75 north omaha freeway

infrastructure temporalities

Omaha

METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

HOLY SEPULCHRE CEMETERY

DODGE RIVERSIDE GOLF CLUB

Foreword

This work contributes to a growing conversation about how infrastructure, urban policy, and community development intersect in neighborhoods shaped by historical inequities. Centered on the North 75 Freeway and its impacts on North Omaha, this effort draws from a multidisciplinary approach that includes planning analysis, historical research, and community engagement.

The intention here is not to revisit the past solely through the lens of loss, but to study it as context for understanding current conditions—and as a foundation for informed, restorative action. Through detailed documentation and proposed frameworks, this research examines the spatial and social consequences of mid-century urban infrastructure and explores alternative strategies for equitable reinvestment.

Rather than offering one solution, the analysis outlines a set of guiding practices rooted in long-term stewardship, inclusive design, and coordinated systems thinking. These practices reflect broader shifts in the field toward planning that is both historically aware and future-oriented. They also align with national efforts—such as the Thriving Communities Initiative—to re-center public investment in communities that have experienced disinvestment over time.

In this way, the work serves as both a study and a proposal—inviting further dialogue, collaboration, and sustained commitment to equitable development. This research, design framework, and policy analysis proposes a reparative approach—rooted in historical clarity, spatial justice, and collective agency. Through detailed documentation, analytical rigor, and visionary design strategies, this work contributes to a growing movement committed to reimagining cities in ways that honor memory while catalyzing equity.

It invites policymakers, planners, architects, and everyday residents to rethink what infrastructure can be when guided by care, participation, and long-term stewardship. As a theoretical compass and practical toolkit, this project stands as both critique and contribution—one that insists that what was broken can also be rebuilt, if done together, and with intention.

Acknowledgements

From The Practice of Democracy

This work reflects a collective belief that public infrastructure is never just about roads, buildings, or policies—it is about people. It is about how we live together, how we remember together, and how we move forward together. This body of work was made possible by a shared commitment to advancing more equitable, accountable, and participatory approaches to urban development—particularly in communities that have long been excluded from shaping the systems that impact their daily lives.

We extend our deep gratitude to the residents, historians, community organizers, and advocates of North Omaha who have spent decades holding space for truth-telling, care, and action. Their lived experiences—both the harm and the hope—anchor this research in purpose.

We are especially grateful to Manuel Cooke, Clarice Dombeck, and Celeste Butler, whose continued leadership and clarity have shaped the evolving vision for what is possible along the North 75 Freeway corridor. Their contributions are not only technical or strategic; they are rooted in deep relationships, civic courage, and a commitment to place-based justice.

To the many public servants, planners, architects, researchers, and cultural workers who have supported this work—thank you for engaging in dialogue. Your efforts help us imagine infrastructure as a practice of repair rather than disruption.

Finally, we acknowledge the organizations, coalitions, and funding partners who continue to invest in community-led visions of infrastructure regeneration. Without your support, this work would remain aspirational rather than actionable.

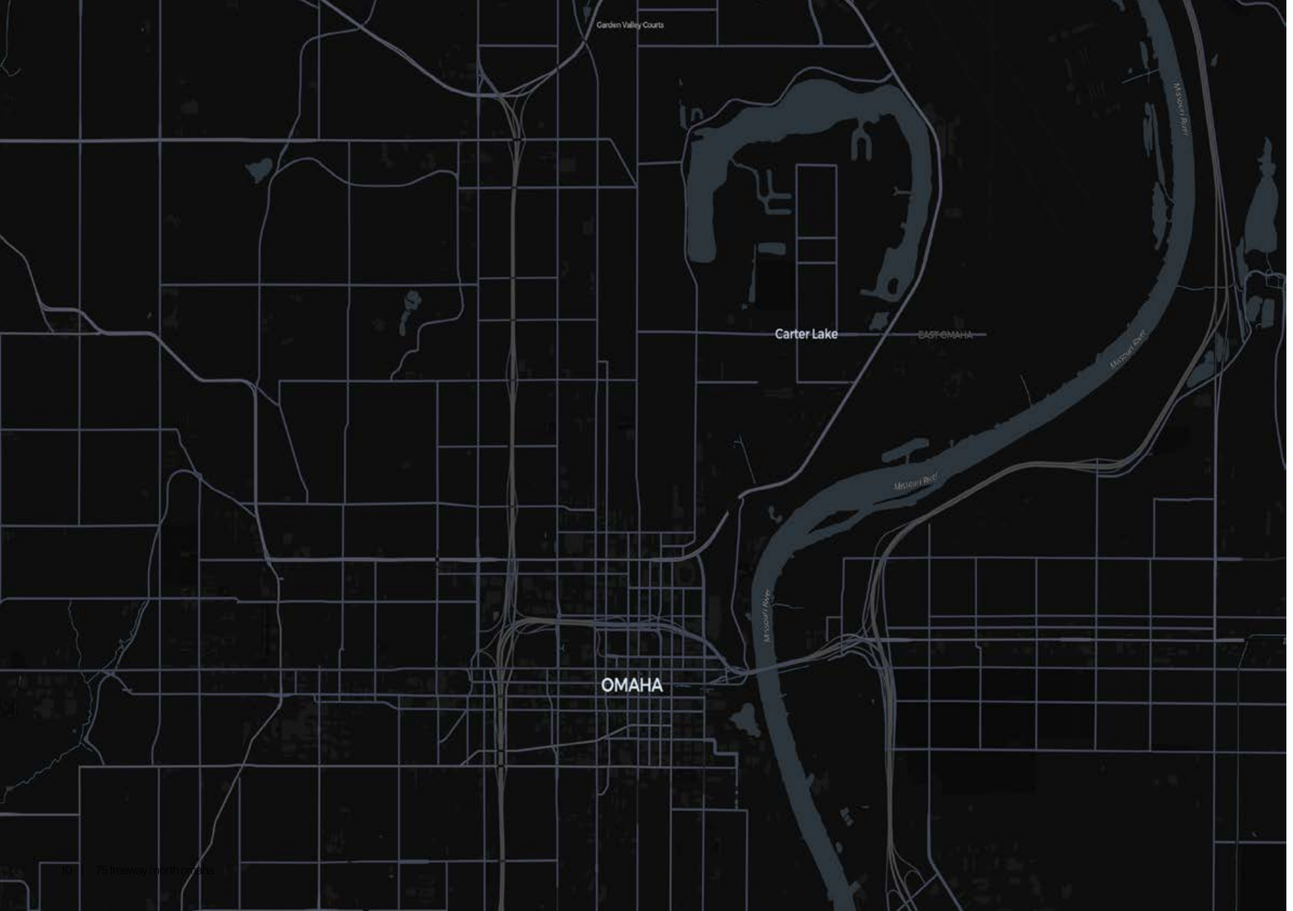
The Practice of Democracy is honored to stand alongside those who continue to ask not only what gets built—but for whom, by whom, and toward what future.

I. synopsis

context
project partnerships
project location

“MOBILITY IS A MEASURE OF FREEDOM, AND ACCESS TO MOBILITY IS ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY.”

PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, 1963



North 75 Freeway | Context

The Thriving Communities Initiative: Strengthening Infrastructure for Long-Term Growth

Introduction

Strengthening Infrastructure for Long-Term Growth

Throughout American history, infrastructure projects have served as both pathways to progress and points of division. The construction of highways and large-scale transportation projects in the mid-20th century reshaped cities and regions—sometimes at great cost to the people and the communities they were meant to serve. In many cases, highway development led to the decline of cities, displacement of neighborhoods, economic fragmentation, and social divides which continue to bear a larger societal cost.

The Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI) aligns with the national infrastructure priorities of the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) in advancing infrastructure projects that are not just about mobility, but also about rebuilding access, opportunity, and community cohesion. USDOT leads this effort builds upon a national movement to ensure transportation networks serve as bridges rather than barriers, creating a functional, thriving, and inclusive infrastructure system.

The Thriving Communities Initiative: Infrastructure as a Foundation for Democracy and Economic Vitality

TCI, is a partnership co-led by the USDOT and state and city transportation agencies. The partnership has outlined a scope of initiatives recognizing that infrastructure is more than just roads and highways—it is a foundational element of a thriving democracy and a well-functioning society. Throughout American history, transportation networks have been at the heart of economic growth, expansion, freedom, and mobility.
The TCI platform is an opportunity to learn from past to present infrastructure challenges by ensuring transportation investments today are equitable, sustainable, and strategically planned to enhance regional vitality. Through capacity-building assistance, planning support, and technical expertise, the program enables communities to maximize federal transportation funding and implement projects that:

- Repair past infrastructure-driven divides and reestablish connections between communities.
- Improve economic resilience by ensuring transportation systems support workforce mobility, commerce, and small business development.
- Enhance public safety and infrastructure durability, ensuring long-term efficiency and accessibility.
- Promote civic engagement and public-driven decision-making, ensuring that modern infrastructure reflects the needs of the communities it serves.

TCI is an opportunity to reconnect communities, restore economic momentum, and lay the foundation for a more cohesive and prosperous America.

North 75 Freeway Project: Advancing Mobility, Commerce, and Regional Resilience

The North 75 Freeway Project is a comprehensive infrastructure initiative designed to modernize and enhance a key transportation corridor in Omaha, Nebraska. This project will improve mobility, strengthen commercial corridors, and enhance the long-term resilience of the transportation network. Through a strategic combination of modernization, multimodal integration, and community-centered planning, the North 75 Freeway Project is designed to:

- Reduce congestion and improve traffic flow, supporting both daily commuters and regional economic activity.
- Enhance safety for all users, integrating smart transportation solutions that reduce risks and improve efficiency.
- Reconnect and strengthen commercial activity, ensuring that businesses, freight corridors, and local industries benefit from improved accessibility.
- Foster long-term resilience, incorporating sustainability measures and climate-adaptive infrastructure.

This project aligns with the USDOT's 2021–2023 Progress Report, which emphasizes investments in safer roads, economic vitality, and next-generation transportation systems. It is also supported by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), demonstrating a national commitment to high-functioning, sustainable infrastructure that generates broad social and economic benefits.

The Thriving Communities Initiative in Project Development

The North 75 Freeway Project benefits from the Thriving Communities Initiative, which provides:

- Technical assistance for project planning and implementation, ensuring transportation investments align with long-term goals.
- Strategic partnerships with national experts in infrastructure planning, sustainability, and economic development.
- Capacity-building resources for workforce and business development, ensuring that infrastructure improvements benefit local businesses and job seekers.
- Advanced infrastructure resilience planning, integrating smart transportation solutions and climate adaptation strategies.

The Conference of Minority Transportation Officials (COMTO) serves as a National Capacity Builder, collaborating with partners including Accelerator for America, AECOM, Intelligent Transportation Society of America, MWDBE Training Academy, Inc., ReConnect Rondo, and Two Degrees. These organizations bring expertise in transportation infrastructure, economic development, and community engagement, ensuring that projects like North 75 are both technically sound and locally beneficial.

The Role of Infrastructure in Advancing Democracy and Quality of Life

Historically, transportation networks have been fundamental to democracy, economic mobility, and civic life in America. Infrastructure investments have shaped the nation's trajectory by:

- Facilitating economic expansion and job creation, as seen in the post-World War II Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which laid the groundwork for an interconnected, economically vibrant country.
- Providing access to economic and civic participation, ensuring people can travel to work, vote, and engage with their communities.
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- Strengthening regional cooperation, linking cities, towns, and rural areas through efficient transportation systems.
- Enhancing quality of life, by reducing commute times, increasing accessibility to public services, and fostering community engagement.
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As the United States continues to evolve, infrastructure remains central to ensuring economic resilience, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion. The North 75 Freeway Project represents an opportunity to integrate lessons from the past with modern innovations, ensuring Omaha's transportation system is efficient, equitable, and forward-looking.

Strategic Alignment with National Transportation Priorities

The North 75 Freeway Project aligns with several national transportation priorities outlined in the USDOT 2021–2023 Progress Report, including:

- Mobility and Safety Enhancements
- Strengthening freeway design to reduce congestion and enhance travel efficiency.
- Integrating smart transportation technologies that improve safety and traffic management.
- Economic Strength and Competitiveness
- Supporting commercial development through improved freight access and business connectivity.
- Expanding local workforce participation in infrastructure construction and maintenance.
- Sustainability and Smart Transportation
- Promoting climate-resilient infrastructure that can withstand future challenges.
- Leveraging intelligent transportation systems to optimize mobility solutions.
-

The North 75 Freeway Project is a transformative infrastructure investment that embodies the power of modern transportation systems to support democracy, economic development, and community well-being. Supported by the Thriving Communities Initiative, this project ensures that Omaha's infrastructure serves as a model for resilience, efficiency, and long-term value creation.

By integrating smart planning, community engagement, and forward-thinking transportation solutions, the North 75 Freeway Project will enhance mobility, expand economic opportunities, and contribute to a thriving regional economy—demonstrating the ongoing role of infrastructure in repairing the past, strengthening the present, and building a sustainable future.

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Project Partnerships

U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT)
Federal Transportation Authority | Policy, Investment, and Equity Leadership

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) is the federal agency responsible for developing and coordinating national transportation policy, overseeing regulatory compliance, and directing infrastructure investments across the United States. Through its sub-agencies—including the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), Federal Transit Administration (FTA), and Office of the Secretary—USDOT administers billions in annual funding for highway, rail, transit, aviation, and multimodal projects. Its mission is to ensure that the nation's transportation systems are safe, efficient, accessible, and sustainable. In recent years, USDOT has elevated equity and climate resilience as central pillars of its policy and investment strategies, recognizing that transportation has historically played a role in both connecting and dividing communities. USDOT works to rectify historic injustices while ensuring that new investments expand opportunity, reduce emissions, and promote inclusive economic growth.

As the initiator and federal backbone of the Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI), USDOT plays a catalytic role in this project by providing strategic alignment, technical assistance, and access to federal resources. Through TCI, USDOT aims to ensure that communities—especially those that have been historically underserved or harmed by previous infrastructure decisions—have the capacity to compete for and effectively deploy federal funding. In this initiative, USDOT helps integrate equity, environmental justice, and economic mobility into the planning and execution of infrastructure investments. Its support enables local governments, nonprofits, and coalitions to strengthen their readiness, improve coordination, and deliver projects that serve long-term community needs.

Specifically, TCI facilitates:

- Capacity building in disinvested or marginalized communities;
- Partnership support to bridge gaps between technical expertise and local knowledge;
- Project acceleration by reducing barriers to funding access;
- Long-term alignment of transportation goals with health, housing, climate, and economic priorities.

The involvement of the USDOT not only ensures federal accountability and compliance but also affirms a bold commitment to reimagining transportation as a tool for social equity, community healing, and prosperity

Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT)
Statewide Infrastructure Leader | Multimodal Transportation Authority

The Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT) is the principal agency responsible for overseeing the design, development, maintenance, and long-term planning of Nebraska's transportation systems. Operating at the state level, NDOT's mission extends beyond road construction to include the comprehensive management of multimodal systems—ranging from public transit and freight corridors to aviation infrastructure and pedestrian pathways. NDOT brings to the table not only technical expertise in engineering and project delivery but also critical regulatory insight and access to state and federal funding sources. The agency is deeply committed to advancing projects that enhance mobility, reduce travel time, and improve safety for all Nebraskans—especially in underserved and rural communities. In recent years, NDOT has increasingly prioritized sustainability, equity, and data-informed decision-making in transportation planning, making it an essential collaborator for regional efforts aimed at inclusive infrastructure development.

NDOT serves as the lead state agency responsible for ensuring that transportation planning and implementation efforts align with Nebraska's broader goals for accessibility, safety, and equity. In this initiative, NDOT plays a key role in coordinating across jurisdictions, ensuring that state-level funding and technical requirements align with local visions and the objectives of the USDOT's Thriving Communities Initiative. NDOT's support is critical to leveraging federal transportation investments in a way that centers underserved communities, builds long-term resilience, and fosters regional connectivity. Their involvement strengthens the initiative's ability to navigate regulatory processes while embedding equity into transportation infrastructure delivery.

City of Omaha | Office of Planning
Municipal Governance & Policy Implementation | Lead Public Partner

The City of Omaha plays a foundational role in shaping the physical, economic, and social landscape of Nebraska's largest metropolitan area. Through its mayor's office and core departments—including Planning, Public Works, Housing and Community Development, and Economic Development—the City is responsible for overseeing the implementation of local policies and capital projects that affect housing, transportation, zoning, land use, and public health. The City of Omaha functions as the central coordinating entity for aligning public services and infrastructure with community needs and long-range visions. It regularly partners with regional planning bodies, state agencies, nonprofits, and the private sector to deliver high-impact projects that aim to improve quality of life, expand access to opportunity, and ensure responsible growth. The City's involvement in infrastructure and revitalization efforts reflects its broader commitment to equitable development, environmental resilience, and resident-driven change.

As the primary local government partner, the City of Omaha leads policy alignment, capital investment coordination, and the activation of municipal services that support infrastructure and neighborhood transformation. Through its planning, housing, and public works departments, the City ensures that community-driven priorities are translated into implementable policies and shovel-ready projects. The City's leadership is pivotal to integrating federal guidance from the USDOT's Thriving Communities Initiative into a local framework that prioritizes racial equity, multimodal access, and economic inclusion. By working hand-in-hand with community stakeholders, the City helps guide reinvestment into historically disinvested neighborhoods and fosters cross-agency collaboration.

Metropolitan Area Planning Agency
Regional Planning Authority | Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)

The Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA) is the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization serving the Greater Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan region, encompassing six counties across eastern Nebraska and western Iowa. As a convener of public agencies, local governments, and community stakeholders, MAPA leads coordinated efforts to guide regional growth, investment, and transportation planning. The agency's work is grounded in data analysis, land use forecasting, and multimodal infrastructure planning, ensuring that regional systems function cohesively across jurisdictional lines. MAPA is responsible for developing and administering the Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), and other planning tools that align local priorities with federal transportation policy. Beyond transportation, MAPA supports regional initiatives in housing, economic development, climate adaptation, and digital equity. Its ability to broker cross-sector relationships and align planning efforts makes MAPA a linchpin for regional resilience and innovation.

MAPA serves as the regional convener and technical backbone of this initiative, providing planning expertise, data analysis, and access to federal funding mechanisms. In alignment with the Thriving Communities Initiative, MAPA supports equitable infrastructure planning by ensuring that transportation and development projects reflect regional cohesion while prioritizing the needs of underserved communities. MAPA helps guide long-range decision-making with a focus on inclusive economic growth, environmental justice, and equitable access to transportation. Through this initiative, MAPA enhances intergovernmental collaboration and strengthens the pipeline of community-driven projects positioned to benefit from USDOT support and other federal programs.

WSP
Global Engineering & Professional Service Firm | Consulting, Urban Planning & Innovation Strategy

WSP is one of the world's leading engineering, design, and professional services firms, known for delivering innovative and sustainable solutions to complex infrastructure challenges. With expertise across sectors—including transportation, environment, architecture, urban design, and public policy—WSP supports communities and governments at all scales. In the Omaha region and throughout Nebraska, WSP provides highly specialized consulting services in project management, feasibility studies, engineering design, environmental impact assessments, and stakeholder engagement. Their interdisciplinary approach integrates technical excellence with human-centered planning, ensuring that projects respond not only to regulatory and environmental constraints but also to the lived realities and needs of residents. As a firm with global reach and local impact, WSP excels in translating long-term visions into actionable strategies while incorporating climate resilience, equity, and technological innovation into every phase of project development.

As a technical advisor and planning consultant, WSP provides deep expertise in mobility solutions, climate-adaptive infrastructure, and inclusive design. In this initiative, WSP's role is to lead scenario planning, equity assessments, and stakeholder engagement processes that directly respond to the goals of the Thriving Communities Initiative. Their interdisciplinary team brings capacity for rigorous analysis and creative design thinking, ensuring that transportation and development strategies are both visionary and actionable. WSP helps integrate community knowledge into project planning and prepares partners to deliver equitable, impactful projects that align with federal performance measures and long-term investment strategies.

Accelerator for America
National Partner in Policy Innovation | Equitable Investment Strategy & Funding Mobilization

Accelerator for America is a national nonprofit organization that bridges the gap between local innovation and federal policy by helping cities and communities implement transformative economic development and infrastructure projects. Created by a coalition of mayors and civic leaders, the Accelerator serves as a trusted thought partner for municipalities seeking to create inclusive, people-first economies. The organization provides a suite of resources—from technical assistance and playbooks to financing frameworks and matchmaking with philanthropic and private capital—to help local governments navigate complex funding landscapes and realize their boldest ambitions. Accelerator for America has pioneered nationally recognized frameworks such as the Community Investment Playbook and the American Rescue Plan Local Investment Guide, helping hundreds of communities mobilize equitable investment strategies. Its involvement in Nebraska reflects a deep commitment to advancing bottom-up strategies that drive opportunity, mobility, and equity at scale—especially in communities historically overlooked in major public investments.

Accelerator for America provides strategic guidance, national best practices, and support in developing investment strategies that align with the Thriving Communities Initiative. Their role in this project includes facilitating access to technical assistance, helping structure equitable capital stacks, and connecting local leaders with peers and resources nationwide. The Accelerator's expertise is particularly valuable in identifying scalable models of inclusive growth and crafting a vision that advances equity through infrastructure. Their involvement ensures that this initiative benefits from tested frameworks and national momentum, increasing the likelihood of attracting philanthropic and federal investment while sustaining long-term community transformation.

One Omaha
Civic Capacity Builder | Grassroots Leadership & Neighborhood Empowerment

One Omaha is a nonprofit organization devoted to strengthening Omaha's neighborhoods by equipping residents with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to participate in local decision-making processes. Founded on the principle that sustainable change begins at the grassroots level, One Omaha offers training, technical assistance, and leadership development programs that build the civic capacity of residents, neighborhood associations, and emerging community leaders. The organization specializes in demystifying planning processes, increasing civic literacy, and creating pathways for historically excluded communities to access resources and influence policy. One Omaha's approach is grounded in equity, transparency, and collaboration, ensuring that residents are not just informed but are truly empowered to shape the future of their neighborhoods. Its hyper-local focus and commitment to inclusive engagement make it an invaluable partner in any initiative that seeks to elevate community voice and foster neighborhood-driven solutions.

One Omaha is the frontline engagement partner for this initiative, ensuring that neighborhood residents and community leaders are equipped to shape and lead development processes. In alignment with the U.S. DOT's Thriving Communities Initiative, One Omaha brings deep community trust and a proven model for civic capacity building that amplifies underrepresented voices in planning. They will lead inclusive engagement efforts, train community liaisons, and ensure that the initiative's goals are informed by real-time feedback from those most impacted. One Omaha ensures that the promise of equity is not just an outcome but a process embedded from the ground up.

SPARK
Community Development Catalyst | Systems Change & Collective Impact

SPARK serves as a catalytic force for equitable neighborhood development, working across sectors to realign systems, resources, and power with historically marginalized communities in Omaha. As a community development intermediary, SPARK builds bridges between residents, government, philanthropy, and private sector partners to co-create strategies that reflect lived experience and generate long-term social and economic impact. SPARK's model centers on collective impact, asset-based community development, and community wealth building. It supports place-based initiatives by offering technical support, fostering trust among stakeholders, and leveraging both data and narrative

Project Partnerships

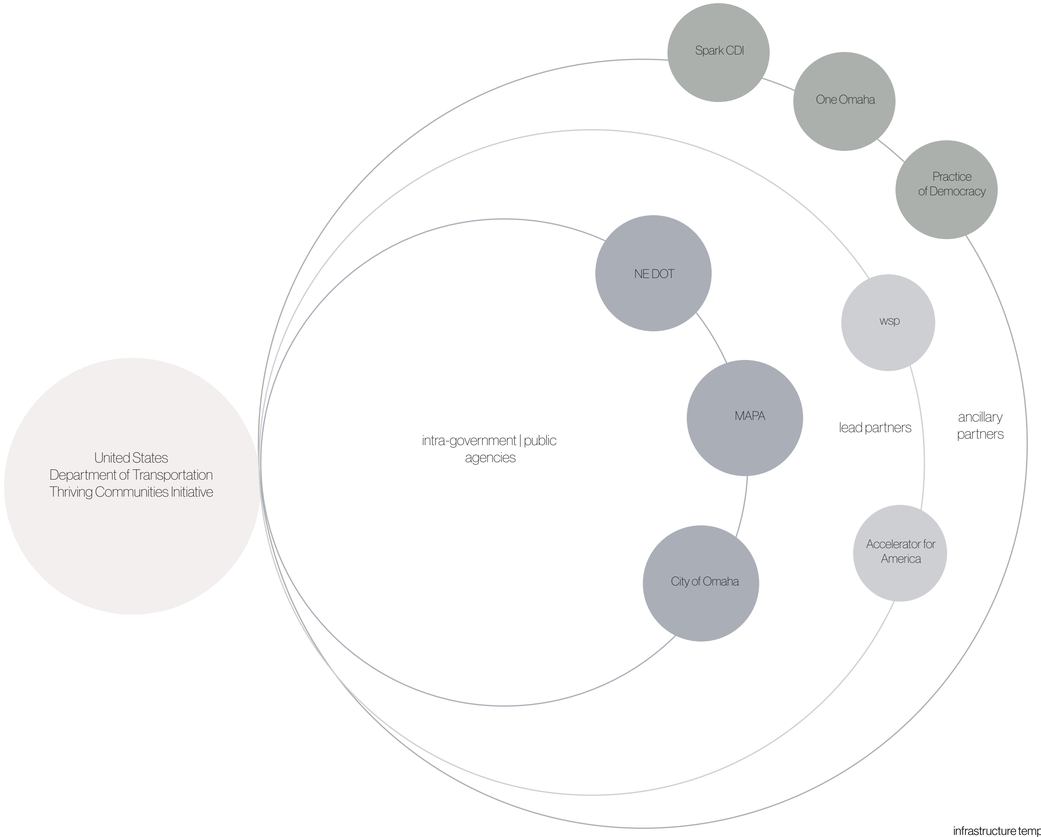
to advocate for inclusive investment. SPARK plays a vital coordination role in neighborhood revitalization, helping to incubate new ideas, scale effective practices, and ensure equitable outcomes. By prioritizing shared ownership, resident agency, and systemic accountability, SPARK exemplifies a new generation of development partners committed to transformation that is led by—and for—the community.

SPARK functions as the central systems integrator, aligning resources, partners, and goals across the ecosystem of stakeholders. Within this initiative, SPARK will coordinate across institutions to activate community-driven development plans, ensuring alignment with the federal emphasis on equitable economic development embedded in the Thriving Communities Initiative. SPARK's approach enables multiple stakeholders—public and private—to work from a shared framework, driving outcomes around affordability, access, and neighborhood self-determination. Their role is crucial in operationalizing equity-focused investment, supporting neighborhood transformation strategies that are scalable, inclusive, and rooted in local knowledge and values.

The Practice of Democracy
Research & Design Studio | Systems and Spatial Transformation

The Practice of Democracy is a transdisciplinary research and design addressing deep societal challenges through the transformation of physical environments and systems. Founded on the belief that all communities deserve a voice in shaping the spaces and policies that affect their lives, PoD bridges architecture, community planning, policy design, and democratic practice. The organization brings a reparative lens to infrastructure and development through participatory, community-rooted processes. By co-creating inclusive spatial narratives and design frameworks, PoD catalyzes new ways of imagining civic life and spatial belonging. With a focus on deep listening, storytelling, and systems change, the studio facilitates engagements that illuminate lived experience and translate it into actionable design strategies. Through its public studio model, PoD fosters sustained dialogue and cross-sector collaboration that centers human dignity, collective memory, and place-based impact opportunities.

Within this initiative, The Practice of Democracy serves as a civic design partner and cultural strategist, responsible for ensuring that planning, engagement, and development processes are not only inclusive, but transformational. PoD brings a deeply grounded methodology for participatory action research, visioning, and design that empowers residents to become co-authors of their community's future. In alignment with the U.S. DOT's Thriving Communities Initiative, PoD works to embed racial equity, community voice, and historical accountability into the heart of infrastructure investment. By elevating cultural heritage, illuminating spatial injustices, and translating community narratives into design and policy frameworks, PoD ensures that the built environment reflects the aspirations and histories of those most affected by systemic inequities. Their presence in this initiative strengthens the connective tissue between engagement and implementation, turning community input into spatial justice outcomes that are resilient, human-centered, and lasting.



Overview

Reimagining the North 75 Freeway Corridor as a Reparative Civic Spine

The North 75 Freeway is more than a transportation corridor—it is a 5.5-mile spatial imprint of disruption, displacement, and disconnection through the heart of North Omaha. Since its construction in the mid-20th century, the freeway has physically divided neighborhoods, severed east-west connectivity, displaced thousands of residents, and reinforced decades of systemic disinvestment—particularly within Black communities.

This project proposes to reframe the North 75 corridor not as a boundary, but as a spine—a connective tissue capable of anchoring community life, economic restoration, mobility equity, and cultural memory. By leveraging the Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI) and design frameworks rooted in the Practice of Democracy (PoD), this work seeks to transform a legacy of harm into a landscape of possibility.

At the core of this transformation are three focus sites—each representing a unique condition, history, and opportunity for repair.

1. North Junction – Ames Avenue & Storz Expressway Onramp From Severance to Gateway

Once home to community institutions like the Holy Angels Parish and dense residential blocks, this area was significantly disrupted to make way for a sprawling highway interchange. Today, it serves as a key transition point between neighborhood streets and high-speed infrastructure—surrounded by underutilized buffers, dead zones, and vehicular dominance.

This site offers the potential to become a restorative gateway—reclaiming land for cultural, ecological, and mobility uses. Through spatial strategies such as multimodal trails, green buffers, and community activation nodes, the north junction can be reframed as a threshold between movement and memory, connecting past harms to future repair.

2. Bristol Street Block – Northeast Corner of 28th & Bristol From Rupture to Reconnection

The Bristol Street block is among the most visible examples of how infrastructure severs community. Once a continuous residential street, it was cut in half by the freeway, leaving sidewalks that lead to guardrails and homes stranded on opposite sides of a sound wall. The social disconnection here is as significant as the physical rupture.

This site presents a model for hyper-local, community-led reconnection. Using a modular grid system, this block can be envisioned as a site of layered programming: reconnection through pedestrian bridges or caps, reflection through cultural memory projects, and renewal through gardens, play, and gathering spaces. It is here that the spatial trauma of past infrastructure can be transformed into a restorative public landscape.

3. South Junction – Creighton University & North 30th Street From Isolation to Interface

Positioned near downtown Omaha, Creighton University, and the Gifford Park neighborhood, this junction is a case study in urban layering. The convergence of multiple highways (I-480 and 75) fractured local neighborhoods and created difficult transitions between institutional and residential zones.

Here, the opportunity lies in designing an interface—a space where university, neighborhood, and city meet. Potential interventions include land bridges, mobility hubs, pedestrian plazas, and mixed-use civic spaces that bring together students, longtime residents, and small business owners. This site represents the possibility of cross-sector co-governance and the potential to transform spatial division into democratic convergence.

Corridor-Wide Vision

Together, these three sites illustrate a replicable framework for corridor-wide transformation. By stitching together interventions grounded in the needs, stories, and aspirations of residents, the project seeks to position the North 75 Freeway not as an unchangeable barrier, but as an evolving civic spine—one that carries the weight of its history and the promise of a shared future.

Key corridor-wide goals include:

- Reconnecting East-West Pedestrian and Bike Networks
- Activating Residual Land through
- Multimodal and Cultural Programming
- Embedding Memory into Landscape
- through Public Art and Oral Histories
- Creating Reparative Land Use
- Strategies for Displaced Communities
- Designing Infrastructure with Environmental
- Resilience and Health Equity at the Forefront

This is not simply a redesign effort. It is a restorative spatial practice—one that recognizes land as a record of power, possibility, and people. Through design justice, shared stewardship, and sustained investment, the North 75 corridor can become a living model of thriving, connected communities.

II. shared value framework

I. **synopsis**

II. **shared value research framework**

III. **infrastructure temporalities**

V. **community voices**

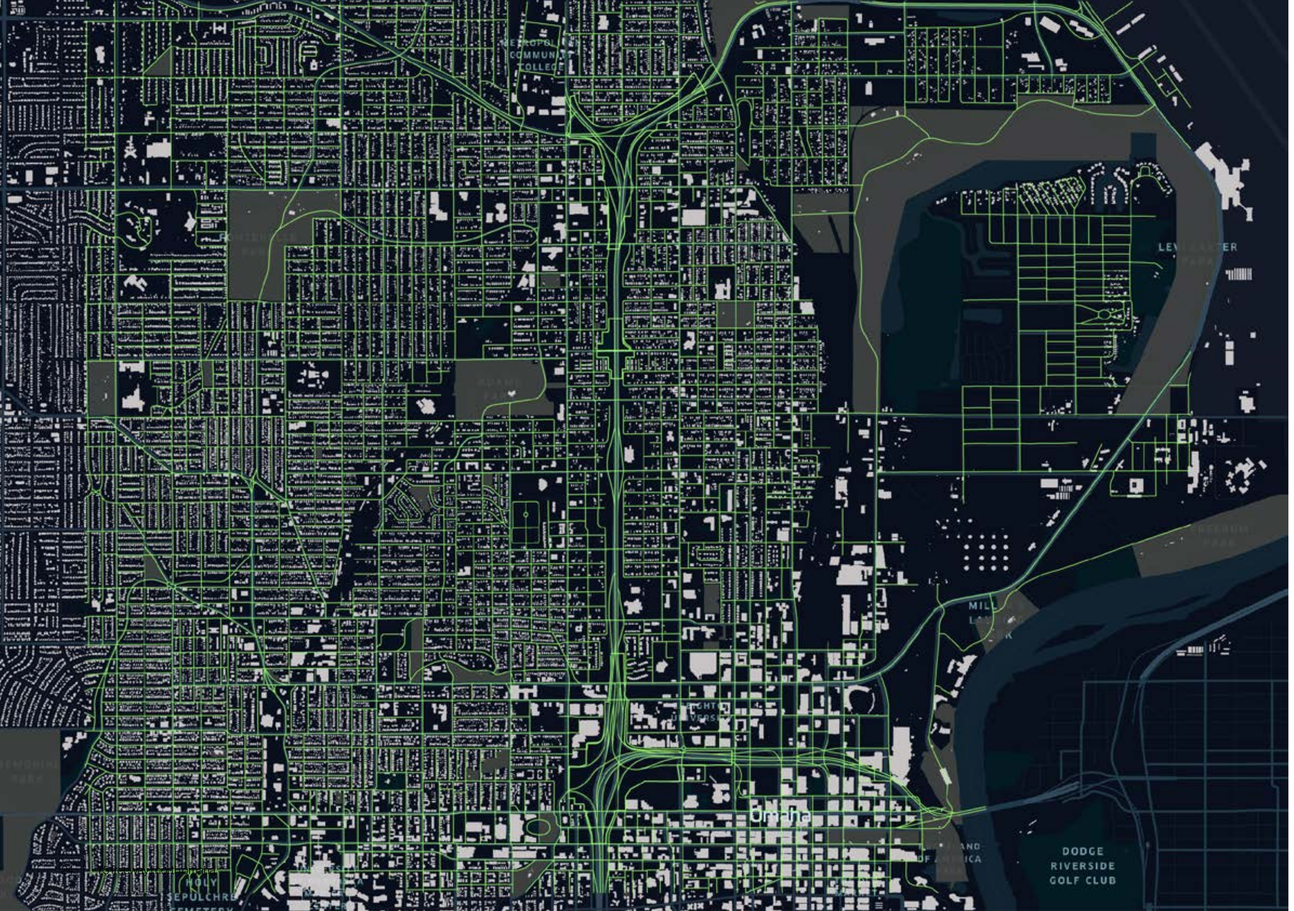
VI. **reparative pathways**

VII **stewarding shared values**

shared value
research methodology
spatial forensics & analysis

“REPARATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIRES SHARED VISION, SHARED BENEFIT, AND SHARED STEWARDSHIP. OTHERWISE, WE RISK REPRODUCING HARM WITH NEW LANGUAGE.”

MANUEL PASTOR, USC EQUITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



Shared Value

Reframing Development through Mutual Benefit and Democratic Purpose

Framework

At the core of this project lies a fundamental question: How can infrastructure serve both the public and the people—equitably, sustainably, and intentionally? The answer begins with the application of a Shared Value Framework—a systems-based approach that reframes development not simply as the delivery of capital improvements, but as the co-creation of long-term, inclusive benefit for all stakeholders involved.

Originating in the realm of social impact business strategy, "shared value" refers to practices that generate economic value in ways that also produce value for society by addressing its challenges. When adapted to the public realm—and to the histories of harm embedded in infrastructure systems—the framework becomes a tool for transformation: a way to realign investment with justice, growth with memory, and progress with accountability.

In the context of the North 75 Freeway corridor, this framework is applied to evaluate how infrastructural reinvestment can actively restore what was lost—homes, access, safety, dignity—while also building new networks of economic and cultural opportunity. Rather than treating harm as collateral or context as static, this framework insists that every dollar, policy, and design decision be measured by how it contributes to social equity, democratic practice, environmental resilience, and cultural belonging. It prioritizes development with purpose—and ensures that purpose is defined by those who live closest to the impact.

This approach is vital for a corridor like North 75, where the scars of urban renewal, displacement, and disconnection remain deeply felt. The Shared Value Framework offers not only a philosophical orientation, but a practical method for building with care, reciprocity, and collective future-making in mind.

Research Methodology

An Interconnected Matrix

Participatory Research Methods

To operationalize shared value frameworks, a participatory research methodology guides the necessary research to evaluate the performance, purpose, and equity of infrastructure through multiple interdependent lenses. This tool functions as both a diagnostic and design mechanism, helping teams surface root causes, measure ongoing impact, and identify actionable pathways for systemic repair.

Rather than relying on traditional metrics alone—such as traffic volume, property values, or construction timelines—the Matrix introduces qualitative and community-centered indicators that align with the Social Determinants of Health (SDH) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). It includes fields for cultural presence, intergenerational knowledge, community satisfaction, environmental exposure, and civic inclusion, among others.

Each axis of the matrix organizes data, narratives, and spatial patterns around three interlinked dimensions: disparate impact, shared value dimensions, and systems conditions. These dimensions help researchers and communities understand not just what happened, but why it happened, who it affected, and what can be done differently. The matrix becomes an iterative framework, adapting to reflect real-time insights gathered through community engagement, historical research, and spatial analysis.

In practice, the research matrix functions as a civic infrastructure in itself: a way to bring residents, institutions, planners, and policymakers into dialogue about the values driving decisions. It reframes evaluation as an act of democratic co-creation, and positions data as a form of storytelling, accountability, and design visioning.

This research framework positions social, economic, and environmental well-being not as competing outcomes, but as mutually reinforcing. The framework allows leading agencies to identify both the value created and the value excluded through infrastructure development practices—particularly in communities that have faced systemic disinvestment as a result. By reframing public infrastructure through a values-based lens, this research ensures that Thriving Communities investments support sustainable, inclusive, and transformative growth.

Methodology Components

1. Shared Value Dimensions
This diagnostic and engagement framework is at the core of this research methodology, offering a structured and iterative framework to evaluate and enhance shared value practices across key dimensions.

Examples of these dimensions include:

- Democratic Values and Rights
- Social Equity and Civic Freedom
- Sustainability and Environmental Justice
- Inclusive Economic Growth and Healing
- Truth, Transparency, and Belonging

The matrix is applied at multiple scales—from neighborhood blocks to regional systems—and includes both qualitative and quantitative indicators rooted in health equity, community well-being, and long-term resilience.

2. Socio-Spatial Phenomena Evaluation
This component evaluates and examines the interplay between people, place, and lived experience. This analysis investigates how built environments—from transit corridors to housing developments—are shaped by social structures, historical legacies, and collective practices.

Evaluations explore:

- The influence of perception and mental models on spatial planning
- The impact of relationship structures and power dynamics on decision-making
- The legacies of policy, investment, and exclusionary practices in shaping space

This provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of how transportation systems are experienced and how they can be transformed to reflect collective dignity and shared futures.

3. Systems-Thinking Triad: The Nucleus
Societal transformation begins with the ability to see beyond symptoms—to recognize the layered systems that produce, sustain, and normalize injustice that impedes the full potential of democracy. The systems-thinking triad is a core conceptual framework that unpacks the structural forces shaping how people experience place, power, and possibility. It helps us ask not only what happened here?—but why did it happen, who shaped it, and how can it be changed at its root?

The triad consists of three interdependent domains:

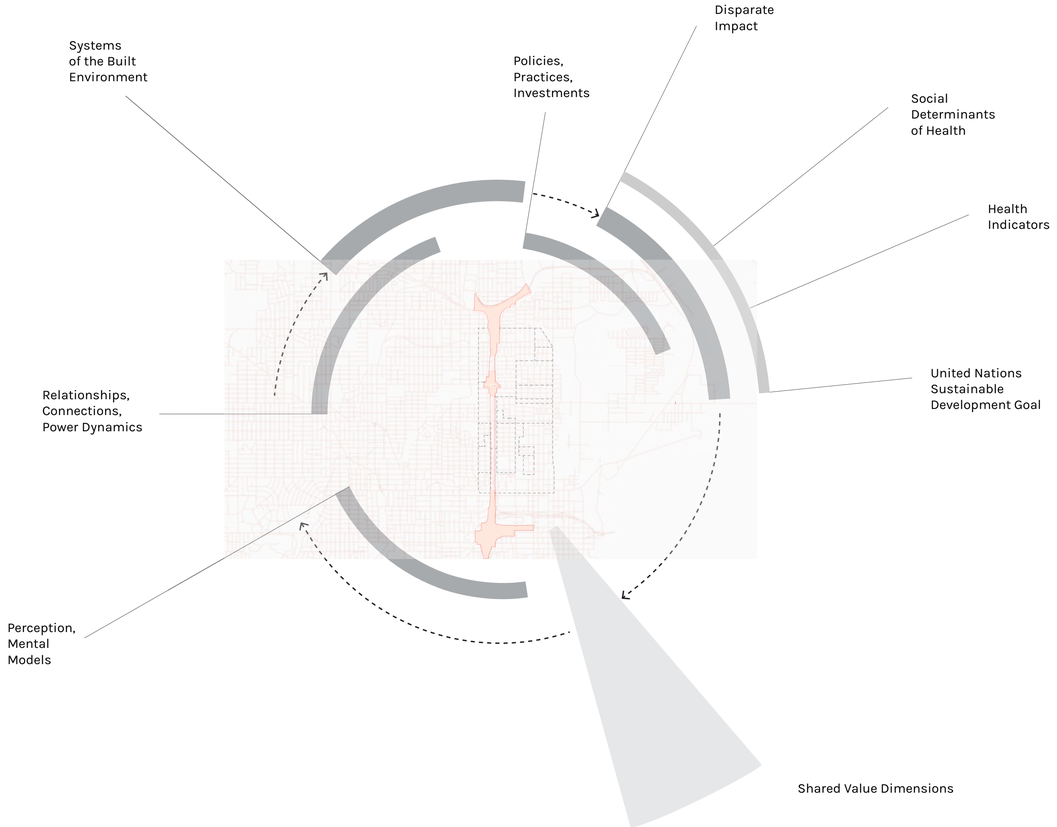
- Perceptions and Mental Models
  This first domain addresses the invisible but powerful narratives that shape how places and people are perceived. Mental models include assumptions, cultural stories, inherited beliefs, and dominant discourses that shape public attitudes and decision-making. When a neighborhood is labeled as "unsafe," "blighted," or "in decline," those perceptions influence how it is treated by institutions, developers, funders, and media. These labels are rarely neutral—they often emerge from racialized, classist, or ableist frameworks that devalue communities of color and working-class histories. In turn, these mental models justify disinvestment, over-policing, displacement, or exclusion from planning processes.

  In the built environment, these beliefs become material realities: they determine what gets preserved, who gets relocated, and what kinds of amenities are seen as "deserved." Transforming systems means transforming the mental models that underpin them.

- Relationships, Connections, and Power Dynamics
  This second domain examines the human infrastructure behind decision-making—how people, institutions, and systems relate to each other, and how those relationships shape power and influence. It maps the social dynamics that structure access, voice, trust, and accountability.

  In many historically harmed communities, the relationship between government and residents has been shaped by exclusion, extraction, or indifference. Decisions have been made for, rather than with, communities—often benefiting outside stakeholders at the expense of local needs. At the same time, local residents maintain powerful networks of solidarity, mutual aid, and cultural resilience.

  Understanding these dynamics is critical. It allows us to identify where power is concentrated or withheld, and where new forms



Research Methodology

An Interconnected Matrix

of co-governance and community stewardship can emerge. Equity doesn't happen by invitation—it happens through redistribution of power and reconfiguration of relationships.

- Policies, Practices, and Investments
  This final domain includes the visible mechanisms through which systems operate: zoning codes, transportation plans, funding priorities, administrative processes, and institutional routines. These tools may appear neutral, but they are deeply shaped by the mental models and power relationships that precede them.

  For example, a policy that favors highway expansion over public transit is not simply a technical choice—it reflects a worldview about who should be mobile, who deserves access, and what forms of life are worth protecting. Similarly, investment patterns that consistently prioritize high-income neighborhoods while neglecting others are not accidental—they are the material result of deeper systemic logics.

  This domain is where structural change must ultimately occur—but only after the upstream systems of thought and power are addressed. Policy reform alone is insufficient if the narratives and relationships that drive policy remain unchanged.

Together, these domains explain how the physical and social environment is shaped—not just by what is built, but by how people are seen, who holds decision-making power, and how resources are distributed over time. Each component interacts with and reinforces the others, forming a dynamic system that either reproduces harm or opens the door to repair. Transformation can only begin when these interdependent domains are shifted.

4. Systems-Theory Assessment
What are systems? Systems emerge as mechanisms designed to address our societal needs, becoming pivotal elements that define the conditions of our society. Considerations like inclusivity, functionality, sustainability, safety, and health in the design of the systems dictating human condition directly influence our relationship not only with the systems we create but also how those systems reflect a practice of values like equity, justice, and democracy.

Within this context, these systems not only shape physical spaces but also embody the sociological conditioning that underpins human experience.

5. Disparate Impact
Understanding how systems harm is as important as understanding how they function. The disparate impact lens is a critical component of the research framework—one that assesses the collectively interplay of the various components bear a societal cost due to generationally disproportionately affecting certain populations over time, particularly along lines of identity, class, geography, and ability.

This lens shifts focus away from intent and centers outcomes. It asks: What consequences did this action have? Who was most affected—and how? It measures how seemingly neutral decisions (such as where to build a freeway or how to zone land) intensify existing disparities in health, access, opportunity, and wellbeing.

Disparate Impact is especially relevant for analyzing infrastructure, because physical interventions often create lasting spatial imprints—not just in the landscape, but in the life chances of those who live near, around, or beneath them. To fully understand and begin to repair these impacts, the lens draws on three interconnected subcategories:

- Social Determinants of Health (SDH)
  Health doesn't begin in a doctor's office—it begins in the environments people live in every day. The Social Determinants of Health (SDH) are the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes, including housing quality, access to education, transportation, economic opportunity, clean air and water, food security, and community safety.

  In areas like North Omaha, the legacy of infrastructure-driven displacement and disinvestment has disrupted many of these conditions. The siting of the North 75 Freeway, for example, created a barrier to healthcare facilities, limited safe walking routes, increased exposure to air pollutants, and reduced access to grocery stores, parks, and public transportation.

  By tracking SDH, this framework reveals how the built environment directly shapes life expectancy, chronic illness rates, stress levels, and even infant mortality. It affirms that public health is spatial, and that designing for health equity means designing with SDH in mind.

- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs)
  The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) offer a universal blueprint for creating just, inclusive, and sustainable societies. These 17 interlinked goals, adopted by 193 countries, address issues such as poverty, inequality, education, climate resilience, and sustainable cities.

  By integrating the UNSDGs into the Disparate Impact analysis, this framework connects neighborhood-scale injustices—like displacement or infrastructure neglect—to international standards of justice and accountability. It recognizes that local harm is part of a global pattern—and that transformation at any scale requires alignment with shared ethical and ecological commitments

  Key UNSDGs activated in this work include:

  Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing
  Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities
  Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
  Goal 13: Climate Action
  Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

  This alignment provides legitimacy, measurability, and vision—ensuring that infrastructure repair doesn't just meet technical standards, but contributes to human rights and environmental stewardship.

- Health Indicators
  While SDH explains the conditions that shape health, and UNSDGs provide the goals, Health Indicators offer the metrics to track change over time. These indicators can include:

  - Rates of asthma, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease
  - Life expectancy by zip code
  - Emergency room visits linked to environmental factors
  - Mental health trends and stress-related illnesses
  - Child development and school readiness

  In communities adjacent to freeway infrastructure, elevated rates of respiratory illness, sleep disruption, noise exposure, and trauma are often recorded. But these indicators are not only markers of medical outcomes—they are reflections of spatial decisions made decades earlier.

  By integrating Health Indicators into the Disparate Impact lens, the framework ensures that transformation is evidence-based, that progress is trackable, and that communities have the tools to advocate for resources, policy shifts, and sustained investment based on measurable need.

Each of these categories brings a rigorous, data-informed framework to guide analysis, deepen insight, and connect local experiences to broader systems of accountability and action.

Continuous Learning & Adaptive Feedback

The research methodology is iterative, not linear, and supports continuous engagement and adaptive management, enabling real-time refinements in planning and implementation. This includes:

- Data collection using interviews, surveys, and participatory mapping
- Baseline condition establishment and longitudinal tracking
- Reflective feedback loops that influence investment, design, and narrative

This process ensures that the Thriving Communities Initiative remains responsive to shifting conditions, challenges, and opportunities, rooted in lived knowledge.

A Theory of Change for Transportation Justice

This methodology operates from a deep commitment to systems transformation. It recognizes that infrastructure challenges facing communities are not coincidental—they are outcomes of patterned decisions. Therefore, the methodology seeks not only to produce data, but to shift perspectives, investments, and design practices through intentional, values-aligned processes. Central to this research framework is to leverage pedagogy, process, and practice to advance a more just transportation future—where mobility, justice, freedom, and belonging are embedded not just in aspirations, but in outcomes.

Spatial Forensics & Analysis

From Matrix to Mapping: Informing Spatial Forensics and Analysis

A Deeper Dive

Spatial forensics and analysis is a multidisciplinary method of examining the built environment to understand how physical spaces reflect, reproduce, or resist systems of power, policy, and cultural meaning. Drawing from fields such as urban planning, architecture, history, public health, and sociology, spatial forensics investigates how social phenomena become embedded in the physical form of neighborhoods, cities, and landscapes.

At its core, spatial forensics is both an analytical and interpretive practice. It seeks to answer questions such as:

How did this place come to be shaped in this way?

What decisions, policies, and narratives influenced its formation?

Who benefited from those decisions, and who was harmed?

What is visible in the built environment—and what has been erased?

Rather than focusing solely on aesthetic or technical assessments, this research approach emphasizes context, consequence, and continuity. It examines how infrastructure, land use, and design choices are tied to broader patterns of investment, displacement, access, and belonging. It also pays close attention to what is missing—gaps in street networks, absences of amenities, or voids where community institutions once stood.

Analysis within this practice typically includes:

Historic mapping and policy overlays
Site-based investigation of infrastructure and land use
Social, demographic, and environmental data analysis

Documentation of spatial pattern of exclusion or fragmentation

Community narratives and lived experiences related to place

Guided by the research matrix tool this method does not treat space as an abstract or technical surface. Instead, it views space as a living archive—one shaped by values, power, and perception. The matrix informs this work by offering a structured, multidimensional lens to organize spatial inquiry across several key domains. The Matrix provides not only categories of observation, but also questions to ask, patterns to trace, and values to uphold. For this intiative it ensures that spatial analysis includes:

Cultural presence or erasure
Access and mobility conditions
Neighborhood connectivity or fragmentation
Environmental exposures and health vulnerabilities
Public and private investment histories
Institutional footprints and their effects on nearby communities

By treating space as both a product and a producer of systems, this research method provides a powerful lens for understanding the material consequences of governance, planning, and perception. It reveals the cumulative effects of decisions that might otherwise appear disconnected—like zoning laws, highway placement, redlining maps, or public housing demolition.

This method is particularly valuable in efforts to address historical harm, inform reparative planning, or ensure that future design is rooted in equity and justice. Ultimately, spatial forensics and analysis help us read the built environment not just as a backdrop to human activity, but as an active participant in shaping lives, relationships, and futures.

North 75 Freeway

The research matrix forms the backbone of this project's spatial forensics and analysis process. Rather than mapping land in isolation from people, or infrastructure apart from memory, the analysis integrates matrix categories to reveal the deeper systems at play beneath the visible surface.

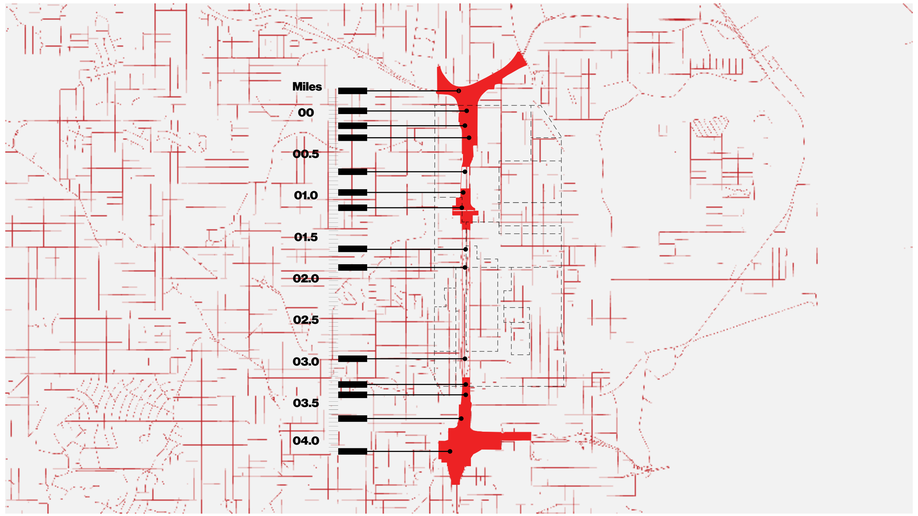
In this process, data collected through cartography, oral narratives, lived experiences, health impact, and value dimensions help to unpack and iterate priorities which are then translated into layered spatial assessments. These include historical overlays, root cause diagrams, displacement mapping, circulation barriers, public amenity gaps, and environmental health exposures. The goal is to uncover not only where harm occurred, but how it was implemented, what structures sustained it, and where design can intervene most meaningfully.

