I'd be curious to hear your input on is, taking down a freeway or burying one, it's a very expensive enterprise, right?

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And so, if you were to think about other potential uses of this money, even just as a baseline, like just giving it to people in the neighborhood, are there cases when you think tearing down the freeway makes more sense than some other use of the money? Are there some circumstances where it might make more sense than others? I would be particularly interested in thinking about the economic benefits, but you might have other questions in mind as well.

Robert Cervero:

Cities which have few mobility options, smaller, medium size cities without a reasonably robust public transport network, which have allowed market driven sprawl to historically occur, it's hard to reverse that once the die's been cast and things are spread all over the place. It's kind of hard to tear down freeways you know? There's not many other choices and options. So you're going to probably create an economic stranglehold on these places, not only motors, but trucks, and as we move to eCommerce, we increasingly have logistical supply chain kind of interconnections that rely on these great separated freeways. So, those are probably not the settings where economically it makes sense. And when you say economics, we're not talking about just the direct cost of tearing it down. It's all of these echo effects, that-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

That's right.

Robert Cervero:

The secondary effects. So it's, if you did a full ...

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Accounting.

Robert Cervero:

Costing of benefit, economic calculus, my guess is that those are not the places to do it. But, it's the cities that have done it, are big cities that have other mobility choices, good well developed public transport networks that have had success. So, Boston with the Big Dig or the celebrated case we often hear is Cheonggyecheon in Seoul, Korea where they took an elevated structure and tore it down and they let a creek, a stream which was hidden and opened up and created a nice public amenity and the core city. And in all of those cases, the analysis was to rehabilitate these aging elevated structures would've cost a lot of money. It was cheaper to replace it with the boulevard, because they had a respectable set of mobility backups, particularly public transport, but also a well developed motorway grid, surface street grid.

Robert Cervero:

But if you compare for instance, many parts of the developing world, and I think when we have these conversations, I mean clearly, we're focused mainly on a US context, but let's not lose side of the fact that according to United Nations, over the next 20 years, 80-90% of urbanization's going to be in the

global south. These are the very places that are rapidly motorizing and building major highway networks. But these are the places where currently often five ... I was speaking about the Mumbais and Jakartas and places like Lagos of the world, five to 8% of land area is taken over by streets. They have a relatively undeveloped motorway network, whereas most American cities, 25 to 30% of land area is taken over by streets.

Robert Cervero:

So it's very hard in those parts of the world to be talking about withdrawing road capacity, when there's so underdeveloped in terms of mobility options, given the rapid pace of urbanization and suburbanization and growth that's happening. So, I don't think the formulas of the US are easily transferable. It's probably very much a case by case kind of setting. But I think perhaps first and foremost is having again good respectable mobility choices and options to replace the loss capacity. And again, some cities have it, others don't.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay. Wonderful. Thanks so much, Robert. Yeah, kind of wish I could hear more from around the world from you, but maybe another time. So for now, I'd actually like to kind of open it up to everyone and ask a couple questions to see what people think, maybe have some comments, if people want to respond to some of the things they heard. But I wanted to start, something that I heard throughout the comments today was, whether it's thinking about San Francisco and creating this beautiful amenity or other contexts, I think there's this issue that the effects of any kind of policy along these lines, when we think about where we're putting transportation, the effects aren't going to be felt evenly.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So there's going to be some inequality. And I think, just generally thinking about different kinds of technologies, thinking about the car as a technology, a lot of different types of technologies have increased inequality and it's not necessarily a bad thing, right. So, the industrial revolution increased inequality. I'm still very happy it happened. We're all better off for it. So I guess the question is, do you see freeways as just kind of an unavoidable companion to cars that will just kind of necessarily increase inequality? Is that something we're just going to have to live with? How do you all think about that?

Amy Stelly:

Well, I'll start. In New Orleans, I don't feel that we can continue to live with the freeway, particularly as it is. It's aged out and it needs repair and the whole nine yards. So there has to be a balance. I think when you talk about the connection between cities, we need it, especially if you need to travel, we need that. You can't take local roads to go everywhere, but in the urban core, there are in many places, alternatives. New Orleans is one of them. So this is a place, and again, I think it's unique to each city and it depends on how these things were put in. But in New Orleans, we live in a city where we can very well do without the urban highway, and we really need the restoration of things like affordable housing and affordable commercial spaces for entrepreneurs. And we are really desperately in need of affordable housing here, especially since short term rentals have gutted the neighborhoods that are close to urban highways.

Amy Stelly:

You know, Treme is walking distance from the French Quarter. It's walking distance from the Central Business District. So we've been gutted in a lot of ways here and removing the highway would certainly

give us some ... It would restore the neighborhood to a large degree, but again, we have to do it with equity, right? Because I don't want to get pushed out of my house. I live a block and a half from the highway deck, and my neighborhood is one that has really, really suffered under a lot of urban renewal and redevelopment and new things like short term rentals.

