

A FREEWAY RUNS THROUGH IT

Houston Freeways by Erik Slotboom.
Published by Oscar E. "Erik" Slotboom,
2003. 416 pp., \$34.95.

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"Is Houston the world's most freeway-influenced city?" ask ads for *Houston Freeways*. The answer is not as obvious as it seems. The freeway has so thoroughly worked its way into the fabric of American life that every city is freeway-dependent. San Francisco — a city that cancelled more freeways than many cities built — relies on commuters flowing into the city on I-80, I-580, and US-101. Even New York, which tallies half the daily transit rides in the United States, would be a very different place without the LIE, the New Jersey Turnpike, and the Cross-Bronx Expressway.

But freeways don't come to mind when one thinks of New York, San Francisco, or even car-oriented sunbelt metropolises such as Phoenix. In Houston, they are a central part of the city's image.

In some ways, Houston was fated to become a freeway city. Its late blooming meant that land was available to easily translate thick red lines on a planning map into concrete (the 610 loop was built largely through open land). The flat plain the city spread across left it with a dearth of natural landmarks, so the freeway took that role. But our freeway city is also the result of deliberate and accidental decisions on the part of planners, engineers, and politicians.

Among the most important of those decisions was the feeder road. No state other than Texas has built feeder roads so universally, and even other Texas cities — Austin is a good example — have considerable lengths of freeway without them. In those places, freeways slip through the city, connected only at on- and off-ramps. In between, they pass back yards, side lots, and the backs of buildings: places that are only incidentally next to a freeway. In Houston, the freeway is the city, a continuous strip of commercial property, all easily and obviously accessible. Elsewhere, one takes the freeway to a shopping strip; in Houston, the freeway is the shopping strip. The feeder roads are a transitional zone, half freeway and half city street, tying the freeway and the city together.

The feeder road originated as an

expedient way to address the concerns of property owners whose street access was cut off by the freeway. On I-45, the Gulf Freeway, Houston's first freeway, intermittent stretches of these roads were built where required, as they had been elsewhere. But it was immediately apparent to property owners that property on a feeder was worth more than property that didn't have a feeder. Thus local politicians — who until 1956 were responsible for right-of-way acquisition — supported building feeders. But so did the local office of the Texas Department of Transportation. By the 1980s, TXDOT engineers were implementing the modern frontage road, continuous even through interchanges, with U-turn lanes at all cross streets.

Houston Freeways reveals 50 years of decisions like that. It makes it clear that Houston's freeways were not inevitable. They were the work of people such as DeWitt Grier, head of TXDOT from 1940 to 1968, "the father of Texas freeways" and a passionate frontage road advocate; of mayor Oscar Holcombe, who brokered the deal to replace streetcars with freeways; and even of Richard Holgin, who fought against building the Harrisburg Freeway through his neighborhood.

It's incredible that this book wasn't written sooner. It took the dot-com bust, which left TexasFreeway.com webmaster Erik Slotboom with free time. Freeways are clearly his passion: Slotboom wrote, photographed, designed and published the book himself.

It's always a joy to read the work of an enthusiast. Slotboom gets excited about high-mast lighting, crash attenuation barriers, and five-level stacks. He discusses the technical virtues of each freeway and ponders, for example, why 290 is a second-generation freeway and 288 is a third-generation freeway, even though they were built at the same time. He provides exhaustive diagrams, illustrating when each freeway segment was built and when it was rebuilt.

Among the technology, a history of Houston emerges. The text covers some of the more obvious changes the freeways brought — the creation of Sharpstown, the rise of Post Oak, the conversion of a suburban subdivision into Greenway Plaza. But the enormity of these changes really comes across in the stunning historic photographs Slotboom pulled out of TXDOT archives. We see the intersection of I-610 and US Highway 59 as construc-



Aerial view of Interstate 45 under construction, circa 1961.

tion started, with only a single shopping center visible. We see Little White Oak Bayou before it was covered by I-45. We see downtown just as the first section of I-45 opened, when the houses of the Fourth Ward still reached to Smith Street. (More such photos are online at Slotboom's Texasfreeways.com).

These photos incidentally show how freeways tore the city apart. We still see ghosts, here and there, of connections that were lost: the Antioch Baptist Church in odd off-kilter downtown blocks, the orphan segments of Louisiana, Travis, and Milam just south of Highway 59, and the disappearance of Post Oak Boulevard and its reappearance south of the Loop. But photos that show the swaths of demolition freeways cut through old neighborhoods make it obvious what we lost in return for mobility.

Every construction project is a trade-off, but freeways offer both greater gains and losses than most. The freeways let us travel through the city with astounding ease. They allowed Houston to grow from a regional city to a center of international business. Freeways have been a boon to the central business district and the suburbs. But the inner city paid the price. Neighborhoods were divided. Residential areas became tawdry commercial strips. The old commercial streets, separated from the neighborhoods that sustained them, declined.

To Slotboom, though, there is no bad freeway, and the wider the better. The only freeway in Houston to have been permanently cancelled was the Harrisburg Freeway — the extension of the Pasadena Freeway to downtown, eliminating a short detour on the 610 Loop. It would have been built within three miles of the Gulf Freeway to serve no obvious trans-

portation purpose, and the ramps connecting it to US 59 near today's Minute Maid Field would have made a congested downtown bottleneck worse. Its 400-foot-wide right-of-way would have wiped out 1,244 residential units, 40 commercial buildings, and two churches. But Slotboom asserts the neighborhood would have benefited: "While other neighborhoods close to downtown experienced a renaissance during the 1990s, particularly the Heights area near the Katy Freeway, the Harrisburg corridor was left behind." In fact, the center of the Heights is no closer to I-10 than Harrisburg Road is to I-45. But the real fallacy here is that no neighborhood on the east side — regardless of how close it is to a freeway — has revitalized. Freeways are not the only factor in urban growth.

As Slotboom laments environmental legislation, asserts the need for more and wider freeways through the inner city (we all know that what Midtown really needs is a freeway down Louisiana to the Pierce Elevated), and celebrates the big-and-cheap philosophy that has long dominated TXDOT, it becomes obvious that there is another side to the story, one that has not been written. Perhaps someday someone will write a companion volume.

Nevertheless, *Houston Freeways* is a remarkable achievement. It has become increasingly obvious that the single most important factor in urban growth is infrastructure, and freeways are the most important infrastructure of modern Houston. This book explores and explains them. Along with Steven Baron's *Houston Electric: The Street Railways of Houston*, which explores the pre-eminent infrastructure of pre-modern Houston, Slotboom's book belongs on the bookshelf of anybody interested in Houston. ■