This process is both analytical and imaginative. It traces the impacts of freeway construction on neighborhoods like North Omaha—but it also helps communities envision what else is possible. Through overlays, historic mapping, site analysis, and narrative gathering, the process helps reveal the layers of influence—economic, racial, environmental, political—that continue to shape how people experience and navigate place.

Residents, local historians, artists, youth, planners, and institutions all contribute to a layered understanding of place. This ensures the analysis does not happen from a distance but is built through deep engagement, lived experience, and reciprocal learning.

Ultimately, spatial forensics and analysis is not just about diagnosing harm—it's about identifying pathways for healing, reconnection, and reparative design. It builds the foundation for restoring physical and social cohesion in places like the North 75 Freeway corridor—not through nostalgia, but through a shared commitment to building futures rooted in justice. This forensic approach is essential to understanding the complexity of infrastructural harm—and to designing strategies that do not replicate past injustices. For example, when assessing the Bristol Street block, the analysis reveals the exact grid discontinuities and missing amenities that correlate with displacement patterns; at the Ames/Storz junction, spatial analysis highlights how freeway design created overlapping zones of environmental and mobility exclusion. These are not accidental patterns—they are spatialized policies, and deeper analysis not only helps make them visible but connects such findings to intentional impact opportunities.

The work of spatial forensics and analysis aligns in tandem to turn abstraction into architecture, policy into place, and memory into movement. This is an analysis in service of restoration, reparative design, and regenerative community planning to be used for perpetuity.



III. infrastructure temporalities

infrastructure as inheritance
first nations and indigenous trails
colonial to early republic
19th century: roads, railroads, and the reshaping of american infrastructure
early 20th century: automobility, federalization, and system thinking
mid 20thcentury: interstates, urban renewal, and displacement
late 20th to 21st century: reconnection and resilience
north omaha | 75 north freeway

“THE FIRST ROADS IN AMERICA WERE NOT BUILT—THEY WERE REMEMBERED.”

ADAPTED FROM INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND ORAL TRADITIONS; INSPIRED BY THE COLLECTIVE SCHOLARSHIP OF NATIVE HISTORIANS, CARTOGRAPHERS, AND CULTURAL PRACTITIONERS.

Infrastructure as Inheritance

Tracing the Legacy, Reclaiming the Future

Throughlines and Breaklines
A Temporal Journey of Infrastructure

Long before the construction of modern highways, First Nations peoples established vast networks of trade routes and pathways that connected regions, economies, and cultures across North America. These routes were not just pathways for movement but lifelines of commerce, diplomacy, and sustenance, deeply tied to the land and the rhythms of nature. Trails such as the Osage, Pawnee, and Otoe-Missouria trade routes, which traversed the plains and river valleys, facilitated economic exchange, seasonal migrations, and spiritual connections to place.

The development of America's modern transportation infrastructure—including highways, railways, and urban roadways—was often built upon these Indigenous pathways. What began as well-worn footpaths, mounted horse trails, and canoe routes evolved into wagon trails, stagecoach roads, and eventually the paved corridors of the 20th century's highway system. The Missouri River Valley and the Great Plains trade networks that once supported First Nations economies were later overlaid with railroads, state highways, and interstates, shaping the infrastructure of today.

To understand how current infrastructure systems have and continue to shape the American landscape, we must begin with the early origins of infrastructure development.

The evolution of American transportation infrastructure has mirrored the country's expansion, economic transformation, and civic values over centuries. From early colonial routes to federally funded highways and railways, each phase has built on the last—often reflecting both technological progress and entrenched social inequities. The development of transportation infrastructure in the United States has always been more than a technical endeavor—it is a mirror of the nation's priorities, power structures, and social contracts. From the first colonial routes to today's climate-resilient and equity-driven investments, infrastructure has shaped the physical, economic, and civic contours of American life. Roads, canals, railroads, and highways have not only connected communities—they've reflected the country's deepest values, from expansionism and innovation to exclusion and control.

This story is not just about movement, but about meaning. Who gets to move? Who decides where roads go? Who benefits from investment—and who is displaced by it? These questions have echoed through centuries of development, starting as early as the 17th-century Boston Post Road, through 19th-century canal building and railroad construction, and culminating in the 20th-century freeway era.

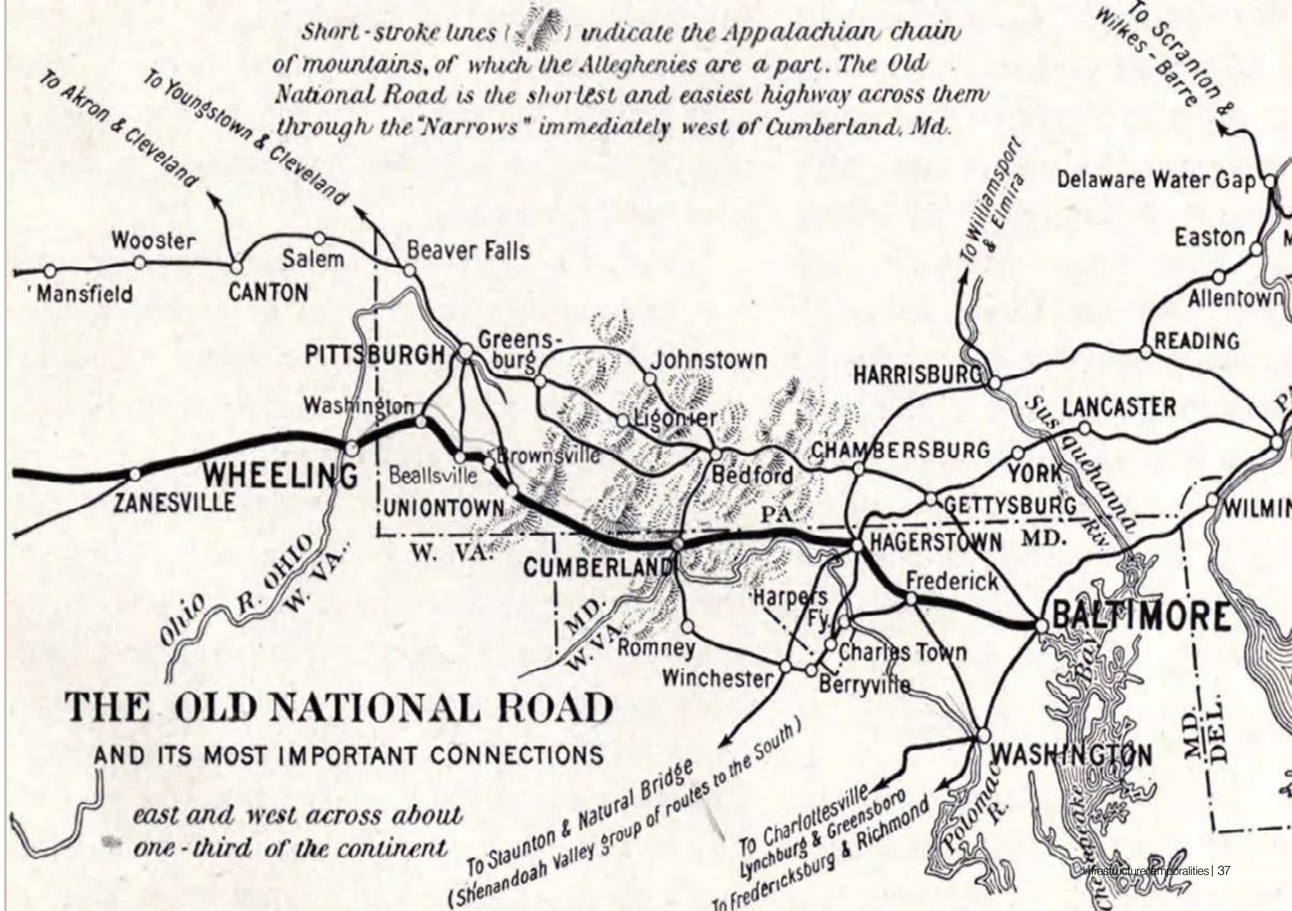
At the heart of the formative decades of the United States, was Albert Gallatin, a Swiss-American immigrant, political thinker, and visionary policymaker who understood the power of infrastructure not just to transport people and goods—but to bind a fractured and expanding republic. As Treasury Secretary under President Thomas Jefferson, Gallatin's 1808 Report on Roads and Canals became the first national call for a publicly funded transportation system. His vision laid the intellectual and policy foundation for the federal role in infrastructure—a role that would only expand over time through engineers like General Roy Stone, and later through congressional oversight bodies such as the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

Understanding these origins allows us to move beyond a technical view of infrastructure toward a historic account of a continuing national movement. It helps us see roads and bridges not just as artifacts, but as decisions—each one shaping opportunity, memory, and possibility across generations. The history of American transportation infrastructure is not just a chronicle of engineering triumphs—it is a story about power, access, and the uneven geography of opportunity. From colonial postal roads to 20th-century interstate highways, the development of roads, canals, railroads, and bridges has been central to the project of nation-building. These systems have physically knit together a vast and diverse country, enabling commerce, migration, and military readiness. But they have also reflected—and reinforced—social hierarchies, political agendas, and structural inequities.

Infrastructure shapes where we live, how we move, what we access, and even what we value. It is foundational to American identity and prosperity—but also deeply entangled with histories of displacement, segregation, and uneven development. The routes carved into the landscape are never neutral. They are the products of decisions—legislative, economic, and ideological—made by people in power, often without the input or consent of those most affected.

This section traces the layered development of the United States' transportation systems, beginning with early colonial routes like the Boston Post Road and expanding into the large-scale projects of the 19th and 20th centuries. It highlights the pivotal role of federal policy and congressional oversight, particularly through the creation of legislative committees tasked with managing the nation's physical infrastructure.

Incorporating historical milestones, federal legislation, and the evolution of congressional leadership—particularly through the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure—this narrative reveals how transportation infrastructure became a tool not only for economic expansion but also for social control and civic possibility.



Map of the eastern section of the National (or Cumberland) Road, c. 1916, map, Encyclopedia Brittanica, January 1, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Road#/media/1/146426/237531.

First Nations and Indigenous Trails

The Original Infrastructure of Turtle Island

Procession: Thousands of Years In The Making

Indigenous trails, portages, waterways, and trade routes were a vast and sophisticated network of systems that existed for millenia. These paths—many still visible in the topography of cities and rural landscapes today—were part of a deeply rooted infrastructure system that reflected the movement, ecology, and cosmology of First Nations.

These routes were not arbitrary—they were the result of thousands of years of intimate knowledge of land, water, and seasonal cycles. They connected not only village to village, but ecosystems to cosmologies, trade to diplomacy, and travel to spiritual practice. Trails followed river valleys, animal migration paths, and ridgelines. They formed a continental web of exchange, culture, and kinship that spanned from the Mississippi to the Great Lakes, the Gulf Coast to the Hudson Valley, the Rockies to the Atlantic.

In what is now the Northeast, for instance, trails like the Great Iroquois Trail and the Mohawk Trail provided strategic and cultural corridors between what are today major urban centers. Many early settler routes—such as the Boston Post Road—were constructed directly over these Indigenous trails, often without acknowledgment or consent. The term "wilderness" frequently used in colonial documents obscured the fact that these landscapes were already deeply inhabited, cultivated, and mapped through Indigenous geographies.

When colonists and early U.S. government officials began to establish road systems, they relied heavily on these Indigenous routes—but systematically erased their origins. Over time, what had once been shared paths for communal, sustainable use became privatized, militarized, and racialized infrastructure projects designed to benefit colonial expansion and settler economies.

The violent reorganization of these trails into settler infrastructure mirrored a broader process of dispossession and cultural erasure. Treaties were broken, Native nations were forcibly removed, and the infrastructure of empire was layered atop the spiritual and material networks of Indigenous life. Yet, these original systems never disappeared. They persist—in landscape memory, in language, in ceremony, and in the work of contemporary Native planners and activists who are restoring Indigenous frameworks to environmental stewardship and regional design.

Recognizing the foundational role of First Nations in shaping North America's original infrastructure systems is not just a matter of historical accuracy— it is a necessary act of reframing. It challenges us to see transportation not only as a modern statebuilding tool, but as a practice of relation, memory, and sovereignty that predates the nation itself. Acknowledging the antecedents allows one to highlight the pivotal role of federal policy and congressional oversight in our built environment, particularly through the creation of legislative committees tasked with managing the nation's physical infrastructure.

Incorporating historical milestones, federal legislation, and the evolution of congressional leadership—particularly through the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure—this narrative reveals how transportation infrastructure became a tool not only for economic expansion but also for social control and civic possibility.

Colonial & U.S. Expansion Aligned with Indigenous Trails

Many highways and modern roads were originally based on Indigenous travel routes and trading paths. Examples include:

- The Great Wagon Road, an Indigenous trail later expanded by European settlers, influenced modern U.S. Route 11.
- The Natchez Trace Parkway, once used by Native nations such as the Chickasaw and Choctaw, became a major transportation corridor.
- Parts of Interstate 80 follow routes once used by the California Trail, which itself overlapped with Indigenous pathways.

National Historic Trails & Highways Overlap

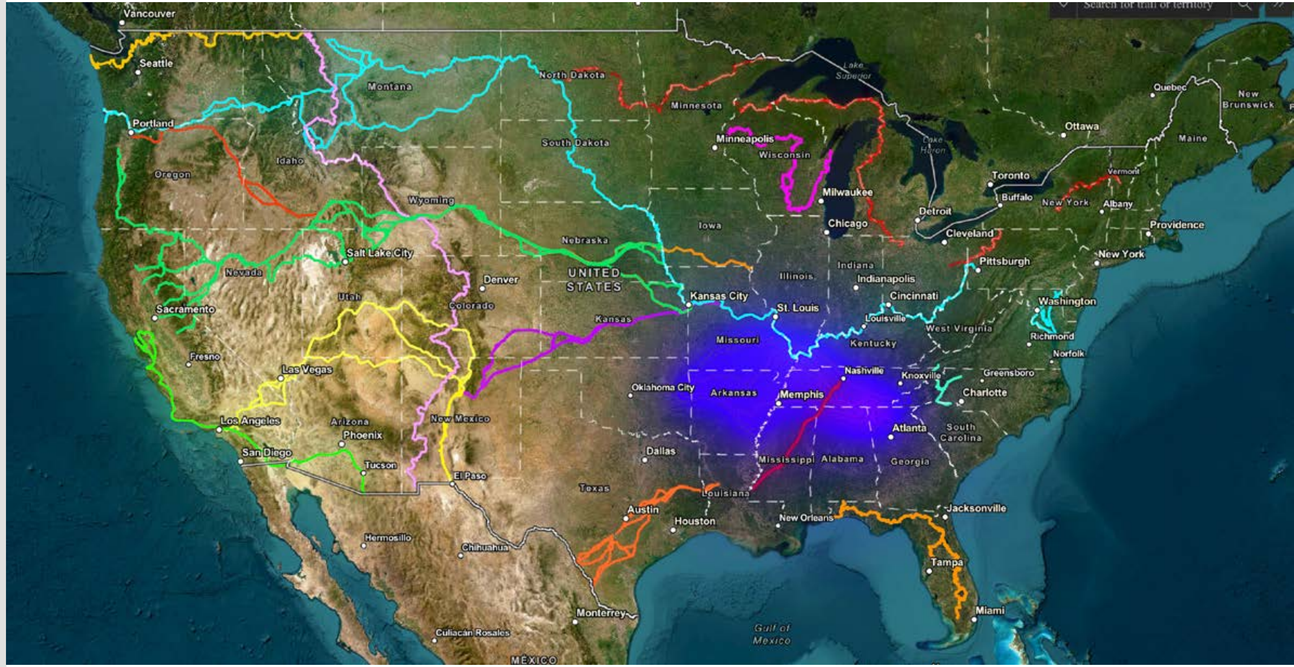
Several National Historic Trails mark forced relocations of Indigenous peoples and now run alongside or intersect with major highways:

- The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail (which follows the forced removal of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole) overlaps with parts of U.S. Highway 412 and Interstate 40.
- The Oregon Trail, originally a Native trade route, now parallels Interstate 84 in places.

Treaty Boundaries & Highway Development

As highways expanded, many were built through or near lands that had been taken from Indigenous nations through treaties, often violating the original agreements. Examples include:

- U.S. Highway 66 (Route 66) crosses lands that were once part of large Indigenous territories in the Southwest.
- The Trans-Canada Highway cuts through Indigenous lands where treaties were signed but often not honored.



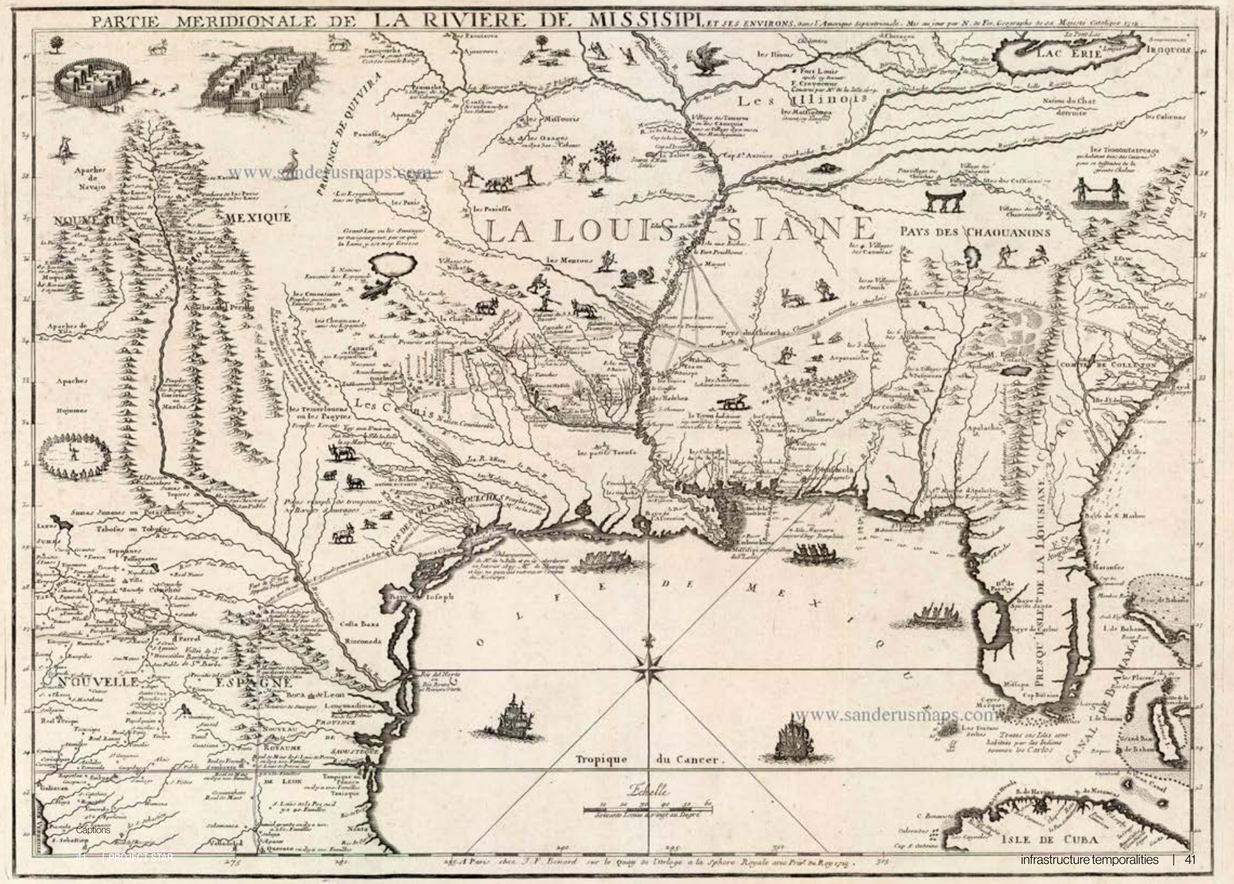
Native Lands, National Trails, map, Partnership for the National Trails System, January 1, 2025, https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/c98b415eb4b44081a6dcb9e824785846/page/NLNT-Map//.

1718 De Fer Map of the Mississippi River Valley

Created by renowned French cartographer Nicolas De Fer, the 1718 map titled Carte de la Louisiane et du cours du Mississipi is one of the earliest European renderings of the Mississippi River Valley and its expansive interior geography. Commissioned during the height of French colonial exploration in North America, the map is both a geopolitical artifact and a visual expression of empire-building—highlighting France's territorial claims stretching from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico.

Importantly, the map does more than outline rivers and settlements—it depicts a dense network of trade and transportation routes that had long been established by First Nations. Indigenous trails, river portages, and village networks are visible throughout the map, reflecting centuries of sophisticated mobility, commerce, and intertribal diplomacy that predate European arrival. By tracing the Mississippi and its tributaries, the map indirectly acknowledges the foundational knowledge systems of Indigenous communities who shaped—and were shaped by—these landscapes.

While the geographic precision of the map is limited by the scientific tools of its time, its layered presentation of settlements, waterways, and native territories reveals how colonial cartography borrowed from and overlaid itself upon Indigenous spatial systems. It stands as a historical record not only of colonial ambition, but of Indigenous presence, movement, and relational infrastructure across the continent.



De Fer, Nicolas. Carte de la Louisiane et du cours du Mississipi. Paris, 1718. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division

captions

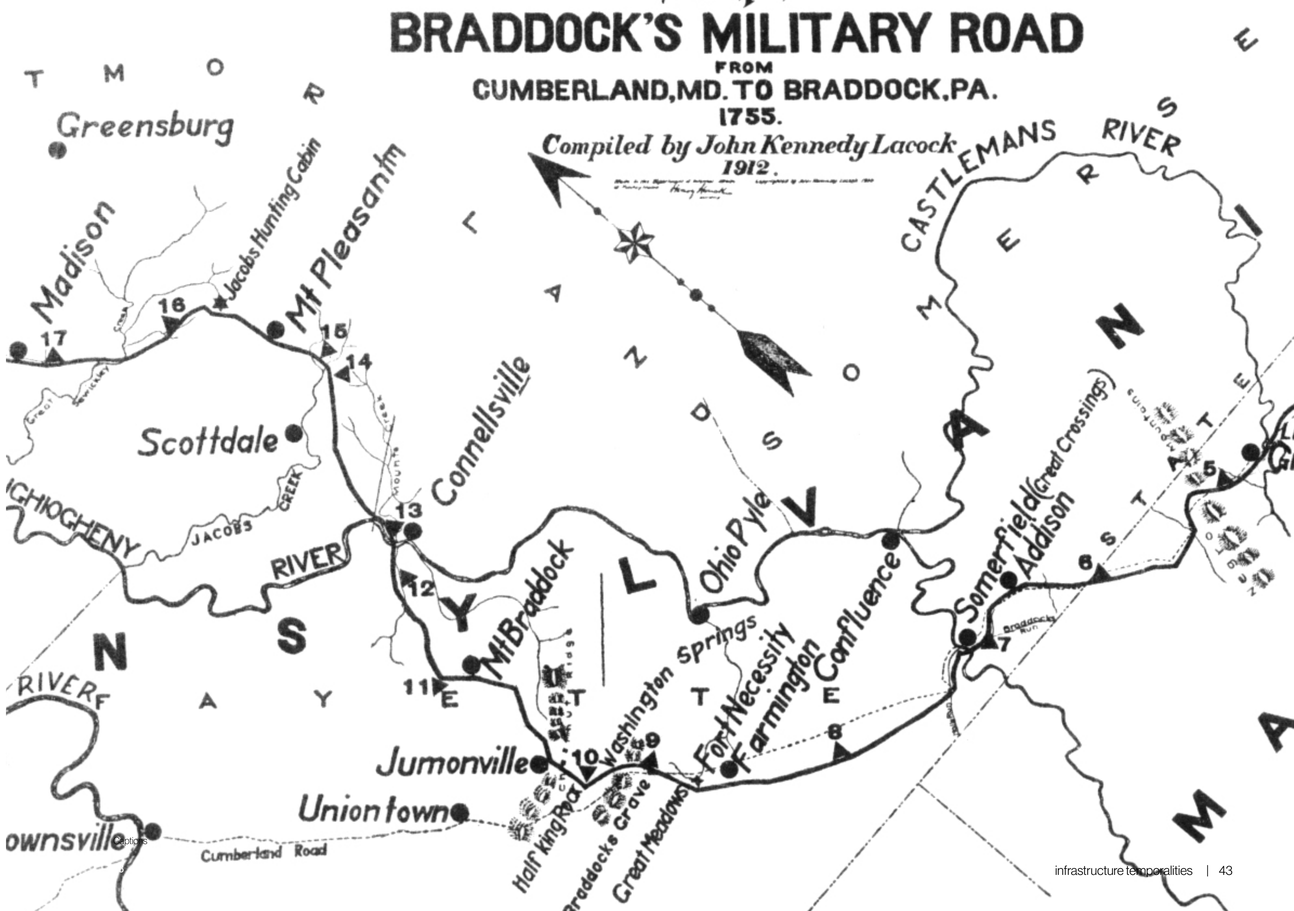
Nemacolin's Path

Nemacolin's Path was a well-traveled Indigenous trail crossing the Allegheny Mountains between the Potomac and Monongahela River valleys. This route, known and used by generations of Native communities, connected the Mid-Atlantic coast to the interior of the Ohio River Valley and was deeply embedded in the region's social, economic, and cultural lifeways.

Named for Nemacolin, a Delaware (Lenape) leader, the path gained prominence in the mid-18th century when Nemacolin worked with Christopher Gist, a surveyor for the Ohio Company, to widen and formalize sections of the trail for use by British traders and settlers. This collaboration was later expanded upon by George Washington, who relied on the path during early exploratory missions on behalf of the British Crown.

In 1755, during the French and Indian War, General Edward Braddock used Nemacolin's Path as the foundation for a military road that would carry British troops toward Fort Duquesne (now Pittsburgh). From Fort Cumberland, Braddock ordered his men to widen the trail—cutting through Haystack Mountain and extending the route to Little Meadows, approximately 20 miles west. Though the campaign ultimately failed, the route itself was later absorbed into what became known as Braddock's Road, and eventually, parts of the National Road—the first federally funded highway in the United States.

This history underscores how Indigenous knowledge systems shaped the geography of early infrastructure. What colonial authorities regarded as "new roads" were often direct appropriations of Native trails—spaces long used to connect people, places, and ecosystems. Nemacolin's Path, like many others, reflects a larger pattern in which Native mobility and land stewardship were reinterpreted through the lens of expansion, military conquest, and settler colonialism.



Anderson, Fred. Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766. Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

National Park Service. "Nemacolin's Path and Braddock's Road." Fort Necessity National Battlefield.

Occaneechi Path

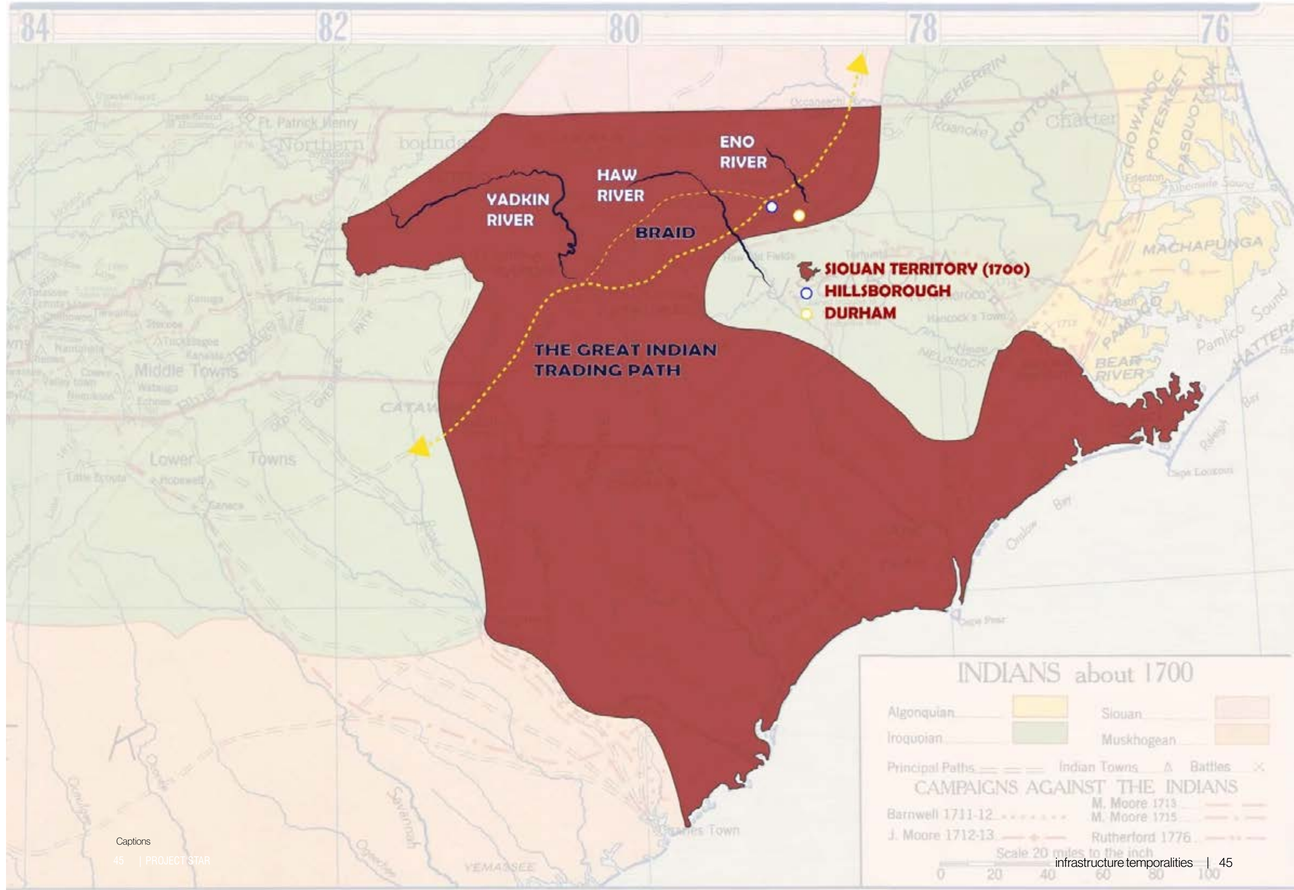
Known historically as part of the Occaneechi Path (also called the Indian Trading Path), this trail stretched across the Piedmont and into the interior valleys of the Appalachian Mountains. For centuries, it served as a conduit for commerce, diplomacy, and seasonal migration among Native nations including the Occaneechi, Catawba, Saponi, and others.

One segment of this expansive trail ran from what is now Winston-Salem, passing through the region that would become Mount Airy, and continued northward—crossing the New River and connecting to deeper interior routes that led through the Cumberland Gap and into the Shenandoah Valley. These routes weren't random—they followed ecologically informed paths, ridgelines, river corridors, and watershed divides that Indigenous people had mapped and maintained over generations.

By the 18th and 19th centuries, as European and American settlers expanded into the region, these Indigenous routes were co-opted and formalized into wagon roads. Old Route 52 is one such example. It followed the original trailbed but was adapted for new economic purposes—particularly as a trade corridor for agricultural goods. In time, this road became the principal route by which farmers from Carroll County, Virginia, just across the state line, hauled their produce to market in Winston-Salem.

A poignant image from the early 1900s shows Greenberry Easter and William Joseph Easter, two Carroll County orchardists, posed beside their horse-drawn wagons loaded with apples. Their journey traced the old Indigenous route, echoing generations of movement across this land—first on foot, then on horseback, and later by wagon. What had once been a Native transportation lifeway was now a rural economic artery, shaped by continuity and change.

While the built road and the wagons represent a settler-era adaptation, the foundational geography belongs to the Indigenous nations who first charted, maintained, and shared these pathways. Like many early American roads, Old Route 52 is a palimpsest—its modern form layered atop Native knowledge systems that oriented people across landscapes long before colonial borders were drawn.



Captions

World Monuments Fund. "The Great Trading Path, United States." World Monuments Fund. Accessed March 26, 2025. https://www.wmf.org/monuments/the-great-trading-path-united-states.

SPECIAL FOCUS

First Nations and Indigenous Trails

The Original Infrastructure of Turtle Island

Nebraska

Before Nebraska became a US territory in 1854—or even a U.S. State in 1867—the land was home to complex Indigenous trail systems used by the Omaha, Ponca, Pawnee, Otoe-Missouria, Lakota, and other First Nations. These routes followed river valleys, ridgelines, and bison trails, forming a regional infrastructure of trade, diplomacy, and ceremony. Many of these original paths would later be overlaid by settler wagon roads and rail lines.

Many of these Indigenous nations maintained overlapping territorial boundaries and complex seasonal movement patterns—often defined not by fixed property lines but by relationships to rivers, hunting grounds, sacred sites, and trade alliances. Trail systems reflected these relationships and were constantly maintained through use, ceremony, and stewardship.

Rather than carving through "empty land," these trails followed natural corridors—river valleys like the Platte, Elkhorn, and Missouri; buffalo migration routes across the tallgrass prairie; ridgelines and watershed divides that made travel more efficient and predictable. Again, linking villages, and seasonal camps across what is now Nebraska and far beyond, stretching into trade networks that connected the Great Plains with the Great Lakes, the Southwest, and the Mississippi Valley.

Many of the major Indigenous trails in Nebraska followed logical and ecologically sound routes: along rivers such as the Platte, Niobrara, Missouri, and Elkhorn, or across ridgelines and natural corridors used by buffalo herds. Trails connected summer and winter encampments, ceremonial gathering sites, and intertribal trading hubs. Some routes stretched north into the Dakotas, east toward the Mississippi Valley, west into the Rocky Mountains, and south to the Southwest and Plains borderlands.

Indigenous pathways were deeply cultural and ceremonial. Movement itself was a practice of relationship: to land, to spirit, to ancestry. Trails carried language, medicine, songs, and diplomacy. They were living maps encoded with meaning, shaped by a worldview in which geography and identity were inseparable.

These trails formed part of a continental Indigenous road network that made possible not only material exchange—beads, furs, foodstuffs—but also the transmission of stories, kinship, and knowledge systems.

One of the most important of these was the Great Platte River Road, a broad corridor used by the Pawnee and other tribes long before it became the central artery of the Oregon, Mormon, and California trails. What settlers called a "natural highway" had, in fact, been shaped by centuries of Indigenous travel, maintenance, and meaning-making. In this way, many of the routes that would later be formalized into U.S. infrastructure—wagon roads, railroads, and highways—traced paths Indigenous people had already marked through relational geography and ancestral continuity.

When settlers arrived in the 19th century, they frequently appropriated these routes without acknowledgment, rebranding them as wagon roads or surveying them as military routes and railroad corridors. For example, segments of Indigenous trails were subsumed into well-known settler pathways like the Oregon Trail, the California Trail, and later, federal postal roads and railroads.

As Nebraska Territory opened to "European" settlement in the 1850s, the push for overland migration intensified. The Omaha-Council Bluffs region quickly became a hub of westward expansion, serving as a major departure point for trails like the California Trail and Oregon Trail. The Platte River Valley became a natural corridor, shaping the geography of early settlement and infrastructure.

However, as European American settlement expanded in the 19th century, these Indigenous infrastructure systems were gradually overwritten or violently severed. Treaties negotiated under duress, military campaigns, and land cession acts displaced many Native nations from their homelands in Nebraska. Trails that had once supported vibrant networks of mobility and community became absorbed into colonial maps, rebranded as military roads, rail corridors, or state highways. Their Indigenous origins were rarely acknowledged, even as their routes underpinned the very geography of the expanding settler state.

In some cases, former Indigenous trails became routes for removal—used during forced relocations such as the Ponca Trail of Tears in 1877, when members of the Ponca Nation were marched from their homelands in northeastern Nebraska to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). In these tragic instances, paths once used for seasonal renewal became roads of erasure.

To begin the story of Nebraska's transportation system with the arrival of the railroads or automobiles is to enter midway through the narrative. A fuller history recognizes that long before "modern" infrastructure development of highways, Nebraska was already a deeply connected landscape—mapped, moved, and maintained by the First Nations whose presence and sovereignty predate the state itself.

Legacy and Relevance

Today, the memory of Nebraska's Indigenous trail systems survives in oral histories, archaeological records, and the lived experience of Native communities still present in and around the state. While much of the formal infrastructure—railroads, interstates, urban grids—has obscured these older geographies, the foundational role of First Nations mobility and stewardship remains embedded in the land.

Understanding these trail systems is not simply an act of historical correction—it is a reminder that infrastructure is not new, and that mobility, connectivity, and spatial order have always existed in multiple forms. Indigenous infrastructure was rooted in balance with the land, communal reciprocity, and ceremonial meaning—offering an alternative to extractive and exclusionary models of development that followed.

Tensions remain encoded in today's infrastructure systems, reminding us that mobility is never neutral, and that infrastructure always carries the values and priorities of its builders. As planners, designers, and communities across Nebraska reconsider the future of infrastructure—whether through freeway transformation, public transit, or greenways—recognizing the Indigenous geographies that preceded and persist can serve as a foundation for more inclusive and respectful place-making.

Colonial to Early Republic (1600s–1830s)

Establishing Overland and Waterway Routes

Laying the Groundwork for National Expansion and Early Governance

As colonial powers sought to establish control, commerce, and administrative order, Indigenous Trails were transformed and formalized into transportation networks into, overland postal routes and rudimentary roads. The construction of routes like the Boston Post Road marked a shift toward standardized movement and early inter-colonial connectivity. These roads were not just practical—they were political, reinforcing colonial power structures and communication systems between regions.

The new American republic emerged following independence, westward expansion became central to the national project. The country's leaders understood that a unified economy and functioning democracy would require more than ideas—it would require physical connections across vast and often undeveloped territory. The early 1800s brought the first federal investments in roads and canals, such as the National Road and the Erie Canal, which enabled access to the frontier and helped shape regional economies. These developments were both visionary and exclusionary: while they fostered trade and state-building, they also facilitated settler colonialism, the displacement of Native peoples, and the entrenchment of land speculation.

One prominent example of this transformation was the creation of the Boston Post Road, a key colonial route linking New York City to Boston via Providence and Hartford. While typically framed as an innovation of colonial governance, this road—like many others—followed the paths of Native trails, such as those of the Algonquian-speaking peoples, including the Narragansett and Mohegan. The Boston Post Road marked a pivotal shift: from informal and organic use of land to state-sanctioned, standardized mobility. The road wasn't merely a conduit for letters and goods—it was a physical infrastructure of control. Roads like it enabled colonial governments to consolidate administrative order, monitor populations, expand commerce, and establish spatial hierarchies that prioritized settler access and rule.

As the colonies transitioned into an independent American republic in the late 18th century, the imperative for internal connectivity intensified. Nation-building demanded more than ideological unity—it required infrastructure. Leaders like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Gallatin recognized that the country's survival, economic viability, and sense of shared identity depended on linking far-flung territories. In this view, roads and canals were not just public works; they were instruments of democracy, security, and expansion.

In the early 1800s, the federal government began to invest in its first large-scale transportation projects. The National Road, initiated in 1811, stretched from Cumberland, Maryland, westward into the Ohio Valley, becoming the young nation's first federally funded highway. It enabled settler access to lands west of the Appalachians, promoted trade between coastal and interior economies, and symbolized the federal government's growing role in shaping national development.

Simultaneously, projects like the Erie Canal (completed in 1825) revolutionized water-based commerce by linking the Great Lakes to the Atlantic via the Hudson River. The canal dramatically reduced transportation costs, catalyzed New York's rise as a commercial hub, and spurred settlement across the Midwest. Other canal projects soon followed, creating a watery lattice that would influence migration, agricultural distribution, and industrial growth.

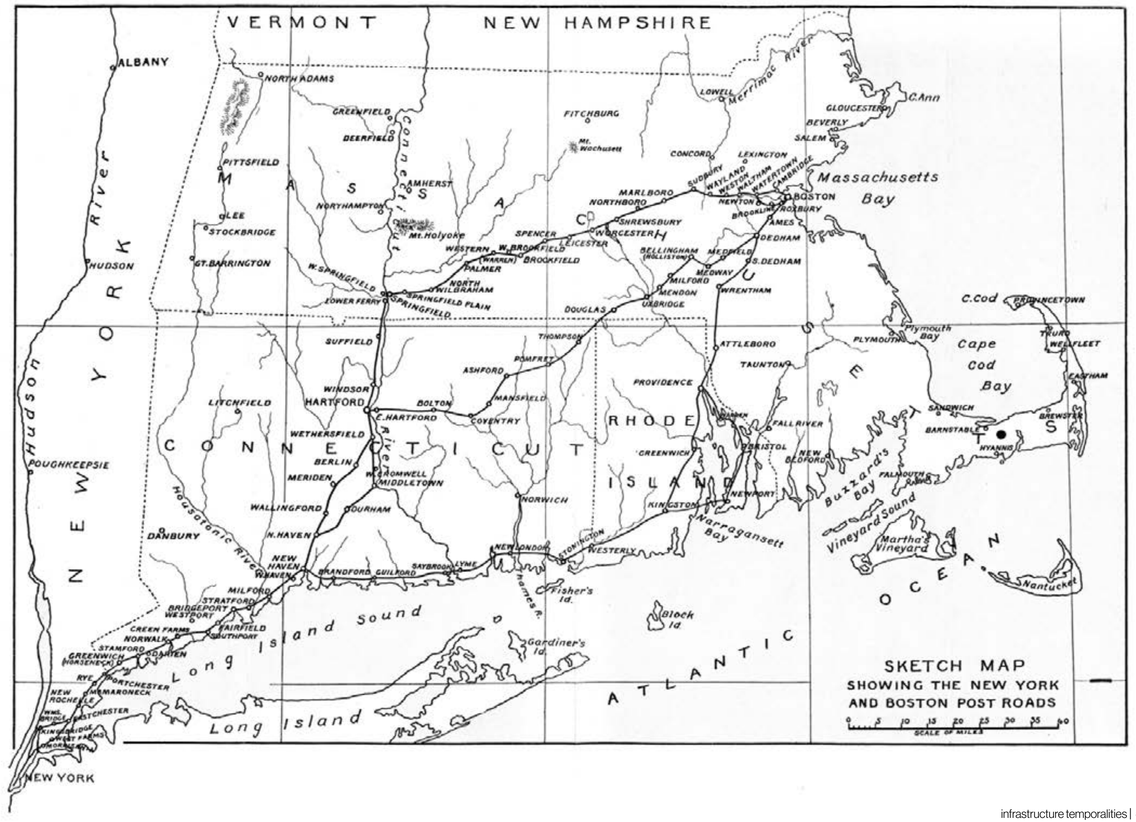
However, this era of infrastructural innovation was not universally beneficial. While hailed as visionary in economic and political terms, these projects deepened settler colonialism and fueled systemic displacement. The very same roads and canals that enabled commercial expansion and "national unity" also served as tools for removing Native peoples from their ancestral lands, undermining tribal sovereignty, and entrenching white settler claims through the formalization of land markets and speculation. In many cases, infrastructure served not just as a connector, but as a mechanism of erasure—transforming Indigenous homelands into commodified landscapes of extraction and privatization.

Moreover, the labor and environmental cost of this development was steep. Roads and canals were often built through dangerous conditions, using enslaved labor, indentured servants, and exploited immigrant workers. The alignment of infrastructure with property ownership, racial exclusion, and class hierarchy would lay a foundation that future generations would either inherit or resist.

The period from the 1600s to the 1830s thus represents the foundational era of American infrastructure—a time when mobility was formalized, and infrastructure became a tool of governance, commerce, and identity. It is in this period that we see:

The transformation of Indigenous trail systems into settler infrastructure;

The ideological linking of mobility with freedom and progress, and the early tensions between economic ambition and spatial justice promoted an ideological undergirding to the development of transportation networks. The federal government's emergence as the infrastructural authority further fueled the embedding of spatial control in economic and real estate development. As such, there existed early contradictions of freedom and exclusion, where roads symbolized an opportunity for some and the dispossession for others. At this moment, infrastructure was not yet industrialized, but it was ideologically charged. It reflected the nation's ambition—and its blind spots. And it laid the groundwork for future debates about who infrastructure serves, who it leaves behind, and how space becomes a political project.



1673 – Boston Post Road Established

Among the first mail routes in colonial America, the Boston Post Road connected Boston and New York, laying the groundwork for early communication and transportation systems. It was developed atop Indigenous pathways and reflected colonial priorities in administration and commerce.

Sketch Map Showing the New York and Boston Post Roads, 1913. Walking the Post Road. January 1, 2025. https://www.walkingthepostroad.net/Blog/Entries/2010/6/16_Entry_14__The_Upper_Post_Road_Milestones.html.

Colonial to Early Republic (1600s–1830s)

Establishing Overland and Waterway Routes

Context and Purpose of the National Road (Early 1800s)

The National Road was initiated in 1811 and became the first major road project funded by the federal government. It was intended to provide a reliable route for settlers moving westward, improve trade, and integrate the new states into a cohesive national economy. The road's route connected Cumberland, Maryland, to Vandalia, Illinois, passing through key regions like the Allegheny Mountains, and incorporated segments of Native American trails. These paths, such as those used by the Iroquois, Shawnee, and other tribes, were critical for trade and travel before European settlement. The construction of the National Road was a response to the difficulty of relying on private individuals or parties for the creation and expansion of infrastructure. The government realized the need for a unified system to expedite commerce and settlement across the growing country.

Influencing Factors: Albert Gallatin and Federal Investment

The creation of the National Road was championed by Albert Gallatin, who served as Secretary of the Treasury under President Thomas Jefferson. Gallatin believed that investments in infrastructure, including roads and canals, were essential to the country's growth and the facilitation of commerce, especially as new territories were being settled and developed. Gallatin's advocacy led to the allocation of federal funds, marking the beginning of the U.S. government's involvement in large-scale infrastructure projects. His vision was to open up new routes for trade and settlement that could support economic growth and national unity.

Construction and Challenges (1811–1830s)

Early Construction: Work on the National Road began in 1811, and it faced significant challenges, particularly in crossing the Allegheny Mountains. The construction was labor-intensive, requiring workers to carve through rough, mountainous terrain. The road was initially built as a dirt path, but over time, it was upgraded to a paved road, with layers of stone and gravel to support vehicle travel. Transportation of Goods: Initially, horse-drawn wagons and stagecoaches were the primary means of transportation along the road, serving settlers and merchants traveling west. The road's strategic importance grew as it became a central route for moving goods and people between the eastern states and the expanding western frontier.

In 1824, President Monroe passed the The General Survey Act of 1824 that gave United States Army engineers the power to survey, design, and construct transportation infrastructure, including roads, canals, and later railroads.

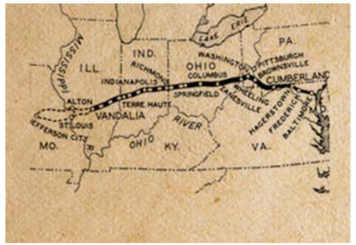
In 1825, The Erie Canal is completed. This groundbreaking canal project connected the Great Lakes to the Atlantic via the Hudson River, making New York a dominant trade center and proving the economic power of infrastructure investment.

Legacy and Influence on Future Infrastructure (Mid 1800s and Beyond)

By the mid-1800s, the National Road had become a crucial part of the United States' expanding transportation network. It not only helped facilitate the migration of settlers westward but also set a precedent for future highway development in the U.S. The route of the National Road influenced the planning of subsequent transportation infrastructure, including the development of U.S. Route 40 and, later, the Interstate Highway System. Many modern highways follow or overlap with sections of the National Road, which laid the groundwork for America's interstate connectivity. The National Road also played a role in the economic integration of the Midwest, as it connected cities like Pittsburgh and Columbus to the East Coast, enabling easier movement of goods and people.

Long-Term Impact on U.S. Transportation

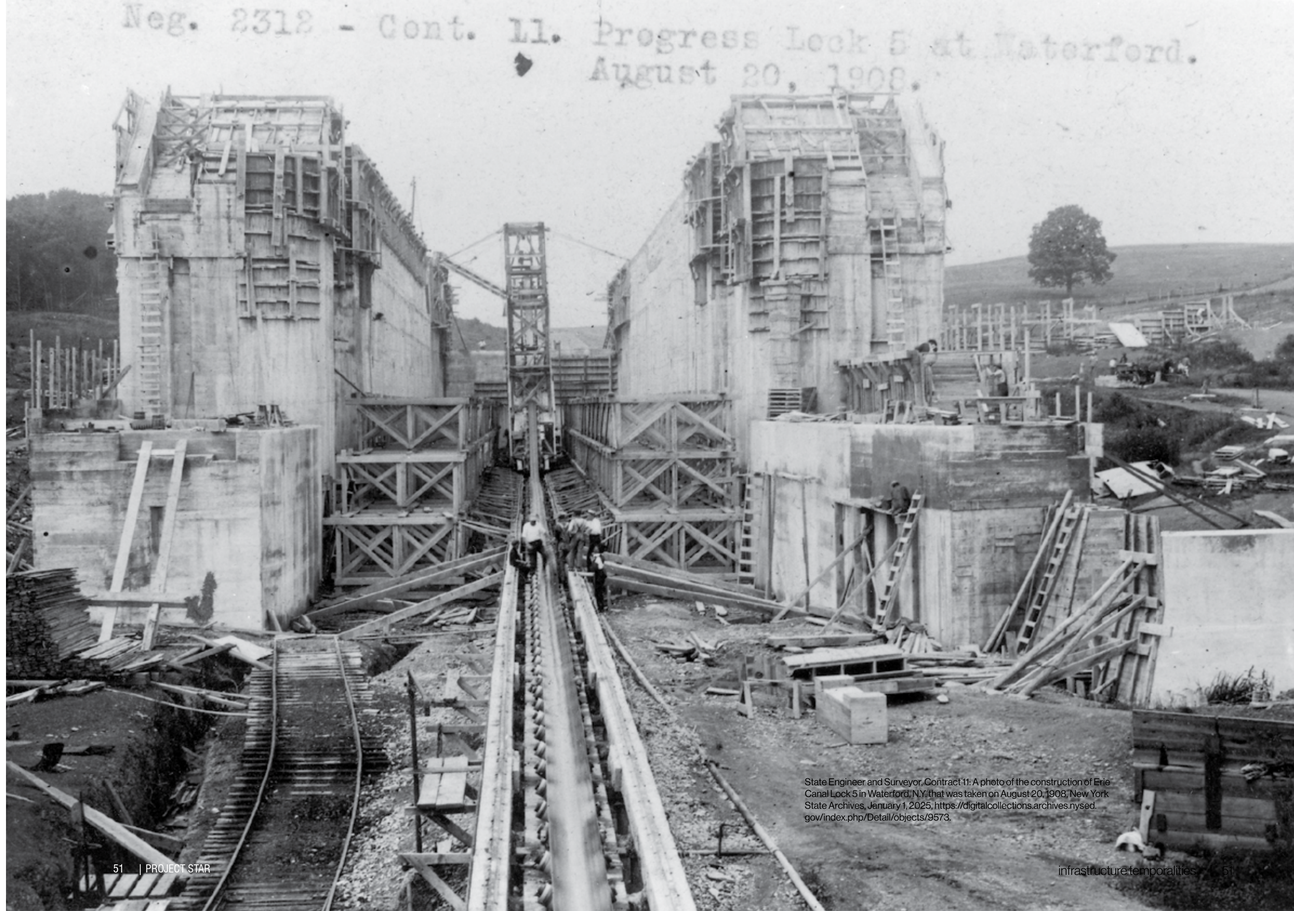
The National Road became a symbol of American determination and progress, representing the country's desire to build infrastructure that supported both economic prosperity and territorial expansion. Today, many sections of the National Road are preserved as historic byways, allowing people to trace the journey of early settlers and understand the critical role the road played in the expansion of the U.S. economy and settlement patterns.



The extent of the National Road in 1840

National Road from Maryland to Illinois

Route 66, was established in November 1926. Named "The Mother Road" by John Steinbeck



State Engineer and Surveyor, Contract 11: A photo of the construction of Erie Canal Lock 5 in Waterford, NY, that was taken on August 20, 1908, New York State Archives, January 1, 2025. https://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/objects/9573.

SPECIAL FOCUS

Colonial to Early Republic (1600s–1830s)

Establishing Overland and Waterway Routes

Nebraska

The turning point for Nebraska's incorporation into American territorial and infrastructural vision came with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Negotiated by President Thomas Jefferson, the acquisition effectively doubled the size of the United States and gave the federal government control of vast interior lands—including the entire Platte River Valley and the future Omaha region. Though these lands had been claimed in name by colonial powers (first France, then Spain, and again France), they had never been developed into colonial settlements. Their transformation into usable space required mapping, surveying, and route-making—tasks that would define the early republic's infrastructural priorities.

Jefferson believed strongly in the necessity of internal improvements—roads, rivers, and canals—as tools of both expansion and unity. He commissioned the famed Lewis and Clark Expedition to explore the new western territory, including present-day Nebraska, not only to record natural resources and establish relations with Indigenous nations, but also to identify navigable waterways and viable overland corridors. The Missouri River, which flanks eastern Nebraska and flows past present-day Omaha, was identified as a major north–south axis of movement and commerce. Though slow-moving and seasonal, the Missouri was considered a critical artery of inland exploration and transportation in the early 19th century.

The Missouri River: Strategic Waterway and Military Access Point

By the 1810s and 1820s, the Missouri River had become a primary navigational route for both civilian traders and military expeditions. The establishment of fur trading posts such as Fort Lisa (1812), located just north of modern-day Omaha, helped anchor early American presence in the area. Founded by Manuel Lisa of the Missouri Fur Company, the post served as both a commercial hub and a strategic outpost for river-based trade and military logistics. American steamboat navigation on the Missouri would not reach full maturity until the 1830s, but even by the 1810s the river was being scouted and adapted for shallow-draft vessels intended to link the frontier with eastern markets.

In addition to trade, the Missouri River also functioned as a military highway. In 1820, the U.S. Army established Fort Atkinson near present-day Fort Calhoun, Nebraska—less than 20 miles north of modern Omaha. This became the first U.S. military post west of the Missouri and an important launch point for expeditions deeper into the western territories. Soldiers used the river to transport supplies, build infrastructure, and extend federal presence across the region. Fort Atkinson would serve as a precursor to later military and territorial installations that would shape Nebraska's 19th-century development.