Amy Stelly:

In terms of things like the technical revolution, I think about it because people always tell me, "Well, the highway can stay because sooner or later, everybody's going to have electric car or a hybrid." The point of entry for those things, those vehicles is really, really high. So when you look at a neighborhood like Treme or the Seventh Ward where we have high rates of poverty, people who live here need the bus. Most people who work in the service industry and New Orleans is built on the service industry, I have to say, unfortunately. COVID has shown us that those people walk to work or they bike to work. They're not thinking about getting an electric car, you know?

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. It's expensive for them.

Amy Stelly:

It's very, very expensive. And I have to say my husband and I kind of stumbled into a hybrid because we needed to trade our car. And I happened to look at a used one that it was really in enticing because the description said 43 miles per gallon, and I'm thinking, "Great." But even the repair costs, the maintenance cost for vehicles like that is pretty high. So when we look at the future, we also have to look at making it so that everybody can participate, but participate equitably. And that means making neighborhoods walkable, because we can't keep the highway thinking it's going to be, the cards will be something else one day soon.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Everyone will suddenly have access to that.

Amy Stelly:

Yeah. That's not going to happen.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And when right now, that's not the case. And it probably won't be the case in the future either.

Amy Stelly:

No, a lot of people who live in my neighborhood don't have regular cars. So they're not looking to invest in a hybrid or an electric car. They want to bicycle.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah.

Amy Stelly:

They just want a good bicycle and good streets because New Orleans, we are really suffering under the condition of our streets. So you've got to put everything to get other, to make the environment a lot more equitable and fair.

Robert Cervero:

Per your question, I would just say, we probably have an overdeveloped freeway system, certainly compared to most European cities that for modernizing in the post Second World War period and a lot of cities were bombed out, had to massively reinvest in public infrastructure. But instead of building massive motorway systems, they invested heavily in public transport, backbone networks, great world class Metro systems, but not only that, secondary street cars, bus systems. So they have a much, much more well developed set of public transport choices and we went the opposite direction. Most American cities, we invested instead of in motorways-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Robert, can I--Can I interrupt? Sorry, just to ask a question there. So how much do you think that, when I think about the difference between, say in walkability and public transportation in European cities versus American ones, I'm curious to know your perspective as a planner, how much of that is because European cities, so many of them were kind of developed at earlier stages and how much of that is more recent design choices, like the ones you were describing?

Robert Cervero:

History certainly had a big part of that. I mean, you've got great walkable neighborhoods because these were all medieval cities that had small teeny blocks, because the only way to get around was by foot or horse carts. So everything was compact, mixed use and so forth. But a lot of European cities and I think particularly of Scandinavian cities like Stockholm and Helsinki rapidly suburbanized, but they didn't build anywhere close to the amount of gray separated high access freeways. They invested instead in rail systems. And these are places where the quality of life per capita income on a parity purchasing power basis are various comparable if not higher in the US. But it was a very conscientious decision instead to invest in public transport, public housing, public schools, instead of privatization of real estate and land use and transportation, it was very much a public investment.

Robert Cervero:

So they have much, much better, not only public transport, but as we know, the access to public transport networks, bike ways, pedestrian systems and so forth. So, what would it take in the US, I think we're slowly trying to get there. We're trying to reinvest in great backbone, public transport networks and wrap more future urbanization around transit stations, in the form of Transit-Oriented Development. It's a slow haul and you don't reverse the last 50 years we've had of urbanization overnight, but we're slowly seeing that and some of it is due to public policy being at ... Climate action plans or public mandates, but a lot of market preference. People want to live in accessible places where they can get to 60% of activities by foot within five minutes to meet a friend and for coffee and so forth.

Robert Cervero:

So I think, there's a high mark of demand. So I think we're moving in that direction, but it's a bumpy road and we would've been a lot closer, had we followed a more of a European model towards urbanization in the post Second World War period, when we massively built our freeway system in the 50s and the 60s.

Amy Stelly:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Dave or Jeff, do either of you have any thoughts on just this idea of, are cars and freeways, is it just kind of an inevitable force for inequality? Or are there some strategies we can take to ameliorate the kind of effects it has on inequality?

Jeffrey Lin:

I wanted to kind of build on some of Amy's comments, specifically directed at freeway removal. So in our research, we have some quantitative estimates on the size of these negative external effects of highways and RSM suggests that they're really big. And following upon some of Robert's comments, there are a lot of candidates of freeway segments in central cities that would probably represent net social benefits if we tore them down. And if such projects are going to increase the wealth of our society, I'm not sure that ... My personal view is that right, that shouldn't necessarily dissuade us from doing it, if some those benefits are unequally distributed.