Surveying the Overland Grid: Early Territorial Infrastructure

Even as rivers formed the backbone of early navigation, there was growing interest in developing overland routes that could support trade, migration, and federal administration. In the early 1830s, the U.S. government began conducting land surveys west of the Missouri, laying out township and range lines in anticipation of future settlement. These surveys followed the Jeffersonian grid system, a spatial logic designed to impose order, ownership, and federal control over western lands. Though population in the Nebraska region remained sparse during this period, the groundwork was being laid for later infrastructure: roads, bridges, and rail alignments would ultimately follow the surveyed corridors that began taking shape during the Early Republic era.

The Platte River corridor—which cuts across central Nebraska—also attracted interest for its potential as an east–west overland route. Though not navigable by boat due to its shallow, braided structure, the Platte Valley offered a relatively flat and direct pathway westward. In the coming decades, this corridor would become the path of major migration trails (Oregon, California, Mormon), the Pacific railroad, and the modern Interstate 80. But even by the 1820s and 1830s, it was being noted by military scouts, fur traders, and government officials as a natural overland spine across the Plains.

Omaha's Geographic Foundations

While Omaha would not be formally founded until 1854, its geographic advantages were already apparent in the Early Republic period. Located just south of the confluence of the Platte and Missouri Rivers, the site offered high bluffs, river access, and relatively central positioning within the expanding American West. Explorers and military agents routinely passed through or near what would become the Omaha region, and by the 1830s, the area was well-known to fur traders and federal agencies as a promising site for future expansion. As transportation networks matured in later decades, Omaha would become a logical choice for bridge crossings, rail hubs, and urban development.

Laying the Foundations of Nebraska's Infrastructure

Nebraska remained largely outside the direct control of European colonial powers, yet the seeds of its future infrastructure were being planted. Through waterways like the Missouri River, the establishment of military forts, fur trading posts, and the earliest overland surveys, the region was quietly drawn into the national narrative of expansion and development. The Colonial to Early Republic period, though often overlooked in Nebraska's timeline, was crucial for establishing the spatial and strategic logics that would shape the territory's—and Omaha's—future as a transportation and logistical nexus in the American interior.

SPECIAL TOPIC

oratam

jan rodrigues

tisquantum

the mohican & mohawk nations

munsee lenape guides

Original Navigators

In the early colonial period of the 17th centuryparticularly in regions like New Amsterdam (present-day New York City)—the success of European settlement, trade, and expansion depended heavily on the guidance, knowledge, and negotiation of Indigenous peoples and Afro-Indigenous intermediaries. Yet, the stories most often told center on the settlers' "discovery" and mastery of a "New World," undermining the original navigators of this.

To navigate, in this context, means far more than physical movement across terrain. It means:

Navigating languages in moments of first contact;

Navigating trade systems and kinship protocols to build economies;

Navigating diplomacy to broker peace, protect people, or resist aggression;

And navigating cultural survival, as Native and Afro-Indigenous individuals responded creatively and courageously to the pressures of colonization.

The guides, diplomats, and cultural mediators profiled here were navigators in multiple senses: of land, of law, of language, of relationship. They understood how to move between worlds—often literally across rivers and trails, but also symbolically across worldviews, belief systems, and power structures. Their contributions laid the groundwork for intercontinental commerce, urban development, and the very survival of early European outposts.

Many of the trails, trade routes, and geographic pathways the Dutch and English later claimed as "discovered" had long been part of sophisticated Indigenous systems of connectivity. From river portages to coastal trails, these routes were not accidental—they were built and maintained by generations of Native peoples who knew how to read the land and manage its use. When settlers arrived, these systems were often co-opted and recast in colonial maps, yet their Indigenous foundations remained beneath the surface

By shifting the narrative toward these early navigators—people like Oratam, Jan Rodrigues, Tisquantum, the Mohican and Mohawk leaders, and the Munsee Lenape—we begin to uncover a deeper, more accurate story of America's origins. A story not of empty land and European ingenuity, but of shared landscapes, negotiated relationships, and the often-overlooked wisdom that made colonization possible—and survivable

This section honors those whose navigation—of rivers and ridgelines, of trade and trust—laid the first pathways across a continent. Their legacies continue to guide us in how we understand place, belonging, and power today.

Oratam

As the sachem of the Hackensack Lenape in what is now northern New Jersey, Oratam was a key figure in navigating the political and cultural complexities of early contact between Indigenous nations and Dutch settlers in the mid-1600s. He led during a volatile era, particularly throughout Kieft's War (1643–1645), a conflict that stemmed from Dutch colonial aggression and the breakdown of alliances. Oratam used diplomacy, patience, and cultural knowledge to mediate between tribes and the Dutch West India Company, helping negotiate peace treaties that protected his people's autonomy—at least temporarily. He did not guide colonial settlers across rivers or through forests, but rather across the uneven terrain of diplomacy, balancing the interests of his people with the demands of foreign powers. His role as a diplomatic navigator reminds us that power was not always exercised through war or territory, but also through negotiation, mediation, and alliance-building.

Jan Rodrigues

One of the earliest non-Indigenous residents of Manhattan, Jan Rodrigues arrived around 1613, predating the formal establishment of New Amsterdam by nearly a decade. Of African and likely Taíno descent, Rodrigues worked as a translator and fur trader, embedding himself among the Lenape and developing deep linguistic and cultural knowledge. Rodrigues was a bridge between worlds—operating as a cultural navigator who could translate language, interpret behavior, and mediate between European trade interests and Indigenous communities. His multilingualism and adaptability enabled early Dutch captains to trade effectively with the Lenape, and his independent presence challenges the standard narrative of colonization as solely European-led. He embodies the complex, often-overlooked identities that made the early Atlantic world dynamic and diverse.

Tisquantum (Squanto)

Although based in the Wampanoag homeland of southeastern New England, Tisquantum, better known as Squanto, is emblematic of how Native guides helped Europeans navigate language, survival, and cultural protocol. Kidnapped by English traders in the early 1600s and sold into slavery in Spain, he later made his way to England and eventually back home—only to find his village decimated by disease. Because of his fluency in English and understanding of both Indigenous and colonial customs, he became a vital intermediary during the Pilgrims' first winter in 1620. He taught them how to plant crops, identify edible plants, and survive the harsh climate, while also facilitating diplomatic ties with the Wampanoag Confederacy. Squanto's life, shaped by forced movement and cultural translation, positioned him as a linguistic and survival navigator—one whose presence fundamentally shaped the fate of early English settlement in the northeast.

Mohican and Mohawk Nations

In the larger northeastern region—including the Hudson and Mohawk River Valleys—the Mohican and Mohawk peoples were central players in early trade networks. As members of the Algonquian and Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) linguistic families, respectively, these nations had deep histories of intra- and inter-tribal commerce long before Dutch ships arrived. With the rise of Dutch settlement in the 1600s, particularly in Fort Orange (Albany) and New Amsterdam, the Mohican and Mohawk emerged as economic navigators—guiding traders through inland territories, controlling access to fur-rich zones, and negotiating prices and routes. The Mohicans initially dominated trade in the lower Hudson Valley, while the Mohawks, as part of the powerful Iroquois Confederacy, grew to control trade deeper into the interior. Their knowledge of canoe routes, portages, terrain conditions, and diplomatic customs was indispensable to Dutch expansion. But they were not passive participants—they actively strategized alliances, leveraged European rivalries, and worked to preserve territorial autonomy amid colonial incursions.

Munsee Lenape Guides

The Munsee-speaking Lenape, whose ancestral lands encompassed present-day Manhattan, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and northern New Jersey, were the original navigators of the geography that became New Amsterdam. Their trail systems, canoe routes, and village placements reflected generations of adaptation to the tidal rivers, estuaries, and uplands of the region. When Dutch settlers first arrived, they depended heavily—though often

without acknowledgment—on Munsee guides to traverse waterways, identify seasonal patterns, and access inland resources. These Indigenous residents also navigated social and diplomatic space, managing early encounters with multiple European powers (Dutch, English, Swedish) while defending their own cultural and territorial integrity. Although many of their names were not preserved in colonial records, their cartographic and ecological intelligence laid the groundwork for the very maps and roads the Dutch would claim and rename. The Munsee were not simply guides to land—they were stewards of place-based knowledge in a rapidly shifting colonial landscape.

Sacagawea

Sacagawea was a Lemhi Shoshone woman born around 1788. She is often remembered as the woman who "guided" Lewis and Clark across the western frontier. While that framing simplifies and romanticizes her contributions, Sacagawea's role in the 1804–1806 Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery Expedition was far more nuanced. She was a cultural and geographical navigator, whose presence and knowledge shaped the expedition's trajectory and helped define the very notion of exploration during the westward expansion of the United States.

Captured as a child by the Hidatsa and later sold into a non-consensual marriage to French-Canadian trader Toussaint Charbonneau, Sacagawea was forcibly enmeshed in overlapping systems of gendered violence, colonization, and survival. When Lewis and Clark enlisted Charbonneau as a guide and interpreter, Sacagawea—by then a teenager and new mother—joined the expedition as well. Her knowledge of the terrain, native foods, and tribal protocols became indispensable. Notably, as the expedition entered Shoshone territory, Sacagawea recognized geographic markers and reconnected with her brother Cameahwait, who was now chief. This encounter enabled the team to secure horses and navigate the Bitterroot Mountains, a crucial turning point in their success. But her role went beyond practical knowledge. Traveling with an infant on her back, Sacagawea visually signaled peace to other Native nations, helping the Corps avoid being perceived as a war party. She navigated cultural tensions between the expedition and tribes they encountered, providing translation (when possible) and assisting in gift-giving and diplomacy. In a moment of crisis when a capsized boat threatened the expedition's notes and supplies, she calmly recovered key materials—a gesture that earned her the admiration of Lewis and Clark and further proved her value beyond symbolic presence.

Still, her navigation was deeply constrained. She had limited agency, and her voice was rarely documented directly—only through the journals of white men. Her contributions were vital, yet embedded in a project of U.S. imperial ambition, which sought to map and claim the Louisiana Territory and extend the logic of Manifest Destiny. As a Native woman navigating a settler expedition, Sacagawea straddled roles of guide, hostage, mediator, and symbol—an Indigenous person helping chart lands that were, ironically, already known and lived-in by her and countless others.

Today, Sacagawea stands as an instrumental figure of navigational multiplicity:

Geographic – guiding across rivers, plains, and mountain passes.

Linguistic – bridging communication across Shoshone, Hidatsa, and English-speaking parties.

Diplomatic – shaping how the Corps was received by tribal nations.

Symbolic – embodying the tension between visibility and voicelessness in the national narrative.

Her name and image have been adopted onto coins, monuments, and school names—but her life story is also a powerful reminder that navigation in the early republic often required Indigenous labor, knowledge, and sacrifice, even as the structures of empire moved forward without them.

sacag awea

Russell, Charles Marion. Lewis and Clark on the Lower Columbia, 1805. Public domain. Image licensed from Alamy.

19th Century: Roads, Railroads, and the Reshaping of American Infrastructure

Speed, Scale, and the Emergence of National Markets

Civic Infrastructure, Rural Advocacy, and the Roots of Federal Coordination

The 19th century marked one of the most pivotal and transformative eras in American infrastructure history—not only because of the rise of the railroad, but because of the foundational shift from local, uneven roadways to a nationally coordinated transportation system. While early investments in roads and canals helped open inland markets and connect coastal settlements with the interior, it was the interplay between road building and the railroad boom that ultimately collapsed time, expanded space, and redefined the physical and economic identity of the United States.

In the early 1800s, the nation's primary overland routes were an inconsistent patchwork of dirt paths, postal roads, and privately operated turnpikes. These rudimentary roads were often poorly constructed and poorly maintained, limiting their utility for long-distance travel or large-scale commerce. The National Road (Cumberland Road), initiated in 1811, was one of the earliest federally funded efforts to create an overland artery stretching westward. Its construction represented an important ideological shift: infrastructure was no longer a local concern, but a federal project aligned with national expansion.

During the same period, state-chartered turnpike companies, using tolls to finance construction, built hundreds of miles of graded roads, particularly in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions. These routes, while commercial in intent, still often suffered from inadequate funding and limited engineering capacity. Stagecoach travel, ox-drawn freight wagons, and postal deliveries operated within this skeletal system, which struggled to meet the demands of a growing, mobile republic. Waterways and canals, such as the Erie Canal, provided more efficient freight movement for some regions, but even those systems required reliable road connections to interior markets.

By mid-century, however, the limitations of the nation's road systems were increasingly apparent, especially as population spread westward. This paved the way—both literally and figuratively—for the railroad revolution. As steel tracks began to stretch across rivers, mountains, and prairies, the U.S. no longer saw itself as a patchwork of coastal enclaves and frontier outposts. The railroad promised something radical: a unified continental interior, capable of sustaining industrial growth, rapid mobility, and trans-regional economic integration.

Railroads replaced weeks-long wagon journeys with days-long train rides, dramatically reducing the cost and time of moving goods and people. Where early roads followed the natural contours of terrain, railroads cut through geography with engineering force—blasting tunnels, bridging rivers, and climbing mountain passes. They made it possible to reach distant markets, develop inland cities, and fully commercialize agriculture, mining, and manufacturing at scale. Cities like Chicago, once considered marginal outposts, exploded into industrial hubs. Remote territories were incorporated into the commercial and political fabric of the Union, often before they had functioning governments of their own.

Yet this infrastructural transformation was not merely technical—it was political and ideological. The expansion of the railroad network was driven not just by private innovation, but by unprecedented public-private partnerships. Corporations received massive subsidies in the form of land grants, tax exemptions, and government-backed bonds. The Pacific Railway Acts of the 1860s enabled the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads to receive vast swaths of land—alternate square-mile sections on either side of their tracks—laying the foundation for speculative real estate empires and the commodification of the West.

The completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869 at Promontory Summit, Utah, was celebrated as the ultimate triumph of American ingenuity—a literal linking of ocean to ocean. But beneath the celebratory narrative was a more fraught reality. The railroads were built by exploited labor forces, including Chinese immigrants, Irish laborers, formerly enslaved African Americans, and Civil War veterans. Chinese workers, in particular, performed some of the most dangerous labor on the Central Pacific line through the Sierra Nevada, facing physical abuse, racial exclusion, and systemic discrimination. They were indispensable to the railroad's success, yet their names and contributions were erased from most public narratives for generations.

Equally obscured were the consequences for Native nations, whose lands were surveyed, carved up, and overrun in the name of infrastructure. Tracks did not simply arrive—they were imposed, often in violation of existing treaties. The expansion of the railroad required military escorts to "secure" territory, and surveyors routinely disregarded sacred sites, village lands, and migration routes. Infrastructure became a tool of settler colonialism, redefining land through grids, right-of-way corridors, and timetables rather than through stewardship, reciprocity, or kinship networks. Where early roads followed Indigenous paths and adapted to terrain, railroads imposed industrial-scale order—often at the expense of local life and ecology.

This era also redefined infrastructure finance and governance. Early roads had been funded by a mix of state and local sources, often reliant on tolls. Railroads, by contrast, introduced a new scale of federal subsidy and corporate consolidation. The land-grant system allowed railroads to sell land to settlers and developers at profit, subsidizing their own expansion while reshaping patterns of migration, agriculture, and investment. The result was a geography of winners and losers: towns with rail stops flourished; those without withered. Property values, political influence, and economic vitality were all redistributed along steel lines.

By the 1880s, the unchecked power of railroad corporations provoked a political backlash. Concerns about monopolies, corruption, and the abuse of public subsidies led to the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, which created the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC)—the first federal agency to regulate private enterprise. This marked a major turning point: the acknowledgment that infrastructure, once handed over to private companies, still required public oversight to ensure fairness, accountability, and access.

The 19th century's infrastructure revolution, therefore, was not just a story of progress and speed. It was a moment of deep contradictions. Roads gave way to rails, but the transition brought with it new tensions: between mobility and displacement, freedom and enclosure, innovation and inequality. As tracks stitched the nation together, they also etched divisions—between labor and capital, settlers and Indigenous peoples, centralized wealth and rural peripheries.

Ultimately, the century transformed infrastructure from an assemblage of local roads and muddy trails into a nationally scaled system of movement, power, and identity. The railroad era built on the logic of the early road builders—but expanded it to continental proportions, institutionalized it through corporate finance, and encoded it with the racial, spatial, and economic hierarchies that continue to shape American infrastructure today.

Early development of railroads and roads in the U.S. West during the 19th. Omaha, Nebraska. Licensed, Alamy

19th Century: Roads, Railroads, and the Reshaping of American Infrastructure

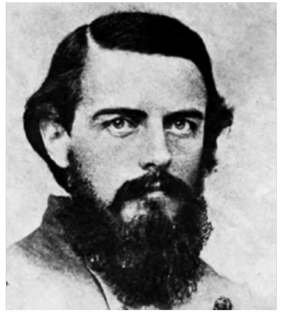
Speed, Scale, and the Emergence of National Markets

General Roy Stone

General Stone, a veteran of the Civil War and the Spanish-American War, pursued a career in civil engineering during peacetime. As a civil engineer, he became a key proponent of the Good Roads Movement, a progressive cause advocating for improved infrastructure. He served as the first director of the Office of Road Inquiry, which preceded the Federal Highway Administration by decades.

Stone championed the idea of a federal roads system, arguing that the absence of good roads was "the last great stain upon our civilization" and "a relic of barbarism." In 1892, he published an article reinforcing the federal government's responsibility in highway construction.:

Stone's commitment to infrastructure reform culminated on October 3, 1893, when he was appointed as the inaugural head of the Office of Road Inquiry (ORI) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. With an initial budget of $10,000 and a small team, the ORI was tasked with investigating and promoting methods of road construction and maintenance.



General Roy Stone

Under Stone's leadership, the ORI laid the groundwork for what would eventually evolve into the Federal Highway Administration, marking the federal government's first formal involvement in road development.

Beyond his administrative contributions, Stone was also an inventor and engineer. He developed a steam-driven monorail showcased at the Centennial International Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia. This innovation demonstrated his forward-thinking approach to transportation challenges and his willingness to explore unconventional solutions to improve mobility. His pioneering efforts in road improvement and transportation innovation have left an enduring legacy that continues to shape the nation's transportation landscape.

"The remedy must be as radical as the disease is deep-seated. Our people have discovered that all over the world roads are among the prime concerns of national government, and they ask themselves what fatal disability has fallen on our own Government in the last half century that makes our statesmen shudder at the mention of national roads or national aid to road making."

General Roy Stone, New Roads and Road Laws in the United States (1894)

Bain News Service, Publisher. Good Roads -- A Scraper. , ca. 1910. [Between and Ca. 1915] Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2014703490/.

SPECIAL FOCUS

19th Century: Roads, Railroads, and the Reshaping of American Infrastructure

Speed, Scale, and the Emergence of National Markets

Nebraska

Nebraska experienced a spatial, economic, and political transformation in the 19th century. What began as a remote frontier—unincorporated and largely outside the institutional reach of the United States—emerged by the century's end as a critical corridor for national commerce, communication, and mobility. The infrastructure that enabled this transformation was not singular. While railroads would come to define the region's industrial era, it was the earlier roads, military trails, and freight corridors that created the conditions for rail development and long-term regional integration. In both road and rail, Nebraska, as well as the city of Omaha became a fulcrum of America's westward ambitions.

The most transformative infrastructure project of 19th-century Nebraska was the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad, which began in 1863 from Omaha. Selected as the eastern terminus of the nation's first transcontinental rail line, Omaha was catapulted from a modest river settlement into a critical infrastructural and economic hub. The Pacific Railway Act of 1862, signed by President Abraham Lincoln, granted massive land subsidies and federal loans to railroad companies willing to undertake the construction of a continuous rail link between the Atlantic and Pacific.

The Union Pacific pushed westward across Nebraska's plains, building rail and telegraph infrastructure that not only altered the physical landscape but dramatically accelerated settlement and commerce. While roads had allowed for the slow, seasonal migration of people and goods, railroads enabled year-round, high-volume freight and passenger movement. Travel time across Nebraska, once measured in weeks, was reduced to days. Agricultural goods—particularly grain and livestock—could now reach eastern markets efficiently, integrating Nebraska's economy into the national system.

The construction of the railroad also shaped land use and urban growth patterns across the state. Towns that secured a rail stop flourished, while those bypassed often declined. Rail corridors influenced where banks, post offices, schools, and grain elevators were located. In many cases, new towns were platted specifically to serve the railroad, often just a few miles apart—reflecting the steam engine's need for water and maintenance and the railroad's role in structuring economic geography.

By the late 1870s and 1880s, Omaha had become a major freight and passenger center, attracting branch lines from other carriers such as the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad. Rail infrastructure allowed Omaha to grow not only as a shipping point but as a site for warehousing, meatpacking, and industrial production. Its growth exemplified how railroads could transform a transportation corridor into an urban center, connecting hinterlands to the flows of capital and commerce.

Federal Strategy and Corporate Power

The development of Nebraska's railroads was deeply tied to federal infrastructure strategy and public-private partnerships. The government granted millions of acres of land to railroad companies, who then sold those lands to settlers in order to finance the construction of tracks. This model reflected a mid-19th-century belief that infrastructure—particularly railroads—was a national project that required both public support and private execution.

However, the scale of corporate control and land speculation that accompanied this expansion led to controversy. Railroad companies wielded enormous economic and political influence in Nebraska, often setting freight rates with little accountability. Farmers and small towns began to protest the power imbalance, a tension that would become central to later populist and regulatory movements. But during the period from the 1860s through the 1880s, the dominant ethos was one of buildout and expansion, with Nebraska's political leaders and businesses largely aligned in supporting the growth of rail-based infrastructure.

Roadways Receding into the Background

While roads continued to play an important local role—connecting farms to towns, facilitating stagecoach lines, and linking outposts—the dominance of rail in long-distance transport rendered many overland roads secondary. Still, county-level road building continued, often underfunded and poorly maintained. Most roads were dirt or gravel and subject to seasonal deterioration, making them unsuitable for anything beyond local travel or supply transport. Road development during this period did not receive the same attention or investment as railroads, and it would not be until the Good Roads Movement of the late 19th century and early 20th century that road infrastructure would again become a central focus.

During the 19th century, Nebraska transitioned from a frontier crossroads to a core corridor of national infrastructure. Early overland roads established the pathways of migration and trade, but it was the railroad—anchored by Omaha's central role—that redefined the scale, speed, and ambition of infrastructure in the region. These developments were driven by a combination of federal policy, corporate enterprise, and geographic opportunity, setting the stage for Nebraska's integration into the national economy.

Eventually, the story of 20th-century infrastructure would return to the road through highways and automobiles, the 19th century was decisively shaped by the interplay between early roads and the rise of the railroad—together laying the foundation for the modern Midwest.importance of road infrastructure did not disappear. In fact, poor road conditions in rural Nebraska became a major political issue toward the end of the century, giving rise to local branches of the Good Roads Movement. Farmers and rural communities lobbied for better local roads to connect to rail depots and markets. The late 19th century saw increased state involvement in road surveys and road district governance, laying the groundwork for Nebraska's early 20th-century investment in highways and motor routes.

Spatial Inequality and the Legacy of 19th-Century Infrastructure

The development of roads and railroads brought wealth and connectivity to many parts of Nebraska, it also entrenched spatial hierarchies. Communities connected to the rail network thrived; those bypassed declined. Land values soared near rail corridors, while more remote areas suffered economic stagnation. Infrastructure became a mechanism of selection—an engine of growth for some, and of marginalization for others.

Roads, Rails, and the Making of Modern Nebraska

The 19th century was Nebraska's formative era of movement and connection. From early overland roads to transcontinental rail lines, infrastructure redefined the region's purpose, population, and future. Omaha's emergence as a rail-powered urban hub and Nebraska's transformation into a national crossroads were not inevitable—they were the results of federal policy, speculative finance, labor exploitation, and geographic strategy. These infrastructures did not merely support the state's growth—they actively produced it, shaping who had access, who had voice, and who was left behind.

Today, the spatial patterns established by 19th-century infrastructure remain visible in everything from highway routes to economic corridors. Understanding this history is essential—not just to appreciate the past, but to imagine new forms

of infrastructure that are more just, inclusive, and sustainable for the future.the thread that stitched the nation together—but also the seam along which it fractured. These tensions remain encoded in our current systems of movement and access, reminding us that infrastructure is never neutral. It always reflects the values, exclusions, and ambitions of its builders.

Employees photographed in the Union Pacific Headquarters in Omaha, "Draft Room" on October 4, 1918. Pictured are: W. Snyder, E. Rosener, W. Janke, H. Edling, G. Boswell, B. Jones, B. Hale, W. Arthur, B. (Burt) Flack [arrow points to this person in photo - all others are un-ascribed]. Clock hangs on wall at left. Framed steam locomotive hangs on the back wall. Paper plans are spread on table at bottom left. Unknown photographer.

"Two Latest Additions to the Transportation World" Book by the McKeen Motor Car Company in Omaha, Nabraska, circa 1915, that advertises the company's motor cars and motor coach cars. The book describes the company's new motor coach cars including their spring-pneumatic-cushioned chairs for passengers.

Union Pacific McKeen Motor Car no. 7 along the side of the General Offices building for Union Pacific in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1906. Unknown photographer.

SPECIAL TOPIC

good roads movement

19th Century: Roads, Railroads, and the Reshaping of American Infrastructure

Speed, Scale, and the Emergence of National Markets

The Good Roads Movement: Reforming Infrastructure, Connecting a Nation

In the half-century between the post-Civil War era and the 1920s, the United States underwent sweeping changes in how it understood, planned, and invested in infrastructure. While the era is often associated with railroads, industrialization, and urban reform, an equally transformative—though less often acknowledged—movement was taking place on the ground: the Good Roads Movement. This campaign, initiated by bicyclists in the 1880s and later joined by farmers and rural reformers, reshaped the national conversation around mobility, accessibility, and the role of government in infrastructure development. Though it focused on something as seemingly mundane as road quality, the Good Roads Movement was, in essence, a Progressive-era crusade for equity, modernization, and national cohesion.

Early Origins: The Wheelmen and the Fight for Smooth Roads

The movement's first spark came from an unlikely source—bicyclists. The 1870s and 1880s saw the rise of the "safety bicycle," a newer and more stable alternative to earlier high-wheel models, which quickly gained popularity in American cities. As the number of bicyclists increased, so too did their frustration with the state of roads, which outside of major urban centers were often unpaved, rutted, and muddy. While railroads had captured the nation's transportation imagination and investment, roads were left behind—a relic of earlier eras, and no longer seen as economically vital.

Recognizing the need for change, a group of avid cyclists formed the League of American Wheelmen (LAW) in 1880. The organization quickly became a powerful national force, lobbying local governments, publishing educational materials, and staging public demonstrations to raise awareness about the condition of American roads. They promoted the slogan "Where the wheel goes, the road will follow," emphasizing that good roads were not only beneficial for bicycles, but for everyone—travelers, farmers, schoolchildren, and rural communities.

The League helped create a vision of shared infrastructure, one that would serve more than just commercial or elite interests. Roads, they argued, were a democratic space, and their improvement was a public obligation.

Farmers Join the Movement: Roads as Rural Lifelines

The second—and ultimately more influential—pillar of the Good Roads Movement came from the rural agricultural community. While bicyclists had sparked the national campaign, it was the incorporation of farmers' alliances and agrarian populist groups like the National Grange and the Farmers' Alliance that brought the movement widespread political clout.

For farmers, poor road conditions were not just an inconvenience; they were a major economic and social barrier. Getting crops to rail depots or markets often meant navigating impassable muddy roads during key seasons. Poor roads delayed deliveries, damaged equipment, and increased isolation, especially in winter and during storms. Farmers recognized that without improved infrastructure, they would remain economically disadvantaged and politically marginalized.

By the 1890s, rural reformers and urban bicyclists had forged a powerful coalition. The shared goal was simple: to elevate road quality to a national priority. But behind that goal was a broader Progressive vision of modernization—of bringing scientific management, engineering standards, and federal investment into the most neglected parts of the American landscape

Roy Stone and the Office of Road Inquiry

One of the most influential figures in moving the Good Roads Movement from advocacy to policy was General Roy Stone, a Civil War veteran and civil engineer. Recognizing the importance of the road reform movement, Stone lobbied Congress to create a federal office devoted to road development. In 1893, the Office of Road Inquiry (ORI) was established within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Stone became its first director.

With limited staff and a modest budget, Stone and the ORI focused on education, demonstration projects, and the dissemination of road-building standards. They sent engineers into rural communities to hold road-building demonstrations and published bulletins explaining how to construct durable macadam roads using local materials. The ORI pioneered what we might now call "technical assistance" to counties and states that lacked engineering capacity.

Stone's vision was clear: good roads were essential public goods, and road-building was both a civic responsibility and a science. His efforts helped shift the public discourse from seeing roads as the responsibility of local farmers and townships to seeing them as a federally relevant infrastructure system

Legislative Outcomes and Institutional Reform

The momentum generated by the Good Roads Movement began to yield concrete legislative results in the early 20th century. After years of local improvements and state-level experimentation, the movement's biggest breakthrough came with the passage of the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916. This law marked the first significant federal investment in roads, establishing a cost-sharing program between the federal government and individual states for the construction of rural post roads.

The act also required that states create official state highway departments, a requirement that helped to professionalize and standardize road planning and engineering across the country. The law reinforced the role of roads as public infrastructure funded and overseen through government partnership, and it represented a fundamental departure from the earlier, privatized model of turnpikes and toll roads

By 1921, with the passage of the Federal Highway Act, the foundations were laid for what would become the national highway system, with over 200,000 miles of improved roads planned under federal coordination. The policies born out of the Good Roads Movement helped transform the United States from a

country of disconnected rural pathways into a networked nation of integrated road systems.

Technological Innovation and the Rise of the Automobile

Although the Good Roads Movement began before the rise of the automobile, its work created the conditions for the automotive revolution of the 1910s and 1920s. The early road improvements designed to benefit bicycles and wagons became essential as motor vehicles began to proliferate. The growth of automobile clubs, like the American Automobile Association (AAA), further expanded the coalition for road reform, blending the original civic and agrarian motivations with new commercial and consumerist interests.

As motor travel increased, so did the demand for paved highways, signage, maintenance standards, and roadside infrastructure. The Good Roads Movement thus serves as a crucial bridge between the 19th-century world of horses and carriages and the 20th-century world of cars and highways. Without it, the automobile would not have been viable as a mode of mass transportation for millions of Americans.

Social Impacts and Enduring Legacy

The Good Roads Movement was not merely a campaign for smoother surfaces—it was a movement with deep social and spatial implications. Better roads meant better access to schools, medical care, markets, and government services. Rural isolation, long a source of hardship and political alienation, began to ease. Farmers could participate more fully in regional economies; schoolchildren could travel longer distances safely; local governments could plan infrastructure more effectively

Moreover, the Good Roads Movement helped to reframe infrastructure as a form of civic equity. The idea that all Americans—regardless of geography—deserved access to safe, usable public roads was a Progressive-era ethos that foreshadowed later civil rights-era demands for investment in neglected communities.

Though overshadowed by the later construction of the Interstate Highway System, the Good Roads Movement laid the institutional and ideological foundations for all subsequent developments in American ground transportation. It introduced the idea of federal–state partnerships, the necessity of professional engineering in public works, and the recognition that mobility is essential to opportunity and democracy.

The Good Roads Movement began with bicycles and mud but ended by transforming the physical, political, and economic landscape of the United States. From the advocacy of the League of American Wheelmen to the policy vision of Roy Stone, and from the frustrations of rural farmers to the ambitions of engineers and planners, the movement redefined the meaning of a road—not just as a path to travel, but as a symbol of public purpose and shared destiny. Its legacy lives on in the roads we drive today, and in the enduring belief that infrastructure is not just about movement—it's about connection, inclusion, and progress.

George Cotton, Emma Cotton, William A. Durant, and Ida May Durant, photograph, 1896-; (https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1593918/: accessed March 31, 2025), The Gateway to Oklahoma History, https://gateway.okhistory.org; crediting Oklahoma Historical Society.

Early 20th Century: Automobility, Federalization, and System Thinking

New Technologies and the Birth of National Road Systems

The invention and mass adoption of the automobile in the early 20th century fundamentally altered the physical and political landscape of the United States. While earlier decades had seen the emergence of railroads and canals as tools of national expansion, the automobile introduced a new kind of spatial freedom—one that was personal, flexible, and increasingly essential to American life. As cars became more affordable and widely available, especially following Henry Ford's innovations in assembly line production, a once-luxury item quickly became a common necessity. But the rise of the car also exposed a glaring deficiency: the country's roads were not ready.

At the dawn of the 20th century, most roads outside cities were unpaved, uneven, and unsuitable for motorized travel. These roads had evolved to serve wagons, horses, and bicycles, not automobiles. The Good Roads Movement, which had been advocating for improved rural roadways since the 1880s, helped lay the groundwork, but the explosion of car ownership added new urgency and scale to the problem. The challenge was no longer about smoothing dirt roads for bicycles or buggies—it was about developing a cohesive, durable, and navigable national road system.

The Shift from Localism to Federal Coordination

Unlike railroads, which had been largely developed through private enterprise and land grants, roads required coordinated public investment. The responsibility for road construction had historically been fragmented, falling to counties, townships, or local property owners. This resulted in a patchwork of road conditions, standards, and connectivity. Automobiles, however, didn't respect jurisdictional boundaries. Their increasing use highlighted the need for regional and national coordination, and thus began one of the most significant shifts in American infrastructure history: the federalization of roads.

The Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 marked the first substantial federal commitment to highway infrastructure. It established a cost-sharing partnership between the federal government and individual states, requiring states to form highway departments in exchange for federal funds. Although the program began modestly—$5 million per year—it established a vital principle: that mobility was a national concern, deserving national support and oversight. The Act also formalized the federal government's role in setting standards, distributing resources, and overseeing project implementation

Following World War I, the momentum for road building accelerated. The military had experienced firsthand the logistical challenges of poor road infrastructure during domestic training and transport efforts. As a result, national defense became part of the rationale for a more robust road system. This culminated in the Federal Highway Act of 1921, which created a systematic plan for highway development across the country. The act emphasized the creation of a network of inter-state and inter-regional primary roads, laid out in cooperation between federal engineers and state departments. It also reinforced the emerging notion of infrastructure as a professionalized and data-driven system, rather than an ad hoc collection of local improvements

The U.S. Highway System and Standardization

Perhaps the most visible result of this era of reform was the creation of the U.S. Numbered Highway System in 1926. Before this, road naming was inconsistent and often locally determined, with overlapping designations and unclear connections between towns and cities. The new system introduced logical numbering conventions: odd numbers for north–south routes and even numbers for east–west, with major transcontinental routes receiving lower, more memorable numbers (e.g., U.S. Route 1, U.S. Route 30, and U.S. Route 66). This standardization revolutionized road navigation and travel planning and gave the American highway system a coherent identity.

With numbered routes, paved surfaces, and interconnectivity, the United States began to support long-distance car travel as a regular, middle-class activity. Tourist camps, motels, roadside diners, and gas stations soon followed, creating an entire economy around car culture. Roads became symbols of freedom and possibility, and the road trip emerged as a quintessential American experience

But this newfound mobility came with challenges. Maintenance, signage, bridge design, safety standards, and traffic regulation all had to evolve rapidly. These issues led to increased specialization and the rise of civil and traffic engineering as distinct professional fields. Local governments, too, had to adapt—shifting their budgets, adopting new materials like asphalt and concrete, and training road crews to meet national standards.

Automobility and Spatial Order

As roads expanded and cars multiplied, infrastructure was no longer understood simply as physical construction—it became a system of spatial order, a framework through which cities, regions, and economies were planned and managed. Roads dictated how people moved, where towns expanded, and how commerce flowed. With automobiles offering a degree of flexibility and reach never before possible, planners began to see roads as tools for shaping growth and regulating urban life.

This was particularly evident in the rise of the suburbs. The availability of paved roads and private automobiles made it possible for middle-class families—especially white families—to live farther from crowded city centers and commute in daily. Zoning laws, streetcar disinvestment, and mortgage policies worked in concert with road expansion to produce a landscape of racially and economically segregated suburbs, connected by new roads but separated by deep inequities.

In rural America, paved highways offered long-awaited connections to markets, schools, and services. But even here, the benefits were uneven. Wealthier counties were often able to match federal funds more easily, while poor and isolated regions lagged behind. The expansion of roads highlighted existing disparities, and in many cases, widened them.

Infrastructure as Equity—or Inequity

The car brought freedom—but not universally. Many Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities found themselves excluded from the benefits of early road infrastructure. In urban areas, as the first major arterials were laid down, many of these communities were overlooked or deliberately bypassed. In some cases, the location of new roads resulted in the displacement of marginalized neighborhoods, reinforcing segregation under the guise of modernization. These patterns, which would become even more pronounced during the postwar freeway era, had their roots in this earlier moment of road-building enthusiasm.

Moreover, automobility assumed ownership of a vehicle—something not accessible to all. For those without cars, new road-centered landscapes often reduced access to public transit, as trolleys and interurban lines were disinvested or dismantled. As the road system expanded, mobility became a function of private ownership, not public right.

Gulf's first drive-in filling station in Pittsburgh (Ferens Collection)

Early 20th Century: Automobility, Federalization, and System Thinking

New Technologies and the Birth of National Road Systems

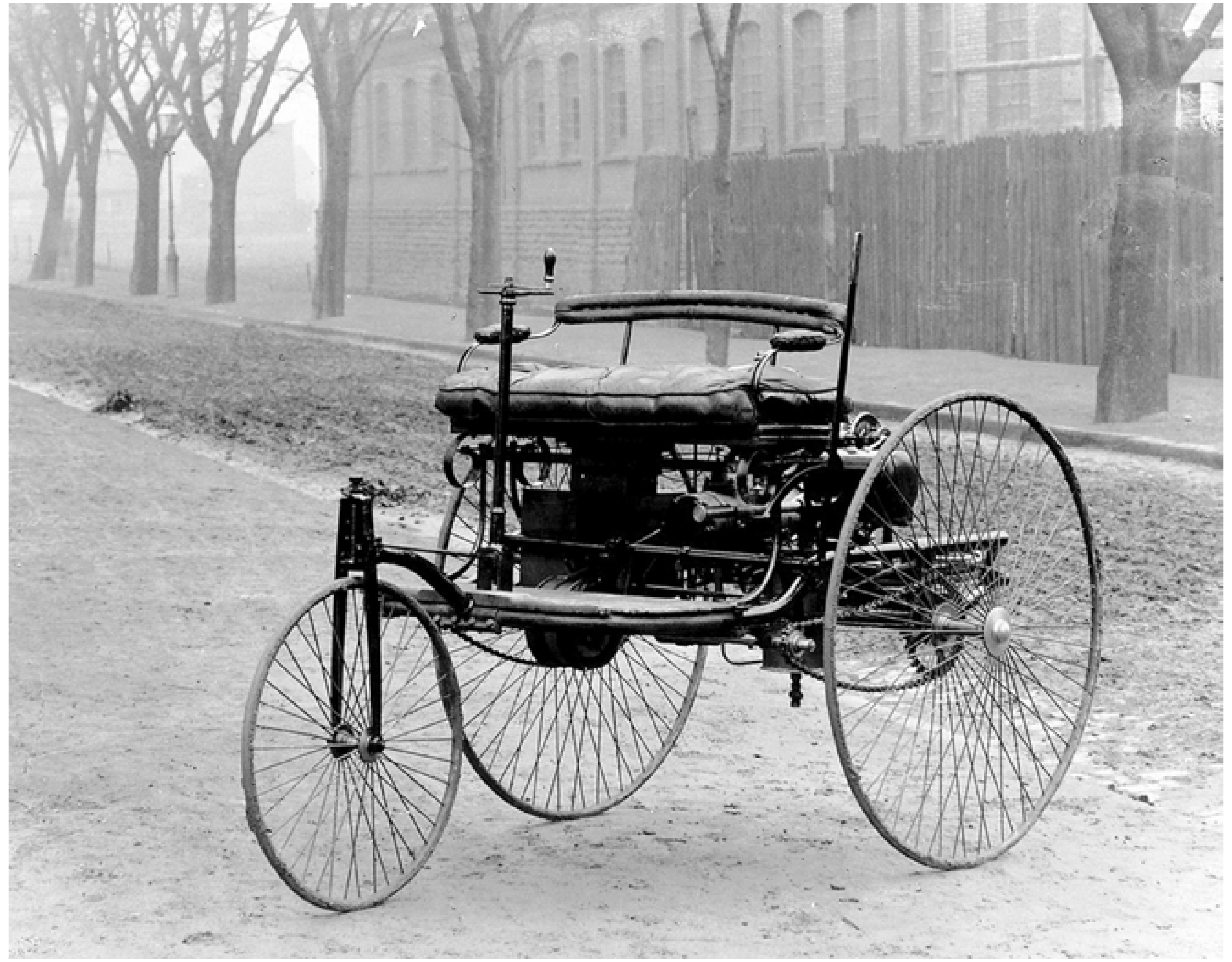
The Professionalization of Infrastructure

One of the defining characteristics of this era was the rise of infrastructure management as a professional discipline. The need for consistency, safety, and efficiency led to the emergence of new roles: state highway engineers, transportation commissioners, traffic safety experts, and planning consultants. Organizations such as the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) were established to coordinate best practices, lobby for federal support, and develop technical standards. This process professionalized what had once been the work of local contractors or township crews.

Planners and engineers began to see infrastructure as a living system—one that required constant monitoring, maintenance, and long-term vision. It was not just about building roads, but about managing flows: of people, goods, information, and capital. The 1920s laid the intellectual and bureaucratic foundation for the interstate highway system, airport planning, and even urban renewal projects that would follow in later decades.

The early 20th century was a foundational moment in the story of American infrastructure. The rise of the automobile forced a reevaluation of roads, mobility, and public responsibility. What began as a fragmented network of dirt paths and rural routes was transformed into a national system—planned, standardized, and integrated. Yet, even as roads offered new freedoms, they also reinforced longstanding divisions. Infrastructure was revealed to be not only a physical system, but a social one—a system that could connect or divide, include or exclude, empower or marginalize.

The legacy of this era lives on in the roads we use today. The debates over funding, equity, land use, and environmental impact that define 21st-century infrastructure policy are rooted in this earlier moment of transformation—when the car changed everything, and America began building not just roads, but a new way of life.



Improve the navigation of the Mississippi River at the Des Moines Rapids, ca. 1905. RG 233, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, National Archives.

Early 20th Century: Automobility, Federalization, and System Thinking

New Technologies and the Birth of National Road Systems

REPORTED BY MR. FLETCHER.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES,
September 7, 1916.

Resolved, That the manuscript submitted by the Senator from Alabama [Mr. Bankhead] on September 7, 1916, entitled "The Federal aid road act of 1916," including a summary of the same, rules and regulations of the Secretary of Agriculture, and an article entitled "The Government and good roads," by Hon. David F. Houston, be printed as a Senate document.

Attest:

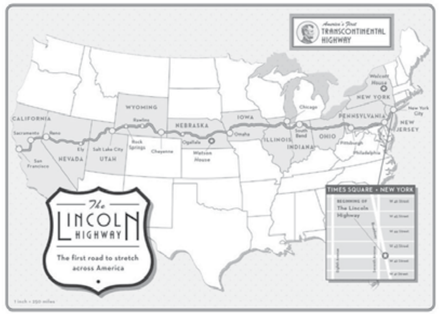
2

JAMES M. BAKER, *Secretary.*

The 1916 Federal Aid Road Act was the first major federal highway legislation in U.S. history and laid the groundwork for today's national highway system. It committed federal funds—up to $75 million over five years—for rural post road construction and required states to form highway departments in order to receive federal aid. This shifted responsibility for roads from counties to centralized state systems, enabling better coordination and planning. It was a turning point in recognizing transportation as a national concern, not just a local or state issue.

The law also created the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture to oversee funding and technical assistance. In Nebraska, the Act led to the establishment of a formal state highway department and drew attention to long-neglected rural infrastructure. The act formalized the federal-state partnership that remains a cornerstone of U.S. transportation policy, ushering in a new era of professionalized road engineering and long-term highway planning.

The creation of the U.S. Numbered Highway System in 1926 brought clarity and structure to the nation's chaotic patchwork of roads. Managed by the BPR and implemented with state cooperation, the system replaced named routes (like the Lincoln Highway) with numbered designations: odd for north-south routes (e.g., US 75), even for east-west (e.g., US 30). This made navigation more predictable and allowed for systematic expansion of the highway grid.



The Lincoln Highway, proposed in 1913 by auto industry leaders and civic boosters, was the first transcontinental highway designed specifically for automobiles. It was conceived by Carl G. Fisher, co-founder of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and a major promoter of early car travel. Stretching from Times Square in New York City to Lincoln Park in San Francisco, the highway would pass through more than a dozen states—including Nebraska—making it a symbol of national unity and modern mobility.

In Nebraska, the Lincoln Highway roughly followed the Platte River corridor, a route long used by Indigenous trails and later by emigrants on the Oregon Trail. Its presence in the state marked Nebraska as a vital artery in the emerging road network. Towns along the route gained visibility, investment, and tourism. The highway also served as a prototype for future road projects, inspiring other long-distance roads and emphasizing the need for road signage, uniform roadbed standards, and public-private collaboration in infrastructure development.

In the summer of 1903, Horatio Nelson Jackson, a Vermont physician and automobile enthusiast, became the first person to drive an automobile across the continental United States. Accompanied by mechanic Sewall Crocker and a dog named Bud, Jackson traveled from San Francisco to New York City in a Winton touring car. The trip, which lasted over 60 days, exposed the severe inadequacies of the country's road systems. The travelers faced broken axles, missing road signage, muddy paths, and stretches where roads didn't exist at all—forcing them to drive across fields or use railway tracks for guidance.

This journey was more than a personal challenge; it became a public symbol of America's need for modernized roadways. At a time when railroads dominated long-distance travel and roads were considered local responsibilities, Jackson's feat captured national attention and fueled early momentum for the Good Roads Movement. His trip illustrated the promise of the automobile and the peril of outdated infrastructure, underscoring the need for coordinated federal and state investment in an interconnected highway system.

SPECIAL FOCUS

Early 20th Century: Automobility, Federalization, and System Thinking

New Technologies and the Birth of National Road Systems

Nebraska

Automobility and Infrastructure Transformation in Nebraska and Omaha (1900s–1930s)
In the early 20th century, the invention and rapid adoption of the automobile revolutionized life in the United States—nowhere more than in emerging heartland regions like Nebraska and cities like Omaha. Previously defined by their roles in railroad logistics and agricultural trade, both the state and its largest city found themselves at the center of a new infrastructural era. The car's growing presence shifted expectations about connectivity, speed, and access, and demanded a total rethinking of how roads were built, managed, and financed.

Nebraska's vast rural landscape and dispersed population made it especially susceptible to the challenges—and the promises—of the automobile. Roads, once secondary to the railroad, were now essential lifelines for commerce, communication, and social life. In Omaha, paved boulevards and arterial routes began to emerge to accommodate urban growth and the new demands of car traffic. Across the state, the arrival of cars signaled the dawn of a more flexible, personalized model of mobility—one that required dramatic transformation of the built environment.

From Patchwork to System: Early Road Conditions in Nebraska

At the turn of the 20th century, Nebraska's road network was largely unregulated, unpaved, and unmanaged. In rural areas, most roads were simple dirt paths—graded at best, but more often shaped by repeated wagon travel. Rain quickly turned them to impassable mud, while dry seasons left them dusty and rutted. Maintenance was typically a local responsibility, funded through property taxes or labor assessments. These patchwork arrangements produced vast inequalities in road quality, especially across the sparsely populated Sandhills, panhandle, and plains regions.

In Omaha, road improvements had begun earlier than in the rest of the state, especially in the form of paved boulevards like Florence Boulevard, laid out in the late 1890s as part of a citywide parks and boulevard plan. However, even in urban settings, most streets remained cobblestone, gravel, or dirt well into the 1910s. For early automobile drivers, navigating the city and its surrounding areas was a matter of endurance and patience.

It was not until the automobile ownership boom of the 1910s and 1920s that serious state-wide reform took hold. Nebraska farmers, merchants, and civic leaders increasingly demanded better roads—not just for car travel, but for moving goods to markets, accessing schools, and connecting to neighboring towns. The rural nature of the state, coupled with its growing car-owning population, made Nebraska a prime target for reform.

Federal Aid and Nebraska's Road-Building Institutions

Nebraska's road transformation was enabled in large part by federal legislation, particularly the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 and the Federal Highway Act of 1921. The 1916 act required states to create highway departments in order to receive federal matching funds. Nebraska responded quickly, forming the Nebraska State Highway Commission in 1917. Its task was monumental: to create uniform standards for road construction, to prioritize investments, and to modernize an outdated and deeply fragmented transportation network.

The federal-state partnership allowed for rapid acceleration of planning and investment, and the 1921 act refined this process by authorizing a connected system of primary highways, often following older trails, trade routes, or postal roads. Nebraska's long-standing corridors—such as the Platte River Valley—became the natural backbone of the state's evolving road grid. One major example is the Lincoln Highway, which passed directly through Nebraska as part of the earliest transcontinental automobile route. Much of what would become U.S. Route 30 traced its lineage to this corridor.

By 1926, Nebraska had embraced the new U.S. Numbered Highway System, with Omaha as a node along key routes like U.S. 6, U.S. 75, and U.S. 30. These roads brought order and navigability to the growing transportation system, allowing for interstate tourism, trade, and consistent signage.

This standardization also benefited rural Nebraskans. Roads that had once served only local needs became part of a national system, and new funding enabled the construction of concrete bridges, gravel surfaces, and roadside infrastructure. However, these benefits often flowed first to wealthier counties and farming communities with stronger political influence or easier geography, leaving behind some remote or Indigenous areas

Omaha's Urban Adaptation to Automobility

In Omaha, automobility transformed the city's structure. The growth of streetcar suburbs, such as Dundee and Benson, was quickly followed by the spread of automobile suburbs, enabled by newly paved roads and better access to downtown. Car ownership freed residents from reliance on fixed rail lines and encouraged new forms of residential and commercial expansion along road corridors. Streets like Dodge, Leavenworth, and Military Avenue became crucial arteries for car travel, prompting the development of gas stations, car dealerships, and garages.

The city's planners responded by laying out more paved roads, installing traffic signals, and eventually building the first limited-access parkways. The idea of regional planning began to take shape, influenced by national trends in traffic engineering and street design. Planners saw infrastructure not merely as a response to growth but as a tool to shape and direct that growth—a philosophy that would become dominant by the 1940s.

However, Omaha's road expansion also reflected broader social disparities. As roads connected affluent neighborhoods and facilitated suburban development, many Black, immigrant, and working-class communities remained under-served and physically constrained by the geography of investment. Although not yet subject to the freeway displacements of the mid-century era, neighborhoods like Near North Side already experienced the early patterns of selective access and planning that would later become more pronounced.

Social and Political Dimensions of Infrastructure

The transformation of Nebraska's roads also

Early 20th Century: Automobility, Federalization, and System Thinking

New Technologies and the Birth of National Road Systems

brought a new kind of public institutionality. Road-building required trained engineers, budgets, policy frameworks, and ongoing maintenance, and this professionalism helped solidify infrastructure as a domain of state governance. Agencies like the Nebraska Department of Public Works (established in 1923) brought scientific approaches to what had once been informal or volunteer efforts. Engineers conducted soil studies, standardized bridge types, and introduced road surfacing innovations, including concrete and asphalt paving.

Yet, as with much Progressive-era reform, this modernization was not equally distributed. Funding formulas often rewarded counties with larger tax bases, and projects were prioritized based on perceived economic return rather than equitable access. Native communities, especially the Omaha and Winnebago Tribes, saw limited benefit from early federal-aid roads, as their lands were frequently bypassed or under-resourced. These disparities would persist well into the 20th century.

Legacy and Long-Term Impact

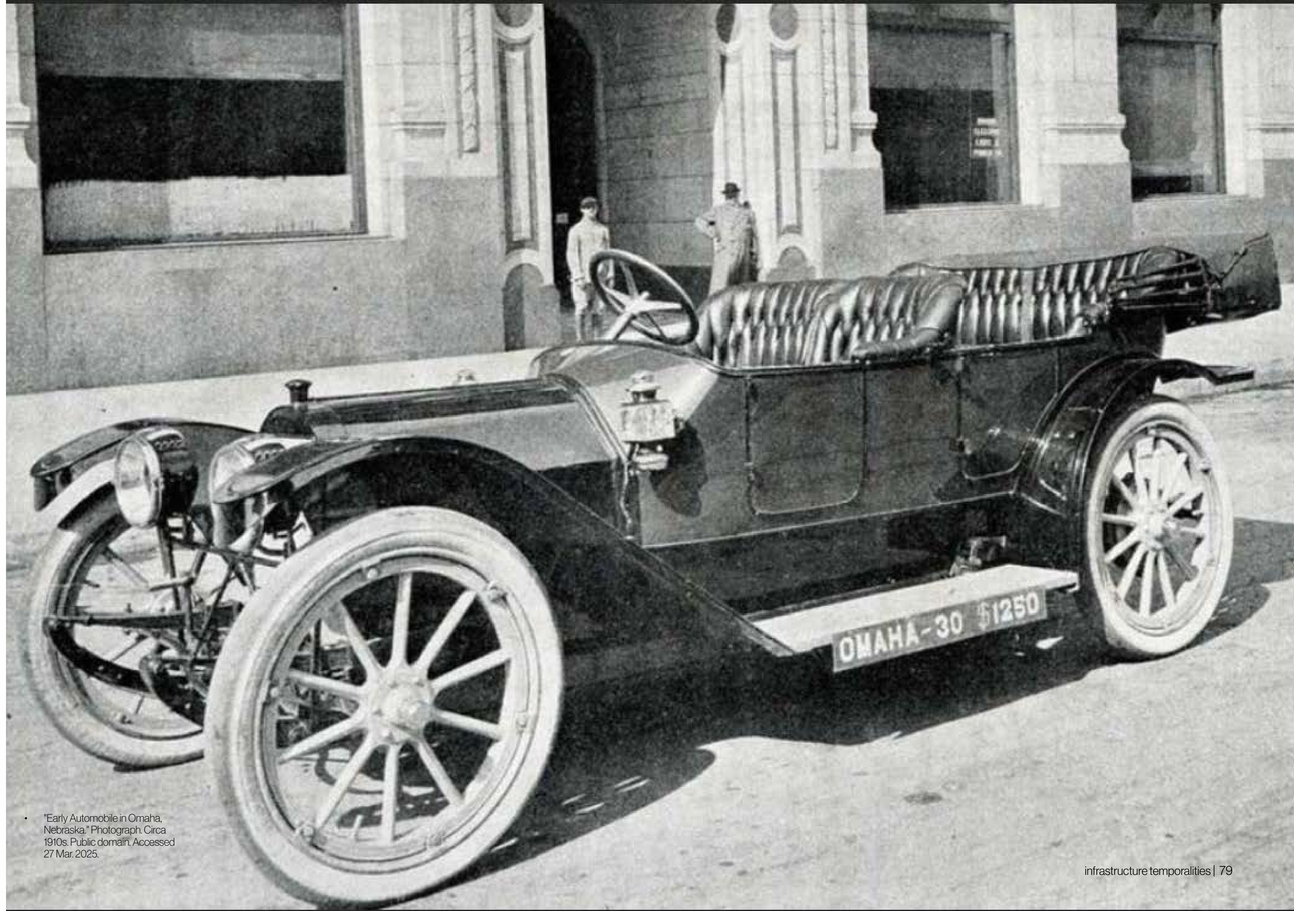
By the early 1930s, Nebraska had become a regional model for rural road-building. Its grid of state highways supported its agricultural economy and its urban centers were increasingly oriented around the car. Omaha, in particular, was laying the groundwork for mid-century automobile dominance, with car-centric neighborhoods, growing arterial roadways, and early signs of decentralization.