Jeffrey Lin:

Now we can respond to that sort of inequality on other margins, right. We can make amenable neighborhoods more or plentiful. We can make housing in amenable neighborhoods more plentiful. And so people will have access to high quality livable neighborhoods. And just kind of another point here is kind of a political point, and so again, these are personal views. But I think people, those among us who are interested in these kinds of policies, we have to think about the sort of durable, political support for highways and car dependency. I think about the recent infrastructure bill and a big chunk of that is devoted to highway spending. And that was probably the sort of most universally embraced part of the bill. Perhaps embracing some of these unequal benefits, may be a pragmatic way to sort of accomplish some of these policies, which could do a lot of social good.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Thanks Jeff.

Dave Amos:

I think part of the problem here too, is that sort of walkable, livable neighborhoods are scarce, right? That we just don't have enough of them. So when we create them, essentially by getting rid of a freeway, we see these unequal impacts because folks who are able to relocate there, can. So much of this is intertwined, right? It's not just removing the freeway, and I think that's obviously what you guys are getting at, but we need to be looking at how we can expand the amount of walkable neighborhoods everywhere in a city, so that when a freeway is removed, it's not a land rush to sort of take advantage of this new amenity.

Dave Amos:

So yeah. So free removal needs to be hand in hand with creating more housing options and more affordable housing, and fixing streets, even not in that neighborhood. So it's a holistic approach and the unfortunate thing with freeways is that we built them so quickly and now we're stuck with them for so

long, and it's really is sort of slowly turning that cruise ship in all the ways that we plan to get us to a new destination. And it's just going to take a lot of time, unfortunately.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

A last question I would like to ask all of you and I hope you can all chime in on. So kind of whatever happens with the different freeways that are in question and those specific cases and that specific policy, I'm curious to know, what do you think are the broader lessons we can learn, whether that's about kind of urban planning, to be honest like race relations or really this broader issue of kind of public policy and decision making. I'm curious if you all have maybe kind of bigger picture lessons from this topic that you think are worth pointing out.

Amy Stelly:

From my experience, living in a city where Black space has never been really appreciated, whether that's neighborhoods, public spaces, the whole nine yards, we have to understand that Black spaces and the spaces of brown and Indigenous people are just as valuable and need protection as white spaces. So one reason we have the Claiborne Expressway going through Treme is because Treme was considered blighted and we still have a bullseye on the neighborhood today because the current administration still sees Treme as an opportunity for development that's not good for the neighborhood.

Amy Stelly:

So once we realize and decide and accept that Black, brown and Indigenous culture and spaces are as valuable as others, I think we'll begin to see the world differently. But without that, we're going to continue to make the same planning mistakes that are racially driven and motivated. I mean, the Claiborne Expressway was planned in 1945 and the march on the destruction of Treme started in the 1920s. So this neighborhood has had a target on its back for a 100 years and the highway was major part of that.

Amy Stelly:

So we've got to begin to rethink places where the people don't look like us, or they don't act like us, or they don't have the same values or economic opportunities. And I think once that respect comes in, then the planning profession will begin and the politicians will begin to govern differently. And in Louisiana, I have to say, once we break the stranglehold of the fossil fuel industry, I think we'll be a whole lot better. And that's something that I think is always behind this drive to build more roads. More cars mean more gas, and we see that very plainly particularly with the environmental impacts that that industry has had in Louisiana. It's actually very frightening. So we just have to respect not only those spaces, but also our environment too.

Robert Cervero:

I'll just add. So, I think broadly, when we think about the negative effects of cars and trying to cope with them and creating better public spaces and public places, meaning tearing down freeways and replacing it with beautiful waterfront promenades or creating great walkable bike-able neighborhoods in well public transport sort of neighborhoods, is the reality is that there's a finite limited supply of great urban space with a lot of amenities and good access. And the market will always bid up the prices for these places. So it's inevitable that you create a lot of public good, of public amenity and great public spaces, you're going to displace folks, if you let the market run its course.

Robert Cervero:

So I think any public initiative being tear down a freeway or another public investment, it's absolutely incumbent and particularly in places with boom economies and robust economic situations, that these programs run in parallel with very aggressive, affordable housing mandates, inclusionary policies, which assures that the neighborhoods have the same socioeconomic demographic profiles as the rest of the metropolitan area. It's not these tony, well-to-do exclusive places. I think it's inevitable in this day and age, if you create great, safe, clean air public spaces that happens. So it can't be an afterthought. It has to be upfront integral part of all these programs.

Robert Cervero:

So, if you leave a freeway removal to the Highway Department and they have some little branch office dealing with affordable housing issues or whatever, it's never going to be as important of an element of that policy and program as otherwise. It's got to be a kind of region wide aggressive policy of inclusionary, affordable housing and inclusive zoning kinds of mandates. And again, I don't think we have those kinds of political systems in place, nor do we have the regional planning apparatus to be in to bring this about. All the wisdom for the most part and all these things has to happen at the State House. It has to be State Governments have to have the enabling legislation to really hardcore mandate this.

Robert Cervero:

Now I talked about San Francisco. To San Francisco's credit, it has by a lot of global standards, a very aggressive affordable housing set of policies, inclusionary zoning. But even in that case, if you look at these places, it's still largely well-to-do college educated, 20, 30 something year old white folks, and a lot of tourists from well-to-do places that are taking the advantage of this.

Jeffrey Lin:

As a country, we made a lot of mistakes in policy, in the original construction of the highway system. Robert's comments are interesting to me because I think they highlight the importance of the spatial structure of policy design. And so, in our federal system, at what level are we making these decisions? At what level are we financing these projects? At what all do people have a voice in the process? And part of what I'm pulling on is here, is that this is related to this housing supply problem in the US today, in many cities, right? Housing supply is under local control, and that can lead to regional ... A lot of local control can lead to regional shortfalls in housing supply, which exacerbates the housing affordability problems in many of our biggest cities.

Jeffrey Lin:

In the case of highways, we arrived at this system of federal financing, but local control. And in some ways, that kind of was an important structural part of the problems that we ended up with, right. With federal financing, states felt unconstrained in building as many highways as they wanted, and it's not surprising that we built maybe too many highways. At the same time, local control meant that, highway departments were able to introduce more racial bias in the construction of these highways. So I think it's important to pay attention to how we're structuring this.

Jeffrey Lin:

You can imagine that actually the opposite might be a better situation. A lot of these highway benefits and a lot of these freeway tear-down benefits are extremely localized in nature. Does it make sense that people in Kansas are paying for highways in San Francisco and Boston? And maybe we need a more or

less local or more regional, or even national approach to thinking about, what are the allocation decisions, where are we building and where are we tearing down highways?

Dave Amos:

Yeah, all this, I mean all of this is great. So, I have very little to add, except that I think one of the lessons we've learned here in the construction of the highway network is what we value and how we need to change what we value. I think Jeffery is mentioning that commute time is something that we value quite a bit throughput of vehicles, is what we sort of optimize for. And we need to start changing what we value, and that means in do we value the lives of our most vulnerable road users. Those who are walking and cycling versus those who are in a comfortable car moving quickly from the suburbs to this city. Do we value the lives of Black, brown and Indigenous people who were displaced or their economic situations were made worse due to the highway?

Dave Amos:

I mean, I just said we valued car throughput, but also, we value tax revenues, right? These freeways went into these neighborhoods because they had sort of a smaller economic base in some of the wealthier areas, and it would have made sort of less economic sense to put them through a wealthier white neighborhood, not to mention the political impact. So we just need to be thinking more holistically about what we value, who we value, even thinking about the climate effects, the health effects, and just have a broader sense for what our impacts are, when we do these sorts of major projects. So I'll leave it at that.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay, wonderful. Thanks so much, everyone. I think that's a great way to wrap up. Thanks for being with us. Thanks for all of your comments and I think that's it. It's a wrap.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

To summarize, we heard from Dave Amos about the ways that cars improved our cities by increasing the amount of land available for development and giving residents access to new areas. However, Dave talked about how much of our zoning and related infrastructure around transportation developed quickly, before we fully appreciated some of the downsides of the new technology represented by cars.

Jeff Lin told us about his research into some of those negative effects. His research found that the costs and benefits of freeway construction were distributed unequally. While freeways made central cities more easily accessible for suburban residents, city residents often did not experience this benefit, but did experience barrier effects to mobility around their city and neighborhoods, as well as environmental and noise pollution, and the loss of green spaces.

Amy Stelley told us about the experience in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans. She described how the construction of the freeway in her neighborhood made it more difficult for residents to get around, especially since many did not and do not have cars. And she described how the construction had a negative effect on businesses in the area, causing many of them to close.

Robert Cervero told us about San Francisco's experience after the removal of its Embarcadero Freeway near its waterfront. This removal came about as a type of natural experiment, in that the freeway was

destroyed by an earthquake. Property values, employment and business activity all increased near the areas where the freeway was removed. Robert told us, though, that the benefits of the freeway removal were tilted toward higher income residents who could afford the newly created natural amenity that is the waterfront.

And, in our final discussion, we heard that while the benefits of freeway removal may be unequally distributed, this points us into the direction of creating more safe and affordable housing in neighborhoods that are walkable and have access to green spaces. And we heard that our experience with freeways and transportation infrastructure offer broader lessons about how we include all voices in our group decisions so that we can appropriately weigh the costs and benefits of our choices.

I hope you enjoyed this conversation about freeways, urban planning and access to economic opportunity. If you would like to learn more about the Cleveland Fed's Program on Economic Inclusion, visit our website at clefed.org/pei.