However, the very success of automobility in Nebraska also raised enduring questions. Who was connected, and who was not? What landscapes were prioritized for access and investment? What cultural and spatial patterns were being reinforced by the location of road.

As future decades would reveal—with the rise of the Interstate Highway System and the urban freeway—these early road-building efforts in Nebraska were not just about connectivity. They were about infrastructure as power, planning as politics, and mobility as a form of privilege.

The automobile era in early 20th-century Nebraska ushered in a new model of infrastructure development: coordinated, professionalized, and expansive. From the creation of the State Highway Commission to the emergence of paved regional networks, Nebraska transformed itself from a loose patchwork of rural trails to a highly integrated transportation system. Omaha, as the state's urban anchor, adapted rapidly to this shift, reshaping its form and function around car culture.

Even as roads brought opportunity, they also reproduced inequality. The legacy of this era is visible not only in the road maps of today but in the spatial hierarchies and patterns of growth that continue to shape Nebraska's development. Automobility, in Nebraska as across the nation, was not just a change in how people moved—it was a redefinition of place, policy, and power.



"Early Automobile in Omaha, Nebraska." Photograph. Circa 1910s. Public domain. Accessed 27 Mar. 2025.

SPECIAL TOPIC

thomas h. macdonald

Thomas H. MacDonald: The Quiet Architect of America's Roads

Predecessor to Robert Moses and Builder of the Federal Highway State

While Albert Gallatin articulated one of the earliest national visions for infrastructure and General Roy Stone helped institutionalize its federal beginnings, it was Thomas Harris MacDonald who turned these ideals into a sprawling, functioning reality. Known widely—and reverently—as "The Chief," MacDonald served as the head of the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) from 1919 to 1953, a tenure that spanned seven presidential administrations and fundamentally shaped the 20th-century transportation landscape of the United States.

Born in 1881 in Leadville, Colorado and raised in Iowa, MacDonald began his career as a state highway engineer before ascending to national leadership just as the U.S. was grappling with the rapid rise of the automobile. At the time, most roads were unpaved, fragmented, and managed by under-resourced local governments. MacDonald set out to change that—not with brute force or political spectacle, but with policy, standards, and systems. His career established the bureaucratic, technical, and funding infrastructure that would support the modern highway era—and later make the work of figures like Robert Moses possible.

Inventing the Infrastructure State: Science, Surveys, and Standardization

MacDonald harnessed a simple but revolutionary philosophy: modern roads are essential to national unity, economic development, and democratic access. He believed that the federal government must take a leadership role in ensuring consistent, connected, and safe roadways, especially in rural and underserved areas. But rather than centralize all control in Washington, he championed a cooperative federalism approach that empowered states while guiding them with shared standards and funding.

To achieve this, MacDonald:

- Institutionalized federal-state partnership through the Federal-Aid Highway Program, providing matching funds to states.
- Created uniform engineering standards for road construction and maintenance.
- Developed road classification systems (primary, secondary, local) to prioritize funding and design
- Pioneered traffic surveys, road use data, and systemic planning models.
- Oversaw the 1926 establishment of the U.S. Numbered Highway System, replacing a chaotic patchwork of named trails with a coordinated national grid.

These reforms weren't just technical—they were transformative. They turned road-building into a national system rather than a local convenience. MacDonald professionalized transportation planning and established the Bureau of Public Roads as one of the most influential federal agencies in American history.

Impact on Nebraska and the American Heartland

MacDonald's innovations had a profound effect in rural states like Nebraska, where roadconnectivity was both a practical necessity and a democratic imperative. His federal policies enabled the newly formed Nebraska Department of Public Works (later the Nebraska Department of Roads) to leverage national resources while tailoring implementation to local needs. Under thismodel, Nebraska developed a coherent highway system that served agricultural markets, rural communities, and emerging cities like Omaha.

Key routes—such as U.S. Route 6, U.S. Route 30 (the Lincoln Highway), and U.S. Route 75—were integrated into the U.S. highway grid under MacDonald's leadership, strengthening regional trade and cultural exchange. His emphasis on rural access helped prevent the isolation of farm communities and reinforced the idea that infrastructure is a public good—not a privilege of urban centers alone.

The Highway as a National Project—and a Tool of Inclusion

More than an engineer or bureaucrat, MacDonald was a civic reformer. He viewed roads not merely as conduits of commerce or defense, but as instruments of democracy. He advocated fiercely for rural road improvement, arguing that equitable access to mobility was a cornerstone of civic participation. His philosophy saw roads as threads in the American fabric—connecting people to opportunity, services, and each other.

Through this lens, MacDonald positioned infrastructure as a national responsibility—and insisted that roads were as vital to the well-being of citizens as schools, water, or electricity.

Predecessor to Robert Moses: Power Without Spectacle

Though he lacked the notoriety of urban power-broker Robert Moses, MacDonald was arguably more influential. Whereas Moses built bridges, expressways, and parks with dramatic flourish (and often with authoritarian disregard for communities), MacDonald built the national machinery that made such megaprojects possible.

MacDonald created the funding streams, planning tools, and federal-state framework that Moses later leveraged to transform New York City and its suburbs.

While Moses dominated headlines and consolidated power through public authorities, MacDonald operated as a system builder, elevating infrastructure into a domain of policy, coordination, and civic purpose.

Moses was the builder of cities; MacDonald was the architect of the American highway state.

In this way, MacDonald was Moses' bureaucratic predecessor—laying the groundwork for an era in which infrastructure would become a central tool of social engineering, urban transformation, and national identity.

Legacy, Criticism, and the Road Forward

By the time he retired in 1953:

- Over 3 million miles of roads had been classified, improved, or paved through federal-state programs.
- Every state had a functioning highway department operating under consistent national standards.
- A comprehensive national framework for planning, funding, and building roads had been institutionalized.

Yet, like Moses, MacDonald's legacy is not without controversy. His centralized, top-down style has been critiqued for failing to account for environmental impacts, community input, or transit alternatives. While he left office before the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act unleashed the Interstate era, his groundwork enabled both its benefits and its harms—including the disinvestment in public transit and the destruction of urban neighborhoods in the name of automobile mobility.

The Chief and the Nation He Helped Connect

Thomas H. MacDonald's tenure is among the most consequential in the history of American public service. He didn't just build roads—he built the systems that built roads. He professionalized a field, scaled a vision, and established infrastructure as a tool of governance, equity, and national identity.

His impact is still felt in every mile marker, every state highway sign, and every policy debate over mobility, access, and inclusion. To understand MacDonald is to understand the ethos of American highway planning—its ambitions, its blind spots, and its ongoing influence in how we build and who we become.

"A nation without adequate roads is a nation without adequate unity."

— Thomas H. MacDonald

Credit: Public Roads Administration/ Library and Archives Canada/PA-172966

Mid 20th Century: Interstates, Urban Renewal, and Displacement

The Highways That United—and Divided—America

The passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, championed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, stands as one of the most far-reaching infrastructure initiatives in U.S. history. At the heart of the legislation was the creation of the Interstate Highway System—a vast network of limited-access highways designed to promote economic growth, national defense, and modern mobility. The system ultimately encompassed more than 40,000 miles of high-speed roads, revolutionizing how Americans lived, worked, and traveled.

Eisenhower, having witnessed Germany's autobahns during World War II, saw strategic value in a unified road system that could quickly move troops and supplies in times of national crisis. At home, the booming postwar economy, rising car ownership, and suburban expansion fueled demands for better roads. The legislation provided $25 billion in federal funds over a decade, marking the largest public works investment to date. With 90% of the funding coming from federal gas taxes, the system was not only ambitious but self-financed, reinforcing the idea that infrastructure could be both monumental and fiscally responsible.

The Interstate Highway System soon became emblematic of American modernity. It facilitated the rise of logistics and long-haul trucking, connected coastal ports with inland cities, and enabled the birth of the interstate tourism economy—complete with rest stops, roadside attractions, and fast food chains. Economically, it contributed to unprecedented national integration. Culturally, it embedded the ideal of freedom through mobility into the American imagination. The highways came to symbolize progress, prosperity, and unbounded possibility.

The Hidden Costs of Progress: Displacement and Spatial Injustice

Yet this transformation came at a profound cost. The routing decisions that shaped the system were not made in a vacuum. In countless urban areas—Detroit, New Orleans, Miami, St. Paul, and Omaha, among many others—interstates were routed through Black, immigrant, and working-class neighborhoods. These communities were often redlined and labeled as "blighted," making them politically vulnerable to displacement under the guise of urban renewal.

Using eminent domain, highway planners razed thousands of homes, businesses, schools, and churches. In doing so, they fractured neighborhoods, displaced families, and severed the social and economic lifelines of entire communities. Cultural institutions and generational wealth were lost, replaced with concrete ribbons of speed that bypassed the very people they harmed. While white middle-class families moved to car-dependent suburbs, Black and Latino communities were trapped in increasingly isolated inner cities—left with the noise, pollution, and barriers of freeway infrastructure, but without the promised mobility or economic benefits.

This was not simply a side effect of modernization—it was often an intentional application of power through planning. Infrastructure, in these cases, was weaponized: not only to build but to divide. Scholar and planner Dr. Mindy Fullilove has called this process "root shock," emphasizing the deep psychological, cultural, and social trauma inflicted by urban disruption. The interstate system, while monumental in ambition, carried within it the seeds of deep structural inequity—some of which persist today in patterns of disinvestment, environmental degradation, and unequal access to transportation and opportunity.

The 1960s: Innovation, Institutional Consolidation, and Federal Power

The 1960s were marked by a dual reality in American transportation policy: unprecedented infrastructure growth and rising backlash against its human and environmental consequences. Against this backdrop, national leaders—beginning with President John F. Kennedy and continuing under President Lyndon B. Johnson—moved to restructure federal transportation governance. Their goal was to bring greater coherence to an increasingly complex web of agencies, projects, and regulations.

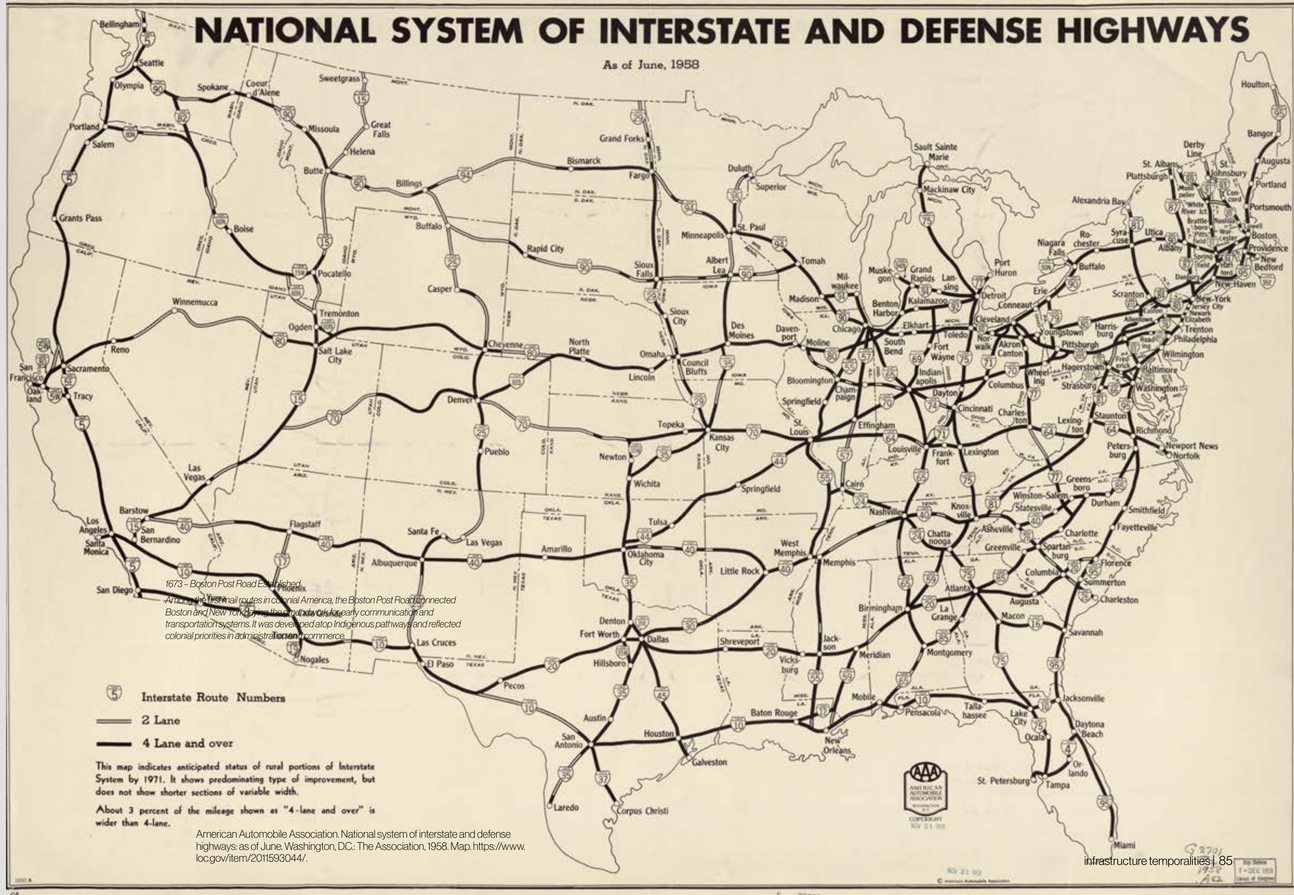
When Kennedy took office in 1961, he inherited an aggressive highway-building agenda and a fragmented federal structure. He appointed Rex M. Whitton, a respected highway engineer and former chief of the Missouri State Highway Department, to lead the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR). Whitton's tenure came at a time when local resistance to urban freeway construction was beginning to emerge. Cities like San Francisco and Washington, D.C., saw growing coalitions of residents—especially from communities of color—begin to push back on highway plans that threatened their neighborhoods. Whitton, however, stayed focused on the technical and administrative aspects of the system, advancing engineering standards, traffic safety, and coordination with state highway departments across the country.

At the same time, Kennedy's federal appointments reflected a broader vision of integrating private-sector efficiency with public-sector goals. One of his most high-profile appointees was Robert S. McNamara, then president of the Ford Motor Company, as Secretary of Defense. While McNamara's primary focus was the military, his background in automotive systems and logistics informed a systems-based, data-driven approach to governance. His appointment also reflected the deep and growing ties between the automobile industry and federal infrastructure policy, particularly as the car became the dominant mode of personal and commercial transportation in the U.S.

Johnson and the Birth of the U.S. Department of Transportation

The real watershed moment came under President Lyndon B. Johnson. As highway construction continued at breakneck pace and urban opposition intensified, Johnson recognized the need to bring order to the sprawling federal transportation bureaucracy. At the time, more than 35 separate agencies oversaw elements of transportation—from aviation to roads to maritime shipping. In his 1966 State of the Union address, Johnson called for the creation of a unified Department of Transportation to centralize authority, reduce duplication, and improve strategic planning

In a message to Congress, Johnson argued: *"In a Nation that spans a continent, transportation is the web of union... Yet our present structure makes it almost impossible to serve either the growing demands of this great Nation or the needs of the industry, or the right of the taxpayer to full efficiency and frugality."* The result was the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT), signed into law in October 1966. The new department brought together the BPR, Federal Aviation Administration, Federal



American Automobile Association. National system of interstate and defense highways: as of June. Washington, D.C.: The Association, 1958. Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/2011593044/.

Railroad Administration, and newly created units for urban mass transit and transportation safety. It marked a critical turning point in the federal approach to mobility: one that recognized not just roads and cars, but multimodal needs, urban integration, and growing public demands for environmental and social accountability.

The creation of the USDOT also institutionalized a key shift: transportation was no longer just a matter of engineering and construction—it was a matter of policy, planning, and people. Infrastructure became understood as both an economic lever and a social determinant, capable of shaping not just markets but neighborhoods, health outcomes, and civic inclusion.

From Concrete to Conscience

The period from 1956 to the late 1960s reshaped the American landscape more profoundly than almost any other era. The Interstate Highway System fulfilled a powerful promise—mobility, economic growth, and national integration—while also revealing infrastructure's capacity to divide, displace, and exclude. What was once celebrated purely as "progress" is now increasingly viewed through a more critical lens, especially in communities still grappling with the legacy of disrupted neighborhoods, environmental burdens, and disconnection.

The technocratic brilliance of leaders like Thomas MacDonald and Rex Whitton, combined with the managerial efficiency of figures like Robert McNamara, helped build the bones of a modern transportation system. But it was the political vision of President Johnson, culminating in the creation of USDOT, that reframed infrastructure as a public responsibility rooted in justice, coordination, and inclusion.

Today, as new federal programs like the Thriving Communities Initiative seek to repair past harms and reimagine infrastructure for equity, climate resilience, and economic mobility, the lessons of the mid-20th century remain vital. Highways may connect cities, but infrastructure connects lives—and how it is planned, built, and governed determines who gets to move forward, and who is left behind.

Improve the navigation of the Mississippi River at the Des Moines Rapids, ca. 1905. RG 233, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, National Archives.

Mid 20th Century: Interstates, Urban Renewal, and Displacement

The Highways That United—and Divided—America

The formation of the House Committee on Public Works in 1947 marked a watershed moment in federal infrastructure governance. By consolidating the previously separate Roads and Canals, Rivers and Harbors, and Flood Control Committees into a single body, Congress centralized its oversight and legislative responsibilities around the nation's growing infrastructure needs. This structural shift mirrored the scale and complexity of 20th-century public works projects, which increasingly spanned multiple sectors and required coordinated planning at the federal level.

This consolidation allowed for a more unified legislative agenda, streamlining how infrastructure policy was developed and funded. It created the legislative foundation necessary to support postwar expansion, particularly in transportation, and served as a precursor to future federal initiatives such as the Federal-Aid Highway Program. With this committee, Congress positioned itself as a key player in the physical and economic transformation of the United States.

President Kennedy's appointment of Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense brought private-sector systems management into the heart of federal policymaking. At the Pentagon, McNamara applied his Ford-derived expertise in logistics, data analysis, and operations research to transform military planning. His influence extended beyond defense, however, shaping how the federal government approached complex infrastructure systems and interagency coordination.

McNamara's presence in the Cabinet reflected the Kennedy administration's belief in modern technocracy. While he did not directly oversee transportation, his systems-oriented approach informed broader federal strategies around planning, resource allocation, and public accountability—principles that would later influence the formation of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

During his tenure at the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) from 1961 to 1966, Rex Whitton oversaw one of the most intense periods of highway construction in American history. He worked to standardize road designs, implement uniform signage, and develop better safety protocols. His leadership helped the BPR mature into a national coordination body capable of managing the sprawling, multibillion-dollar Interstate system

The momentum of highway construction also produced growing resistance. Urban communities—especially Black and working-class neighborhoods—began organizing against freeways that threatened their homes. While Whitton did not lead systemic reform, his era marked the beginning of a national dialogue around displacement, environmental justice, and the limits of technocratic planning. His quote, "Our task is not merely to lay down concrete," reflects his emerging recognition of the human consequences of infrastructure.

American Automobile Association. National system of interstate and defense highways: as of June. Washington, DC: The Association, 1958. Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/2011593044/.

SPECIAL FOCUS

Mid 20th Century: Interstates, Urban Renewal, and Displacement

The Highways That United—and Divided—America

Nebraska

The mid-20th century marked a defining era for Nebraska's transportation system, as the state transitioned from a primarily rural road network to a modern, federally integrated highway infrastructure. This transformation was shaped by a blend of national policy and funding, state-level engineering leadership, and practical adaptations to Nebraska's unique geography and economic needs. During this period, highway development in both Nebraska and its largest city, Omaha, shifted from improving basic access and mobility to delivering large-scale, coordinated infrastructure systems—most notably through the construction of Interstate 80 (I-80) and a comprehensive grid of U.S. and state highways

Nebraska's embrace of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 reflected its historical commitment to long-range planning and fiscal responsibility. Even before the act's passage, Nebraska had invested decades into improving its roads: from the Good Roads Movement of the early 20th century to its strategic use of federal aid during the New Deal. The Nebraska Department of Roads (NDOR)—which evolved from the Department of Public Works—was well-positioned to take on the ambitious task of interstate construction. The state's engineers worked efficiently to align new highways along topographically favorable corridors, particularly in central Nebraska, where the Platte River Valley offered a naturally level route across the state.

Interstate 80, the state's principal east-west route, became the centerpiece of this modern system. Following the historic pathways of Indigenous trails, the Oregon Trail, and the Lincoln Highway, I-80 offered continuity with the region's transportation legacy while meeting contemporary demands for speed, safety, and economic integration. Construction began in 1957 and progressed swiftly. By 1964, Nebraska earned national recognition as the first state to complete its mainline segment of I-80 border to border. The 455-mile route not only improved regional mobility but facilitated interstate commerce, agricultural exports, tourism, and military readiness during the Cold War era.

The construction of I-80 was characterized by innovations in road surfacing, bridge design, and snow management, including the use of Portland cement concrete pavement suited to Nebraska's freeze-thaw cycles. Rest areas, scenic lookouts, and service interchanges were also strategically placed to accommodate long-distance travel and support rural economies. In addition to I-80, Nebraska built out complementary routes including I-129 near South Sioux City, as well as improvements to U.S. highways like U.S. 6, U.S. 30, and U.S. 275, which provided access to rural communities and agricultural distribution centers.

Omaha's Urban Highway System: Access and Complexity

In Omaha, highway development during the mid-to-late 20th century was deeply interwoven with the city's evolving urban form. As suburbanization accelerated post–World War II, the need for high-capacity, limited-access roadways became clear. The integration of Omaha into the Interstate system involved the construction of I-80 as it passed through the city's southern corridor, along with the development of I-480 (Downtown Loop), I-680 (northern bypass), and major U.S. routes like U.S. 75 (the North Freeway).

The urban segments of the interstate in Omaha required complex planning, as roadways had to navigate rail lines, residential neighborhoods, river crossings, and a growing suburban fringe. The I-480 corridor, designed to link downtown with the interstate network, was among the earliest and most significant projects. Constructed during the 1960s and 1970s, it involved extensive right-of-way acquisition and reshaped traffic circulation in the city's core. While intended to support economic growth, these developments—like in many U.S. cities—also necessitated the relocation of homes and businesses in older urban neighborhoods.

The North Freeway (U.S. 75), a major north-south corridor, was constructed to improve access from downtown to North Omaha and beyond. Completed in segments throughout the 1960s and 1970s, it was designed to reduce surface-level congestion and streamline commuter and freight traffic. The freeway connected to the existing network of arterials, bridges, and industrial zones but also introduced lasting changes to land use patterns in adjacent neighborhoods.

The expansion of I-680, forming a partial beltway around the west and north of the city, further encouraged suburban development. Communities like Millard, West Omaha, and areas near the Mormon Bridge saw residential and commercial growth catalyzed by highway access. Industrial parks and logistics centers also clustered near interchanges, illustrating the economic benefits of interstate proximity.

Infrastructure as a Public Commitment

Throughout this period, the Nebraska Department of Roads (NDOR) maintained a reputation for engineering excellence and budget-conscious planning. The department emphasized durable materials, standardized bridge designs, and efficient maintenance practices. Snow and ice control innovations were especially important in Nebraska's harsh winters, and the department developed responsive systems for storm clearance and traffic safety. Investments were also made in rest areas, welcome centers, and statewide signage to support tourism and driver experience.

By the late 20th century, Nebraska's highway system was widely regarded as one of the most accessible and well-maintained in the country. The integration of urban interstates in Omaha and the build-out of I-80 across the state created a reliable foundation for economic activity, cross-state travel, and national defense logistics.

The mid-to-late 20th century in Nebraska was a period of strategic, well-coordinated infrastructure development. The state balanced rural and urban needs, modernized its planning frameworks, and participated in one of the most ambitious transportation programs in American history. In Omaha, these developments brought both opportunity and complexity, marking a shift toward a metropolitan identity shaped by mobility, growth, and regional integration.

Mid 20th Century: Interstates, Urban Renewal, and Displacement

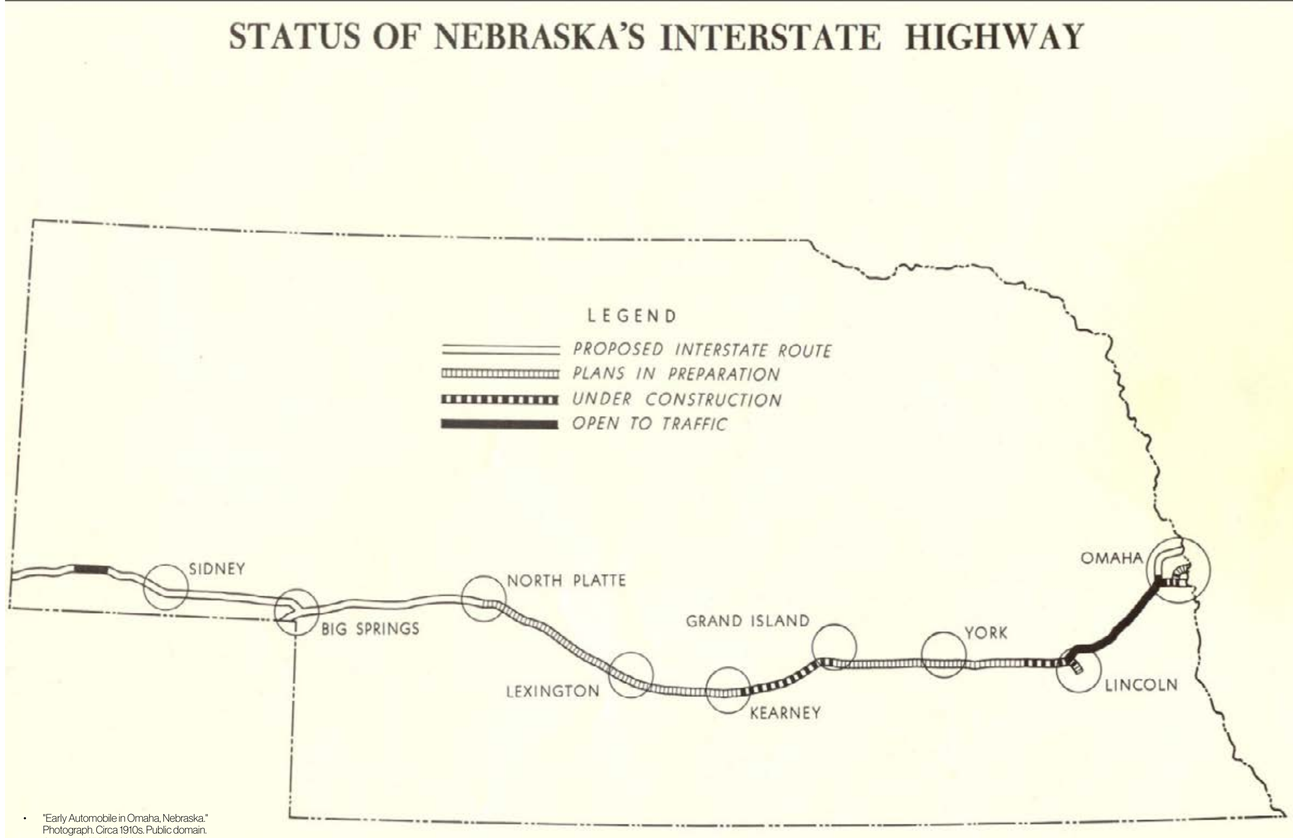
The Highways That United—and Divided—America

This photograph shows the construction of a major elevated freeway segment in Omaha, Nebraska—part of the Interstate 480 (I-480) and U.S. Route 75 (North Freeway) interchange development during the mid-20th century, spanning the Missouri River into Iowa. It documents the scale and engineering complexity of Omaha's urban highway expansion during the Interstate Highway era.

Nebraska Department of Transportation. Construction of I-480/North Freeway Interchange, Omaha, Nebraska, ca. 1960s. Nebraska Department of Transportation Photo Archive.

This historic map titled "Status of Nebraska's Interstate Highway" depicts the phased progress of Interstate 80 across the state during the early stages of the federal Interstate Highway Program. It categorizes segments of the roadway as "Proposed Interstate Route," "Plans in Preparation," "Under Construction," and "Open to Traffic." The route runs from Omaha in the east, through cities like Lincoln, Kearney, North Platte, and Sidney, following the Platte River corridor—a long-established corridor of travel and trade. The map reflects the mid-20th century vision of national connectivity through Nebraska's rural and urban centers.

Nebraska Department of Roads. Status of Nebraska's Interstate Highway. Circa 1960s. Nebraska Department of Transportation Archives.



- "Early Automobile in Omaha, Nebraska." Photograph. Circa 1910s. Public domain. Accessed 27 Mar. 2025.

Mid 20th Century: Interstates, Urban Renewal, and Displacement

The Highways That United—and Divided—America

The Buckingham Road Viaduct, part of the South Omaha Union Stock Yards complex, stands as a significant example of early 20th-century industrial infrastructure. Constructed in 1924, the viaduct carried 29th Street over the expansive cattle pens of one of the nation's largest livestock processing centers. It was designed to facilitate efficient movement of people, goods, and livestock above the bustling stockyard operations below, reflecting a broader national trend of grade separation in urban industrial zones to increase safety and productivity.

The viaduct's structural design—utilizing reinforced concrete—was both functional and symbolic. It represented a modern approach to infrastructure during a time when Omaha was a national leader in meatpacking and livestock commerce. The bridge allowed traffic to bypass congestion, helping integrate South Omaha's commercial and industrial fabric. Today, it serves as a reminder of the city's working-class heritage and the role infrastructure played in shaping urban labor economies, spatial hierarchies, and patterns of industrial development.

"South Omaha Union Stock Yards, Buckingham Road Viaduct, Twenty-ninth Street spanning Stockyard Cattle Pens, Omaha, Douglas County, NE." Historic American Engineering Record, Survey No. HAER NE-10-D, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1924.

Mid 20th Century: Interstates, Urban Renewal, and Displacement

The Highways That United—and Divided—America

"South Omaha Union Stock Yards, Buckingham Road Viaduct, Twenty-ninth Street spanning Stockyard Cattle Pens, Omaha, Douglas County, NE." Historic American Engineering Record, Survey No. HAER NE-10-D, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1924.

Mid 20th Century: Interstates, Urban Renewal, and Displacement

The Highways That United—and Divided—America

This historic photograph captures the early construction of the Dodge Street Interchange in Omaha, Nebraska—an essential east-west corridor integrated into the larger Interstate 80 system. The image shows a cloverleaf interchange design under development, symbolizing the expanding complexity and engineering ambition of Omaha's mid-century transportation planning. The inset map highlights the broader I-80 route across Nebraska, situating the Dodge Street location in the state's growing network. This project played a critical role in linking urban Omaha with regional and national highways.

Nebraska Department of Roads. Dodge Street Interchange Under Construction, Omaha, Nebraska. Circa 1960s. Nebraska Department of Transportation Archives

SPECIAL TOPIC

dr. evelina lópez antonetty

reverand wendell foster

reverand theodore gibson

reverand charles hill

jane jacobs

Resistance to the Federal Highway Program

Local Movements, Community Leaders, and the Fight for Spatial Justice

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, championed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, initiated the largest infrastructure project in U.S. history: a 41,000-mile Interstate Highway System designed to connect cities, ports, and military bases across the country. Touted as a symbol of progress, prosperity, and national unity, the system also delivered unintended—and devastating—consequences for urban communities. In cities from San Francisco to Miami, New Orleans to New York, grassroots opposition emerged to challenge the destruction wrought by this ambitious plan. This wave of resistance, driven by local leaders, neighborhood coalitions, and civil rights advocates, transformed infrastructure from a technical matter into a deeply political and moral debate about space, equity, and power.

Eisenhower Era
Highways, Displacement, and Early Resistance

During the late 1950s, the highway system was implemented swiftly and forcefully. At the federal level, the Bureau of Public Roads delegated significant autonomy to state highway departments, which often selected routes through neighborhoods labeled "blighted." In practice, these designations disproportionately targeted Black, Latino, immigrant, and working-class communities—places already redlined or excluded from public investment. Through eminent domain, entire communities were razed to make way for new freeways. The physical impacts were immediate: homes bulldozed, businesses shuttered, and families displaced with minimal recourse or compensation.

One of the earliest major victories for community-led resistance came in San Francisco, where local residents, planners, and preservationists united to fight the Embarcadero and Western Freeways. Their activism, led by groups like the San Francisco Citizens Committee to Save the Waterfront, culminated in a 1959 decision by the city's Board of Supervisors to cancel the Western Freeway project. This marked the first successful "freeway revolt" in the U.S. and inspired similar movements across the country

In New Orleans, the proposed Claiborne Expressway (a spur of I-10) ran through the historic Black neighborhood of Tremé. Construction obliterated Claiborne Avenue, once a vibrant cultural and economic artery. While the project was completed, residents organized through groups like the Tremé Community Improvement Association, setting an early precedent for mobilization, resistance, and the articulation of spatial justice from within affected communities.

Kennedy Administration
Growing Mobilization and Public Awareness

The 1960s ushered in greater public scrutiny of urban renewal and freeway projects. While President John F. Kennedy continued to support infrastructure modernization, communities across the U.S. began to resist en masse. Civil rights advocates, neighborhood associations, and environmentalists raised concerns about top-down planning and the human toll of displacement

In Syracuse, New York, Interstate 81 split through the thriving, majority-Black 15th Ward. Despite community pushback—led by churches, civic leaders, and members of the NAACP—the highway was built, causing lasting damage. Similarly, in Detroit, the construction of I-375 obliterated Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, displacing over 130,000 residents. Rev. Charles Hill and other leaders protested the loss of housing and culture, elevating the visibility of freeway resistance as a dimension of the Black freedom struggle

These local battles mirrored a broader critique: that infrastructure projects prioritized suburban commuters and car access over the lives and livelihoods of urban residents—particularly those of color. Even when construction proceeded, community-led resistance changed the narrative and created long-term political pressure for more inclusive planning.

Johnson Era
National Recognition and Intensified Revolt

By the time President Lyndon B. Johnson took office, resistance to freeway construction had become widespread. As part of his Great Society agenda, Johnson supported more comprehensive transportation policy, culminating in the creation of the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) in 1966. Johnson framed transportation as a public good, warning against "scarring the irreplaceable countryside" and enabling 50,000 highway deaths annually.

However, freeway projects continued to tear through urban cores. In Miami, the routing of I-95 through Overtown, the city's largest and oldest Black community, met fierce resistance. Rev. Theodore Gibson of the NAACP and Overtown leaders demanded alternative routes and better relocation plans. Though unsuccessful in halting the freeway, their resistance created a legacy of activism that has shaped recent efforts to reconnect and reinvest in Overtown

In Washington, D.C., opposition crystallized into organized action. The Emergency Committee on the Transportation Crisis, led by Reginald Booker and Sam Smith, mobilized predominantly Black neighborhoods to stop the North Central Freeway. After years of protests, lawsuits, and public advocacy, the project was canceled in 1972—one of the most high-profile victories of the freeway resistance era.

The Urban Revolt
Jane Jacobs, the Bronx, & New York's Fight for Place

The most iconic symbol of freeway resistance remains Jane Jacobs, author of The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961). Jacobs, who lived in New York's Greenwich Village, fought against Robert Moses, the city's powerful planner and freeway proponent. Moses had planned the Lower Manhattan Expressway (LOMEX) to run through SoHo and Little Italy, threatening to demolish hundreds of buildings and displace thousands. Jacobs organized residents, testified at hearings, and orchestrated high-profile protests—including her own arrest. Her movement successfully halted the project, reframing urban infrastructure as a social and moral issue, not just an engineering challenge.

In the Bronx, Moses had already constructed the Cross Bronx Expressway, completed in phases between 1948 and 1972. It displaced more than 60,000 people—largely Black and Puerto Rican families—and severed neighborhoods like Morris Heights and Tremont. The expressway accelerated urban decline, cut off access to jobs and schools, and catalyzed a public health crisis. In response, figures like Rev. Wendell Foster and Dr. Evelina López Antonetty led grassroots organizing around displacement, environmental injustice, and education equity. These campaigns—though

unable to prevent the highway—built a foundation for community development corporations, tenant rights groups, and environmental health coalitions that endure today.

From Resistance to Reconnection

The resistance to mid-20th century freeway construction reshaped American infrastructure politics. What began as neighborhood pushback evolved into a nationwide movement that challenged technocratic planning and called for spatial justice, community control, and public accountability. These efforts led to landmark legislation: the National Environmental Policy Act (1969) and the Uniform Relocation Act (1970)—important, if imperfect, responses to the harms inflicted by federal infrastructure.

The legacy of the freeway revolts persists. Today, federal programs like the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program and Thriving Communities Initiative reflect a new ethos—one that acknowledges past harms and seeks to repair them. Cities like Syracuse, New Orleans, and Oakland are reimagining their highways, pursuing removal, capping, or transformation of legacy infrastructure. And in New York, calls to retrofit or remove the Cross Bronx Expressway grow louder—drawing directly from the efforts of earlier activists.

The freeway revolts remind us that infrastructure is not neutral—it is a reflection of values, often shaped by decisions made without those most affected at the table. Resistance movements of the 1950s and 60s made clear that communities are not blank spaces on a map. They are sites of history, culture, and resilience. Their stories—and their defiance—offer a roadmap for building infrastructure that heals rather than harms, and that connects rather than divides.

Late 20th to 21st Century: Reconnection and Resilience

Toward a Just and Future-Oriented Framework

Late 20th to Early 21st Century: From Efficiency to Equity—Redefining American Infrastructure

By the latter half of the 20th century, the United States stood at a complex crossroads. The postwar boom in highway construction had yielded one of the most expansive and ambitious public works projects in human history: the Interstate Highway System. Cities were connected. Economies were transformed. Suburbanization, freight logistics, and military preparedness were made possible on a scale previously unimaginable.

But the very roads that stitched the country together also divided it. The consequences of infrastructure decisions—particularly freeway placement became increasingly undeniable. Highways sliced through the hearts of thriving urban neighborhoods, disproportionately targeting Black, immigrant, and working-class communities. Entire ecosystems were destroyed or disrupted. Public health outcomes worsened due to proximity to major roadways. These were not side effects—they were structural features of a planning regime that had long prioritized automobile mobility and land speculation over community cohesion and ecological balance.

As the century closed, these realizations prompted a profound reevaluation of what infrastructure could and should be. Public perception began to shift. No longer was infrastructure seen as purely a technical or engineering domain—it was increasingly recognized as a deeply social, economic, and political instrument, capable of entrenching inequality or advancing justice.

Evolving Governance: From Public Works to Transportation and Infrastructure

This changing understanding was reflected in federal policy. In 1994, Congress renamed the long-standing House Committee on Public Works and Transportation to the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. This was not just a change in name—it marked a paradigmatic shift. Infrastructure policy was now expected to do more than lay concrete and steel. It was tasked with addressing the growing complexities of environmental remediation, disaster resilience, multimodal systems, public land use, and inclusive community development.

Federal agencies and local governments began integrating new policy lenses such as environmental justice, accessibility, and climate adaptation. At the same time, new funding and planning tools were introduced, including livability indices, health impact assessments, and "Complete Streets" design guidelines—measures that emphasized safety, walkability, and public life alongside vehicle throughput.

This was also the era of expanding grassroots resistance and civic empowerment. Community groups, environmental advocates, and racial justice organizations increasingly held agencies accountable for the lived impacts of transportation infrastructure. The consequences of mid-century urban renewal policies—displacement, disconnection, and disinvestment—were not just documented but challenged. Movements to remove or cap highways, reclaim public space, and restore community landmarks grew louder and more sophisticated. Examples such as San Francisco's Embarcadero removal, Boston's Big Dig, and freeway revolts in Portland, New Orleans, and the Bronx helped shift the national conversation toward repair and regeneration.

New Federal Investments: From Repair to Reconnection

With the turn of the 21st century, this growing momentum met new urgency. Climate change, economic inequality, and racial injustice were no longer emergent issues—they were dominant forces shaping the American landscape. Infrastructure had to be reimagined not as a static system of pipes and pavement, but as a dynamic opportunity to build resilience, sustainability, and trust.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021 marked a watershed moment. Passed amid the COVID-19 pandemic and rising national reckoning with systemic inequality, the IIJA represented the largest federal infrastructure package in generations—$1.2 trillion in total spending. But unlike its 20th-century predecessors, it came with a clear and explicit mandate: rebuild in a way that centers equity, climate resilience, and community restoration

Two signature programs from the IIJA reflect this shift:

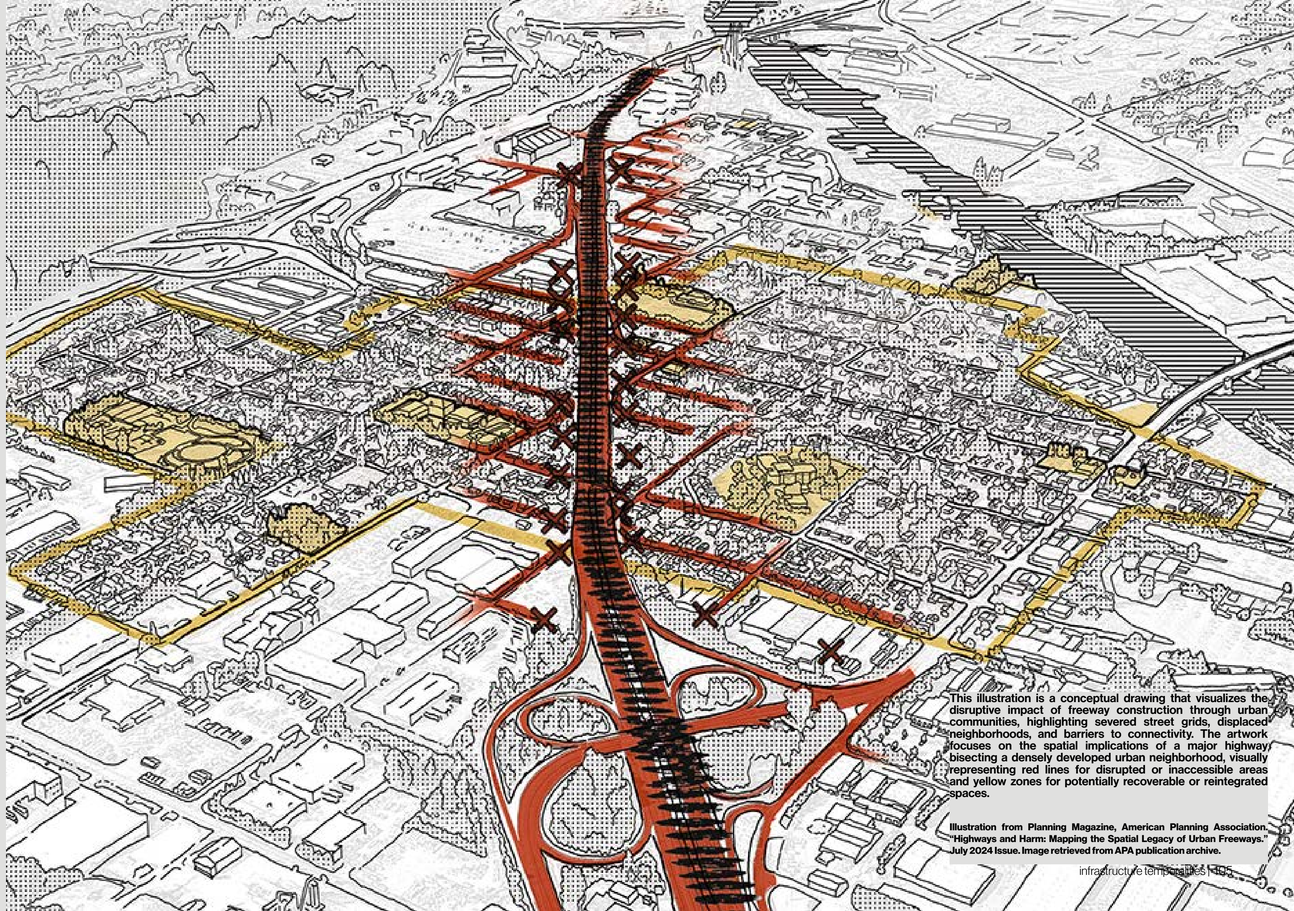
- The Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program targets communities that were divided by past highway construction, offering grants for projects like highway capping, pedestrian infrastructure, and transit restoration.
- The Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI) seeks to ensure that underserved communities receive the technical assistance, capacity building, and equitable development planning needed to access federal infrastructure funds and co-create future investments.

These programs marked a moral and strategic departure from earlier eras. Instead of building over communities, they aim to build with them. They prioritize participatory planning, restorative design, and place-based investment, recognizing that infrastructure must support not just movement—but memory, identity, and long-term opportunity.

Infrastructure as a Civic Instrument

This era has also prompted new approaches to measuring the success of infrastructure. Traditional metrics like "level of service," "vehicle miles traveled," and "cost-benefit analysis" are increasingly joined by more holistic indicators: health outcomes, environmental impact, public participation, and social equity.

Designers and planners have developed frameworks that embed justice at the core. Shared value models, spatial forensics, systems thinking, and indicators rooted in the Social Determinants of Health (SDH) or United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) are guiding new ways of thinking. These approaches acknowledge that infrastructure is not neutral—it reflects values, priorities, and power structures. As such, it can either reproduce inequality or serve as a lever for transformation.



This illustration is a conceptual drawing that visualizes the disruptive impact of freeway construction through urban communities, highlighting severed street grids, displaced neighborhoods, and barriers to connectivity. The artwork focuses on the spatial implications of a major highway bisecting a densely developed urban neighborhood, visually representing red lines for disrupted or inaccessible areas and yellow zones for potentially recoverable or reintegrated spaces.

Illustration from Planning Magazine, American Planning Association. "Highways and Harm: Mapping the Spatial Legacy of Urban Freeways." July 2024 Issue. Image retrieved from APA publication archive.

Looking Ahead: Values That Move Us

Today, America's infrastructure future stands on uncertain but promising ground. The challenges are immense: aging systems, climate threats, housing crises, and growing distrust in government. But so are the opportunities.

For the first time in decades, infrastructure is being treated not as a siloed engineering exercise, but as an interdisciplinary, justice-oriented field of practice. Architects, historians, artists, public health officials, and community organizers are helping reshape the narrative of what infrastructure can be.

This shift—from building for efficiency to building for equity—is neither automatic nor complete. It requires ongoing vigilance, partnership, and imagination. But it also offers a generational opportunity: to redefine infrastructure not as the machinery of separation, but as the connective tissue of a thriving, inclusive, and sustainable society.

This image offers a striking "before and after" comparison of the Klyde Warren Park project in Dallas, Texas, a prominent example of a freeway capping initiative that transformed a major urban highway into a vibrant public green space. On the left, the image shows Woodall Rodgers Freeway (Spur 366) exposed and sunken between downtown Dallas and the Uptown neighborhood, creating a physical and psychological barrier that separated communities and limited pedestrian access. On the right, the "after" image reveals the completed park, which was constructed directly above the recessed freeway using a deck or cap structure.

The project reconnects downtown with the Arts District and surrounding areas, offering a renewed sense of urban cohesion and dramatically enhancing walkability, accessibility, and green space in the urban core. Klyde Warren Park is now a national model for freeway capping, often cited in infrastructure and urban design discourse as an example of how transportation corridors can be reimagined to serve community, ecological, and social purposes.

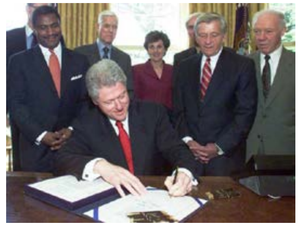
Photo credit: Klyde Warren Park, Dallas, Texas — Before and After Images. Source: The Office of Urban Design, https://www.klydewarrenpark.org. Accessed March 28, 2025.

- **This image shows City Walk BHAM, a vibrant linear public space constructed beneath the I-59/I-20 interstate bridges in downtown**

Right: Birmingham, Alabama. Completed in 2022, this multi-block transformation project reclaims formerly underutilized space beneath elevated highway infrastructure and reimagines it as a civic asset.

The project includes walking and biking trails, playgrounds, performance spaces, fitness areas, public art, picnic zones, and vibrant lighting installations—all designed to reconnect neighborhoods that had been divided by highway construction decades ago. It is one of the most ambitious examples of infrastructure reuse in the country and reflects a growing national movement to repair communities fractured by mid-20th-century highway development.

Image: City Walk BHAM, Birmingham, AL. Photo courtesy of Volkert, Inc., featured in the City of Birmingham's City Walk BHAM project. Accessed via The World Games 2022.



This photo shows President Bill Clinton signing the Wendell H. Ford Aviation Investment and Reform Act for the 21st Century (AIR-21) into law in the Oval Office on April 5, 2000. Surrounded by lawmakers and transportation advocates, the moment marked a major investment in the future of aviation infrastructure in the United States.

AIR-21 authorized nearly $40 billion over three years for airport improvements, safety enhancements, and expanded aviation capacity. It represented a bipartisan effort to modernize the national air transportation system in response to growing passenger volumes and emerging security and efficiency challenges. The law also reinforced the commitment to ensure equitable access to federal aviation funds for large and small airports alike.

Image: President Bill Clinton signs the AIR-21 Act in the Oval Office, April 5, 2000. Source: Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) / U.S. Department of Transportation / Public Domain.
allowed for systematic expansion of the highway grid.

This photo captures President George W. Bush signing the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) on August 10, 2005. The signing took place at a Caterpillar plant in Montgomery, Illinois, symbolizing the law's emphasis on improving highway safety and promoting infrastructure development across the nation.

SAFETEA-LU authorized $286.4 billion in funding for federal surface transportation programs for highways, highway safety, and public transportation through 2009. It continued the legacy of prior major federal transportation acts but placed a new emphasis on transportation planning that included safety, congestion relief, and environmental stewardship. The legislation also introduced performance-based planning and encouraged community involvement in transportation decision-making.

Image: President George W. Bush signs SAFETEA-LU at Caterpillar plant, Montgomery, Illinois, August 10, 2005. Source: U.S. Department of Transportation / White House Archives / Public Domain.

This image captures Rose Kennedy Greenway in Boston, Massachusetts, a hallmark of the Big Dig (Central Artery/Tunnel Project), one of the most ambitious urban infrastructure reconstructions in American history. The photo shows the vibrant public park that now occupies the space once dominated by the elevated Central Artery (I-93), a divisive and noisy highway that ran through downtown Boston. By placing the highway underground, the city reclaimed valuable urban space and reconnected long-separated neighborhoods.

Completed in the early 2000s, the Big Dig not only transformed Boston's traffic patterns but also represented a new era of infrastructure design that prioritizes environmental integration, civic life, and urban cohesion. The Rose Kennedy Greenway is a landscaped ribbon of parks and cultural space that stretches over the buried freeway, offering residents and visitors a restored connection to the waterfront and downtown core.

Rose Kennedy Greenway, Boston, built over the Big Dig freeway tunnel, reconnecting neighborhoods and replacing the former Central Artery." Licensed image from Alamy, Image ID: B6264M. Photographer: © Joseph Sohm / Alamy Stock Photo.

SPECIAL FOCUS

Late 20th to 21st Century: Reconnection and Resilience

Toward a Just and Future-Oriented Framework

Nebraska

Nebraska's highway development in the mid-20th century was a critical component of the state's modernization efforts. Cities like Omaha and Lincoln benefitted from new connections to regional and national markets, and rural communities gained more reliable access to goods, services, and labor mobility.

But as elsewhere, the benefits of postwar infrastructure were not evenly distributed. In Omaha, the routing of major expressways like U.S. Highway 75 (the North Freeway) reshaped entire neighborhoods, particularly in North and South Omaha. These routes were carved through historically Black, immigrant, and working-class communities. Homes were demolished, churches relocated, businesses shuttered, and street grids permanently altered. While these highways improved regional and commercial connectivity, they also severed the social fabric of neighborhoods that had long resisted redlining and disinvestment.

During the late 20th century, this reality came into sharper focus. The very infrastructure projects once hailed as engines of progress began to be recognized for their role in accelerating patterns of racial and spatial inequality. In Omaha, the scars of the North Freeway were particularly visible. Local leaders, neighborhood associations, and community historians began to organize, document, and challenge the legacy of these mid-century interventions.

Reassessing Omaha's Infrastructure Priorities

The 1980s and 1990s brought both a slowing of major freeway construction and a new emphasis on maintenance, safety, and urban planning. In Omaha, infrastructure became increasingly entangled with concerns over land use, environmental impact, and community health. Civic institutions began to reflect this shift. The Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA) played a growing role in facilitating regional collaboration, transportation studies, and public engagement initiatives. The City of Omaha began incorporating long-term transportation goals into its urban development plans, with growing attention to transit, bike networks, and walkability.

By the early 2000s, the need for a more balanced transportation system had become apparent. Traffic congestion, aging infrastructure, and widening racial and economic disparities shaped public conversations. Federal programs like the ISTEA (1991) and SAFETEA-LU (2005) provided new frameworks for multimodal planning, encouraging cities to think beyond the automobile. Omaha's own experiments in Bus Rapid Transit (ORBT), street corridor redesigns, and transit-oriented development reflected these national currents.

Still, many of the structural issues introduced by earlier infrastructure decisions remained unresolved. The North Freeway, for example, continued to act as a physical and psychological barrier between neighborhoods. Communities like Prospect Hill, Near North Side, and Saratoga—once vibrant hubs of Black cultural, spiritual, and economic life—were left divided and struggling to attract reinvestment.

A New Paradigm: Equity, Repair, and Place-Based Investment

With the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) in 2021, Nebraska—like the rest of the nation—entered a new chapter in infrastructure planning. For the first time, equity and community restoration were not just supplementary goals, but explicit federal priorities. Programs like the Reconnecting Communities Pilot and the Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI) provided technical and financial support for cities and states to address the harms caused by past infrastructure policies.

In Omaha, these new tools arrived amid rising interest in the future of the North Freeway. Public forums, university research, and grassroots organizing all pointed toward a renewed desire to reconnect the fabric of divided neighborhoods. The City and its partners—including MAPA, One Omaha, SPARK, —have been exploring whether sections of the North Freeway could be removed, capped, or reimagined as public spaces that reflect community needs and memory.

Simultaneously, Nebraska's Department of Transportation (NDOT) has taken on a more nuanced role. Beyond simply maintaining highways, the agency has begun engaging with climate resilience, equity frameworks, and collaboration with tribal governments and local municipalities. Recent NDOT planning documents reflect a broader understanding of what infrastructure should do—support mobility, yes, but also advance opportunity, health, and social cohesion.

Beyond Asphalt: The Role of Values in Infrastructure Planning

In both urban and rural Nebraska, the discourse around infrastructure has shifted. Stakeholders now recognize that how and where we build carries deep ethical and cultural significance. The legacy of the North Freeway has become a touchstone for understanding both the unintended consequences and the intentional choices that shaped the modern city. In its place, new conversations are taking root—ones that ask not just how to build, but how to heal.

Omaha's next generation of infrastructure projects—whether in transit, housing, or broadband—will be judged not only by their efficiency or engineering excellence, but by how well they serve people and place. Programs like TCI, supported by the U.S. Department of Transportation, provide a framework for collaborative, justice-centered development that can respond to the complex histories embedded in Nebraska's roads and bridges.

As Nebraska moves into the future, it does so with a clearer sense of its infrastructure past. The challenge now is to integrate memory, equity, and imagination—to ensure that highways no longer divide, but connect; that roads no longer bypass, but uplift.

Late 20th to 21st Century: Reconnection and Resilience

New Technologies and the Birth of National Road Systems

Left: This image shows a historic photograph of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75) onramp in Omaha, Nebraska, during a rainy day—likely taken in the late 1960s or early 1970s during the construction and early use phases of the freeway system. The signage indicates the connection to Interstate 480 and Dodge Street, major corridors in Omaha's central urban grid. The layered interchanges above reflect the engineering style of the era, prioritizing car-based connectivity and high-speed travel.

"North Freeway Onramp, Omaha, NE." Omaha World-Herald Archives, via Omaha.com. Accessed March 2025. Original image URL: Omaha World-Herald

Right: This black-and-white archival photograph captures the early construction phase of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75) in Omaha, Nebraska, likely taken during the mid-to-late 1960s. In the foreground, construction equipment, including a large crane and several trucks, are visible at the future site of an elevated interchange. Concrete bridge supports and girders are being placed over a graded terrain, emphasizing the scale and technical ambition of the infrastructure effort.

In the distance, several buildings from Omaha's urban core can be seen, grounding the freeway within the broader spatial development of the city. This particular segment was part of the federal Interstate and highway expansion efforts that reshaped Omaha's transportation network and urban fabric—especially affecting the Near North Side and North Omaha neighborhoods. The project was part of a larger wave of infrastructure modernization driven by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956.

"North Freeway Construction, Omaha, NE, c. 1960s." Omaha World-Herald Archives, via Nebraska Department of Transportation Historical Collection. Accessed March 2025. Original image source: [Nebraska DOT Archives or Omaha Public Library Digital Collections, if applicable].

SPECIAL TOPIC

north 75 omaha freeway

North Omaha: A Landscape of Connection, Disruption, and Possibility

Past, Present and Future

North Omaha was a place of movement, memory, and deep-rooted in belonging. The region's wooded ravines, riverfront bluffs, and rolling floodplains were not simply natural features, these landscapes shaped the rhythms of life: seasonal migration, and trade. Trails etched by foot and terrains of First Nations, would later become the North Omaha neighborhood.

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, North Omaha emerged as a key destination for immigrants arriving in Omaha's growing industrial economy. Jewish families from Eastern Europe, along with Czech, Italian, and Irish communities, settled in the area, bringing with them faith traditions, small businesses, and social institutions. Along streets like 24th and Lake, synagogues, delicatessens, bakeries, and corner stores marked a flourishing immigrant presence. Streetcars and modest homes lined 24th Street and Lake Street. Neighborhoods like Prospect Hill, Saratoga, Long School, and Near North Side formed tight-knit neighborhoods with vibrant religious, educational, and commercial life. The railroad yards and warehouses near the river that brought employment and economic opportunities.

Early development in North Omaha bore the marks of uneven investment. While desirable neighborhoods and identities in the western parts of the city received curbs, gutters, and paved boulevards, North Omaha's roads often remained gravel or dirt. Infrastructure came late—or not at all. Nonetheless, the 20th century brought both momentum and marginalization. In the New Deal era, federal programs brought partial improvements—sidewalks, public housing, and WPA labor projects—but often stopped short of full parity with the rest of the city. Despite the mid-century, patterns of segregation, redlining, early indicators of industrial decline, North Omaha remained a community of remarkable vibrancy—home to writers, musicians, educators, and entrepreneurs. The Great Migration brought African Americans from the South into the North with employment opportunities in the meatpacking plants, railroads, and service sectors. Segregation and discriminatory housing practices pushed them into North Omaha, where over time they built a thriving social and cultural ecosystem—anchored by churches, businesses, jazz clubs, social halls, and activist networks.

As the neighborhood's racial demographics began to shift, New Deal-era housing policies and federally backed mortgage programs (like the Home Owners' Loan Corporation and FHA loans) expanded opportunities for upward mobility through home ownership and the massive suburbanization of outlying neighborhoods. Many "white" and newly assimilated immigrant families were able to secure loans and relocate to newer, racially exclusive developments in South and West Omaha. These opportunities were explicitly denied to Black residents through redlining, restrictive covenants, and discriminatory underwriting practices. As a result, the Black community—largely barred from the housing and credit resources that underwrote suburban expansion—became increasingly concentrated in North Omaha.

Despite these limitations, Black North Omaha continued to grow as a powerful cultural and economic hub. Anchored by institutions like the Dreamland Ballroom, the Omaha Star newspaper, and churches that doubled as organizing spaces, the area built its own legacy of enterprise and civic engagement. Residents worked in meatpacking plants, rail yards, and domestic labor, often navigating exploitative working conditions with dignity and perseverance.

Community organizations, Black-owned businesses, and a strong tradition of political activism helped sustain neighborhood identity amid growing spatial and economic constraints. North Omaha's growth was shaped by a dual narrative: of vibrant community-building and systemic exclusion. Even in its early days, the neighborhood was underserved by the city.

Growing patterns of redlining, industrial decline, and now "urban renewal" hardened racial and spatial divides. Home values stagnated, landlords neglected repairs, and the promise of upward mobility slipped further away.

And then came the freeway.

The disruption came in concrete form. The construction of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75) in the 1960s and 1970s marked a profound turning point. Over a thousand homes and community institutions were demolished, and the freeway carved through the neighborhood like a wound—isolating blocks, uprooting families, and undermining commercial life along key corridors. This was not simply an infrastructure project; it was a geographic rupture that dislocated culture, disrupted generational wealth, and restructured the city's growth away from its urban core

In the decades that followed, North Omaha was too often treated as a zone of decline—targeted for police enforcement rather than public investment, and discussed more in the language of deficits than dreams. Yet through it all, community institutions persisted. Activist groups, neighborhood associations, churches, and small businesses have carried forward a long-standing tradition of resistance and renewal

Today, North Omaha stands at a crossroads. In the midst of a national reckoning with racial equity and infrastructure justice, the neighborhood has become central to local conversations about repair and investment. Proposals to cap, reroute, or remove the North Freeway reflect more than urban design—they reflect a deeper desire to reconnect the physical and social fabric of a place that was never truly broken, only interrupted. What lies ahead depends not just on funding or policy, but on listening—on restoring power to the communities that have always called North Omaha home.

North 75 Freeway

The construction of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75) in Omaha stands as one of the most transformative and contested infrastructural decisions in the city's history. Conceived during the mid-20th century's national freeway boom, it was part of a larger vision to streamline transportation and foster suburban expansion. But the freeway's path was not carved through uninhabited land—it cut directly through North Omaha, one of the city's oldest, most established, and culturally vibrant neighborhoods.

Initial plans for the freeway emerged in the 1950s as Omaha officials and federal transportation authorities began aligning local road development with the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. Like in many American cities, planners sought a direct route to link the downtown core with major national arteries, particularly I-480 and I-680. North Omaha's dense grid and central location made it a tempting corridor. But rather than tunneling around or integrating existing patterns of life, engineers selected a route that prioritized speed and efficiency over social cohesion and community well-being.

The North Freeway construction was made possible by a confluence of federal and state-level transportation policies, funding streams, and planning authorities, most notably through the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. This act authorized a massive investment in interstate highway construction, backed by the Highway Trust Fund, which was itself financed through a national gas tax. As part of the larger Interstate Highway System, Omaha's U.S. Highway 75 was eligible for 90% federal funding, with the remaining 10% typically covered by the state—in this case, through the Nebraska Department of Roads (now known as the Nebraska Department of Transportation).

The state of Nebraska received its first allocation under the 1956 act in the late 1950s, and planning soon began to bring interstate access to Omaha's urban core. In 1963, a proposed route for the North Freeway was formalized by city and state officials, with the support of the Bureau of Public Roads. Key players in advancing the project included state highway administrators, Omaha city planners, and regional offices of the Federal Highway Administration. Federal engineers and administrators often pushed for speed, standardization, and technical efficiency in route selection—factors that contributed to limited community input and insensitivity to the neighborhood fabric.

Local Omaha officials—working closely with state engineers—had already embraced the logic of urban renewal and modern expressways. As such, they routed the North Freeway through North Omaha's Near North Side, Prospect Hill, and Saratoga neighborhoods—areas labeled "blighted" or "obsolete" in planning documents. This framing allowed city leaders to qualify for additional federal urban renewal grants and right-of-way clearance support under the Housing Act of 1949. In practice, this meant that freeway construction became intertwined with broader efforts to demolish and redevelop older urban neighborhoods.

Importantly, the decision to route U.S. 75 through predominantly Black neighborhoods was neither accidental nor purely a product of cost-benefit analysis. Rather, it was reinforced by systemic conditions: land values were lower in North Omaha, political resistance from residents held less sway, and the dominant models of planning privileged access and flow over equity and cohesion. The Nebraska State Highway Commission approved the freeway alignment with little modification after receiving input from the Bureau of Public Roads and national consultants. These alignments were often reviewed through a lens of engineering efficiency—minimizing turns, maximizing speed, and avoiding commercial downtown zones

Though city council members and state officials held public meetings, the extent to which North Omaha residents could influence decisions was limited. Many federal officials and engineers viewed community resistance as emotional or obstructionist, rather than legitimate feedback. The language of technical necessity prevailed. In this environment, projects like the North Freeway gained momentum not through democratic consensus, but through federal funding incentives, engineering protocols, and planning orthodoxy

By the early 1970s, more than $30 million (approximately $230 million in today's dollars) had been invested in right-of-way clearance, land acquisition, and construction for the North Freeway. Federal and state partnerships facilitated rapid progress, even as civil rights groups, local pastors, and North Omaha residents raised objections. Yet their voices were drowned out by the machinery of bureaucratic modernism—a system that prized speed and mobility over justice and local well-being.

As city officials like Omaha Planning Director Alden Aust and local engineers advanced freeway design plans with assistance from federal agencies, the surrounding community had limited access to the closed-door sessions where alignment decisions were made. While the official rationale cited traffic alleviation and economic efficiency, alternative routes that would have spared dense residential neighborhoods were dismissed early. The public narrative masked a quieter calculus: the targeted removal of what had already been redlined and stigmatized as "blighted" Black communities.

Voices from the Right-of-Way: Community Stories of Displacement in North Omaha

Community leaders such as Bertha Calloway, founder of the Great Plains Black History Museum, and activist Charles Washington, a North Omaha resident and one of Nebraska's earliest Black journalists, used their platforms to speak out against the destruction. Residents organized petitions, wrote letters to the editor, and held forums in school gyms and churches. They weren't opposed to all infrastructure—they wanted investment, but on their terms. The freeway, however, was not for them. It was for the convenience of white commuters driving in from newly developing western suburbs.

In the political arena, figures such as Councilman Fred Conley emerged as critical voices. Elected in the late 1980s as Omaha's first Black city council member, Conley inherited the long aftershocks of freeway disinvestment. Though he came after the height of construction, he continually pushed for greater city reinvestment in the communities harmed by earlier infrastructure policies. At the state level, the Nebraska Department of Roads (now NDOT) had few mechanisms for community consultation at the time, though later officials would revisit the legacy of the freeway and its social impacts.

Senator Ernie Chambers—one of Nebraska's most iconic and unyielding political voices. Born and raised in North Omaha, Chambers witnessed firsthand the steady erosion of his community under the weight of racist housing policies, economic neglect, and ultimately, the construction of the North Freeway.

Chambers emerged in the public eye in the 1960s as a barber, community leader, and outspoken activist. His early critiques of racial inequality were sharpened in the crucible of neighborhood transformation. As bulldozers cleared homes, shops, and churches in the path of U.S. Highway 75, Chambers became one of the few individuals with both the visibility and courage to challenge the city's leadership head-on. He was an early critic of the freeway's routing, framing it not simply as a planning decision, but as a continuation of systemic racism—another tool in the machinery of erasure.

In 1970, Chambers was elected to the Nebraska State Legislature, representing North Omaha's 11th District. Over the next four decades—becoming the longest-serving state senator in Nebraska history—he used his position to elevate the grievances of his constituents and place the injustices of the North Freeway on the public record. He spoke passionately about the social and economic costs of displacement, and the hypocrisy of labeling long-standing Black neighborhoods as "blighted" to justify their destruction.

Chambers also provided crucial institutional memory. As administrations changed and city plans evolved, he reminded policymakers of the lasting damage done to North Omaha—not just in dollars and square footage, but in trust, dignity, and cultural cohesion. He championed efforts for reinvestment, public oversight, and restorative planning practices, insisting that reparative infrastructure must not be symbolic but substantive.

He did more than critique—he cultivated civic consciousness. His speeches, legislative proposals, and community appearances kept the issue of North Omaha's displacement alive in the public imagination long after the last mile of freeway was paved. In doing so, Chambers helped lay the groundwork for today's calls to reimagine the North Freeway—not as an immutable structure, but as a remnant of harm that could, and should, be transformed.

Ernie Chambers remains a living archive of North Omaha's history and a reminder that infrastructure is never only about concrete and cars—it is about people, power, and the enduring fight for justice. His life's work challenges us to see freeways not as fixed outcomes, but

This historical black-and-white photograph captures the northeast corner of 24th and Lake Streets in North Omaha, circa 1963—a bustling commercial and cultural hub of Omaha's Black community during the mid-20th century. Prominent storefronts line the street, including Eva's Dress Shop, Speed Van, and a Pepsi-Cola Package Goods store, which together reflect the neighborhood's vibrant small business ecosystem. Cars from the era line the snow-covered curb, and pedestrians can be seen going about their daily routines, lending a sense of everyday life and economic activity to the scene.

Image courtesy of the Omaha World-Herald Archives. "24th and Lake Northeast Corner in 1963." File name: 24th and Lake northeast Corner in 1963 - OWH.jpg. Used for educational and research purposes.

as spaces where politics, protest, and policy intersect. The legacy of the North Freeway is still unfolding, and thanks to voices like Chambers', it now includes the possibility of restoration, repair, and renewal.

As the North Freeway sliced through North Omaha in the 1960s and 70s, the damage went beyond asphalt and buildings—it carved into the heart of a community. For the people who lived, worked, worshipped, and gathered in the path of U.S. Highway 75, the freeway was not an abstract transportation project. It was a bulldozer's shadow on their front porch. It was the knock on the door announcing forced relocation. It was the sound of demolition where laughter and song once lived.

Mrs. Elaine Johnson, a former resident of the Long School neighborhood, recalls the day her family was notified: "We got a letter. No one came to talk to us. They said we had 60 days to leave the house we'd lived in for 22 years. My parents had bought it just after the war—my dad was a porter on the trains. He built the porch himself. My mother grew hydrangeas along the fence. After we left, I don't think she ever planted flowers again."

Like Elaine's family, many residents lost more than property—they lost the symbols of stability, the memories that turned a house into a home. Compensation was rarely fair, and relocation offered few good options. Redlining meant mortgages were difficult to secure in other parts of Omaha. "We were boxed in," said James Bradford, a business owner whose barbershop was one of the many businesses along 24th Street shuttered during the highway construction. "First they told us where we could live. Then they came and tore down the one place we made our own."

The churches were among the hardest losses. Mount Nebo Baptist Church, a cornerstone of faith and resistance, was razed during Phase 2 of the freeway build. Congregants scattered. "It was more than a building," said Reverend Thomas Hill, who led the congregation during those years. "It was where we buried our elders, baptized our babies, and taught our children not to be afraid. When it went down, something in us did too." Even children understood the rupture. Rosalind Gaines, who was eight when her family was displaced, said she remembers packing in silence: "Nobody said anything, but everyone looked sad. Our neighbors brought over food like someone had died. Maybe something had."

The loss extended beyond households. Social clubs, community centers, and informal gathering spots—porches, stoops, barbershops—vanished. In their place came concrete, traffic, and isolation. The once-walkable streets became fragments, divided by high-speed ramps and sound walls. Mary Carter, whose father ran a record store that doubled as a youth hangout, described the shift as psychic as well as physical: "After the freeway came through, it felt like the soul of the neighborhood got quieter."

Through oral history projects and community storytelling circles, residents have worked to preserve these stories. Their accounts challenge dominant infrastructure narratives that prioritize efficiency over equity, engineering over empathy. They remind us that behind every eminent domain claim was a family uprooted. Behind every map was a home unmade.

These voices echo into the present. As new infrastructure investments are debated and the future of the North Freeway is reimagined, residents call not just for technical fixes but for moral repair. "You can't just put a park over a wound and call it healing," said longtime activist Claudine Washington. "You've got to listen to what was lost. You've got to ask what kind of community we want to be now—and who gets to decide that."

By centering these voices, we move from a history of silence to a practice of acknowledgment. Infrastructure, after all, is not just about concrete—it's about community. And these stories are blueprints for a different kind of future.

The freeway project, guided by technocratic logic and institutional detachment, decimated generational wealth. Many homeowners received only a fraction of their property's value. Families were scattered. The street grid, once walkable and interconnected, was ruptured. Social cohesion dissolved as the new concrete trench formed a psychological and physical divide. What had once been an area of density, diversity, and cultural vitality was reduced to fragmented blocks hemmed in by overpasses and retaining walls. From the beginning, community voices raised alarms. Residents, pastors, local business owners, and civic leaders protested the proposed routing through historic Black neighborhoods, offering alternatives that would have spared the core of Near North Omaha. Their appeals were largely ignored. City planners, with the backing of federal dollars and local development interests, pursued a path that fragmented some of the city's most resilient cultural institutions. Churches were razed. Homes were condemned. Schools, once within walking distance for neighborhood children, were cut off by lanes of high-speed traffic and concrete barriers.

The freeway's phased construction, which took place between the early 1960s and 1970s, displaced more than 1,000 households—predominantly African American families. Streets like 24th, 30th, and Lake, once the arteries of Black Omaha's commercial and civic life, were severed. Vital gathering places such as the Fair Deal Cafe, Zion Baptist Church, and numerous barbershops, clubs, and small businesses either vanished or lost the foot traffic they depended on. What had once been a dense, interconnected web of streets and social life became a series of fragmented zones cut off by overpasses, embankments, and noise walls.

The North 75 Freeway impacts were not only physical—they were deeply psychological and generational. The freeway routed more than vehicles; it routed disinvestment. Insurance maps changed. Property values declined. Lending institutions withdrew. Families who had once owned homes in tight-knit communities now found themselves in scattered housing arrangements, often in neighborhoods that lacked support systems and familiarity. The loss of intergenerational wealth, neighborhood stability, and community-based economies was profound—and measurable.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the North Freeway became a symbol of what had gone wrong in urban planning. Far from being a connector of opportunity, it functioned as a wedge, reinforcing racial and economic segregation. While wealthier areas of Omaha expanded westward with new housing, malls, and schools, North Omaha's tax base eroded. Infrastructure maintenance lagged. Bus routes were curtailed. Crime increased—not because of some inherent flaw in the neighborhood, but because the systems of support and investment had been undermined.

In recent decades, community-led initiatives have begun challenging this narrative. Local leaders and advocacy groups have pushed for a reevaluation of the freeway's footprint. Some propose "capping" parts of it—essentially building parks or civic space over the sunken freeway to reconnect the grid. Others advocate for complete removal and replacement with walkable boulevards that restore the historic street network. These ideas are not radical—cities like Syracuse, New Orleans, and Detroit have begun similar processes. In Omaha, the North Freeway remains both a cautionary tale and an opportunity for healing.

By the 2000s and 2010s, national conversations about freeway harm—particularly in Black communities—gave renewed momentum to local organizing. In Omaha, groups like the North Omaha Neighborhood Alliance and the North Omaha Legacy Project amplified

- Archival aerial photograph documenting the construction of Highway 75 North in North Omaha, Nebraska. Published in local media outlets, accessed for public research and education.

calls to cap, reroute, or reimagine U.S. 75. City planners began including North Omaha voices in transportation planning, though deep disparities remained. The long-ignored question—who gets to decide what gets built and where—was back on the table.

Efforts like the "Reconnecting Communities" initiative, federally supported through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, offer new hope. These programs recognize that past infrastructure projects created harm—and they prioritize reparative investment. In North Omaha, this means not just beautifying the freeway or increasing traffic efficiency, but fundamentally rethinking its role. Can it serve as a bridge rather than a barrier? Can future transportation policy honor the communities it traverses rather than erase them?

The legacy of the North 75 Freeway reminds us that infrastructure is never just about roads. It is about decisions—who makes them, who benefits, and who bears the cost. In North Omaha, these questions are not academic—they are lived realities etched into the geography of the city. To understand the freeway is to understand how power, race, space, and memory converge in the built environment. And to reimagine it is to chart a new path forward—one rooted in justice, care, and community-led design.

A Future Reimagined: Contemporary Visions Shaping the North 75 Freeway Dialogue

In recent years, North Omaha has become the site of a growing movement to reclaim, reimagine, and repair the impacts of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75). Community planners, artists, policymakers, and activists are stepping forward not only to reflect on past injustices but also to shape bold alternatives for the future. Among them are leaders like Manuel "Manne" Cooke, Clarice Dombeck, and Kimara Snipes—each deeply rooted in the community and carrying unique skills that bring life to an alternative vision for infrastructure as a tool of healing. Cookeis a North Omaha-based urban planner and creative strategist whose work centers around infrastructure justice and cultural memory. A graduate of University of Nebraska at Omaha and the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, Cooke roots his spatial planning expertise and leads projects that bridge community voice with design innovation. His exhibit, Reclaiming the Grid at Kiewit Luminarium, explores the history of displacement caused by the freeway and invites residents to visualize new spatial futures through maps, storytelling, and immersive installations. In addition to curating exhibitions, Cooke is one of the lead coordinators of the Omaha Trail—a community-led effort to create a linear cultural greenway that reconnects neighborhoods fragmented by the freeway. His work emphasizes the power of design to not just build structures, but to restore identity, memory, and agency.

Clarice Dombeck, a long-time advocate and policy specialist, brings a background in housing justice, city planning, and civic engagement. As a former public servant and current policy advisor focused on equitable development, Dombeck has played a key role in convening dialogues around freeway reparations and environmental justice in North Omaha. Her experience in navigating municipal systems and federal grant frameworks makes her a strategic voice in bridging local organizing with institutional change. Dombeck's efforts have supported the creation of public forums, impact studies, and a community-led visioning process that directly addresses land reuse, displacement prevention, and restorative development. She is particularly focused on ensuring that women, elders, and renters—often left out of traditional planning processes—are centered in conversations about infrastructure renewal.

Kimara Snipes, a former Omaha City Council candidate and community connector, brings decades of leadership rooted in civic participation, youth development, and cross-sector collaboration. As a North Omaha resident and nonprofit strategist, Snipes champions community stewardship and equitable development without displacement. She has been vocal about transforming the North Freeway into a corridor of opportunity—proposing ideas like "cap and reconnect" designs, workforce development programs tied to infrastructure work, and neighborhood resilience zones that reinvest in local institutions. Snipes' approach to change emphasizes co-governance and builds power from within, inviting local organizations, faith groups, and youth into planning tables that were historically closed off.

Together, Cooke, Dombeck, and Snipes represent a new generation of infrastructure leadership in Omaha—one that sees transportation as more than engineering and asphalt. Their work intersects with broader national movements calling for infrastructure reparations, especially in cities where freeway construction caused generational harm. In North Omaha, these leaders are asking: What does healing look like in concrete terms? How can we transform a corridor of division into a spine of cultural, economic, and ecological renewal?

Their efforts are part of a growing momentum for federal and local support through initiatives like the Reconnecting Communities Program and Thriving Communities Initiative, which provide resources for places looking to undo the damage of past infrastructure projects. With design charrettes, planning grants, and storytelling campaigns underway, North Omaha may soon become a national model for what it means to transform a freeway into a community-led future—where justice is not just spoken but built into the land itself.

Vision for Restoring the Urban Fabric

Amid the deep scars left by the construction of the North Freeway, a new vision has emerged—one that imagines not just restoring what was lost, but reweaving the fractured landscape into a vibrant, inclusive corridor of opportunity. That vision is "The Stitch," a restorative design concept developed through the Urban Land Institute (ULI) Nebraska District Council's Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) process, held in early 2025.

The concept is a development proposal for reparative planning. Focused on roughly 20 acres of underutilized land at the intersection of 30th Street and the North Freeway, this area—shaped by unfinished ramps, decommissioned parcels, and historic displacement—was identified by ULI as an urban infill opportunity in Omaha. For decades, the site has embodied both the literal and symbolic disconnect wrought by the freeway system: a "no man's land" between North Omaha and the city's civic and institutional core.

In response, ULI's panel of planners, designers, economists, and community leaders proposed a mixed-use development vision that would "stitch" the surrounding neighborhoods back together.

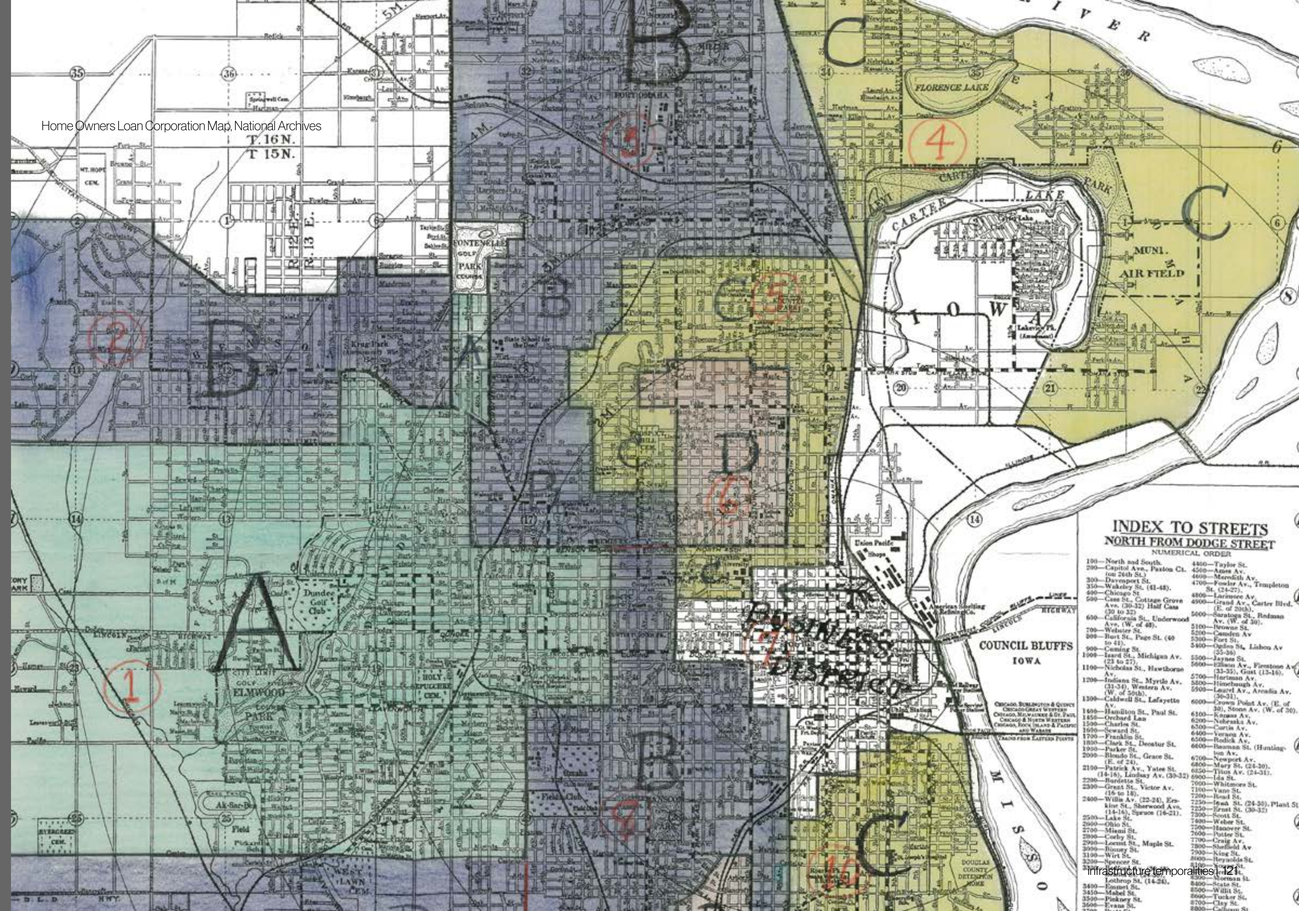
The proposal includes:

Mixed-income housing: With an emphasis on affordability, the plan supports housing that welcomes displaced families and ensures long-term neighborhood stability.

Street grid reconnection: The removal of obsolete ramps and reconfiguration of infrastructure would restore north-south and east-west pedestrian and vehicular connectivity.

Community-serving spaces: Ideas include a health and wellness hub, cultural center, open space, and local retail to reinvigorate commerce and community life.

Green infrastructure and trail connections: Building upon existing plans like the Omaha Trail, the Stitch proposes new active mobility corridors that integrate with regional trail systems and promote environmental health.



Home Owners Loan Corporation Map, National Archives

Transit-oriented design: By anchoring the redevelopment near key transportation nodes, including potential bus rapid transit and bike network improvements, The Stitch envisions a model of multi-modal, inclusive mobility.

ULI's TAP report offers design recommendations and underscores a financing and governance strategy that reflects the complexity of reparative development. It proposes a layered capital stack including:

- Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC)
- New Markets Tax Credits
- Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funds
- Philanthropic and institutional
- partnerships
- City and state investment in infrastructure removal and site preparation

The predevelopment costs are estimated at $31 million, with full build-out approaching $214 million, covering infrastructure upgrades, housing, streetscape improvements, and public amenities. ULI explicitly recommended that the land disposition process, led by the Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT), be tied to public benefit outcomes rather than market-driven bidding alone—an effort to prevent speculative development and ensure the land serves those most affected by past displacement.

In planning discussions—particularly those surrounding The Stitch @ 30th Street vision—Creighton University has been identified as a potential anchor institution that could help redress historical harms by intentionally supporting equitable redevelopment. The university's proximity to the freeway interchange and the underutilized land created by its unfinished ramps places it in a position of both influence and accountability.

Creighton University, a private Jesuit institution founded in 1878, has long stood as a major educational and healthcare anchor in Omaha. Its campus, located at the southern end of the North Freeway corridor, directly abuts one of the most contested and historically significant sites in the city's urban fabric—where disinvestment, displacement, and institutional expansion have long intersected.

As the University grew through the 20th and early 21st centuries, its development pattern mirrored broader forces at work in Omaha: freeway construction, federal urban renewal policy, and the consolidation of land once occupied by working-class and Black residents. While Creighton itself did not plan or construct the North Freeway, the impacts of its expansion were amplified by the void left behind—by homes lost, businesses displaced, and communities fractured.

In recent years, Creighton has continued to grow its academic and medical footprint through major capital investments, increasing its presence along Cuming Street and within the I-480 and U.S. 75 interchange zone. This expansion has included new buildings, parking garages, and campus facilities that sit atop or adjacent to land where entire neighborhoods once thrived. The geographic proximity to The Stitch—a proposed redevelopment of the freeway-adjacent parcels near 30th Street—places the University in a unique position of influence, whether formally engaged in the project or not.

Planners and residents alike have called on Creighton to be more than a neighbor—to be a civic partner in the repair of urban space shaped by exclusion and erasure. Community members envision a role for the University that extends beyond its boundaries: investing in shared infrastructure, supporting affordable housing, creating educational pipelines for nearby residents, and aligning development plans with community-led visions.

For Creighton, participating in the transformation of the North Freeway with proposal's like "The Stitch" offers this corridor a chance to mitigate the past and model what anchor institutions can look like in a more just, community-centered future.

As community leaders, planners, and national partners such as the Urban Land Institute (ULI) engage with the future of this corridor, the role of large institutions like Creighton is being scrutinized: Will they repeat patterns of insular expansion, or lean into a vision of shared prosperity?

Perhaps most importantly, "The Stitch" insists that community participation and equity must guide the entire process. The TAP panel calls for a community governance body—one that includes residents, small business owners, local nonprofits, and neighborhood institutions—to steward the project from planning through implementation. Without this, the panel warns, the project risks reproducing the very patterns of disconnection and exclusion it aims to heal.

Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI) and Reconnecting Communities Program

As federal initiatives like the Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI) and Reconnecting Communities Program advance, this effort can move from rhetoric to repair, from fragmentation to reconnection. The Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI), launched by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) in 2022, represents a landmark commitment to reorient infrastructure policy around equity, justice, and community well-being.

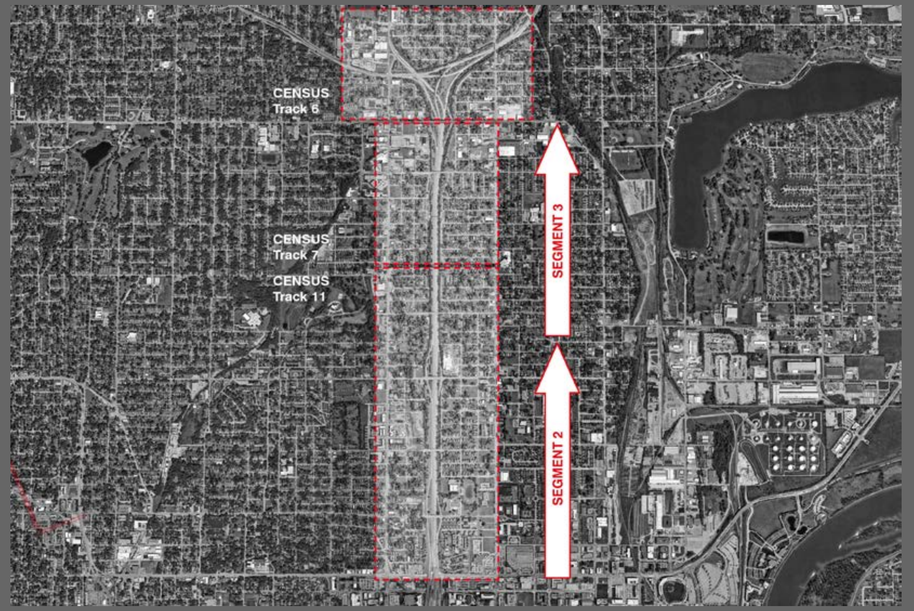
The relevance of TCI to the North 75 Freeway corridor in Omaha is significant. North Omaha is emblematic of the very conditions TCI aims to address: a community deeply impacted by mid-century highway construction, redlining, displacement, and decades of structural disinvestment. The freeway, originally intended to improve mobility, instead became a barrier to opportunity—splitting neighborhoods, displacing residents, and entrenching racial and economic segregation.

Through TCI, communities like North Omaha gain access to resources that go far beyond traditional infrastructure funding. The initiative offers planning grants, community engagement support, and cross-sector coordination—tools necessary for long-term, people-first development. Importantly, TCI prioritizes local knowledge and leadership in shaping transportation investments, marking a critical departure from the top-down planning models that created the problem in the first place.

In Omaha, the TCI framework supports ongoing work to reimagine the North Freeway corridor of reconnecting neighborhoods, fostering economic inclusion, and advancing climate resilience. As part of a national network of Thriving Communities projects, Omaha stands to benefit from federal best practices, shared data tools, and peer-to-peer learning with other cities grappling with similar legacies of harm.

TCI signals that infrastructure planning must now be about healing, not just building. It reframes federal responsibility not as neutral administration, but as an active participant in righting past wrongs. In this context, TCI provides the scaffolding upon which communities can design reparative futures—where roads and rail no longer divide, but connect; where public works are built with the public in mind.

As implementation unfolds, the challenge will be to ensure that funding, governance, and design processes remain accountable to those most affected. If executed with fidelity to its principles, the Thriving Communities Initiative could mark a historic turning point in how America builds—and who gets to benefit from that building. For North Omaha, it represents an opportunity, a promise, that the era of erasure can give way to one of repair.



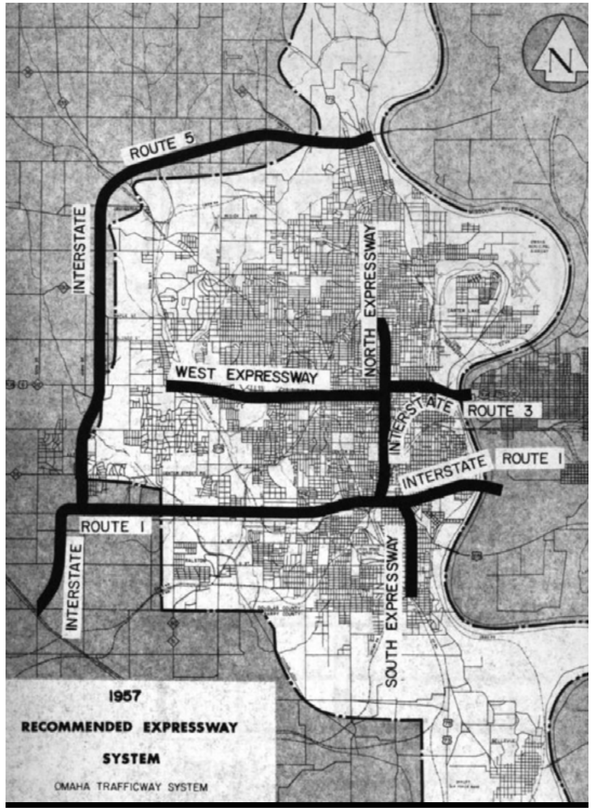
Credit: Public Roads Administration/
Library and Archives Canada/PA-17

75 north omaha freeway

Part of the impetus for the construction of the North Freeway was the needs of businessmen in South Omaha at the Stockyards to transport their cattle up north and vice-versa. From the 1960s to the 1980s, the city of Omaha demolished a pathway forward between North 27th and North 28th Ave – razing large swathes of historic homes, churches, schools, and community assets to place a highway that would tear the community in two to this day.

The North Freeway was completed in multiple stretches:

- Segment 1 in 1960 - 1965: California St to Cuming St
- Segment 2 in 1965 - 1969: Cuming St to Lake St
- Segment 3 in Late 1970s - 1989: Lake St to Ames St

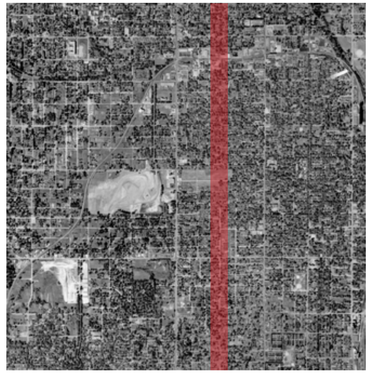


north 75 omaha freeway

1950

A Stable and Growing Community

In 1950, North Omaha was a thriving hub for working- and middle-class Black families, many of whom had migrated north during the Great Migration in search of industrial employment and more equitable opportunity. The neighborhood around 3448 Evans Street was well-maintained and densely populated with homeowners, businesses, churches, and schools. Although segregation and redlining limited mobility and investment, the community was self-sustaining and culturally vibrant. Streets like Evans were lined with modest but proud homes, and 24th Street bustled with activity. During this time, there was no formal plan for a freeway in this part of the city, and the fabric of neighborhood life—front porches, corner stores, block parties—remained intact.

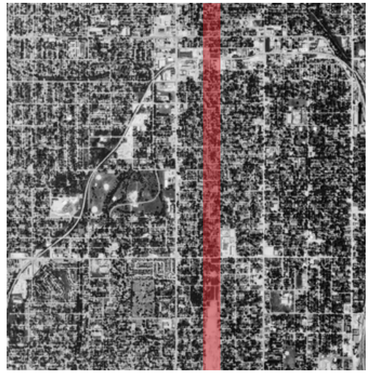


3448_Evans_Street_1950

1975

Unraveling of A Community Fabric

By 1975, the landscape had begun to shift dramatically. The North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75) had begun cutting through the heart of North Omaha, severing once-connected neighborhoods and displacing over a thousand residents. Homes near Evans Street were demolished or devalued as construction advanced. Residents living near the planned freeway path faced forced relocation, often without fair compensation or access to comparable housing due to discriminatory housing practices. The once-vibrant corridor around 24th Street began to empty out as foot traffic declined and businesses shuttered. For those still living near the construction zones, noise, dust, and uncertainty filled the air. The physical and psychological scars of the freeway were now visible—and deeply felt.



3448_Evans_Street_1975

1982

Razing Continues

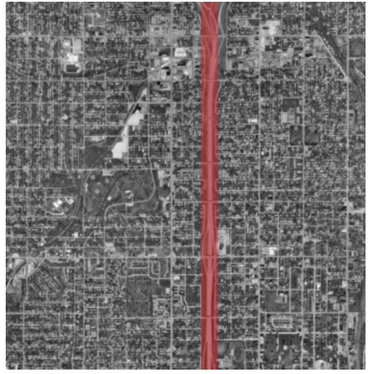
The North Freeway was in full operation, and its presence loomed over the surrounding community. What had been a tight-knit neighborhood with multi-generational households was now fragmented and frayed. Properties show signs of structural decline—boarded windows, weathered facades, and lack of maintenance were common. Many homes nearby had been demolished or abandoned, and public investment had not followed the promises of renewal. The freeway acted as a barrier—isolating North Omaha from the city center while facilitating access to the suburbs. Redlining and land devaluation entrenched patterns of poverty and racial segregation, even as civic leaders elsewhere celebrated the freeway as a triumph of progress.

3448_Evans_Street_1982

1993

Enduring Consequences

The long-term impacts of freeway construction were impossible to ignore. The area around 3448 Evans Street had been hollowed out, with significant population loss, rising vacancy rates, and economic decline. Many homes, including those once adjacent to the freeway, had either been demolished or sat in disrepair. The vibrant institutions that once defined North Omaha—churches, schools, cultural venues—had diminished or relocated. Public attention shifted away, and disinvestment became normalized. Yet, within this landscape, a core of community leaders and residents continued to organize, resist, and imagine alternatives. The scars of the freeway remained etched into the land, but so too did a memory of what once was—and what could return through restorative planning and community-centered investment.



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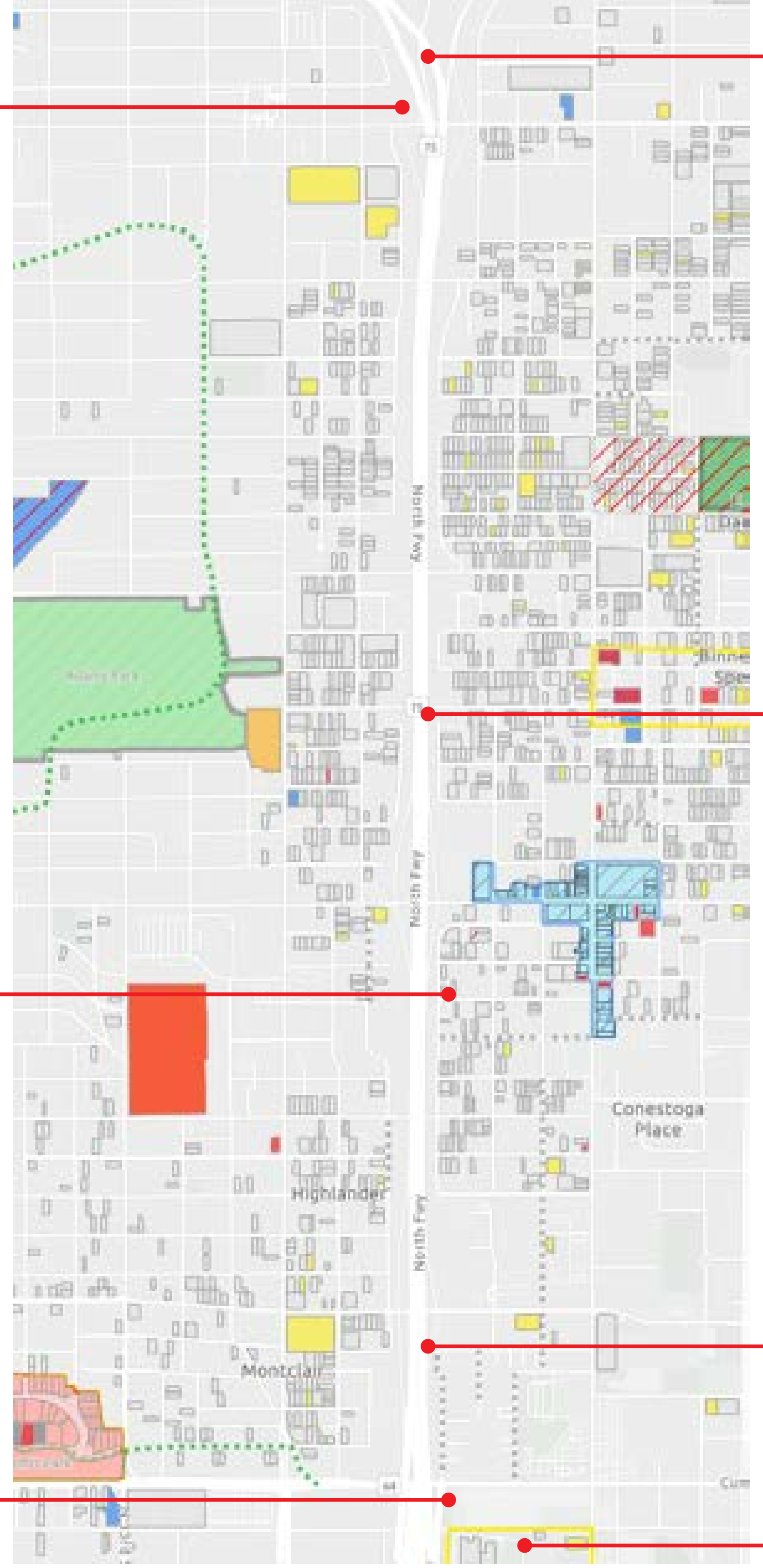
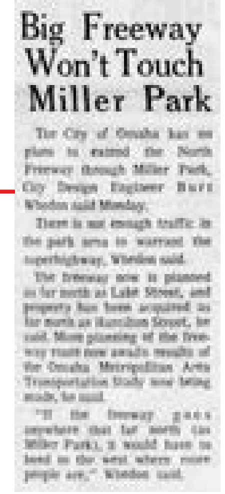
75 north omaha freeway





Big Freeway Won't Touch Miller Park

The City of Omaha has no plans to extend the North Freeway through Miller Park, City Design Engineer Burt Whedon said Monday.

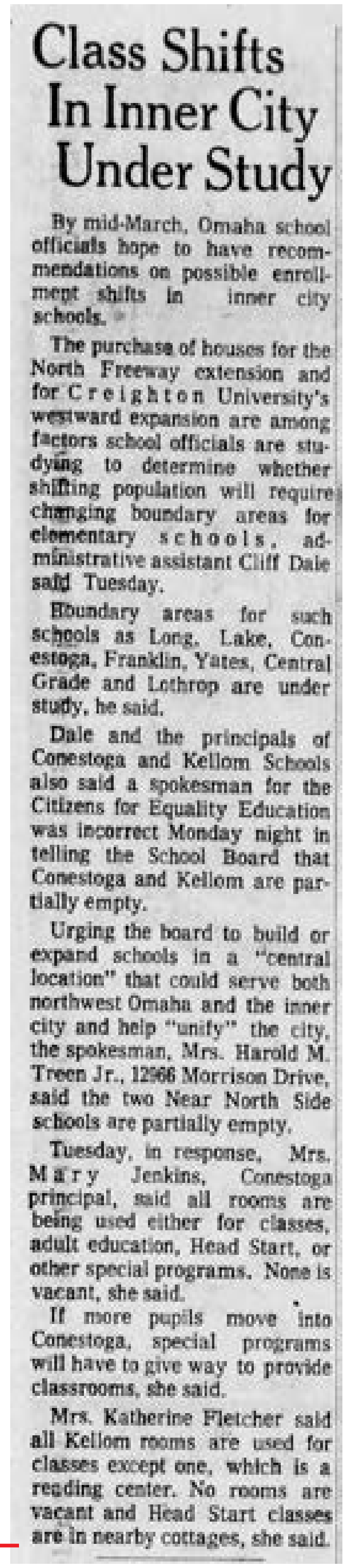
There is not enough traffic in the park area to warrant the superhighway, Whedon said.

The freeway now is planned as far north as Lake Street, and property has been acquired as far north as Hamilton Street, he said. More planning of the freeway itself now awaits results of the Omaha Metropolitan Area Transportation Study now being made, he said.

"If the freeway goes anywhere that far north (as Miller Park), it would have to head to the west where more people are," Whedon said.

Freeway Wreckers to Take 4-Year-Old Center

Demolish Buildings for North Freeway



Class Shifts In Inner City Under Study

By mid-March, Omaha school officials hope to have recommendations on possible enrollment shifts in inner city schools.

The purchase of houses for the North Freeway extension and for Creighton University's westward expansion are among factors school officials are studying to determine whether shifting population will require changing boundary areas for elementary schools, administrative assistant Cliff Dale said Tuesday.

Boundary areas for such schools as Long, Lake, Conestoga, Franklin, Yates, Central Grade and Lothrop are under study, he said.

Dale and the principals of Conestoga and Kellom Schools also said a spokesman for the Citizens for Equality Education was incorrect Monday night in telling the School Board that Conestoga and Kellom are partially empty.

Urging the board to build or expand schools in a "central location" that could serve both northwest Omaha and the inner city and help "unify" the city, the spokesman, Mrs. Harold M. Treen Jr., 12966 Morrison Drive, said the two Near North Side schools are partially empty.

Tuesday, in response, Mrs. Mary Jenkins, Conestoga principal, said all rooms are being used either for classes, adult education, Head Start, or other special programs. None is vacant, she said.

If more pupils move into Conestoga, special programs will have to give way to provide classrooms, she said.

Mrs. Katherine Fletcher said all Kellom rooms are used for classes except one, which is a reading center. No rooms are vacant and Head Start classes are in nearby cottages, she said.

1929 A small concrete block house at 2856 Larimore Avenue

1929 A duplex at 2858-60 Larimore Avenue, Omaha, NE.

1927 The Gibson Soap Company, 2812 SAHLER

1927 The Saratoga Laundry, 4322 North 24th Street

75 north omaha freeway

Holy Angels Catholic Parish

Holy Angels Catholic Parish, once located at North 27th and Fowler Avenue, was more than a place of worship—it was a vital community anchor in North Omaha. Holy Angels became known not only for its spiritual mission but also for its social outreach, educational programs, and commitment to neighborhood stability. It hosted community dinners, youth activities, and interfaith gatherings—offering a safe and affirming space in a city that was deeply segregated.

The construction of the North Freeway (U.S. 75) in the 1960s and 1970s dramatically disrupted the parish and its congregation. As the freeway plan advanced, entire blocks surrounding Holy Angels were designated for demolition. Families were displaced, businesses shuttered, and institutions—like Holy Angels—saw their communities fractured. The parish was ultimately forced to close as its base population dwindled and neighborhood cohesion was eroded by the freeway's construction.

Holy Angels Catholic Parish, N 27th and Fowler Avenue

The People's Church

The People's Church, located at 1708 N 27th Street, was a cornerstone of spiritual life and community empowerment in North Omaha. Known for its grassroots activism and deep connection to the lived experiences of Black Omaha residents, the church rose to prominence during a time of social and political upheaval in the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike traditional churches that operated solely as places of worship, The People's Church embodied a broader mission—combining faith, justice, and organizing in defense of community survival and dignity.

The People's Church provided food, shelter, and counseling to families displaced by the construction of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75), which carved a path through the heart of North Omaha—including neighborhoods directly surrounding the church. Despite its resilience, the encroachment of the freeway and the systematic disinvestment that followed left a lasting impact on The People's Church.

The People's Church, 1708 N 27th Street

Dexter Thomas Mansion

This historic image features the Charles H. Dexter Mansion, an elaborate Queen Anne-style residence that once stood in North Omaha. Built in the late 19th century, the Dexter Mansion exemplified the architectural grandeur and affluence of the neighborhood's early development. Located near North 30th Street, the mansion was home to Charles H. Dexter, a prominent businessman and civic figure during Omaha's early urban growth.

Eventually, many homes like this were demolished or fell into disrepair due to redlining, disinvestment, and the physical rupture of communities caused by the construction of the North 75 Freeway.

Dexter Thomas Mansion, 958 N 27th Street958 N 27th Street

2856 Larimore Avenue

Many homes like the one once located at 2856 Larimore Avenue—modest, single-family dwellings built in the early 20th century—stood as more than just structures of wood and brick. They represented the stability, aspirations, and cultural continuity of families who had lived in North Omaha for generations. These were homes where grandparents raised children, where porches served as front-row seats to community life, and where everyday joys and struggles unfolded in tight-knit neighborhoods.

During the construction of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75), hundreds of homes of this kind were uprooted and demolished, often with little notice and minimal compensation. The properties were acquired through eminent domain or pressured sales, displacing families—many of them Black—who already faced structural barriers to housing, wealth-building, and relocation due to redlining and racial covenants. While these homes may not have been architecturally grand, they were rich in emotional and communal value.

The loss of such houses wasn't just about physical removal—it was about the fracturing of communities. Entire streetscapes changed, leaving voids where vibrant life once thrived. These houses, now gone, continue to represent the unseen cost of infrastructure decisions made without community consent or care.

2856 Larimore Avenue

The Gibson Soap Company

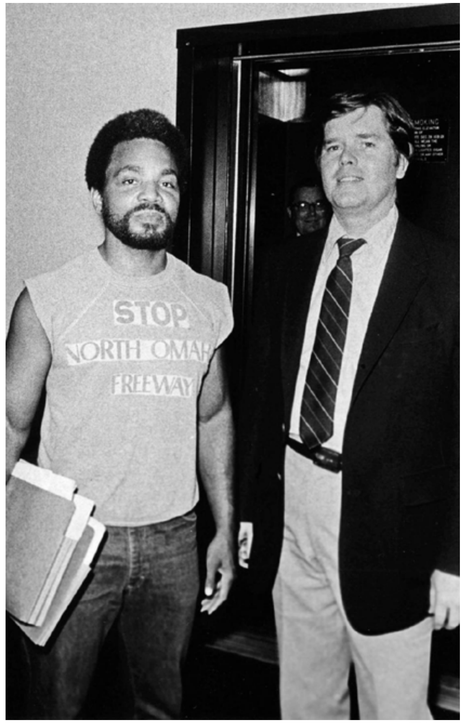
The Gibson Soap Company

The Saratoga Laundry, 4322 North 24th Street

Located in the Saratoga neighborhood of North Omaha, the Saratoga Laundry once stood as a locally rooted business in a working-class area shaped by streetcar lines, small shops, and residential enclaves. Situated at 4322 North 24th Street, the laundry was emblematic of early-to-mid 20th century neighborhood-based industry—serving local families and businesses. The building was demolished in 1965.

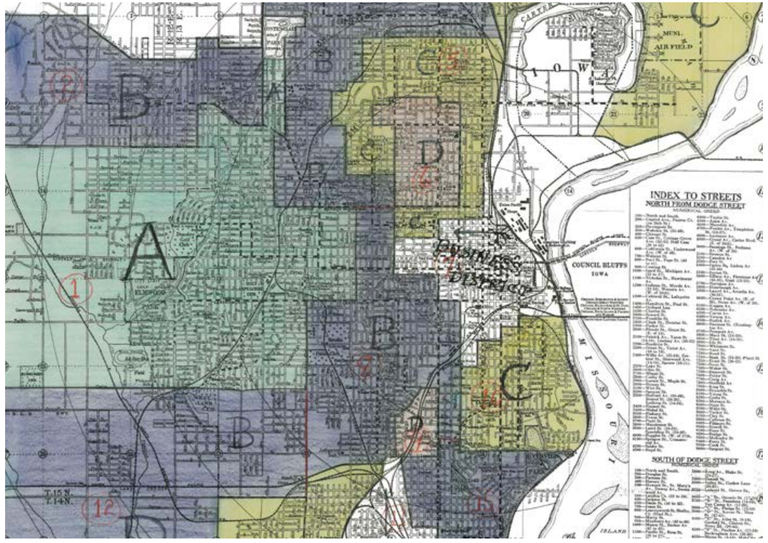
The Saratoga Laundry Company

75 north omaha freeway



Stop North Omaha Freeway

State Senator Ernie Chambers, North Omaha residents, and faith-based coalitions publicly opposed the freeway, calling out its racialized impacts and demanding that infrastructure be accountable to the communities He is wearing a T-shirt boldly printed with "STOP NORTH OMAHA FREEWAY," holding folders likely containing community petitions, planning documents, or evidence of displacement. His presence personifies the grassroots resistance movement that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as North Omaha residents fought to protect their homes, businesses, and institutions from the federally funded highway project that disproportionately impacted Black communities.



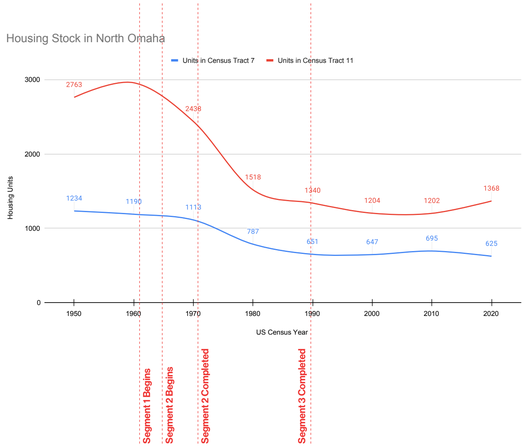
Home Owners Loan Corporation Map

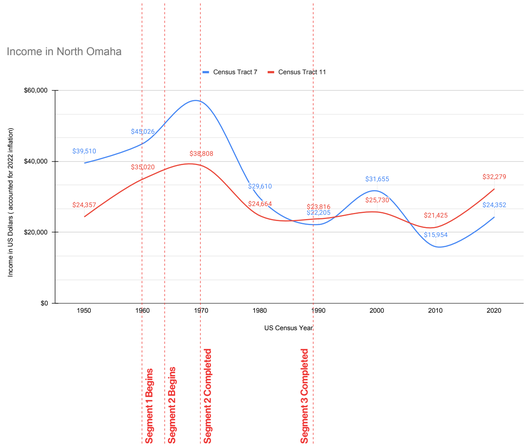
At the end of the Great Depression, the Homeowners Loan Corporation employed out-of-work real estate agents to assist in the surveying of American cities and counties for mortgage risk. These efforts produced 'area descriptions,' a document that described a neighborhood's demographics, housing conditions, economic livelihoods, and a projected market outlook. These documents were highly subjective to the biases and mental models held by the surveyors. This is evident in the frequent correlation between higher risk and diverse, heterogenous communities made in these documents.

Risk was also assessed based on the presence of 'Foreign- Born' populations like Irish or Italians, 'Relief' populations such as migrants and refugees, and 'Negro' populations which is self-evident. In some instances, it took only a few households to deem an area 'hazardous,' which would result in a yellow or red classification. Through this process, the classifications became prescriptive as it would determine how much investment would be made in these communities.

For North Omaha, the geographic contours of the redlining were a near perfect rectangle around the African American part of town. These areas became spaces of containment, whereby populations could not leave without severely economic loss or those who could not access mortgages attained housing through other means, like contract buying. These practices also reduced the commercial and economic vibrancy of North Omaha by removing it from critical financial instruments. Omaha's public housing development followed these patterns due to the complexes being built with segregation as policy.

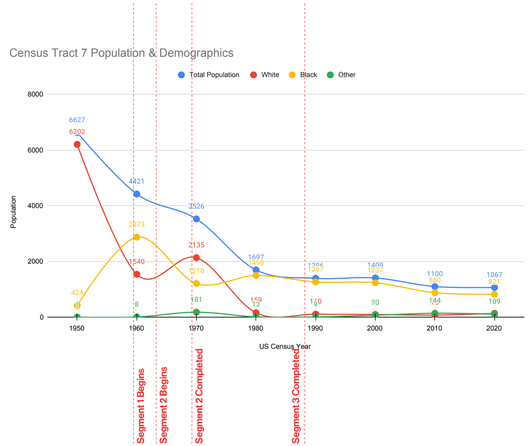
north 75 omaha freeway

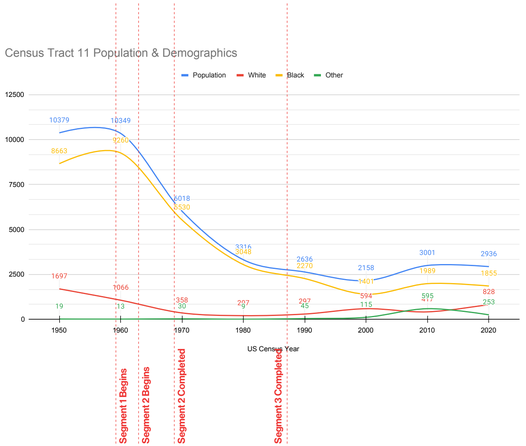




The housing stock in North Omaha has undergone significant changes over the decades, reflecting broader economic and social shifts. From 1950 to 2020, the number of housing units in Census Tracts 7 and 11 experienced fluctuations, likely influenced by urban renewal projects, economic disinvestment, and demographic shifts. A decline in housing stock suggests trends of depopulation, abandonment, or redevelopment efforts, while periods of stability or growth could indicate new construction or revitalization initiatives. Understanding these patterns helps in assessing the availability, affordability, and sustainability of housing in North Omaha. Further examination of vacancy rates and housing conditions would provide deeper insights into the area's housing dynamics.

Income levels in North Omaha have played a critical role in shaping housing accessibility, neighborhood stability, and overall economic mobility. Historically, income disparities in the area have been linked to systemic factors such as redlining, employment opportunities, and economic disinvestment. A lower median income can correlate with housing insecurity, higher rental burdens, and limited homeownership rates. Analyzing income trends alongside housing costs helps to determine affordability challenges and potential policy interventions. Additionally, income disparities between different racial and acommunity development.





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The Freeway Is Coming Through

By Vicki Krecek

The house at 2308 North Twenty-seventh Avenue resembles many dwellings on Omaha's north side. Unpretentious but tidy; white picket fence; a bird-of-paradise showing through the bay window; rose bushes waiting for the warmth of spring.

Inside, it is home to Mr. and Mrs. E. A. Hester. They've lived at this address for 10 years. The retired

would make a more detailed investigation and city relocation officers would assist with locating another house and the actual moving.

The Hesters' relocation would be difficult, Westendorf said later. "A single story house renting at $65 a month will be hard to find."

Relocation assistance will pay the family's moving expenses and the difference in rent for a comparable house for four years. After that time, for people of modest income, the difference in rent could mean another

Freeway Job Could Start in 30 Days

Construction of a half-mile stretch of the North Freeway could begin in about 30 days, Public Works Director Gene Jordan said Thursday.

Jordan commented after the city opened bids for grading, paving and construction of bridges for the freeway between California and Hamilton Streets.

Submitting the apparent low bid of $1,843,823 was the Martin K. Eby Construction Co. of Omaha. Jordan said the job should be completed about a year after construction begins.

He said $1.3 million of the cost would be met with bonds approved in December 1967. A bond issue approved in April would pay for the remainder, he said.

The city also opened bids to build a pedestrian overpass at Forty-eighth and Center Streets. The apparent low bidder for $57,276 was the Continental Bridge Co. of Omaha.

The overpass is to be built across Center Street on the west side of Forty-eighth Street. Jordan said the structure is scheduled to be completed early next year.

Housing Need To Be Topic

The Omaha Housing Authority board will discuss the "need" for additional public housing for families at its 9 a.m. Thursday meeting, Executive Director Charles E. Denton said Saturday.

"We need more three, four- and five-bedroom dwellings," he added.

Denton said the city's relocation office has told him that extension of the North Freeway next year and enforcement of the minimum dwelling standards ordinance will increase the need for family dwellings.

No specific figures are available, Denton said.

Denton said the OHA has not built any family housing in several years. It has been leasing homes at scattered sites and 250 of these are occupied, he said.

The meeting will be at the OHA offices, 710 North Twentieth Street.

N. Omaha Freeway Community Meeting Sunday, April 29

A community meeting concerning the North Omaha Freeway Meeting will be held at Zion Baptist Church Sunday, April 29, at 2:30 p. m. Guest panelist will be Mr. Stan Peter, Cooridor Study Engineer for the Department of Roads, and two of his staff members.

Also participating will be Arthur B. Stearns manager of the Neighborhood Development and Improvement office, Burt Whedon, Operations Engineer for the City of Omaha and Mr. John Bennett the Director of Transportation for M.A.P.A.

The meeting is being sponsored and combined by the Human Relations Department, City of Omaha. Everyone if cordially invited to attend this vitally important meeting.

PATRONIZE STAR ADVERTISERS

"If we pass this, we'll be the laughing stock of the nation," he said.

The far-ranging debate, moving from open housing to Vietnam and the Negroes fighting there, saw 13 senators rise to speak for and against the bill.

Charges of bigotry creeped into the discussion.

Following heated remarks by Senator Carpenter, who called for an end to lawlessness as preached by Stokely Carmichael, leader of the "black power" movement, Senator Danner said:

"If all senators personified bigotry like this senator, I can understand Carmichael."

'Didn't Show Ghetto'

Senator Carpenter said he took the bus tour to Omaha's North Side with other senators with the attitude that "if they would show me this was a ghetto I would have an open mind.

"They didn't show me it was a ghetto."

Two senators accused each other of letting special interests guide their thinking.

Bellevue's Senator Dale Payne said Omaha Senator Henry Pedersen supported LB 358 because he knew it would "create a big law practice for attorneys." Senator Pedersen is an attorney.

Senator Pedersen noted that Senator Payne had an interest in the real estate business.

Blames Negroes

He said the Negroes on Omaha's North Side "made their own ghetto and now want the state to help them out."

He said most of the support for open housing comes from "revolutionaries" and that "some of us have become dupes."

Senator Batchelder said Omaha's North Side "is not a ghetto."

"I despise that word," he said. "It doesn't describe the situation."

He said streets in that area were tree-lined.

"Show me a slum in the East where you have tree-lined streets," he said, adding that some areas in East Omaha are "far worse than North Omaha."

"But the people are well-behaved," he said. "There have been no riots and no looting."

Patience Asked

Senator Batchelder said he knows housing "conditions are unspeakable" in some areas of Omaha, adding that "patience" would solve the problems.

Lincoln Senator William Swanson, opposing the bill

City-County Building Spearheaded

City Council President H. F. Jacobberger said Tuesday a "steering committee" has been organized to spearhead efforts in the construction of the proposed city-county building.

Mr. Jacobberger said he, Councilman Arthur D. Bradley, Jr., Mayor Sorensen, County Board Chairman John J. Cavanaugh and a still unnamed County Commissioner will act as representatives of the two governments.

In other action, the Council:

—Authorized the city to pay Kirkham-Michael & Associates $141,945 to design the North Freeway from Cuming Street to Hamilton Street.

—Hired the accounting firms of Peat, Marwick, Mitchell and Company and Haskins and Sells for $10,500 to make the city's annual financial audit.

—Condemned houses at 5616 South Thirty-third Street, 524 South Twenty-sixth Avenue, 2210 Spencer Street, 3108 Seward Street, 4931 North Nineteenth Street, 2428 Blondo Street, 1812 North Twenty-first Street and 5314 South Twenty-seventh Street.

School Building Plans Shaping Up

Continued from Page 1.

money raised under the 1963 program.

Supt. Owen A. Knutzen said teacher committees will begin developing "educational specifications" for the two new high schools next month. He said these schools are critically needed to relieve overcrowding at Benson and Bryan High Schools.

It has not been decided which schools in the central city will be replaced, Dr. Knutzen said. Webster, part of Lothrop, Lake and Long schools are among the older schools most frequently mentioned as due for replacement.

Benson 'Jammed'

Benson High will be "worse than jammed" this fall, Principal Howard R. Sorensen said. He said registrations are running two hundred above last year and enrollment probably will reach 25 hundred.

Benson had 25 hundred three years ago, but it also had four grades. Now it has three. The ninth grade was moved to Monroe Junior High three years ago.

Classes will be in session 10 hours a day this fall and students will attend in overlapping shifts. The school was built for a maximum enrollment of 1,850.

Principal John McQuinn said Bryan High will have about 16 hundred students. It was built five years ago to accommodate 12 hundred.

Eight portable classrooms were used last year and five more have been added.

Other Lists Grow

The principal said Bryan is "taxed to capacity" in its shops, gymnasium and homemaking science departments.

He said enrollment has been increasing about 150 a year, which could go to three hundred a year if more housing developments are built.

Other high school prospects:

—Central is braced for a record 2,350 students, about one hundred more than last year. Principal Gaylord Moller said the building's original capacity was 16 hundred. But, he said, if the turnout doesn't exceed 24 hundred, "We can handle it."

—Burke is looking for 1,425, about 175 more than last year. Assistant Principal Ray Kennedy said the school's capacity is 18 hundred.

—North expects 2,381, an increase of about 60, according to Principal Harold Reeves. The school was designed for 2,130. He said North will handle the increase by having nine class periods a day, instead of eight.

—Tech will lose "several hundred students," Principal Carl Palmquist said. The decline, he said, is the result of families having to move to other parts of the city because of the Interstate Highway and North Freeway construction. He said Tech will have about 21 hundred students, far below its capacity of 36 hundred.

—South officials are expecting to be near last year's figure of 2,550. "But it's hard to say what will happen in the next two weeks," a school spokesman said.

Wood ibis in Florida make a practice to stir up mud on bottom of streams, which forces the fish to the surface, where they are easily caught.

North Omaha development plan causes friction

By Erin Grace
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Ruth Matlock is tired of looking out her window at 26th and Grant Streets and seeing raggedy houses and vacant lots that stretch for blocks.

That's why she's excited about a neighborhood and city effort to help put up to 100 new homes in a north Omaha area that has seen its population and housing stock dwindle.

But to make room for the new homes, some of the existing ones in the Long School area — a neighborhood bounded by Hamilton and Lake Streets, 24th Street and the North Freeway — will have to go.

The demolition of existing houses and relocation of people — particularly the elderly and those who have lived in the neighborhood for decades — was the subject of concern and some friction at a meeting Monday night.

The meeting, at the northeast Boys and Girls Club, drew residents of the Long School area, Omaha city planners and a nonprofit developer.

On one side were Long School residents who for years have fought to save their once-prospering neighborhood from the blight of abandoned homes and vacant lots.

On the other were residents or homeowners who weren't against development but shared concerns about not knowing exactly what the new development would mean for their properties and neighbors.

During the 90-minute meeting, James Thele, the city planning department's property manager, walked the 26 people through the city's policies on acquiring properties and relocating residents.

Thele, along with city planner Jim Anderson and nonprofit developer Michael Maroney, then fielded questions about how residents could stay informed, whether those displaced by development will be able to afford the $116,000 homes going in and what's next for the neighborhood.

The discussion, which included some back-and-forth between residents who disagreed with one another, showed the challenge in redeveloping an older section of the city.

Several residents complained they didn't know enough about specific plans for properties, particularly those slated for possible removal.

"You need time to think about this thing," said Alex Bane, who has lived in his home near 26th and Decatur Streets for 25 years. "I'd like to have some time when I can figure this thing out. We should be informed of every single thing."

Matlock, also a longtime resident, asked how neighbors could say they didn't know what was happening.

"We've been working on this for the last I-don't-know-how-many years," Matlock said.

Maroney of New Community Development Corp. told the audience that redeveloping Long School won't be easy.

"Understand there has to be some give and take," Maroney said. "Development is going to call for some kind of sacrifice on somebody's part."

Engineers Don't Envision a Replacement for West Freeway

Officials See Potential in Mayor's River Expressway Idea

By Robert Hoig

"It sounds like a real good idea," Chamber of Commerce President John M. Diesing said of Mayor Leahy's decision Thursday to explore the idea of an Interstate-type highway along the Missouri River.

A scenic drive from north of the Mormon Bridge south to Mandan Park would provide "a terrific shot in the arm" to developing the river area industrially and commercially, Diesing said.

Also, it would anchor the downtown and would provide a freeway encircling the city by connections with Interstate 480 and 680, he added.

Reaction generally was enthusiastic to the mayor's creation of a committee to study the freeway idea and development potential along the river. The committee is to report by Jan. 1.

Some Criticism

But his suggestion that the river drive, through connections with the North Freeway and Interstate 680, could end the need for a West Freeway drew criticism.

State Engineer Marvin L. Nuernberger said he would like time to study any proposals but "on the surface of it, I do not see what he (Leahy) is suggesting as a replacement for a West Freeway."

As state engineer, Nuernberger's opinion is important in approval of any state or federal funds that would be involved.

L. N. Ress, a former state engineer and now chairman of the Chamber's highway committee, said a West Freeway will be essential because of "terrific traffic generators along Dodge Street" — Mutual of Omaha, the University of Nebraska at Omaha dn the Crossroads and Westroads.

Ress said some $4 million in public funds have been spent on a west leg at the Twenty-eighth and Dodge Streets interchange of Interstate 480.

Also, he echoed City Planning Director Alden F. Aust in noting studies which indicate that Dodge Street still would be carrying a heavy load, about 40,000 cars daily, after construction of a West Freeway.

Aust was enthusiastic about other aspects of the scenic drive and river development.

O. J. Norman of the Burlington Northern, Inc., said the river highway "would naturally complement" undeveloped or underdeveloped land along the river.

"This is providing that the highway right of way does not use too much of the land," added Norman, who is regional manager of industrial development.

With this qualification, he said, Leahy's vision could fit in with present Burlington Northern plans to convert the Douglas Street yards into an industrial park.

A. F. Jacobson, recently retired president of Northwest Bell Telephone Co., said a number of questions would need to be answered.

Interfere With Airport?

"I would wonder whether it would be practical from a cost standpoint? Also, what would be the effect on the river from a point of view of long range commercial traffic? Would it interfere in any way with the operation of the airport?"

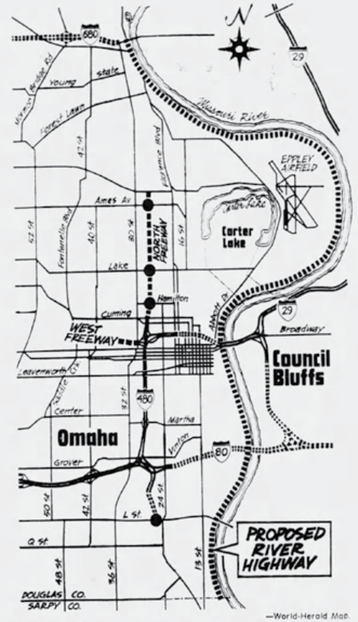
Leahy told the committee, headed by Michael Yanney, a vice president of the Omaha National Bank, to be "both innovative and realistic" in developing a plan for the river freeway.

Members also are to include recommendations for access to Eppley Airfield, eventual linking of Strategic Air Command headquarters in the south to Washington County in the north to the highway and for a full range of commercial, industrial and apartment development. No specific routes have been suggested for Eppley acess or for connecting the river route with the North freeway.

The committee also should prepare legislation to "convey the East Omaha Drainage District back into the normal city government," the mayor said.

Leahy had said earlier that the river drive idea, which was first proposed in the early 1920s, was rekindled in his mind last week when he received a letter from the district's attorney, S. Sam Jensen. Jensen said the five-member district board was interested in exploring the idea of having the city take over the district.

The district maintains some 13 miles of dike and levees along the river from near the Mormon Bridge to Mandan Park.



River drive idea . . . Committee will explore ways to link a drive along the Missouri with industrial-commercial tracts, apartment areas, Eppley Airfield and the North Freeway.

VI. community as infrastructure

practicing place, purpose, and participation
mapping a neighborhood story
north omaha trail
community campaigns
reparative monumentality
“the stitch”
community moments

“MOBILITY JUSTICE DEMANDS THAT “SAFETY” AND EQUITABLE MOBILITY ADDRESS NOT ONLY THE CONSTRUCTION OF OUR STREETS BUT THE SOCIOECONOMIC, CULTURAL, AND DISCRIMINATORY BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND COMFORT DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES EXPERIENCES WITHIN PUBLIC SPACES.”

MIMI SHELLER, MOBILITY JUSTICE

practicing place, purpose, and participation

In recent years, conversations about infrastructure have expanded beyond traditional concerns of roads, bridges, and utilities. In North Omaha, this expanded view is not theoretical—it's grounded in the work of residents, planners, and advocates who have long understood that communities themselves function as critical forms of infrastructure. Through shared space, neighborhood memory, civic relationships, and local knowledge, communities help hold the physical and social fabric of cities together. The challenge and opportunity today is to design with this understanding in mind.

Against this backdrop, new planning efforts in the area are intentionally centering local voices to ensure that future investments reflect shared priorities. This is a critical juncture in the aftermath of infrastructure systems that have historically divided, displaced, or diminished communities. A new paradigm is taking shape, one in which community itself is treated as a form of infrastructure. This shift positions human relationships, cultural memory, civic trust, and participatory governance as equally foundational components in how we build and sustain cities. This perspective is being translated into lived practice through a growing body of community-led proposals, design projects, and organizing strategies that foreground people, place, and purpose.

The notion that "community is infrastructure" resists reductive definitions of infrastructure as simply physical or technical. Rather, it embraces a systems-based approach that recognizes the social, emotional, and ecological interdependencies of place. In neighborhoods like those impacted by the North 75 Freeway, where infrastructural violence has left deep scars—displacement, disconnection, and economic stagnation—community-led efforts are reweaving the urban fabric through collaborative stewardship and creative reimagination. These initiatives challenge traditional top-down development models and instead prioritize frameworks of shared value, restorative justice, and participatory design.

The term "community engagement" is often used in infrastructure conversations, but in practice, it can fall short of real inclusion. In North Omaha, residents have expressed a need for deeper forms of participation—opportunities to shape priorities from the outset, influence how resources are used, and play a role in long-term maintenance and vision.

When community is treated as a kind of infrastructure, participation becomes a continuous practice, not a single event. This means investing in long-term relationships, building local capacity, and ensuring transparency in decision-making. It also means designing infrastructure that supports multiple uses and users, from small businesses and schools to elders and youth.

As national frameworks such as the Thriving Communities Initiative bring funding, technical assistance, and planning support to cities like Omaha, the opportunity to model what community-led infrastructure looks like has never been greater. But to succeed, such efforts must treat community not simply as a stakeholder, but as a system of infrastructure in its own right—capable of holding knowledge, distributing care, organizing priorities, and governing resources. The challenge is not whether North Omaha has ideas worth funding—it does. The challenge is whether systems of power are willing to invest in the capacity, relationships, and long-term structures that community-as-infrastructure requires. True participation is not a one-time event but an ongoing practice. It demands intentional design, iterative feedback, and the redistribution of control.

The future of the North Omaha community will be determined not only by engineering feasibility but by the civic imagination of Omaha's people.

Practicing place, purpose, and participation means the things that connect us. Shared history, mutual care, and collective design are forms of infrastructure—and perhaps the most enduring kind.

As North Omaha continues its journey of healing and regeneration, it offers not only a local lesson but a national blueprint: that communities themselves, when given the tools and trust, are the strongest foundations we can build upon.

Reclaiming Infrastructure Through Community Proposal

Among the most visible efforts to translate these ideals into actionable proposals is the work of the Urban Land Institute (ULI), whose "stitch" framework reimagines infrastructure corridors like Highway 75 as places of reconnection rather than division. Their concept plan includes a cap over portions of the freeway to support new mixed-use development, public green space, and improved pedestrian connectivity between North Omaha and adjacent neighborhoods. This proposal is more than a design intervention; it is a strategic response to the long-term spatial and economic isolation imposed by mid-century urban renewal. However, the strength of such proposals will depend on their ability to not just deliver new capital investment, but to prioritize reparative mechanisms that prevent speculative land pressures and further displacement.

ULI's work demonstrates the increasing willingness of institutions to consider equity and repair in infrastructure development. Yet the success of such projects depends not only on visionary design but on sustained community engagement and governance. A freeway cap can create opportunities, but without participatory stewardship, it can also re-entrench inequality. As such, the process through which these projects are co-created matters as much as the product.

The North Omaha Trail: Infrastructure Rooted in Story and Healing

A living example of community-as-infrastructure in action is the North Omaha Trail—an ongoing public project envisioned by urban planner and designer Manne Cooke. The trail is both a mobility corridor and a cultural landscape: a restorative greenway that threads together historical sites, community art, public health programming, and environmental stewardship along a former rail bed. It provides not only walkable and bikeable connections across neighborhoods once severed by the freeway but also opportunities for residents to participate in shaping the trail's design and programming.

More than a path, the North Omaha Trail embodies the values of participatory placemaking. It offers space for collective memory, cultural expression, and intergenerational dialogue, all while addressing key social determinants of health—mobility, recreation, access to green space, and mental well-being. By rooting infrastructure in community identity, the project transforms a formerly abandoned corridor into a platform for shared growth and healing

Community Leadership as Planning Practice

Projects like the North Omaha Trail are possible because of the leadership of community members and practitioners who bring lived experience, institutional knowledge, and deep commitment to justice. Clarice Dombeck, a landscape designer and environmental justice advocate, has worked to ensure that environmental health, green infrastructure, and youth engagement remain central in the project's evolving vision. Kimara Snipes, a North Omaha native, former school board member, and civic leader, continues to advocate for planning processes that are inclusive and responsive to the community's evolving needs—especially around education, land use, and housing security.

These individuals represent more than their professions; they symbolize a mode of practice where expertise is shared, not siloed. Their work blurs the line between resident and planner, advocate and designer. They show that the future of just infrastructure is not only technical—it is personal, relational, and grounded in trust.

practicing place, purpose, and participation

From Community Input to Community Power
As national frameworks such as the Thriving

Communities Initiative bring funding, technical assistance, and planning support to cities like Omaha, the opportunity to model what community-led infrastructure looks like has never been greater. But to succeed, such efforts must treat community not simply as a stakeholder, but as a system of infrastructure in its own right—capable of holding knowledge, distributing care, organizing priorities, and governing resources.

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Conclusion: Designing Infrastructure That Reflects Us
The future of Highway 75 will be determined not only by engineering feasibility but by the civic imagination of Omaha's people. In the layered proposals of ULI, in the trail-making of Cooke, in the design thinking of Dombeck, and the advocacy of Snipes, we see glimpses of a new civic architecture—one where community is not a passive audience but an active architect of its own infrastructure.

Practicing place, purpose, and participation means remembering that roads are not the only things that connect us. Shared history, mutual care, and collective design are also forms of infrastructure—and perhaps the most enduring kind. As North Omaha continues its journey of healing and regeneration, it offers not only a local lesson but a national blueprint: that communities themselves, when given the tools and trust, are the strongest foundations we can build upon.

mapping a neighborhood story

75 freeway

Manuel "Manne" Cook is an urban planner, creative entreprenuer, and community organizer dedeicated to shaping spaces into thriving places. A North Omaha native, he has spent nearly a decade leading initiatives that blend urban development, placemaking, and cultural entrepreneurship to foster more liviable communities.

As the father of the North Omaha Trail, founder of Fabric Lab, catalyst for projects like the Thriving Communities Initiative, and the Forever North Strategy, Manne has worked at the intersection of the arts, community development, public health infrastructure, and district level planning.

He also curated the exhibition, Mapping A Neighborhood Story, which is currently featured at the Kiewit Luminarium Musuem in Omaha, Nebraska.

Manne is a champion for housing innovation, and the power of public space to shape communities. Whether advocating for bike-friendly cities, leading innovative housing initatives, or designing infrastructure that centers people, he remains dedicated to making cities more healthy, vibrant, and just.

north omaha trail

75 freeway

The North Omaha Trail is a community-led initiative that illustrates what it means to approach infrastructure through the lens of place and purpose. Designed as a linear park and mobility corridor, the trail connects neighborhoods through safe walking and biking routes, while incorporating cultural storytelling, public art, and environmental improvements. Its development was activated by urban planner and designer Manne Cooke, whose work reflects a deep understanding of the neighborhood's history and potential.

This effort goes beyond access or beautification. It demonstrates how infrastructure, when guided by local vision, can improve safety, offer economic opportunity, and provide spaces for learning, reflection, and recreation.

As an emerging urban planner and community organizer, Clarice Dombeck focuses on addressing housing disparities in North Omaha. She emphasizes the detrimental effects caused by the collateral consequences of the North 75 Freeway project which have exacerbated external property investors who have contributed to displacement and the proliferation of vacant properties. Dombeck advocates for community engagement and equitable development to revitalize the neighborhood and prevent further loss of its cultural heritage.

Dombeck has contributed to projects like the North Omaha Trail and the Healing Roots African Diaspora Garden, aiming to restore community connections and promote equitable development.

Left: Dombeck activates community campaigns to engage the public on important transportation issues.

75 reparative monumentality freeway

Celeste Butler's story is both deeply personal and powerfully emblematic of the broader consequences of mid-20th-century urban infrastructure policies. A multidisciplinary artist, cultural strategist, and community memory-keeper, Butler is known for her intricate, story-based quiltwork and her commitment to amplifying narratives often left out of official histories. But before her creative practice took root, her life—and that of her family—was irrevocably shaped by the construction of the North 75 Freeway

Celeste's family lived in a neighborhood that, in the 1960s, was a tightly knit community filled with multigenerational homes, neighborhood churches, and corner stores that provided both economic sustenance and social gathering space. Her grandparents' homes, like many others on their block, were places of care, history, and rootedness. They represented not only a form of housing, but a symbol of intergenerational investment—a sense that families could grow together in place. When the North Freeway was routed through their neighborhood, those homes were seized and demolished under the auspices of urban renewal. Her family, like over a thousand others, was displaced.

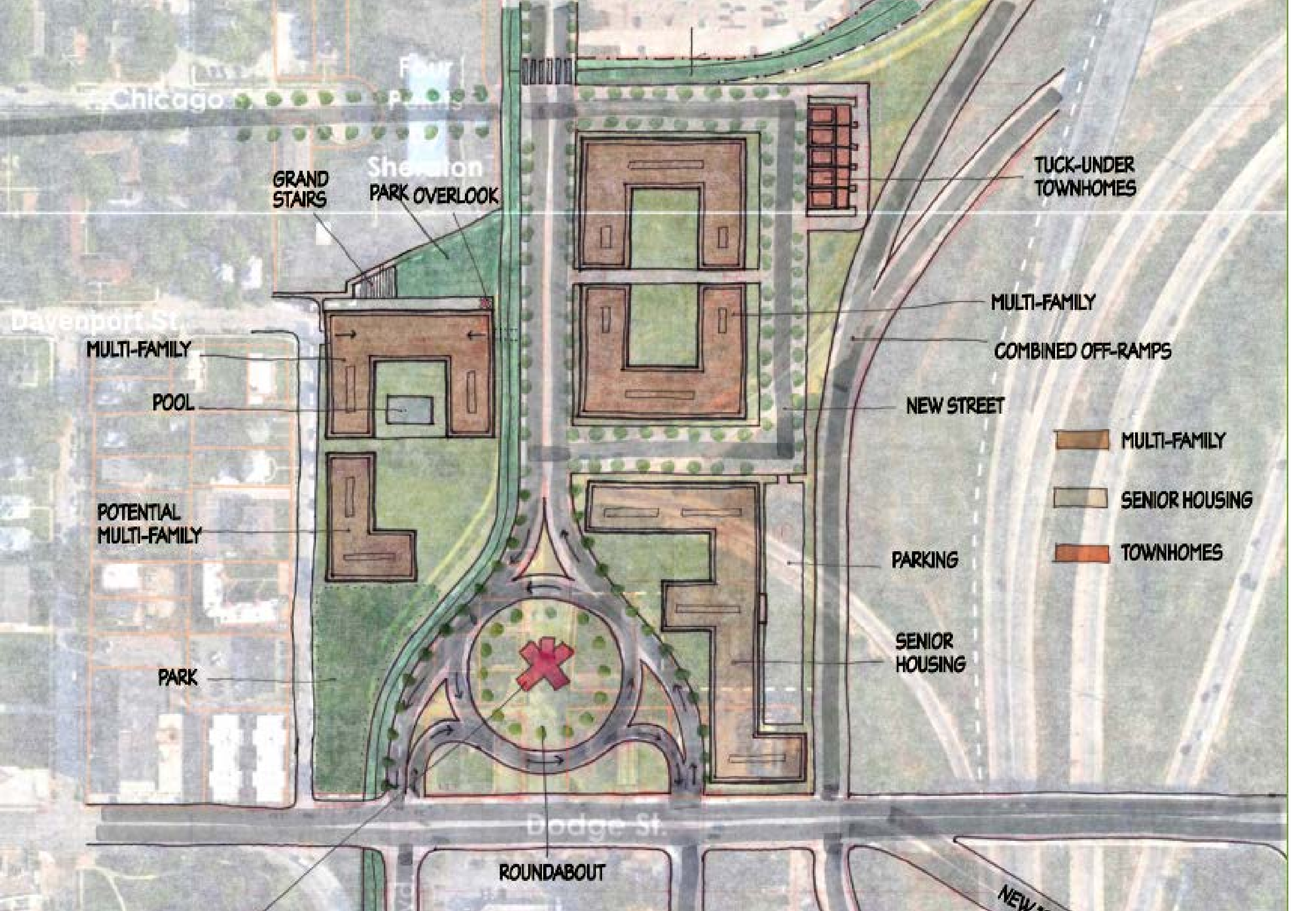
What followed wasn't a smooth transition to new housing or neighborhood relocation—it was fragmentation. Families scattered to different parts of the city, often unable to find homes that matched the stability or affordability of what they had lost. Redlining and discriminatory real estate practices meant that Black families had fewer options, and those options were often in under-resourced parts of the city. "We didn't just lose a house," Butler has said in public talks and interviews, "we lost our foundation."

Decades later, the lots where her family's homes once stood remain empty. Overgrown and unmarked, they are part of a checkerboard of vacant land and interrupted street grids that trace the path of displacement. Butler has revisited these spaces not only as a descendant but as an artist, drawing upon her personal and familial loss to fuel work that challenges the invisibility of these histories. Her quilt installations often carry embedded stories of land, memory, and displacement, crafted with fabric sourced from families who share similar experiences.

Butler's work insists that these vacant lots are not just urban remnants—they are living archives. They hold untold stories of community, resilience, and systemic harm. Through her storytelling and civic engagement, Butler has helped reframe public memory around the North Freeway and North Omaha more broadly. She has spoken about how erasure is not just physical—it is cultural and emotional. Her efforts seek to interrupt that erasure through acts of creative repair.

Her advocacy is also forward-looking. She is involved in community-driven discussions about how to reimagine the land around the North Freeway—not simply through removal or redevelopment, but through acknowledgment and intentional stewardship. Butler has advocated for approaches that memorialize what was lost while creating new possibilities for healing and regeneration.

Celeste Butler represents not only the trauma of the freeway's construction but the potential of community-rooted restoration. Her story underscores the need for infrastructure planning that centers lived experience, and her artistic practice serves as both testimony and tool—a reminder that memory is infrastructure too, and that justice must include the power to remember, create, and rebuild.



The Urban Land Institute's (ULI) work in Omaha provides an example of this shift. Their "stitch" proposal envisions capping portions of the North Freeway to better connect neighborhoods that were previously divided. The plan incorporates mixed-use spaces, community amenities, and improved pedestrian access. It represents a step toward reconnecting areas that have been separated for decades—but also raises important questions about process, affordability, and long-term stewardship. As local leaders and stakeholders have noted, the value of this type of proposal depends not only on the design itself but on how it's shaped and governed in partnership with the people who live nearby.

This kind of forward-looking planning reflects a broader interest in aligning infrastructure with community well-being. It's not about undoing the past, but about making sure future efforts address what's been lost and what still needs to be restored.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July 2023
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IV. reparative pathways

Activating Infrastructure as a Force for Repair, Equity, and Uplift

"THE GENERATIONS OF AMERICANS MAKING TRANSPORTATION DECISIONS TODAY ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ORIGINS OF THESE PROBLEMS-BUT ALL OF US ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT WE DO, TODAY, TO REPAIR IT."

PETE BUTTIGIEG, FORMER SECRETARY, U.S. DEPARMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Activating Infrastructure as a Force for Repair, Equity, and Uplift

In Practice

Reframing Spatial Analysis as a Democratic and Reparative Practice

Infrastructure holds the power to shape not only how we move, but how we live, connect, and thrive. The evolution and modernization of transportation systems across the United States have lifted freedom, mobility, and commerce in many aspects but has far too often fragmented communities, displaced families, and reinforced structural inequities. Yet in this recognition lies a profound opportunity: to reimagine infrastructure as a platform to amplify its value while also holding restoration, justice, and inclusive prosperity as guiding principles.

The Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI) affirms this new direction for infrastructure planning—one where transportation no longer divides, but connects; where mobility is not just a right of way, but a right to thrive. Along Omaha's North 75 Freeway, the TCI framework offers enormous potential for exemplifying what productive infrastructure development and regional growth can be for all community members. TCI aims to address the systemic challenges posed by this corridor by reimagining its role in the city's infrastructure. Efforts include improving multimodal connectivity, enhancing access to affordable transportation options, and mitigatingthe environmental impact of the freeway on surrounding communities.

This initiative prioritizes the neighborhoods most affected by the North 75 Freeway's legacy, ensuring that community voices are integral to the planning and design process. By working with community members, planners, and advocates, the project seeks to infuse a reparative framework that scales infrastructure development into the new century. A vision that reverses decades of disconnected priorities and disinvestment, restitching communities in ways that foster resonating opportunities for all through improved infrastructure.

Diligence, focus, and consistency should be fundamental and ground this TCI process if the aim is to truly reimagine infrastructure as a pathway to equity and repair. The practice of reparative frameworks cannot be sustained through fragmented engagement or symbolic gestures. The adverse impacts on people and neighborhoods is alarming systemic. Which then requires a framework that offers checks and balances of the productive outcomes to ensure practices that have been used to create such disparate impacts are not repeated today.

A durable, collective investment in the long-term civic visioning process is essential to advancing a reparative framework—not as a one-time expense, but as foundational infrastructure itself. When communities are invited to participate without the resources, time, or organizational continuity to shape outcomes meaningfully, participation becomes performative rather than transformative. Far too many public engagement efforts to date have not sustained a concerted long term commitment to ensure sound bites and post-it notes become practice. To counter this, a coordinated and well-funded effort is needed to build a civic ecosystem where communities are not just consulted but empowered—where they have the tools, data, design literacy, and convening power to make informed decisions, advocate for shared value interests, and accountability to ensure the implementation of a reparative framwork.

Establishing this civic foundation for the TCI initiative and beyond requires resourcing the scaffolding of multistakeholder engagement: facilitators, translators, community liaisons, organizers, artists, and educators who serve as a bridge to the wider public. A central public location that anchors this collective effort becomes essential to demystifying technical planning processes and fostering collective learning. When adequately supported, they help ensure that community members are not simply passive recipients of information, but active co-authors of their neighborhoods' futures. Equally important is sustained investment in public-facing platforms—such as storytelling initiatives, digital tools, participatory design studios, and youth-led research—that translate infrastructure planning into lived experience. These platforms reinforce a feedback loop of civic participation, deepening both understanding and agency towards the greater goals outlined by infrastructure initiatives.

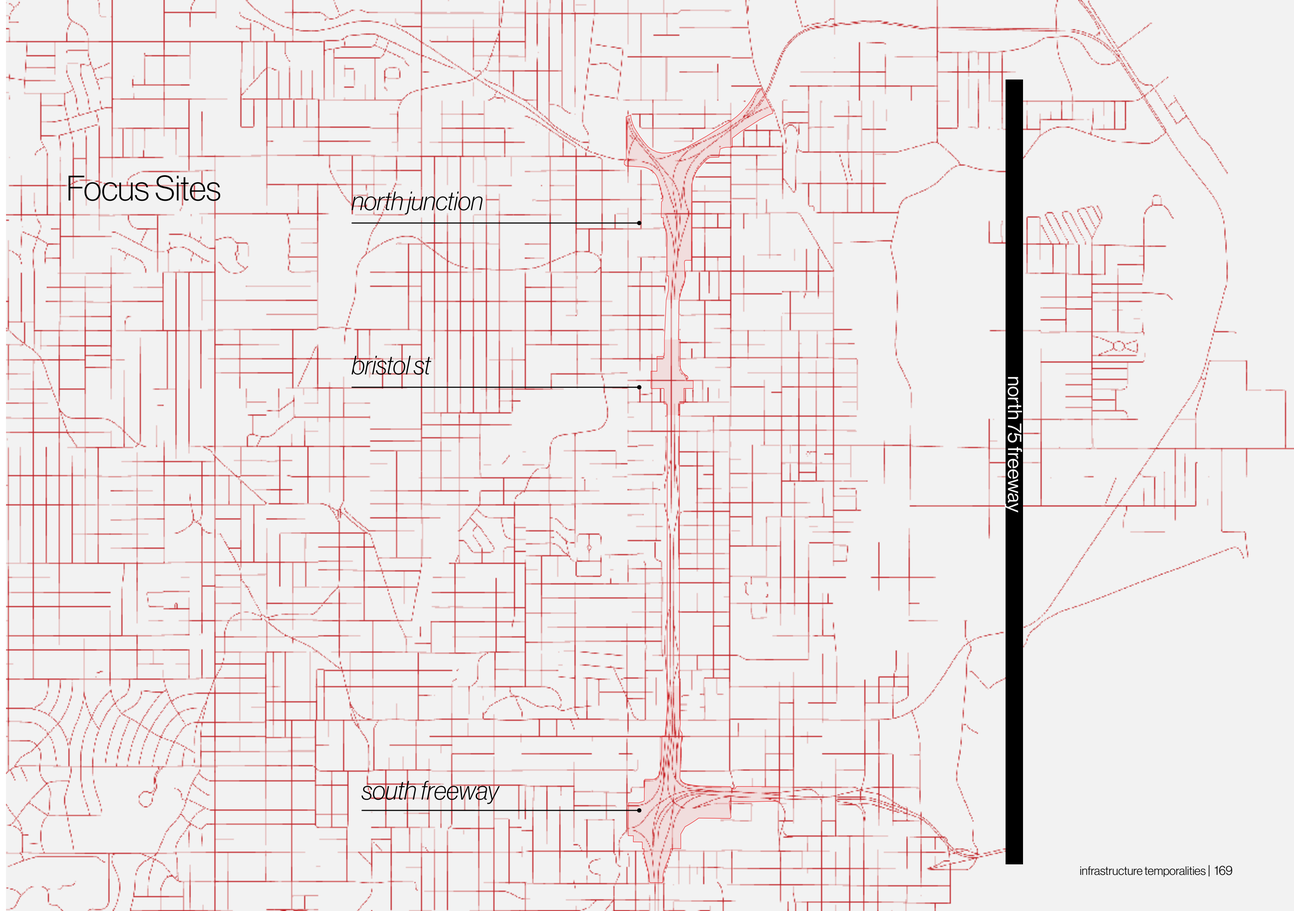
Beyond engagement, funding must also enable communities to test their reparative visions on the ground. Pilot projects and prototypes—whether they take the form of capped freeways, micro-parks, pop-up cultural spaces, or community land trusts—offer tangible demonstrations of how new models of infrastructure can work. They provide a testing ground to assess how proposed plans align with local values, mitigate displacement risks, and promote long-term affordability and environmental health. Importantly, they also help identify and preempt harmful externalities, such as speculative land value increases, that too often follow in the wake of infrastructure investment and lead to further marginalization of the very communities projects are meant to serve.

Without this kind of iterative, community-rooted testing and sustained civic architecture, even the most progressive infrastructure proposals run the risk of reproducing the dynamics they seek to undo. But with it, cities can cultivate a base of support that is informed, organized, and prepared to influence policy not just in moments of crisis, but over decades. Such infrastructure is not simply about mobility or connectivity—it is about cultivating a shared democratic future, rooted in memory, shaped by voice, and made real through collective effort.

The reparative pathway framework offers a societal blueprint for this transformation. It is rooted in the belief that infrastructure must not only meet the needs of today, but also take responsibility for yesterday—by actively addressing the legacies of harm and deliberately investing in healing, reconnection, and equity. This is the evolving role of 21st-century public infrastructure: not only to build, but to repair; not only to connect, but to restore.

At the heart of this reparative work of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Thriving Communities Initiative is activating a framework by embedding shared value-centered planning, technical assistance, and capacity building. Through strategic partnerships, this effort works alongside local governments, community-based members and organizations to ensure that infrastructure investment reflects community needs, addresses historic consequences that continue to bear a societal cost, and delivers tangible, generational benefits.

In Omaha, the legacy of the North 75 Freeway exemplifies the urgency and relevance of this work. Once a vibrant community, decisions made that did not reflect shared value opportunities, led to the creation of the freeway displaced over 1,000 families, disrupted neighborhood continuity, and contributed to decades of disinvestment. The physical infrastructure remains, but its impacts are more than concrete—they continue to remain social, economic, and psychological.



Activating Infrastructure as a Force for Repair, Equity, and Uplift

In Practice

Numerous projects across the United States have embarked on instilling reparative pathways with the support of various USDOT initiatives, including TCI. The full impact of those efforts in advancing reparative outcomes remains to be fully understood. However, initial reporting on these projects like the Big Dig in Boston, Massachusetts, offers the opportunity to ensure the process in Omaha can learn and adapt from.

North Omaha is reclaiming its future. The initiative supports community-led visions for transformation—such as the North Omaha Trail, reinvestment in cultural corridors, and infrastructure that supports mobility justice, health, and economic opportunity. These projects are not only about just correcting past wrongs—they are about building toward a more just and connected future.

Reparative Pathway Framework

As this report has highlighted, infrastructure has long been treated as a neutral force—webs of connectivity built in the name of progress. But infrastructure is not neutral. It is designed, legislated, financed, and constructed through a series of decisions that either include or exclude; connect or divide; uplift or undermine. Roads, highways, and transportation systems carry not only people and goods—but also the visible and invisible traces of who and what matters in the eyes of planners, engineers, and policymakers.

The North 75 Freeway is one of countless examples of the reverberating impact of infrastructure construction that did not consider people and neighborhoods. It exemplifies the displacement of residents and businesses, and uprooting of the neighborhood fabric. These harms were not incidental. There is enough evidence to demonstrate the concerns raised by residents and business at the time of the massive infusion of infrastructure projects across the United States. History and numerous studies has revealed what was protested and amplified through community voices came to bear. The outcomes were the result of cumulative systemic decisions—urban renewal, redlining, zoning policy, and technocratic planning practices that privileged speed and vehicular throughput, segregated suburban development, and the perception of urban as pariah, over human life and communal continuity.

This reparative framework is designed to uncover, understand, and address that history—not as a retrospective exercise, but as a blueprint for transforming how we shape cities in the present and future. It acknowledges that public infrastructure can no longer be designed in ways that repeat the exclusion, dispossession, and spatial violence of the past. Instead, it must be leveraged as a vehicle of democratic repair, particularly in communities that have been harmed by its prior construction.

This analysis is grounded in the national vision of the U.S. Department of Transportation efforts in aligning technical assistance and funding with the lived experiences and needs of its citizens and communities. It is equally rooted in the ethos of the Practice of Democracy (PoD), which affirms that equitable design emerges through shared power, cultural stewardship, and collective authorship—not simply professional expertise or institutional intention.

The goal of this framework is to shift infrastructure analysis from:

- Descriptive to transformational
- Technical to systemic
- Symbolic to participatory
- Policy-aligned to community and placebased -authored

This shift is achieved through six core lenses of inquiry—Current Condition, Root Causes, Impact on Social Determinants of Health and UNSDGs, Connection to Thriving Communities, Addressing Conditions and Shifting Impact, and Aligned Recommendations. Each lens builds upon the last, creating a layered and actionable methodology that is adaptable to neighborhoods, corridors, and communities.

By applying this framework to three case study sites along the North 75 corridor—the north junction (Ames Avenue and Storz Expressway), the severed Bristol Street block (near 28th Street), and the southern junction near Creighton University and North 30th Street—this analysis aims to demonstrate how communities can reclaim their spatial future through memory, metrics, and imagination.

This is not a planning tool. It is a civic and cultural one.

It insists that infrastructure is not just about moving people through places, but about keeping people rooted in place—with dignity, equity, and full democratic participation.

Six Core Lenses of Inquiry

1. Current Conditions

Why this lens matters:
The current condition lens provides a clear, grounded picture of what exists today—physically, socially, and environmentally. It is the foundation upon which all further analysis builds.

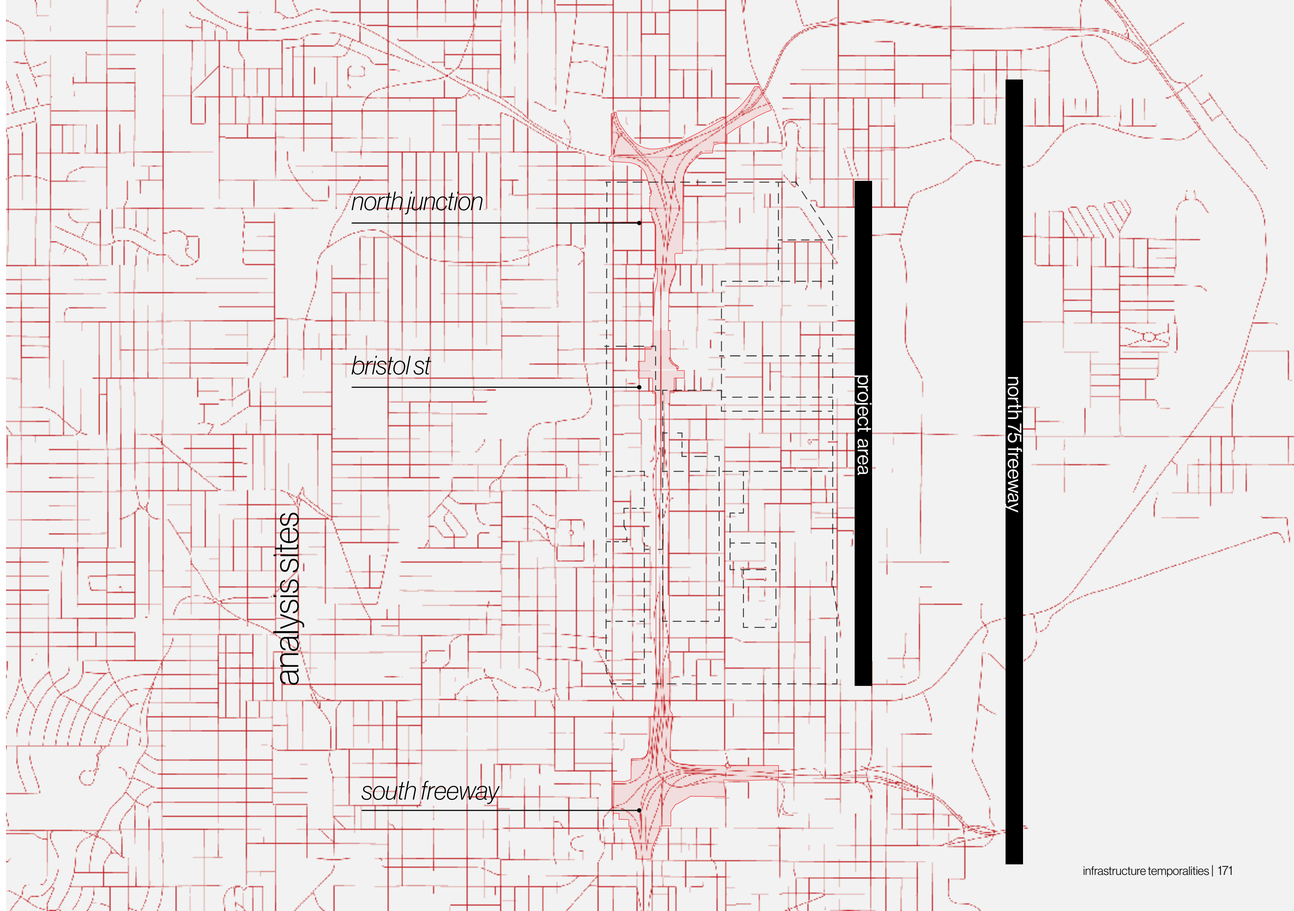
Understanding the present state of each site—its infrastructure, accessibility, maintenance, land use, and surrounding context—reveals how past planning continues to affect community wellbeing. It identifies points of disconnection, neglect, and opportunity, setting a baseline for measuring future change.
This lense is applied to the three focus sites to analyze how the current condition exists grounded in a past to present understanding of what informed those conditions. For example, Ames/Storz, in what ways has the sprawling interchange created physical and psychological barriers to mobility and visibility. At Bristol Street, the severed sidewalks and razed properties highlight the freeway's role in dividing the neighborhood and the creation of a lack of east-west connection and fragmentation. Similarly, at Creighton/30th, heavy traffic and institutional sprawl isolate communities from one another and from downtown resources, how do plans to remediate such impacts further exacerbate uneven development?

This lens allows us to document spatial conditions not as fixed realities but as symptoms of policy decisions—paving the way for thoughtful reimagining.

2. Root Causes

Why this lens matters:
Root causes uncover the structural and historical factors that produced current conditions. Without tracing how we got here, efforts to address harm remain superficial and risk reproducing inequities.

This lens delves into the era of mid-20th-century highway construction, redlining, disinvestment,



Activating Infrastructure as a Force for Repair, Equity, and Uplift

In Practice

and planning policies that saw many communities as disposable. It reveals how federal funding, local politics, and zoning laws based on identity politics shaped where roads were placed—and whose homes, businesses, and institutions were sacrificed in the process.

The displacement around Bristol Street was not random; it was the result of policies that prioritized regional flow over community cohesion. The Ames/Storz onramp replaced parks and parishes central to Black and working-class life. At Creighton/30th, the creation of multiple highways (including I-480) turned connected neighborhoods into isolated pockets.

Root cause analysis helps reframe repair as a matter of justice—not charity. It clarifies that current disparities were engineered, and thus, can be redesigned.

3. Impact on Social Determinants of Health (SDH) and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

Why this lens matters:
Infrastructure is a public health issue. The placement and design of roads affect far more than traffic—they influence health outcomes, economic opportunity, environmental exposure, and quality of life.

This lens applies SDH metrics—like access to care, transportation, housing, and social support—and aligns them with global goals (UNSDGs) to understand how the freeway continues to shape human wellbeing.

At Ames/Storz, air quality and noise pollution affect nearby schools and homes. At Bristol, severed connections reduce walkability, increase isolation, and hinder intergenerational support. At Creighton/30th, unsafe crossings and vehicular dominance undermine mental and physical health, especially for students, elders, and those without cars.

By measuring these impacts, we can build infrastructure that not only moves people but heals them—advancing both local and global equity commitments.

4. Connection to the Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI)

Why this lens matters:
TCI provides a federal mandate—and opportunity—to simultaneously correct the inequities that infrastructure once imposed and the potential it has in shaping a practice of democratic values in the future. This lens situates each case study within TCI's mission: delivering technical assistance, investment, and policy support to historically disinvested communities.

This analysis identifies how each site embodies TCI's focus on equity, climate resilience, health, and mobility. The Ames/Storz junction is an opportunity to redesign a gateway that reflects North Omaha's identity. The Bristol Street block represents a test case for spatial reparations through reconnection and innovative housing ownership models. The Creighton/30th site offers a model for institutional-community partnerships that build beyond concrete.

This lens matters because it ensures local solutions are backed by structural support—and that TCI's resources are grounded in lived experience.

5. Addressing Current Conditions & Shifting Impact
Why this lens matters:

This is the heart of reparative practice: how do we intervene meaningfully, not just symbolically? This lens evaluates how physical, policy, and programmatic solutions can not only address current harms but shift long-term impact.

It explores how design, governance, and investment can change the trajectory of these places—from fragmented and polluted to connected, beautiful, and just. At Bristol, that might mean capping or bridging the freeway. At Ames/Storz, reclaiming adjacent land for trails, cultural nodes, or community-owned green space. At Creighton/30th, investing in pedestrian infrastructure, street-level activation, and cross-institutional accountability.

This lens turns diagnosis into direction. It ensures that every proposal is measured not just by feasibility, but by how it re-centers community wellbeing.

6. Aligned Recommendations

Why this lens matters:
This framework created by the research and design firm, Practice of Democracy (PoD), is not just a framework—it is a guide to build shared value outcomes. It proffers opportunities to synthesizes all the previous insights into actionable recommendations rooted in democratic values: participation, transparency, belonging, and repair.

It proposes structural solutions that are co-governed by communities, not imposed upon them. These include:

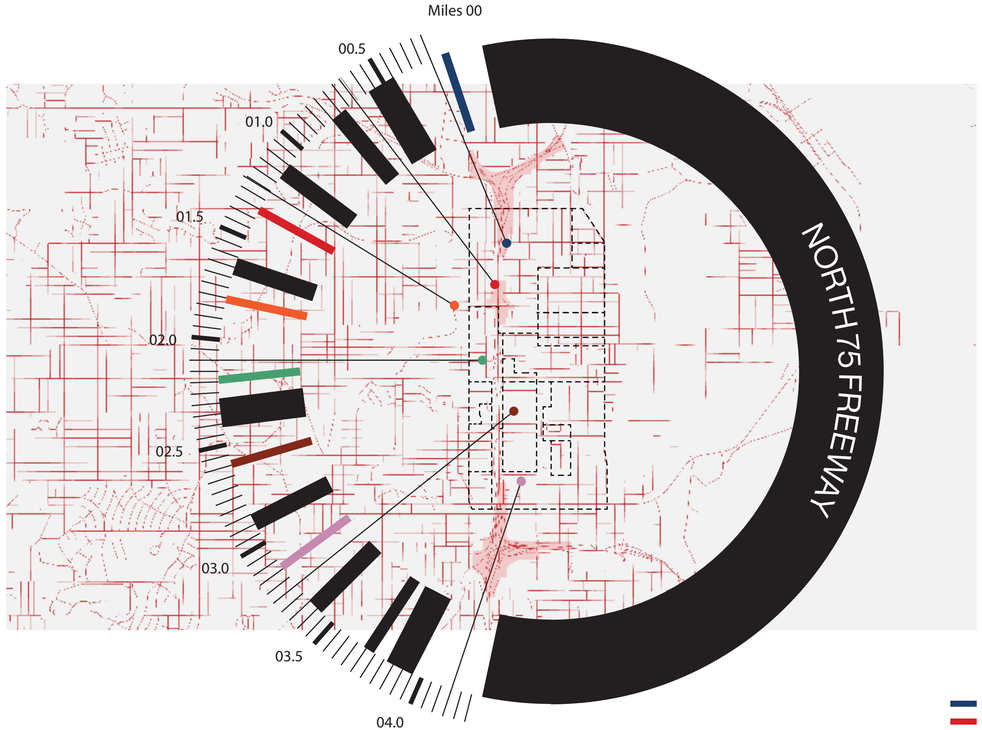
Establishing Community Design Hubs for co-creation

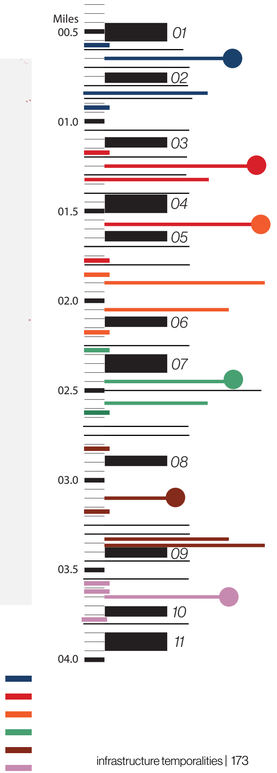
Developing Reparative Trust Compacts with public agencies

Embedding Shared Value Metrics tied to SDH/UNSDG performance

Integrating arts, history, and culture into every planning process

This final lens matters most because it ensures that infrastructure becomes a tool for transformation—both material and moral. It asks: Who decides? Who benefits? Who remembers?





CURRENT CONDITIONS

This section presents a visual analysis of current conditions in North Omaha as shaped by a confluence of policies, practices, and investments, including the construction of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75). Present-day conditions demand not only acknowledgment but action, guided by a reparative framework that integrates community agency, equitable development, and sustained accountability.

The displacement caused by the North Freeway has yet to be repaired. Families whose homes, churches, and businesses were removed were left with few options and little support. For many, there was no pathway back. This forced removal initiated a long-term demographic shift, severing intergenerational connections to place and weakening the cultural infrastructure that once sustained neighborhood identity. These fractures remain visible—both in the physical landscape and in the socio-economic conditions that have followed. Areas near the freeway continue to exhibit suppressed property values, aging infrastructure, and stagnating development. The persistent absence of reinvestment mirrors the neighborhood's displacement from the city's broader growth trajectory.

Economic Isolation and the Fragmentation of Mobility

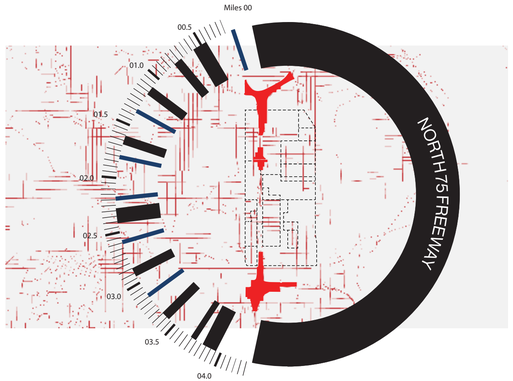
North Omaha's economy remains shaped by the severing of its mobility networks. What was once a neighborhood interwoven with commerce, culture, and foot traffic has been transformed into a series of disconnected vacant parcels and cul-de-sacs. The freeway rerouted potential customers away from commercial corridors like 24th Street and interrupted the natural circulation of neighborhood life. Today, the once vibrant business cooridor has transformed into a hallowed district with very few businesses that struggle to sustain themselves amidst a fractured customer base, limited pedestrian access, and aging commercial stock. Public transit options remain limited and inefficient—amplifying barriers for those seeking employment or essential services across town. The geography of the freeway didn't simply reroute traffic—it rerouted access to economic opportunity.

Neighborhood Cohesion and the Geography of Disconnection

The freeway did not just remove buildings; it removed connective tissue. Blocks once interlinked by streets, sidewalks, and social networks were split, their continuity broken by underpasses and noise barriers. Community cohesion, historically nurtured through physical proximity and daily interaction, was undermined by the very structure that claimed to serve mobility. With few bike lanes, limited shade, and minimal investment in the public realm, everyday movement becomes a burden—particularly for those without access to a car. The freeway imposed a geography of disconnection that continues to constrain how life in North Omaha is lived and experienced.

The cumulative effect of these conditions are structural, layered, and deeply embedded in the systems that govern infrastructure planning and resource allocation. The analysis reveals that North Omaha has not merely been overlooked; it has been institutionally sidelined. Thus, addressing these conditions requires more than retrofitting infrastructure—it demands a recalibration of planning paradigms. A reparative approach offers a framework for this transformation. It begins with centering community experience, but it does not stop at participation. It calls for long-term, flexible funding, protections against displacement, and measurable outcomes that reflect the restoration of value—not only economic, but cultural, spatial, and historical.

Through this lens, current conditions are evidence of structural inequity. Yet they are also opportunities—critical starting points for imagining what it means to truly heal, reconnect, and reinvest. As cities across the country engage in infrastructure repair and federal programs like the Thriving Communities Initiative gain momentum, North Omaha stands as both a cautionary tale and a test of national resolve. If equity is more than a concept, then here—in the shadows of a freeway that divided—must be where its most tangible commitments begin.



WESTSIDE & EASTSIDE OF 75 NORTH FREEWAY

Community (West of 75 North Freeway)

- Demographics: Predominantly Black and minority populations.
- Economic Conditions: Lower-income households, higher unemployment rates, and limited business investment.
- Urban Fabric: Older housing stock, lower property values, and fewer commercial developments.
- Environmental & Health Impacts: Higher exposure to pollution, noise, and poor air quality due to proximity to the freeway.
- Access & Mobility: Limited walkability, fewer pedestrian-friendly crossings, and reduced access to high-quality public transportation.
- Historical Context: This area was historically impacted by displacement due to highway construction and urban renewal policies, leading to long-term economic stagnation.

Community (East of 75 North Freeway)

- Demographics: Predominantly white, with higher-income households.
- Economic Conditions: More stable employment rates, greater business presence, and higher property values.
- Urban Fabric: Newer housing developments, better-maintained infrastructure, and well-planned commercial spaces.
- Environmental & Health Conditions: Less exposure to highway pollution, more green spaces, and better healthcare access.
- Access & Mobility: More connected streets, easier freeway access for commuting, and better public transportation options.
- Historical Context: Benefited from white flight and suburbanization, with freeway infrastructure designed to serve commuters from these wealthier areas.

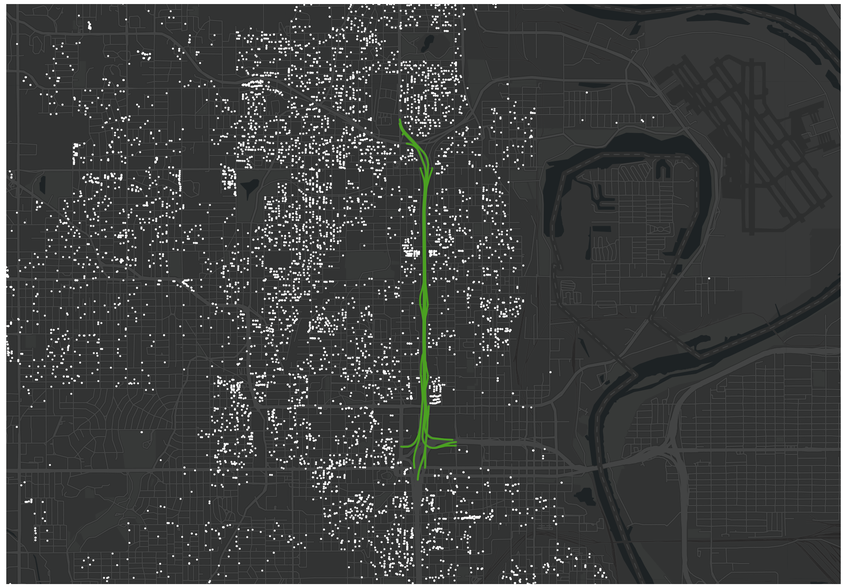
Experential Analysis

EVICTIONS

Evictions and the Impact of the 75 North Freeway on Omaha's Social, Economic, and Political Landscape

The construction of the 75 North Freeway in Omaha has significantly impacted surrounding communities, contributing to higher eviction rates. The freeway not only serves as a physical divide but also exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, leading to increased housing instability. Here's a breakdown of the freeway's influence on evictions:

- Social Fragmentation and Disconnection
  The freeway has fragmented neighborhoods, reducing social cohesion. This disconnection limits residents' ability to form supportive networks that can help prevent evictions, especially when they face financial hardships. Social isolation makes it harder for renters to access resources that could support housing stability, directly increasing eviction rates.
- Economic Displacement
  Communities near the freeway have experienced economic displacement, with rising housing costs and limited employment opportunities. These factors increase financial strain on residents, making it difficult to keep up with rent payments. The lack of affordable housing further contributes to higher eviction rates as long-time residents are pushed out by gentrification and new developments.
- Political and Institutional Factors
  Historically, the freeway's development aligned with urban renewal policies that displaced minority communities. These neighborhoods often lacked political resources, making it harder for residents to access legal protections. This lack of support continues today, as tenants facing eviction may struggle with limited legal assistance and local governments may not prioritize tenant rights.
- Impact on Housing Security
  The freeway has reshaped local housing markets by driving up costs and reducing affordable housing availability. Areas near the freeway often face high rental turnover, leading to housing instability. As evictions increase, displaced residents are often forced to move to other economically strained areas, perpetuating the cycle of instability.



Mapping Evictions

WALKABILITY

Walkability and the Impact of the 75 North Freeway on Omaha's Landscape

The 75 North Freeway significantly affects walkability in Omaha, disrupting social, economic, and environmental dynamics. Here's a concise analysis of its impact:

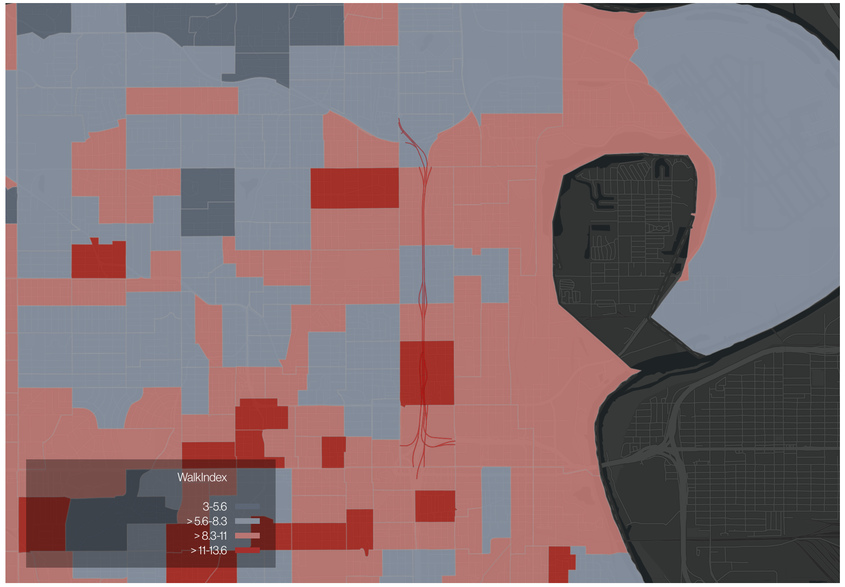
Reduced Pedestrian Connectivity
The freeway creates a physical barrier that limits pedestrian access between neighborhoods, reducing connectivity and making it harder for residents to reach resources like schools and businesses.

Economic Impact
Limited walkability reduces foot traffic to local businesses, harming economic activity in affected neighborhoods. Without pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, these areas struggle to attract investment and support local commerce.

Environmental and Health Effects
The freeway increases air and noise pollution, discouraging walking and negatively impacting public health. This reduces outdoor activity and increases health risks, especially in nearby areas.

Social Isolation
For those without cars, limited walkability isolates individuals, particularly vulnerable groups like the elderly or disabled, who struggle tao access essential services and social opportunities.

Urban Mobility and Sustainability
The freeway prioritizes car travel, undermining sustainable mobility efforts. The lack of walking infrastructure contributes to environmental issues and limits alternatives to car-dependent transportation.



Captions

ZONING

Zoning and the Impact of the 75 North Freeway on Omaha's Landscape

NBD (Neighborhood Business District)
The freeway limits local business potential, reducing pedestrian access and economic growth in these areas.

CC (Community Commercial)
Access issues from the freeway decrease customer flow, harming the viability of businesses in these zones.

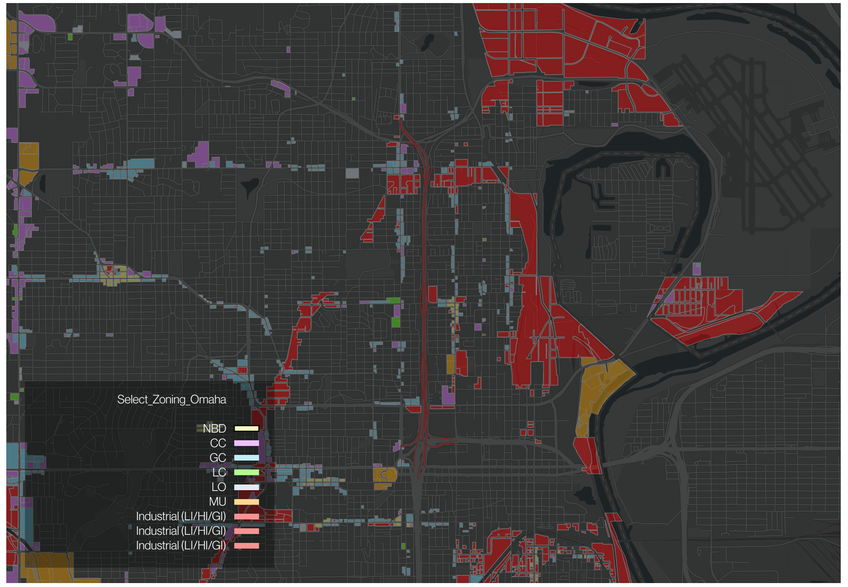
GC (General Commercial)
Commercial areas near the freeway face increased land value pressures, pushing out small businesses in favor of car-dependent developments.

LC (Limited Commercial)
Limited Commercial zones struggle with underinvestment and lack pedestrian infrastructure, hindering business attraction.

LO (Limited Office)
Limited Office areas near the freeway struggle to attract tenants due to poor accessibility and reduced appeal for office use.

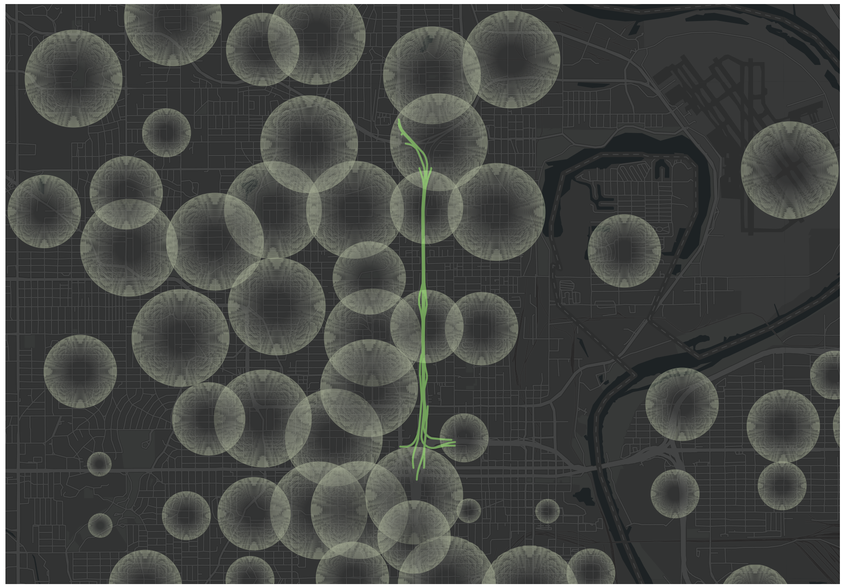
MU (Mixed-Use)
The freeway disrupts Mixed-Use development by limiting walkability and connectivity between residential, commercial, and recreational areas.

Industrial (LI/HI/GI)
Industrial zones benefit from highway access but suffer from pollution and noise, impacting surrounding residential areas and worker health.



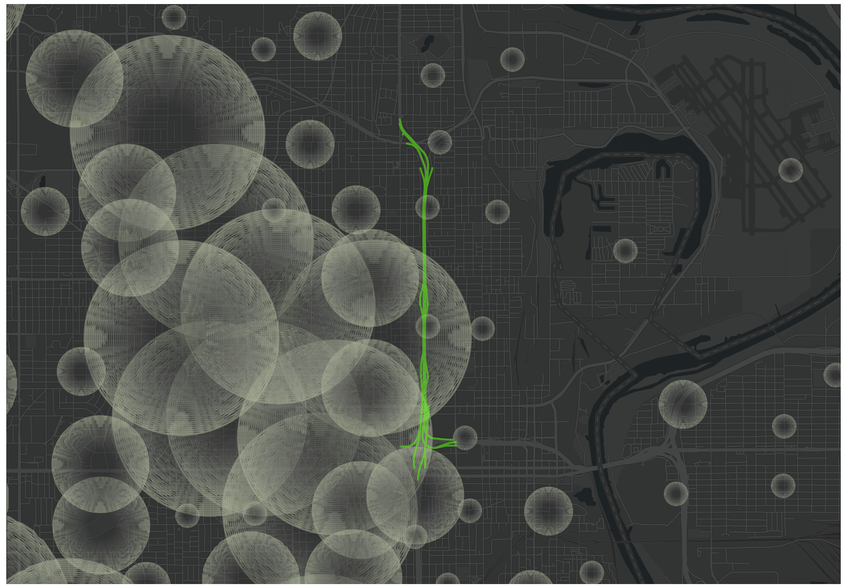
Captions

POPULATION ACCORDING TO RACE



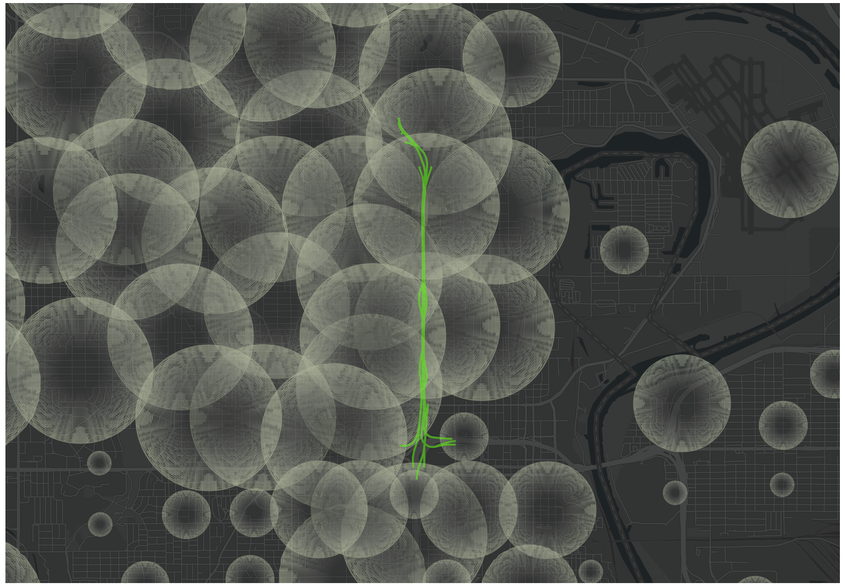
Population According to Race: White (Hispanic) Demographical Data

POPULATION ACCORDING TO RACE



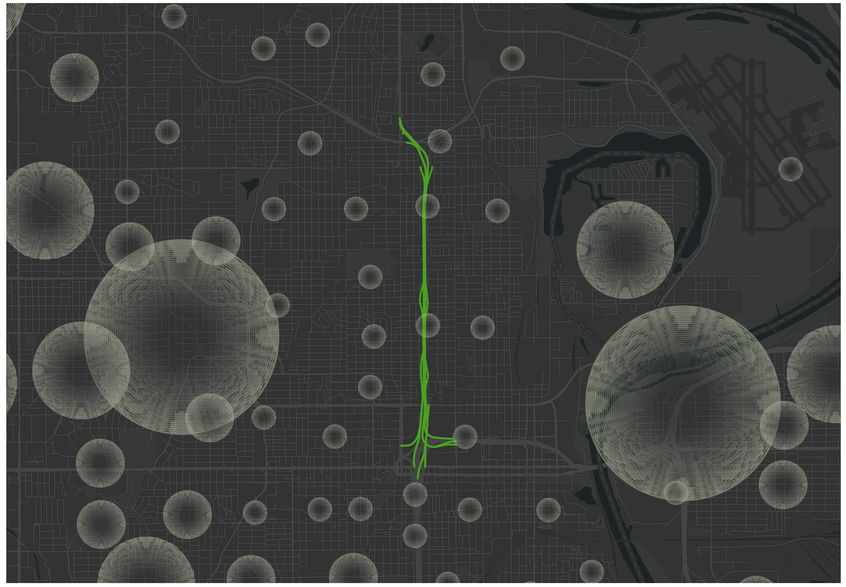
Population According to Race: Asian (Non-Hispanic) Demographical Data

POPULATION ACCORDING TO RACE



Population According to Race: Black (Non-Hispanic) Demographical Data

POPULATION ACCORDING TO RACE



Population According to Race: White (Non-Hispanic) Demographical Data

EDUCATION

School Location and the Impact on Education Due to the 75 North Freeway

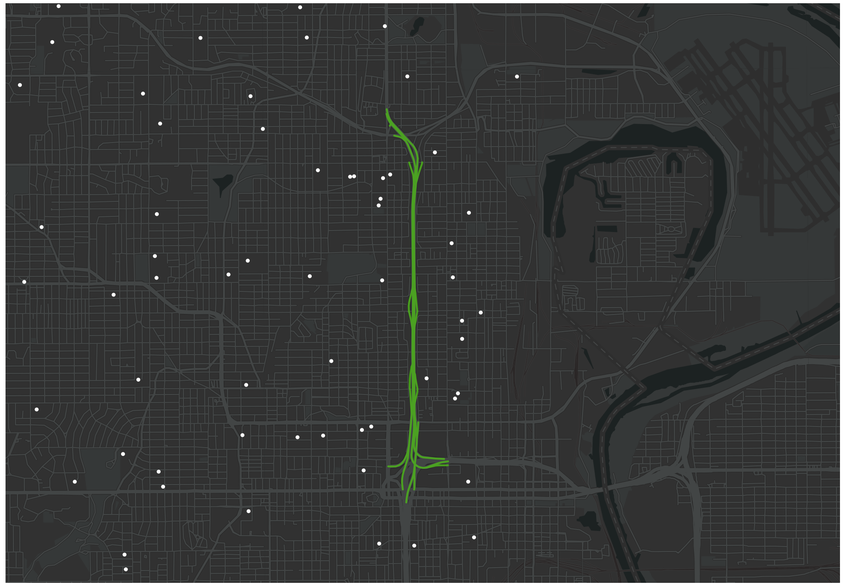
Access to Schools
The freeway limits safe access to schools for students, particularly in disadvantaged areas, where transportation infrastructure is lacking, increasing travel time and reducing attendance.

School Quality
Schools near the freeway may face underfunding and disinvestment due to the socio-economic challenges of surrounding neighborhoods, resulting in poorer educational outcomes.

Safety Concerns
Proximity to the freeway introduces safety hazards, such as air pollution and traffic accidents, impacting both the physical health and well-being of students and reducing their ability to focus on learning.

Community Engagement
The freeway's division of neighborhoods weakens community ties, making it harder for schools to foster strong parental and community involvement, which is crucial for improving educational outcomes.

Resource Disparities
Neighborhoods impacted by the freeway often experience higher rates of poverty and unemployment, limiting funding for local schools and the resources available to students.



Captions

PARKS, WALKABILITY, AND GREEN SPACE CONNECTIVITY

Impact of the 75 North Freeway on Parks, Walkability, and Green Space Connectivity

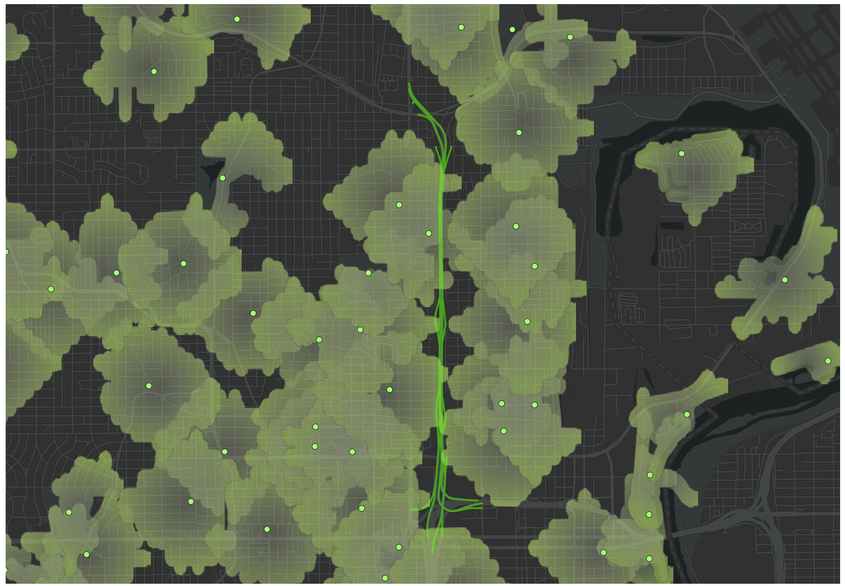
The 75 North Freeway significantly affects access to parks, overall walkability, and the connectivity between green spaces in Omaha.

Barrier to Park Access – The freeway acts as a physical divide, making it harder for residents, especially those in disadvantaged neighborhoods, to reach parks and recreational areas. Limited pedestrian crossings and unsafe walking conditions discourage park use.

Reduced Walkability – The freeway prioritizes vehicular traffic over pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. Sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike lanes are often missing or poorly maintained, making walking less practical and more dangerous.

Fragmented Green Space Network – Parks and green areas that could be connected are instead separated by the freeway, limiting continuous green corridors. This affects both human movement and wildlife migration, reducing the ecological benefits of green infrastructure.

Disparities in Park Quality and Distribution – Wealthier areas with better infrastructure have easier access to parks, while communities near the freeway often face reduced investment in green spaces, exacerbating health and recreational inequalities.



Parks, Walkability, and Green Space Connectivity

OVERAL CHILD OPPORTUNITY INDEX

Child Opportunity Index and the Impact of the 75 North Freeway on Omaha

Overall Child Opportunity
The freeway creates barriers that limit access to quality education, healthcare, and recreational spaces for children in nearby communities, reducing their overall opportunity for growth and development.

Social Opportunity
Social connections are fragmented by the freeway, leading to fewer community-based support systems that help children thrive, limiting opportunities for positive social development.

Educational Opportunity
Children in areas near the freeway may face lower quality schools due to socio-economic disparities exacerbated by the highway's presence, affecting their educational outcomes.

Health Opportunity
Proximity to the freeway exposes children to higher levels of pollution, which can negatively affect their physical and mental health, limiting their access to a healthy, supportive environment.

Economic Opportunity
The freeway's impact on economic stability in nearby communities reduces access to well-paying jobs, limiting parents' ability to provide the resources necessary for their children's success.

OVERAL Child Opportunity Index

EDUCATIONAL CHILD OPPORTUNITY INDEX

Impact of the 75 North Freeway on Educational Child Opportunity

The 75 North Freeway has shaped disparities in educational access and child development opportunities by reinforcing spatial, economic, and social divisions.

School Accessibility & Segregation
The freeway creates physical barriers that limit access to high-quality schools, reinforcing patterns of educational segregation and inequality. Children in lower-resourced neighborhoods often attend underfunded schools with fewer academic and extracurricular opportunities.

Environmental & Health Barriers
Proximity to the freeway exposes children to air and noise pollution, leading to higher asthma rates, sleep disturbances, and cognitive impairments that hinder learning and academic performance.

Transportation & Safety Concerns
Students face longer, less reliable commutes due to fragmented transit networks, reducing school attendance rates and limiting participation in after-school programs. Unsafe pedestrian infrastructure also increases risks for children traveling to school.

Economic Hardship & Resource Gaps
Neighborhoods divided by the freeway often experience economic disinvestment, affecting school funding, teacher retention, and access to enrichment programs that enhance educational outcomes.

Community Disconnection & Support Systems
The freeway weakens social networks, reducing parental engagement and community-based educational support systems that contribute to student success.

Addressing these disparities requires investment in school funding equity, improved transportation infrastructure, and environmental protections to support children's learning

Educational Child Opportunity index

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY INDEX

Impact of the 75 North Freeway on the Social and Economic Opportunity Index

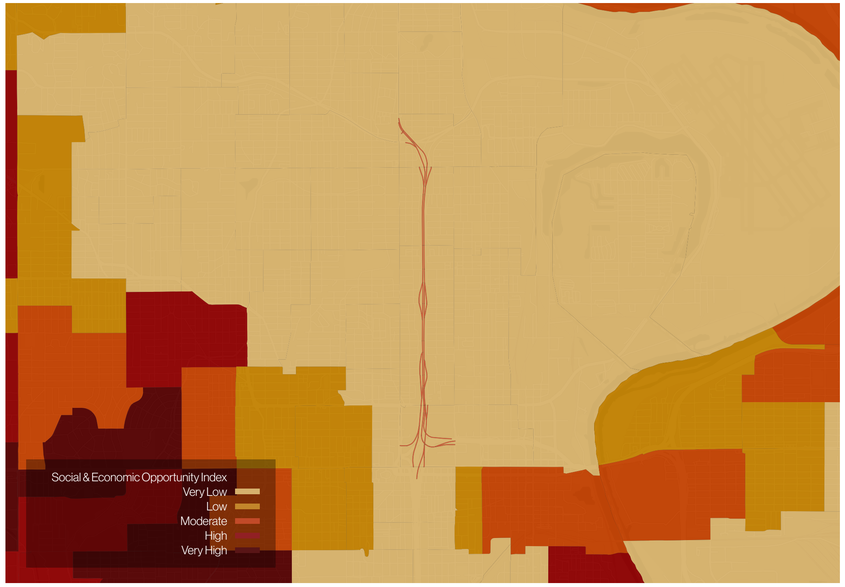
Reduced Economic Mobility
The freeway's division of communities limits access to economic opportunities by isolating disadvantaged areas from employment hubs, reducing overall economic mobility and perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Disconnection from Resources
Communities on either side of the freeway face barriers in accessing vital services like healthcare, education, and job training, which are key components of the Social and Economic Opportunity Index. This disconnection hinders upward mobility.

Job Market Inequality
The freeway exacerbates job market inequality by restricting mobility for low-income workers, limiting their access to well-paying jobs outside of their immediate neighborhoods.

Social Capital Depletion
Social ties, which are crucial for community support and job opportunities, are weakened by the physical barrier of the freeway. This leads to lower social capital and fewer opportunities for residents to engage in networks that promote economic and social growth.

Impact on Economic Resilience
The freeway contributes to the economic instability of neighborhoods by restricting access to resources and opportunities for investment. This lack of economic resilience diminishes long-term stability and community prosperity.



Captions

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL OPPORTUNITY INDEX

Impact of the 75 North Freeway on Health and Environmental Opportunity

The 75 North Freeway has contributed to disparities in air quality, access to green spaces, and overall public health.

Air Pollution & Respiratory Health
Traffic emissions increase exposure to pollutants like NO and PM, leading to higher asthma rates, respiratory illnesses, and cardiovascular diseases, particularly among children and the elderly.

Limited Green Space Access
The freeway restricts walkability and access to parks, reducing outdoor activity opportunities and contributing to obesity, stress, and poor mental health.

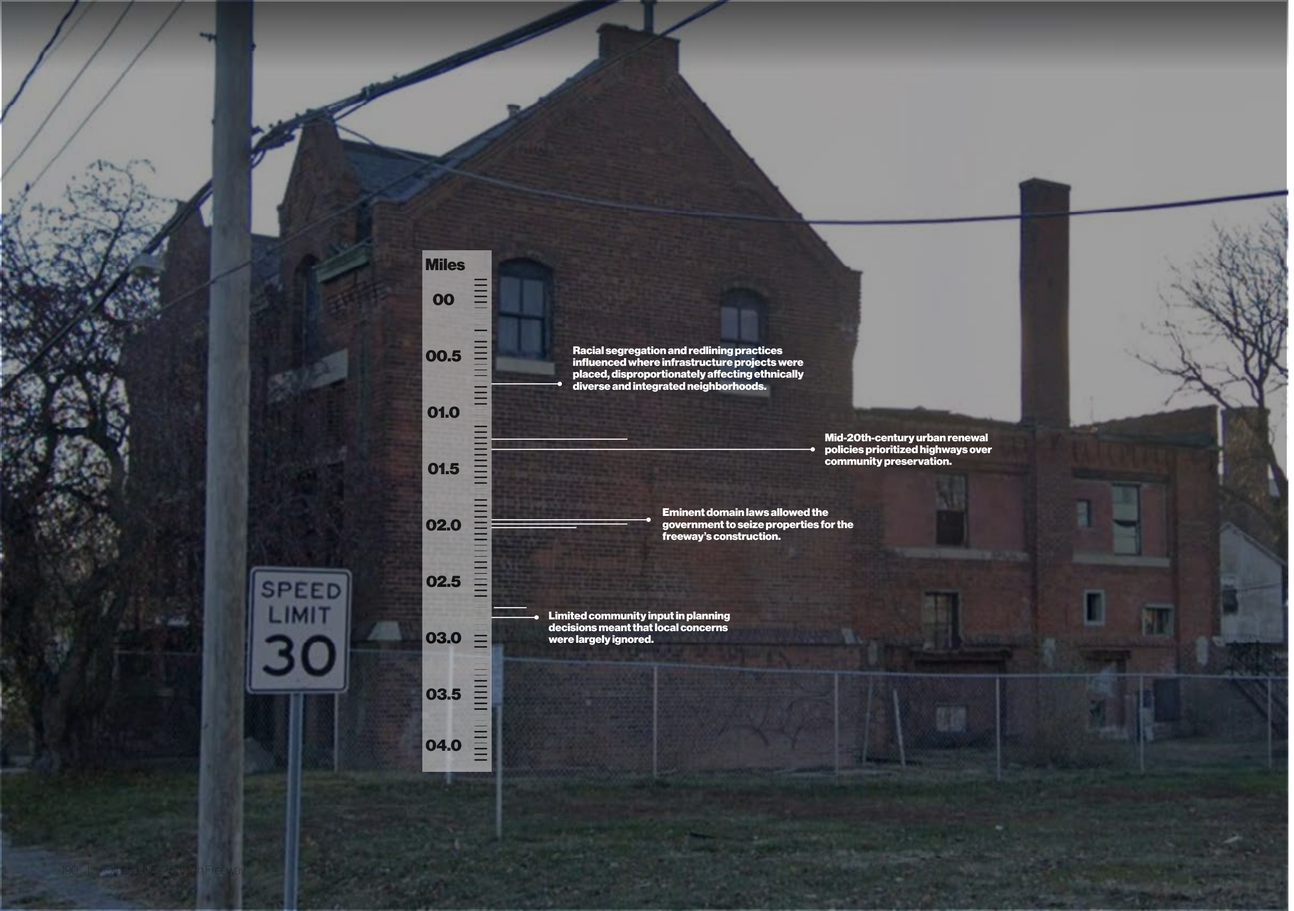
Noise Pollution & Mental Well-being
Constant traffic noise disrupts sleep, increases stress, and raises risks of anxiety and hypertension.

Urban Heat Island Effect
Freeway-adjacent areas often have less tree cover and absorb more heat, worsening summer temperatures and increasing heat-related illnesses and energy costs.

Water & Soil Contamination
Runoff carries pollutants into local water sources and soil, harming ecosystems and limiting safe drinking water access.

The freeway disproportionately affects marginalized communities, necessitating mitigation efforts such as air quality monitoring, noise reduction, green infrastructure, and equitable urban planning.

Health and Environmental Opportunity index



ROOT CAUSES

The historical trajectory of North Omaha illustrates how a combination of urban planning decisions, economic trends, and public policies shaped the landscape and well-being of the community over time. When viewed in a longer arc, it becomes clear that the current conditions—marked by disconnection, economic challenges, and underinvestment—are rooted not in a single cause, but in a sequence of well-intentioned efforts, shifting priorities, and evolving policy frameworks.

In the early 20th century, practices like redlining—where maps guided federal and private investment decisions—contributed to patterns of differential access to homeownership and credit. While these tools were designed to manage financial risk during a period of rapid urban growth, they inadvertently limited access to capital in certain neighborhoods. In North Omaha, this contributed to a lack of reinvestment, slower infrastructure upgrades, and barriers to homeownership, particularly for African American families and other minority residents. As these patterns took shape, they began to influence broader social and economic outcomes for the area.

Urban renewal programs introduced in the mid-20th century were intended to improve conditions in cities by replacing deteriorated buildings with new development. In practice, however, these programs sometimes resulted in the displacement of residents without fully replacing what was lost—both physically and socially. This disruption of community networks, institutions, and small businesses created longer-term ripple effects. While the efforts were aligned with national goals of modernization and growth, the implementation did not always include local voices or reflect the full complexity of neighborhood life.

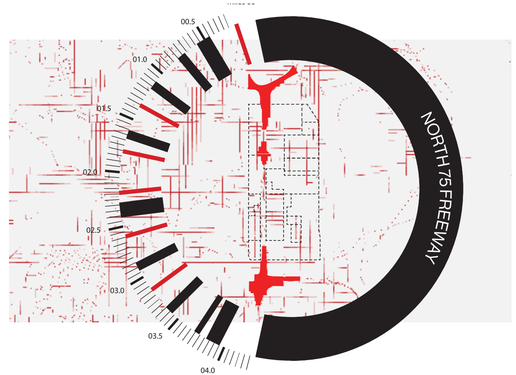
The construction of the Interstate Highway System brought transformative connectivity and economic opportunity to many parts of the country. Yet in Omaha, as in other cities, routing decisions often favored efficiency and topography over existing neighborhood cohesion. The North Freeway, developed in phases beginning in the 1960s, improved regional mobility but also bisected established communities in North Omaha. The result was a physical and psychological barrier that made it more difficult to maintain walkability, street-level commerce, and social continuity. At the time, urban planning standards were oriented toward vehicular movement and suburban expansion—perspectives that have since evolved with new knowledge and values.

In subsequent decades, additional pressures such as suburban growth, shifting economic bases, and the rise of predatory lending created further challenges. As industries decentralized and employment centers moved westward, North Omaha residents—already disconnected from these new hubs—faced increasing difficulty accessing opportunity. Disinvestment became a self-reinforcing cycle: reduced demand led to lower property values, which limited tax revenues and constrained public services.

The legacy of this approach remains visible today. North Omaha continues to experience disproportionately low property values, limited private investment, and high rates of housing instability. Without adequate reinvestment, affordability has become more about lack of demand than preservation by policy. Many residents remain locked out of homeownership or struggle with aging housing stock and unstable rental markets. The long-term impacts of displacement are not only spatial, but economic—reflected in intergenerational poverty, diminished asset accumulation, and restricted access to new housing developments that emerge in the region.

Today, many of these dynamics continue to affect North Omaha. However, there is growing recognition—across sectors and disciplines—of the need to reframe infrastructure as not only a technical endeavor but a human one. New initiatives, like the Thriving Communities framework, demonstrate how data, history, and community engagement can inform forward-looking strategies for reinvestment. Instead of simply identifying what went wrong, these frameworks help clarify what's possible when infrastructure planning centers equity, connectivity, and collective well-being.

By understanding this historical context not as a sequence of failures but as an evolving learning process, Omaha and other cities can apply past lessons to current planning. With intentional collaboration, inclusive engagement, and sustained investment, communities like North Omaha can move toward reconnection—not only in the built environment, but in shared civic life.



Policies Leading to Displacement & Disinvestment

1930 | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000

Redlining (1930s-1960s, Though Effects Persist)

Denial of Home Loans & Insurance to Black & Minority Communities
- Federal Housing Administration (FHA) refused to back loans in "redlined" areas.
- Private banks followed suit, denying loans based on racial composition.

Lack of Homeownership & Investment in Affected Areas
- Residents were forced to rent instead of owning property.
- Home values stagnated or declined due to lack of demand.

Deterioration of Housing & Infrastructure
- Land was redeveloped for commercial or high-income residential use.
- Former residents could not afford to return.

Community Fragmentation & Economic Hardship
- Local businesses closed, social networks eroded.
- Job loss, increased homelessness, and decline in local economies.

Cycle of Poverty & Further Disinvestment
- Lower property values > Less tax revenue > Poor schools, infrastructure, and services.
- Middle-class residents moved out, deepening economic decline.

Urban Renewal (1940s-1970s)

Urban Renewal Policies (Slum Clearance & Redevelopment)
- Title I of the 1949 Housing Act funded clearance of "blighted" areas.
- City governments demolished entire neighborhoods for highways, commercial districts, or luxury housing.

Forced Displacement of Low-Income Residents
- Homes and businesses bulldozed, often without adequate compensation.
- Residents (mostly Black, immigrant, or working-class) pushed into overcrowded, low-quality housing..

Gentrification & Loss of Affordable Housing
- Land was redeveloped for commercial or high-income residential use.
- Former residents could not afford to return.

Community Fragmentation & Economic Hardship
- Local businesses closed, social networks eroded.
- Job loss, increased homelessness, and decline in local economies.

Highway Construction & Suburbanization (1950s-1980s)

Interstate Highway Act (1956) & Suburban Expansion
- Highways cut through urban centers, demolishing homes and displacing residents.
- Wealthier (mainly white) populations moved to suburbs, aided by FHA-backed loans.

Decline of Inner-City Neighborhoods
- Local businesses lost foot traffic as residents moved away.
- Remaining populations (often Black and working-class) faced fewer jobs and declining services.

Car Dependency & Environmental Degradation
- Public transit funding was reduced in favor of highways.
- Increased pollution, making urban areas less livable.

Disinvestment & Predatory Practices (1970s-present)

White Flight & Declining Investment
- Banks, businesses, and wealthier populations moved out, taking resources with them.

Rise of Predatory Lending & Housing Crisis
- Subprime mortgages targeted low-income communities in the 1990s-2000s.
- 2008 financial crisis led to mass foreclosures, disproportionately affecting Black and Latino homeowners.

Continued Gentrification & Housing Inequality
- Investors bought foreclosed properties and redeveloped them, further displacing long-time residents.
- Affordable housing stock continued to shrink.

comparative property value changes

1930 | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000

Pre-1960s (Before Freeway Construction)

- **Property Values:** Stable or increasing in North Omaha.
- **Social Context:** Vibrant, connected communities with a growing residential and commercial presence.

Pre-1960s (Before Freeway Construction)

- **Eminent Domain Use:** Properties acquired at low prices, leading to displacement of families and businesses.
- **Immediate Property Impact:** Steep decline in property values in areas affected by the freeway route due to eminent domain and removal of structures.
- **Social Impact:** Displacement of African-American communities, breaking social cohesion and reducing local investment.

1970s–1980s (Long-Term Effects of Construction)

- **Property Values:** Continued decline in property values in areas directly adjacent to the freeway due to disinvestment, lack of public services, and economic isolation.
- **Social and Economic Disinvestment:** Isolation of neighborhoods leading to further economic challenges and reduced property demand.

1990s–2000s (Continued Economic Struggles)

- **Property Values:** Steady stagnation or continued decline in North Omaha, especially close to the freeway.
- **Limited Investment:** Difficulty attracting new businesses and homeowners due to the freeway's legacy and ongoing economic challenges.

2010s–Present (Revitalization Efforts)

- **Recent Improvements:** Infrastructure projects like the $25 million bridge repairs started in 2023.
- **Property Values:** Small improvements in surrounding areas, though some argue these efforts are insufficient to resolve deeper social and economic issues.
- **Social Response:** Community debates over whether these efforts address the original harm caused by the freeway's construction or are merely cosmetic improvements.

IMPACT ON SDH | UNSDGS

Under the auspices of federal and state modernization, the construction of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75) carved through the heart of North Omaha. This act of forced displacement was not simply a matter of housing removal; it signified the systematic erasure of generational wealth, social continuity, and spatial agency. Urban planning at the time centered vehicular throughput and regional connectivity, with little to no regard for the integrity of the neighborhoods affected.

The ongoing effects of Highway 75 North demonstrate how historical infrastructure decisions worsen social determinants of health and contradict sustainable development goals. Addressing these challenges requires equitable urban planning, investment in public transportation, affordable housing initiatives, and environmental justice efforts to repair past harms and create a more sustainable future for North Omaha.

As a result, the North Freeway's physical footprint and broader urban effects bear a profound influence on Social Determinants of Health (SDH). These are the non-clinical factors—economic opportunity, environment, mobility, and cohesion—that shape health outcomes in measurable ways. In North Omaha, decades of physical division, diminished investment, and environmental exposure have compounded across generations.

Economic stability in the area has been weakened by spatial disconnection from economic nodes and job centers. Limited transit access exacerbates this barrier, especially for residents without access to private vehicles. Employment opportunities, particularly those in higher-wage sectors, remain out of reach due to infrastructural isolation.

The built environment offers another key determinant. Walkability is severely compromised along the freeway corridor, with limited pedestrian infrastructure, few green spaces, and ongoing concerns about traffic safety. Children walking to school or elders accessing community services face both physical barriers and social risk. In terms of health and healthcare access, proximity to high-volume traffic corridors brings elevated exposure to air pollutants such as fine particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide—both linked to respiratory and cardiovascular illness. In North Omaha, health disparities track closely with freeway proximity. The stress of historical displacement, compounded by limited access to preventative and responsive healthcare, contributes to mental and physical health outcomes well below the city average.

Education, a frequently overlooked but essential determinant of long-term health, has suffered due to both direct and indirect impacts of the freeway. The construction disrupted neighborhood schools, often cutting them off from their student bases or reducing enrollment due to outmigration. Underfunded schools in isolated or declining areas face persistent challenges in attracting resources, retaining teachers, and supporting students facing trauma and instability. Children living near the freeway are more likely to attend schools burdened by aging infrastructure, fewer extracurricular programs, and lower academic performance, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage. The absence of safe routes to school, coupled with environmental stressors, diminishes not only educational outcomes but also children's sense of safety and opportunity.

Finally, the social and community context reflects decades of fragmentation. Displacement has frayed intergenerational ties and cultural institutions, eroding the trust and support networks that are vital for community resilience. Segregation, both enforced by policy and perpetuated by economics, continues to limit opportunities for shared civic life and upward mobility

The cascading impacts of Highway 75 extend beyond the Social Determinants of Health—they contradict global frameworks aimed at human flourishing and environmental resilience. Several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations as a shared blueprint for equitable global development, are actively undermined by the conditions still present in North Omaha.

SDG 1: No Poverty is challenged by the chronic underinvestment and economic segregation embedded in the neighborhood's infrastructure history. Housing insecurity and unemployment form a persistent cycle that resists recovery without intentional intervention

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being remains distant for residents facing pollution exposure, health inequity, and barriers to care—all of which are tied to the freeway's presence and its social consequences.

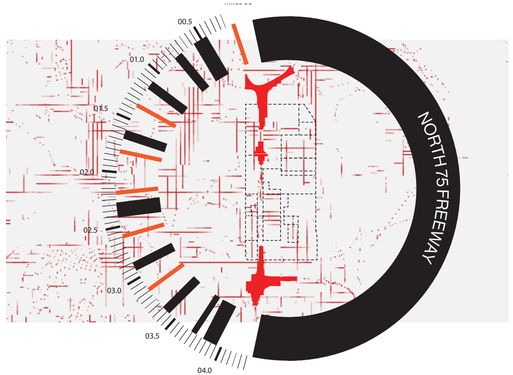
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities is relevant both historically and presently. Displacement, redlining, and inequitable transportation planning all created the conditions for structural exclusion that persist in property values, access to amenities, and life expectancy.

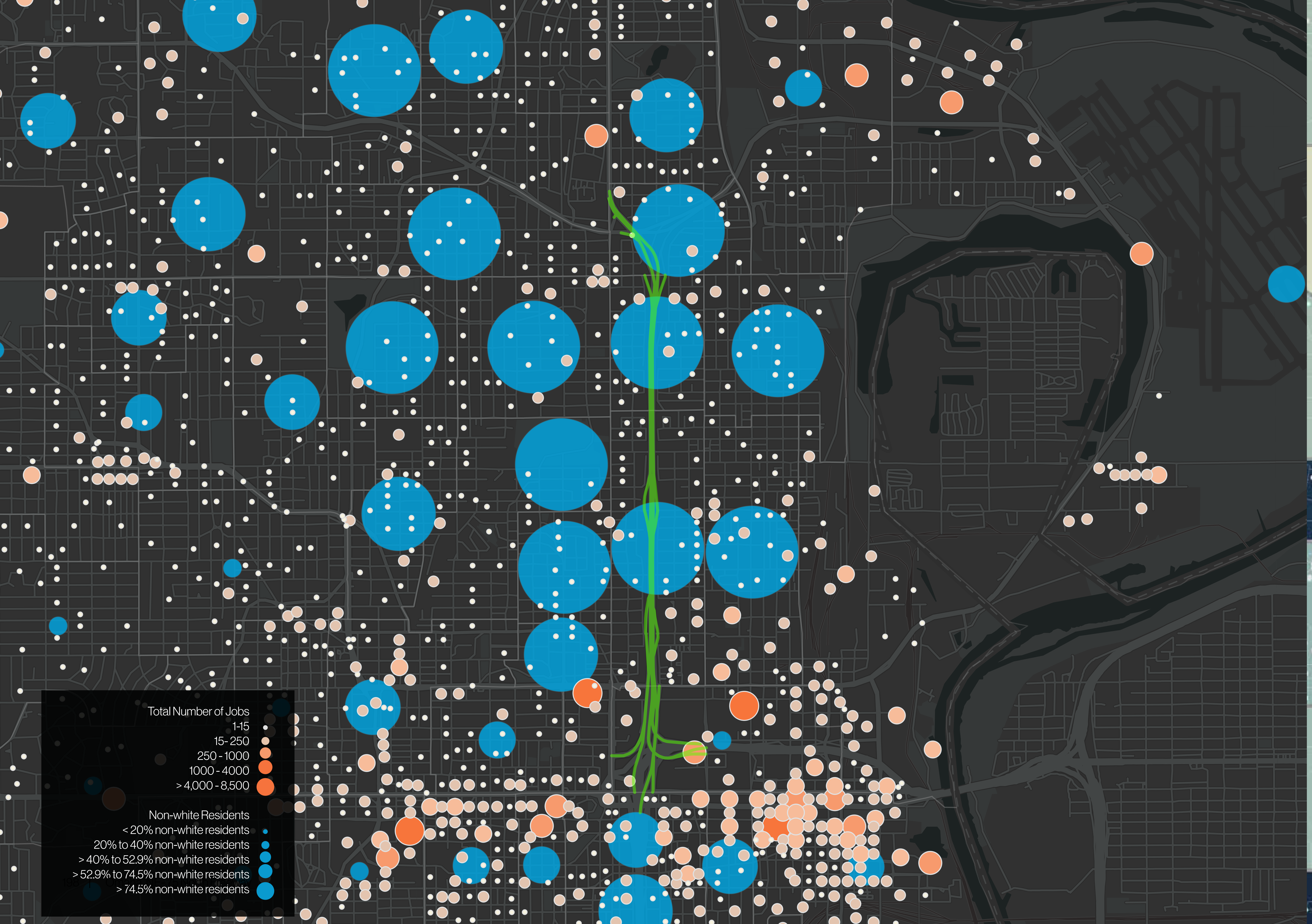
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities is particularly salient. The North Freeway's construction—an artifact of auto-centric design—directly contradicts today's principles of compact, inclusive, and transit-oriented urbanism. Instead of uniting the city, it segmented it, prioritizing movement through over connection within.

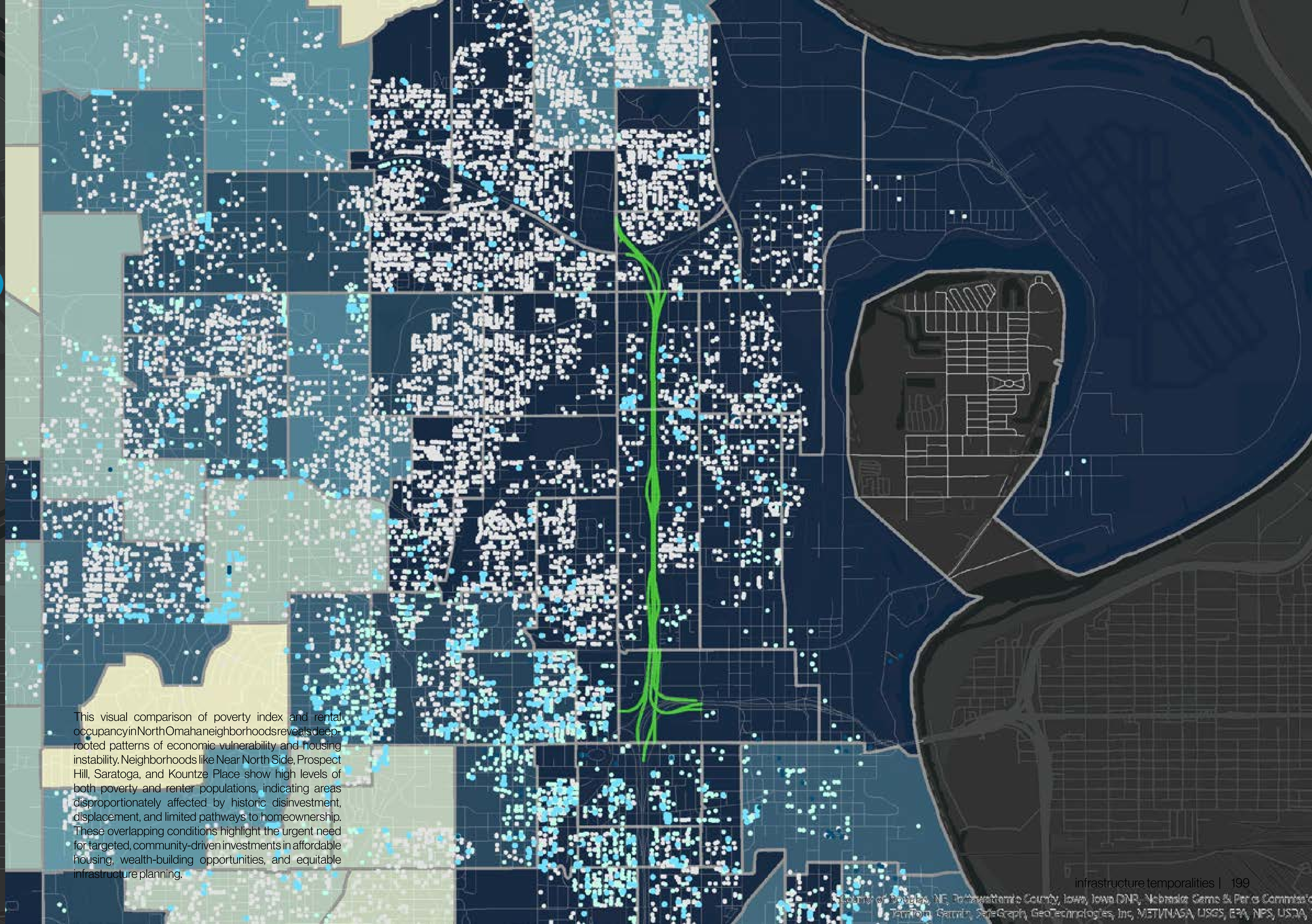
And yet, amidst these challenges lie opportunities for reconciliation and repair. SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure can serve as a guiding principle for how Omaha reimagines its mobility network—integrating climate-smart infrastructure, equitable development practices, and community-rooted design.

SDG 13: Climate Action invites a re-evaluation of carbon-intensive transit systems and opens the door for green infrastructure, stormwater management improvements, and air quality interventions tailored to frontline communities.

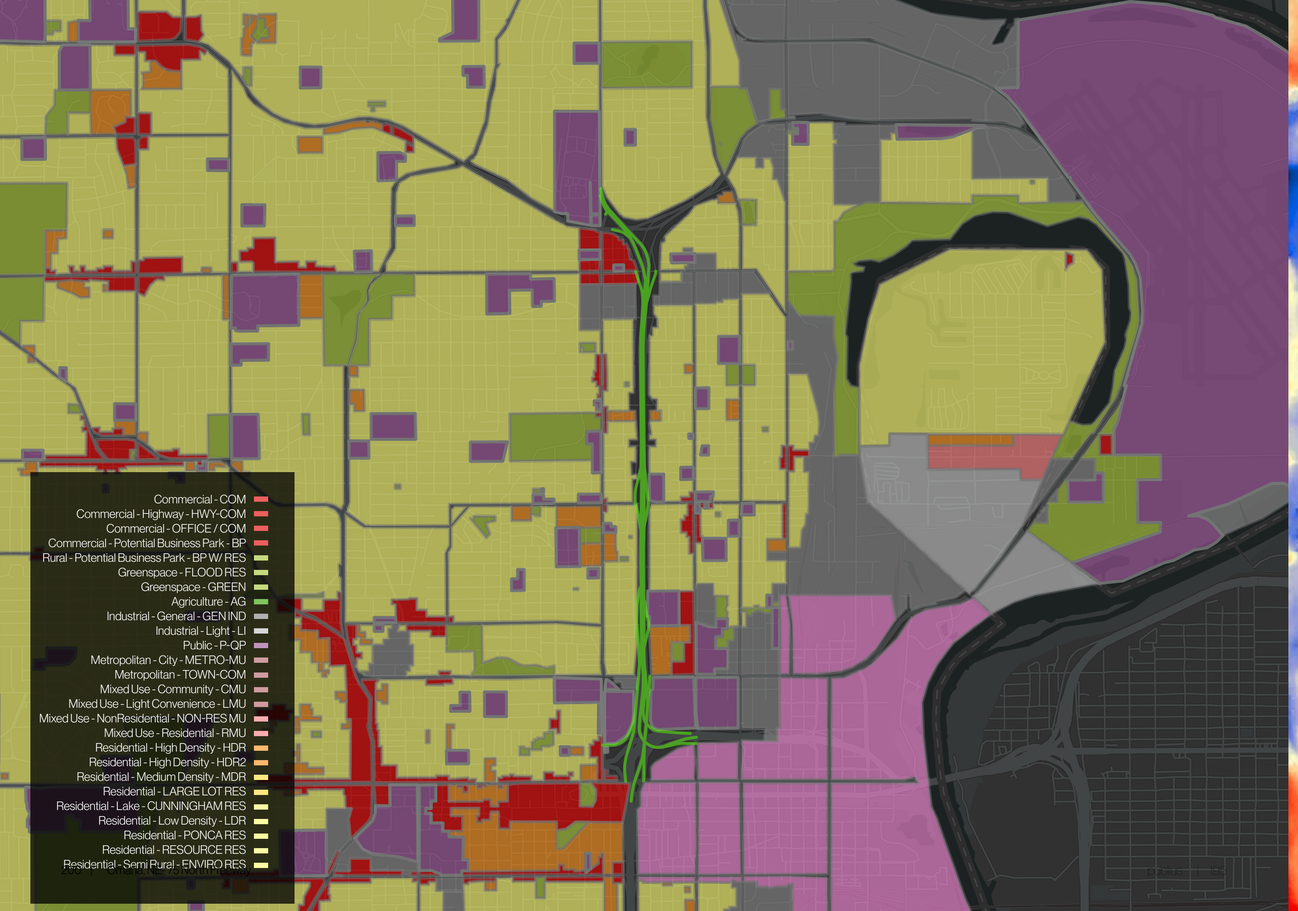
Finally, SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions reminds us that democratic processes—including urban planning—must meaningfully involve those who are most impacted. Repairing harm begins with inclusion, transparency, and community governance.

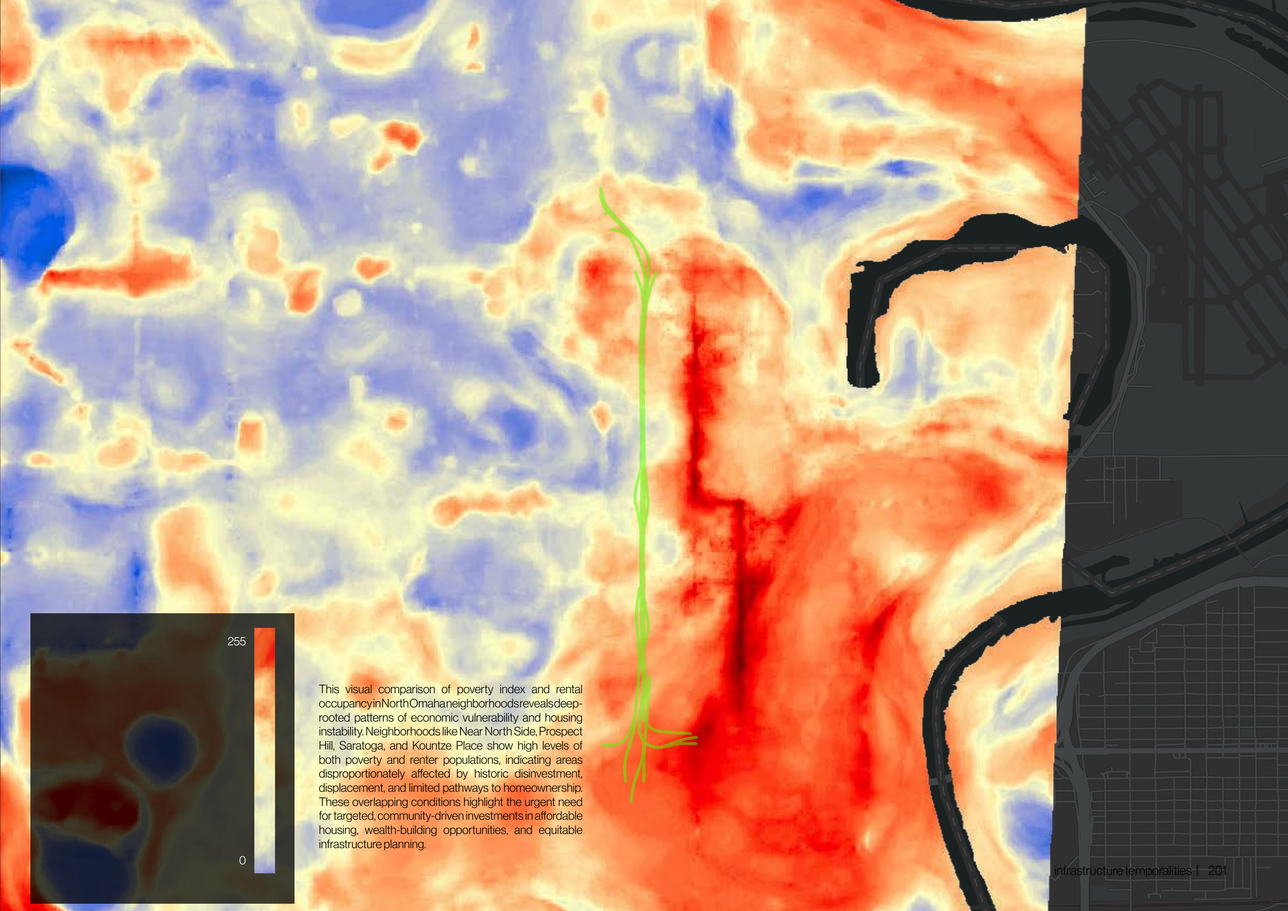






This visual comparison of poverty index and rental occupancy in North Omaha neighborhoods reveals deep-rooted patterns of economic vulnerability and housing instability. Neighborhoods like Near North Side, Prospect Hill, Saratoga, and Kountze Place show high levels of both poverty and renter populations, indicating areas disproportionately affected by historic disinvestment, displacement, and limited pathways to homeownership. These overlapping conditions highlight the urgent need for targeted, community-driven investments in affordable housing, wealth-building opportunities, and equitable infrastructure planning.





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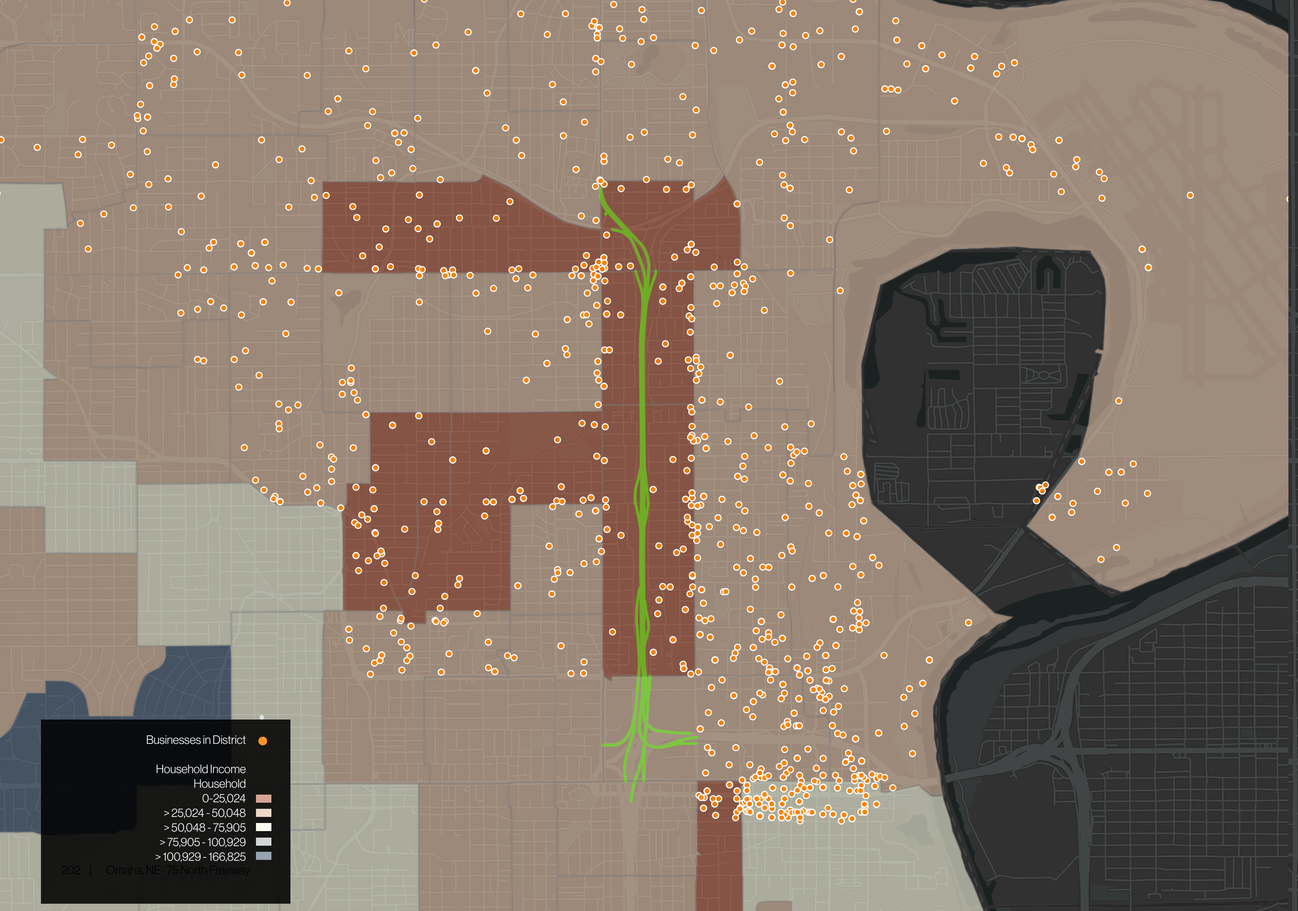

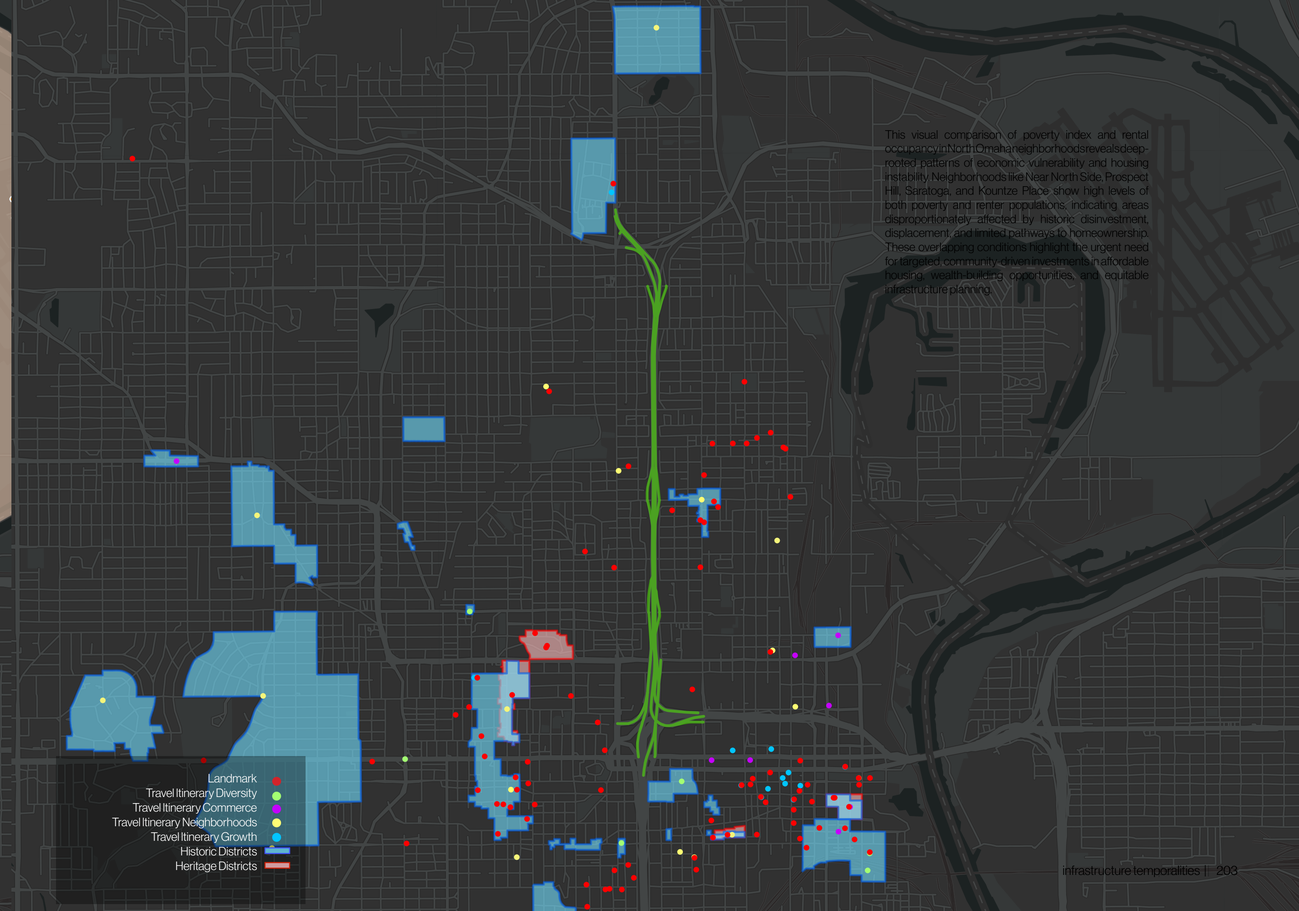

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CONNECTION TO THRIVING COMMUNITIES

As communities across the United States grapple with the legacies of exclusionary planning and inequitable infrastructure development, the federal Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI) has emerged as a targeted framework to address long-standing disparities. Designed to align infrastructure investment with justice, sustainability, and community-led visioning, TCI framework is uniquely positioned to support places like North Omaha, where historical transportation decisions have left deep scars—economically, environmentally, and socially. the highway's lingering physical and psychological effects—displacement, disinvestment, and disconnection—map directly onto the core mandates of TCI.

As such, Highway 75 North is a critical proving ground for how federal tools like TCI can foster repair and build inclusive futures:

1. Displacement, Housing Inequities & Community Disinvestment

Legacy Conditions:

The forced displacement of families, homes, churches, and businesses erased, neighborhood cohesion, wealth building opportunities, and access to stable, affordable housing.

TCI Alignment:

The Thriving Communities Initiative was created to directly confront such legacies. It prioritizes historically marginalized and disinvested neighborhoods for proactive planning support, capacity-building, and access to federal resources. TCI's emphasis on equitable neighborhood and housing development—particularly mixed-use and mixed-income models—aligns with North Omaha's need to reclaim its residential base while preventing further speculative displacement. Moreover, the initiative foregrounds community ownership and participatory design, ensuring residents play a central role in shaping housing strategies that meet their needs and reflect their histories.

2. Economic Disconnection and Mobility Barriers

Legacy Conditions:

Highway 75 created a hard boundary between North Omaha and the city's commercial and employment cores. This disconnection was compounded by an underinvestment in transit infrastructure, which has contributed to limited job access, stagnant local business activity, and declining property values. Economic exclusion remains a defining feature of the region, reinforced by the lack of mobility options beyond private automobiles.

TCI Alignment:

One of TCI's core tenets is multi-modal transportation justice. The initiative seeks to undo patterns of auto-dependence by investing in public transit, pedestrian infrastructure, and micro-mobility networks that restore connectivity for underserved communities. In the context of North Omaha, this means developing transportation systems that not only bridge geographic divides but also improve economic access—through job proximity, small business corridor revitalization, and workforce development strategies. TCI funding can be channeled to projects that build economic corridors around the freeway, reconnecting people to place and opportunity.

3. Neighborhood Cohesion, Environmental Health, and Public Space

Legacy Conditions:

The North 75 Freeway remains both a physical barrier and an environmental burden. It disrupted neighborhood street grids, weakened place-based identity, and introduced harmful pollutants that have contributed to elevated rates of respiratory illness and stress-related conditions. The absence of walkable, green, and publicly owned space around the corridor further reinforces North Omaha's marginalization.

TCI Alignment:

TCI's focus on environmental equity and climate resilience enables municipalities to transform legacy infrastructure into community assets. Through investments in capping freeways, expanding greenways, and remediating urban heat islands, TCI provides the policy and funding tools to reclaim space for people. In North Omaha, this opens the door to rethinking the corridor not just as a traffic conduit, but as a potential site for cultural healing, recreational space, and neighborhood reconnection. TCI also integrates environmental justice metrics, allowing communities to track and mitigate the public health burdens imposed by past infrastructure decisions.

4. Omaha as a National Model for Reparative Infrastructure Planning

Legacy Conditions:

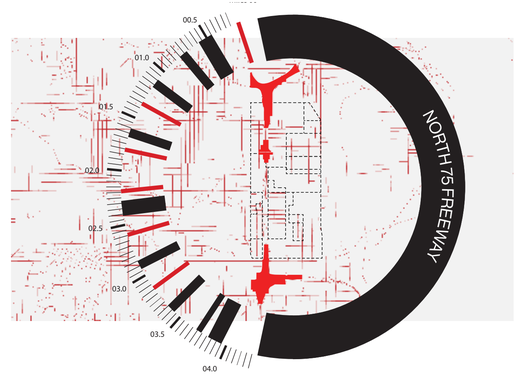
Mid-sized cities like Omaha often struggle to gain national attention for the depth of their infrastructure-related harms. Yet, their scale presents a unique advantage: the potential to implement restorative interventions at a community-wide level. The North Freeway, due to its local symbolism and spatial imprint, offers a tangible opportunity to demonstrate how infrastructure can shift from harm to healing.

TCI Alignment:

TCI positions cities like Omaha to become models of inclusive infrastructure transformation. With technical assistance, grant access, and implementation support, the initiative can help Omaha center community-driven design, participatory governance, and data-informed planning. If leveraged thoughtfully, TCI will not only support local efforts but elevate Omaha in national dialogues about equitable urban development. This includes ensuring that future investments—whether in transportation, housing, or public space—do not perpetuate exclusion, but instead build long-term systems of belonging.

The TCI Opportunity for Omaha

The Thriving Communities Initiative offers a generational opportunity to reverse that paradigm. But success will require more than funding. It demands sustained, community-led engagement, visionary design, and a commitment to accountability. Omaha has a chance to lead—to show that when infrastructure is built not on displacement but on dignity, it can become a foundation for thriving.




Carter Lake
EAST OMAHA
Carter Lake
Sandpiper Cove
Missouri River
Missouri River
Missouri River
Boat Cove
NODO
BENSON
Cultural Preservation and Public Space Displacement -emphasizes creative placemaking and community assets, which could support memorials, cultural spaces, or reuse of right-of-way land.
Affordable Housing and Anti-Displacement Tools- equitable housing development, land banking, and preservation tools to prevent speculative gentrification as the corridor is reimagined.
Community-Led Planning
North Omaha residents, including planners like Manuel Cooke and civic leaders like Kimara Snipes and Clarice Dombeck, are already engaged in visioning.
Small Business and Corridor Revitalization- offer technical support and funding for small business development and local job creation.
Green Infrastructure and Climate Resilience-activate green infrastructure—tree planting, bioswales, and stormwater management that aligns with North Omaha's environmental and climate justice efforts.
Health Equity and Environmental Justice- advance projects that reduce pollution, promote clean transportation, and improve air quality, aligning with public health goals in North Omaha.
Green Infrastructure and Climate Resilience-activate green infrastructure—tree planting, bioswales, and stormwater management that aligns with North Omaha's environmental and climate justice efforts.
Youth and Education Access
Physical-support transportation equity, including improved transit, bike paths, and safe streets—critical for expanding educational access.

ADDRESSING CURRENT CONDITIONS & SHIFTING IMPACT

Transformational impact must move beyond mitigation and into active repair—a shift from technical infrastructure projects to socially and spatially conscious interventions. Long-term stewardship, participatory processes, and holistic systems thinking offers infrastructure redevelopment the opportunity to not only reverse the harm of the freeway's construction but to seed a future where North Omaha thrives.

Each pillar of this proposed framework addresses not only current disparities but also offers considerations to fundamentally shift Social Determinants of Health (SDH) and advance the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), ensuring North Omaha becomes a national model for just, inclusive, and sustainable regeneration.

1. Reparative Monumentality

The North Freeway erased entire blocks of homes, churches, and businesses—many of which held deep cultural, historical, and spiritual value to North Omaha residents. In this context, reparative monumentality is not just about commemoration, but about restoring presence—making visible what was lost and recognizing the people and places that built the neighborhood.

This transformation shifts us from cultural erasure and invisibility to public acknowledgment, civic storytelling, and spatial recognition. It enables social healing through inclusive public spaces that reflect lived experiences and cultural legacies. This sense of historical belonging can be protective for mental health and helps rebuild trust between residents and public institutions.

SDH Impact
Restores social and community context, enhances mental health through recognition, and fosters civic pride.

UNSDG Alignment
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities – by validating the histories of displaced communities.

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities – through inclusive place-making rooted in memory and justice.

2. Perpetual Stewardship

Infrastructure has long operated under extractive models that favor short-term investment and privatized gain. Perpetual stewardship reframes infrastructure as a shared and enduring responsibility—one that prioritizes housing stability, affordability, and resident control over land and development processes.

This pillar shifts us from a paradigm of displacement and speculation to one of community-rooted ownership and generational equity. Land trusts, cooperative housing, and non-displacement protections can ensure that reinvestment in North Omaha does not come at the cost of further gentrification.

SDH Impact
Stabilizes housing and economic conditions, reduces stress-related health disparities, and builds pathways to generational wealth.

UNSDG Alignment
SDG 1: No Poverty – through permanent affordability tools.
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities – by embedding equity into long-term land use and housing development.

3. Participatory Design

Too often, the very people most affected by infrastructure decisions are excluded from shaping them. Participatory design ensures that community members are not passive recipients but active agents in imagining and building their futures. This process redistributes power, builds civic trust, and produces infrastructure that reflects local realities and aspirations.

By prioritizing co-design sessions, inclusive planning charrettes, and youth engagement, this pillar enables meaningful social cohesion and transparency in decision-making. It also affirms dignity and collective ownership in redevelopment.

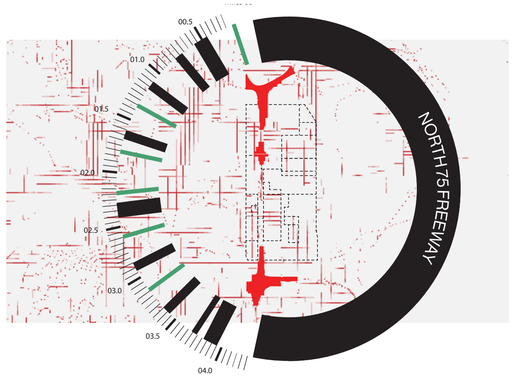
SDH Impact
Increases civic engagement and strengthens communal bonds through trust-building and democratic participation.

UNSDG Alignment
SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions – by supporting democratic planning models.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities – by elevating historically silenced voices in public infrastructure design.

4. Integrated Systems Thinking

The fragmentation of services, planning silos, and narrow metrics often lead to disjointed or inequitable outcomes. Integrated systems thinking moves beyond this by recognizing the interdependence of transportation, housing, education, health, climate, and culture in shaping quality of life.

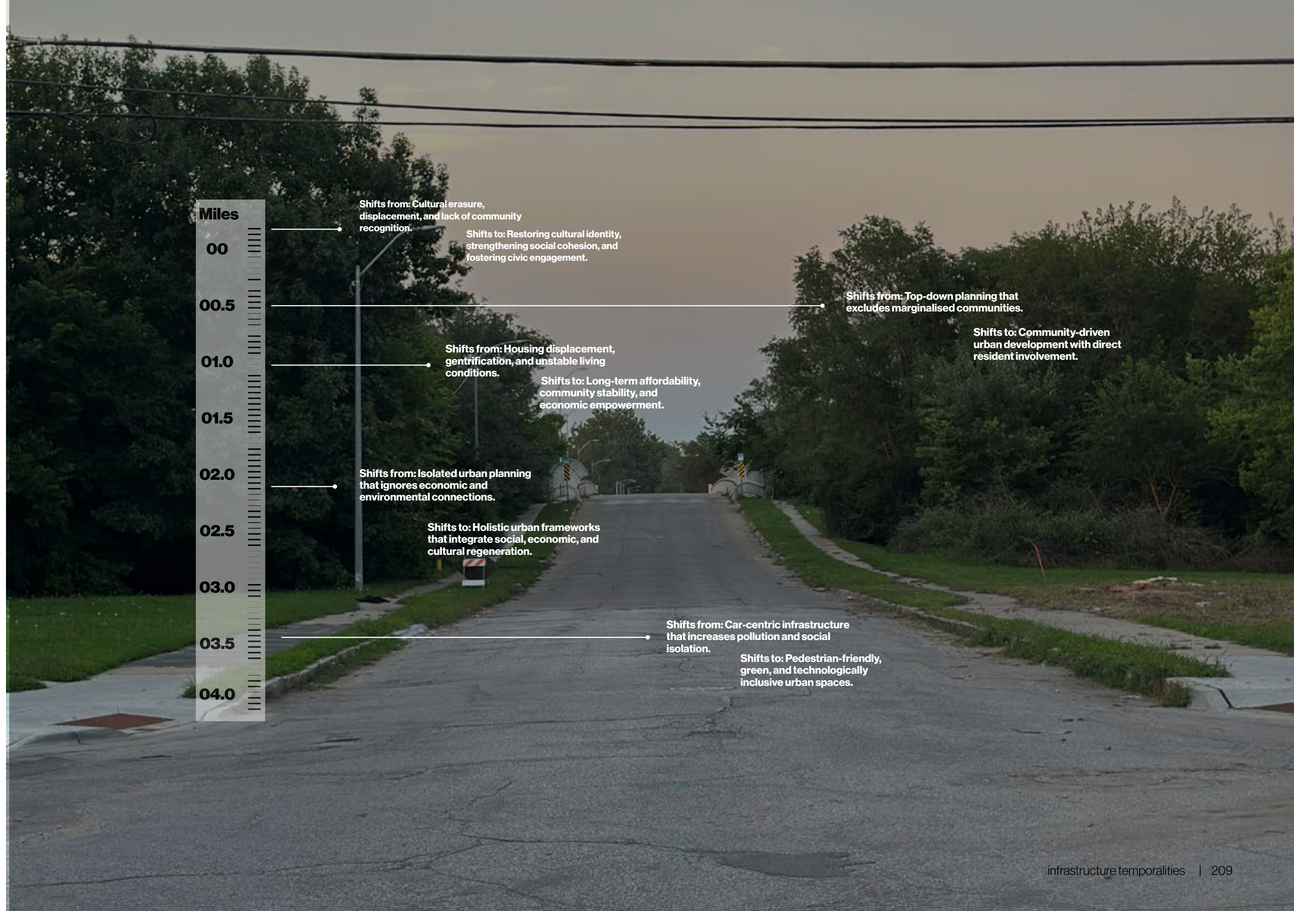


By employing cross-sector collaboration, regional planning, and values-based policy design, this approach reconnects neighborhoods with opportunity—ensuring infrastructure decisions address both visible and invisible barriers to well-being.

SDH Impact: Enhances access to opportunity and resources while reducing environmental and health burdens in historically impacted areas.

UNSDG Alignment
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth – by linking infrastructure to workforce and entrepreneurship pipelines.

SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure – through forward-looking and resilient systems.



5. Equity-Driven Innovation

Rebuilding infrastructure cannot rely on outdated car-centric templates. This pillar promotes green, human-centered design—expanding multimodal mobility, reducing pollution, and reclaiming public space for people, not just cars.

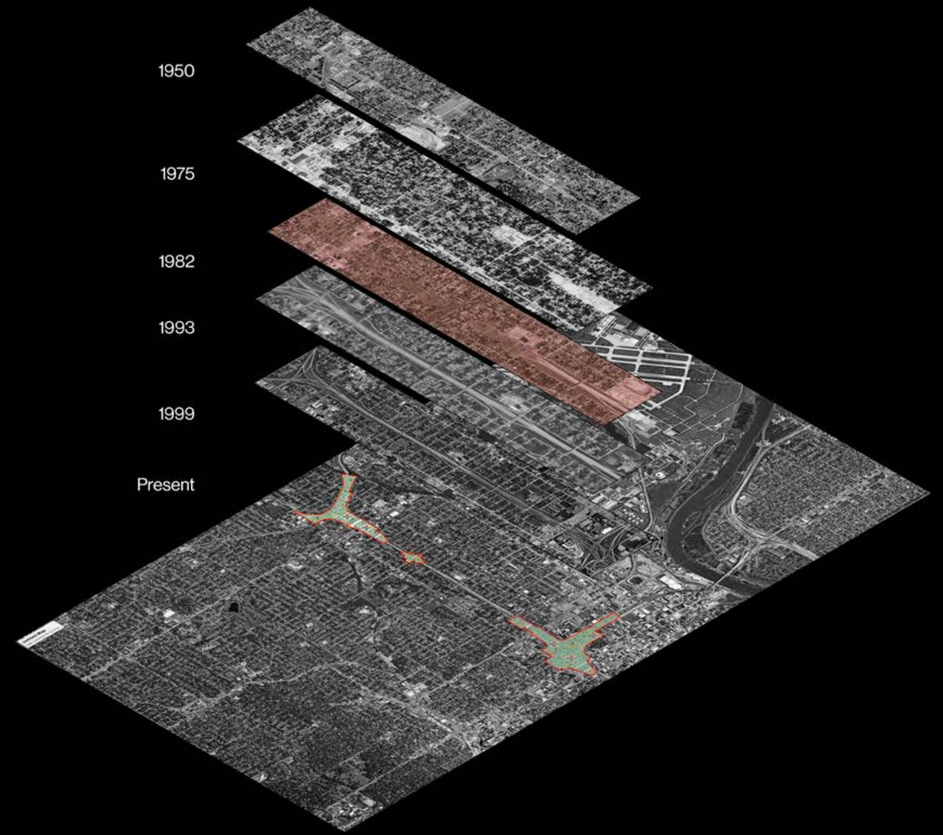
Through smart infrastructure, sustainable energy integration, and digital equity, this approach modernizes urban space to be more inclusive, accessible, and resilient—while ensuring innovation is guided by justice, not just efficiency.

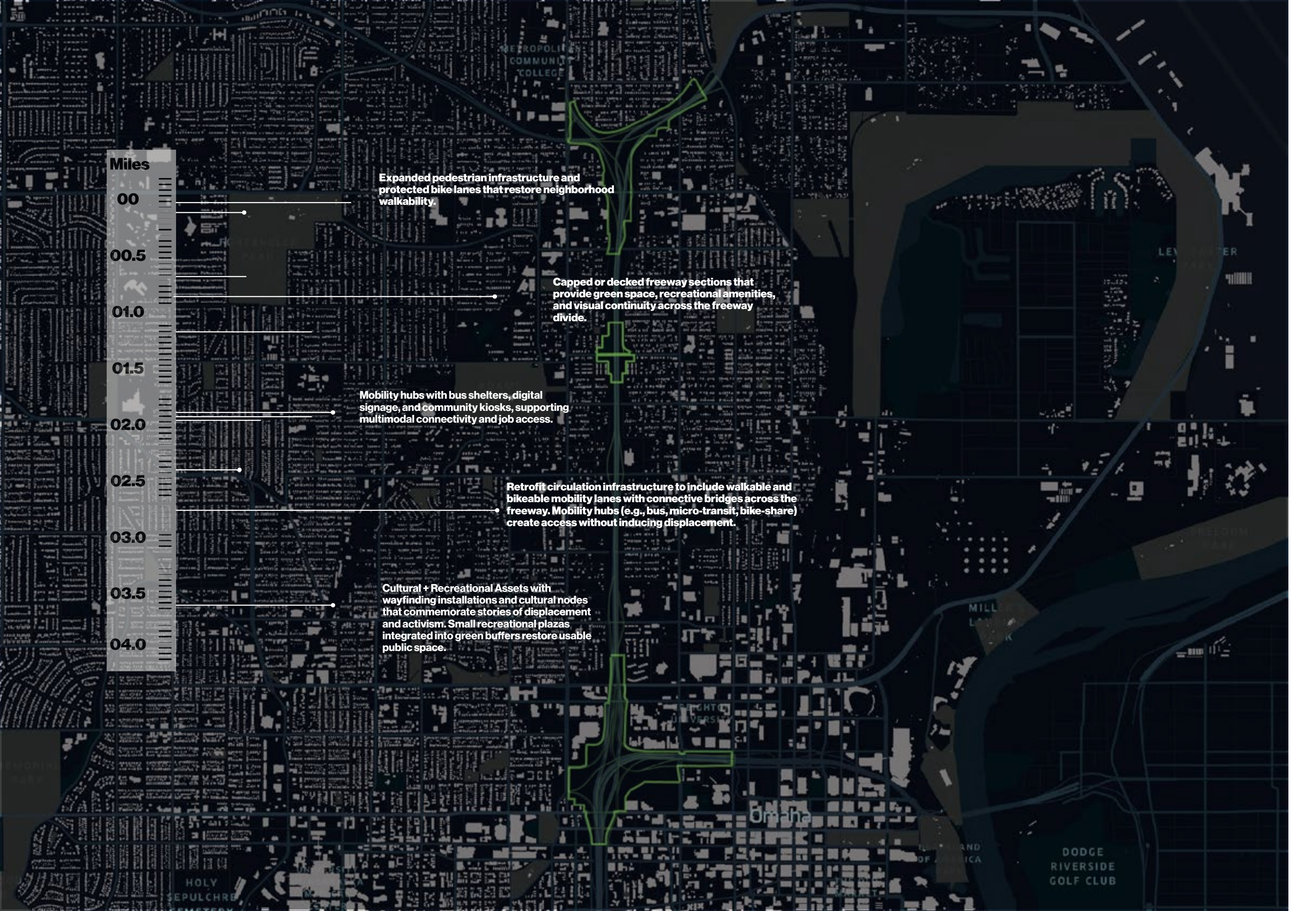
SDH Impact
Improves physical and mental health, promotes active living, and ensures environmental benefits are shared equitably.

UNSDG Alignment
SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being – by reducing exposure to pollution and stress.

SDG 13: Climate Action – through climate-aligned infrastructure and reduced emissions

There a many considerations to represent pathways forward—all rooted in care, restoration, and collective responsibility. Through this framework, the story of the North Freeway can be transformed—from a symbol of exclusion to a catalyst for regeneration. With intention, investment, and integrity, Omaha can model how cities across the nation reckon with their histories and build futures that center people—not just pavement.





ALIGNING OPPORTUNITIES AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD SCALE

This section aligns opportunities and considerations highlighted throughout this process at the neighborhood scale. A spatial design and planning framework is proposed, rooted in a modular, multidimensional grid system. This layered cell-based model reimagines how neighborhoods could be re-stitched through a combination of ecological, infrastructural, and social assets. By layering typologies such as public space, mobility hubs, recreational assets, cultural institutions, and more, the grid cell framework creates a robust planning language capable of restoring both form and function to neighborhoods historically fragmented by disinvestment and urban renewal.

Each grid cell represents a unit of potential—programmable and adaptable to local needs while remaining structurally coherent across a larger urban scale. When applied across North Omaha and three targeted intervention zones—such as North 30th & Bristol, Storz Expressway & Ames, and Creighton/Cuming—these cells serve as precedent-setting templates for regenerative design.

Neighborhood Scale

This section explores three key intervention sites along the North 75 corridor—two major onramps and the Bristol Street block—where the potential for restorative infrastructure is not abstract. These are real places where disconnection and displacement have shaped generations, and where reconnection and reinvestment now carry the promise of a different future.

Each site represents an opportunity to translate research and rhetoric into spatial repair, guided by the voices and visions of North Omaha residents. These sites restitch a broader neighborhood fabric, long torn by policy decisions made without consent. Together, they offer a blueprint for how infrastructure can be used to restore trust, reignite public life, and rebalance power.

North Junction

The area surrounding the northbound onramp junction between Ames Avenue and the Storz Expressway in Omaha, Nebraska, has undergone significant transformations over the past several decades. Historically, this region was part of North Omaha, a vibrant community with a rich cultural and social fabric. The construction and expansion of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75) have profoundly impacted this area, leading to substantial changes in its demographic composition, urban landscape, and community dynamics.

Historical Overview

Prior to the freeway's construction, the neighborhoods in this vicinity were characterized by a mix of residential homes, local businesses, churches, and schools. Notably, the Holy Angels Catholic Parish, including its church and school located at North 27th and Fowler Avenue, was a central institution in the community. This parish served as a spiritual and social hub for residents, fostering a sense of belonging and community cohesion.

Community Composition

The area was predominantly inhabited by African American families, along with other ethnic groups, contributing to a diverse and culturally rich neighborhood. Residents engaged in various occupations, supported local businesses, and participated actively in community organizations. The neighborhood was known for its strong social networks and a collective commitment to community development.

Impact of the North Freeway Construction

The introduction of the North Freeway brought about drastic changes to this community. The construction process led to the demolition of over 2,000 structures, including homes, businesses, churches, and schools. The Holy Angels Catholic Parish and its associated buildings were among the significant losses, as they were demolished to make way for the interchange between the North Freeway, Sorensen Parkway, and Storz Expressway.

This large-scale displacement disrupted the social fabric of the neighborhood. Families were forced to relocate, severing long-standing community ties and support systems. The loss of local businesses and institutions further eroded the neighborhoods economic and social stability. Additionally, the physical presence of the freeway created barriers that segmented the community, limiting mobility and access within the area.

Long-Term Consequences

The aftermath of the freeway's construction had enduring effects on the community. The displacement contributed to a decline in property values and deterred investment in the area, leading to economic stagnation. The disruption of social networks and the loss of communal spaces resulted in weakened community cohesion. Furthermore, the neighborhood experienced increased crime rates and other socio-economic challenges in the years following the freeway's completion.

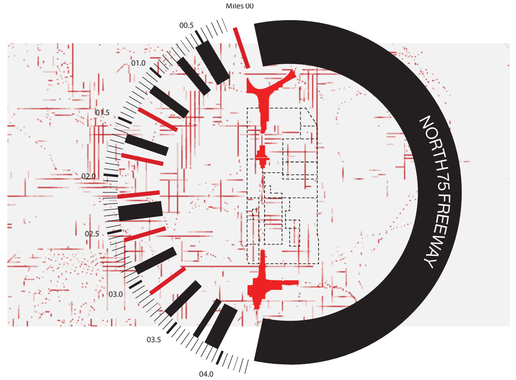
Contemporary Reflections

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the adverse impacts that such infrastructural projects have had on communities like North Omaha. Discussions around restorative justice and equitable urban planning have emerged, emphasizing the need to address past harms and invest in the revitalization of affected neighborhoods. Proposals have been made to reimagine the North Freeway, with suggestions to replace it with human-scale boulevards that prioritize community connectivity and development.

The construction of the North Freeway at the junction between Ames Avenue and the Storz Expressway serves as a poignant example of how large-scale infrastructural developments can profoundly alter the trajectory of established communities. The experiences of the residents in this area underscore the importance of inclusive and community-centered planning processes that honor and preserve the social and cultural fabric of neighborhoods

Bristol Street

The northeastern corner of North 28th and Bristol Streets in Omaha, Nebraska, embodies a microcosm of the broader historical transformations that have shaped North Omaha over the past century. This area, once a vibrant residential neighborhood, has experienced significant changes due to infrastructural developments, notably the construction of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75).



Historical Overview

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the vicinity of 28th and Bristol Streets was part of a burgeoning suburban development aimed at middle-class residents. Neighborhoods like Bedford Place, established during this period, featured a mix of residential homes, local businesses, and community institutions. The area was characterized by tree-lined streets and a strong sense of community among its residents.

Community Composition

Initially, these neighborhoods were predominantly inhabited by white middle-class families. However, as the 20th century progressed, demographic shifts occurred, leading to a more diverse population. African American families began moving into the area, contributing to the rich cultural tapestry of North Omaha. This transition was part of a larger pattern of migration and settlement influenced by various socio-economic factors.

Impact of the North Freeway Construction

The introduction of the North Freeway in the mid-20th century had profound effects on the neighborhood surrounding 28th and Bristol Streets. The freeway's construction led to the demolition of numerous homes and businesses, effectively bisecting the community. This physical division disrupted established social networks and altered the neighborhood's cohesion. The freeway served as a barrier, limiting mobility and access between the separated sections of the community.

Long-Term Consequences

The long-term consequences of the freeway's construction were multifaceted. Property values in the immediate vicinity declined due to the proximity to the freeway and the associated noise and pollution. The neighborhood experienced economic downturns, with local businesses suffering from reduced patronage as foot traffic diminished. Socially, the community faced challenges in maintaining the close-knit relationships that had characterized it prior to the freeway's construction.

Contemporary Reflections

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to address the historical injustices associated with such infrastructural projects. Community advocates and urban planners have proposed initiatives to reconnect and revitalize neighborhoods affected by the freeway's construction. Ideas include transforming sections of the freeway into boulevards that prioritize pedestrian access and community spaces, aiming to restore the neighborhood's integrity and promote equitable development.

The area at the northeast corner of 28th and Bristol Streets serves as a poignant example of how large-scale infrastructural decisions can have lasting impacts on local communities. The history of this neighborhood underscores the importance of inclusive and community-centered urban planning that considers the social and cultural fabric of the areas involved.

South Junction

The southern junction onramp near Creighton University and North 30th Street in Omaha, Nebraska, has experienced significant transformations over the past several decades. Historically, this area was part of a vibrant community that included residential neighborhoods, local businesses, and institutions closely tied to Creighton University. The construction of the North Freeway (U.S. Highway 75) and Interstate 480 (I-480) has profoundly impacted this area, leading to substantial changes in its urban landscape and community dynamics.

Historical Overview

Prior to the construction of the freeways, the vicinity of North 30th Street was characterized by a mix of residential homes, local businesses, and community institutions. The area was known for its strong community ties and active engagement in local affairs. Creighton University, established in the late 19th century, served as a significant educational and cultural anchor in the neighborhood.

Community Composition

The neighborhoods surrounding North 30th Street were diverse, with a mix of ethnic and socio-economic groups contributing to a rich cultural fabric. Residents were employed in various occupations, supported local enterprises, and participated actively in community organizations. The proximity to Creighton University also meant that students and faculty were integral parts of the local community, fostering a symbiotic relationship between the institution and the neighborhood.

Impact of Freeway Construction

The introduction of the North Freeway and I-480 brought about significant alterations to the area. The construction process necessitated the demolition of numerous structures, including homes and businesses, leading to the displacement of residents and disruption of established social networks. The physical presence of the freeways created barriers that segmented the community, limiting mobility and access within the area.

Specifically, the construction of I-480 as a north-south belt route around downtown Omaha crossed the northern half of the area, roughly paralleling Cass Street. This development led to the removal of existing structures and altered the neighborhood's connectivity. Additionally, the construction of the North Freeway further divided the community, with significant portions of the neighborhood being demolished to make way for the new infrastructure.

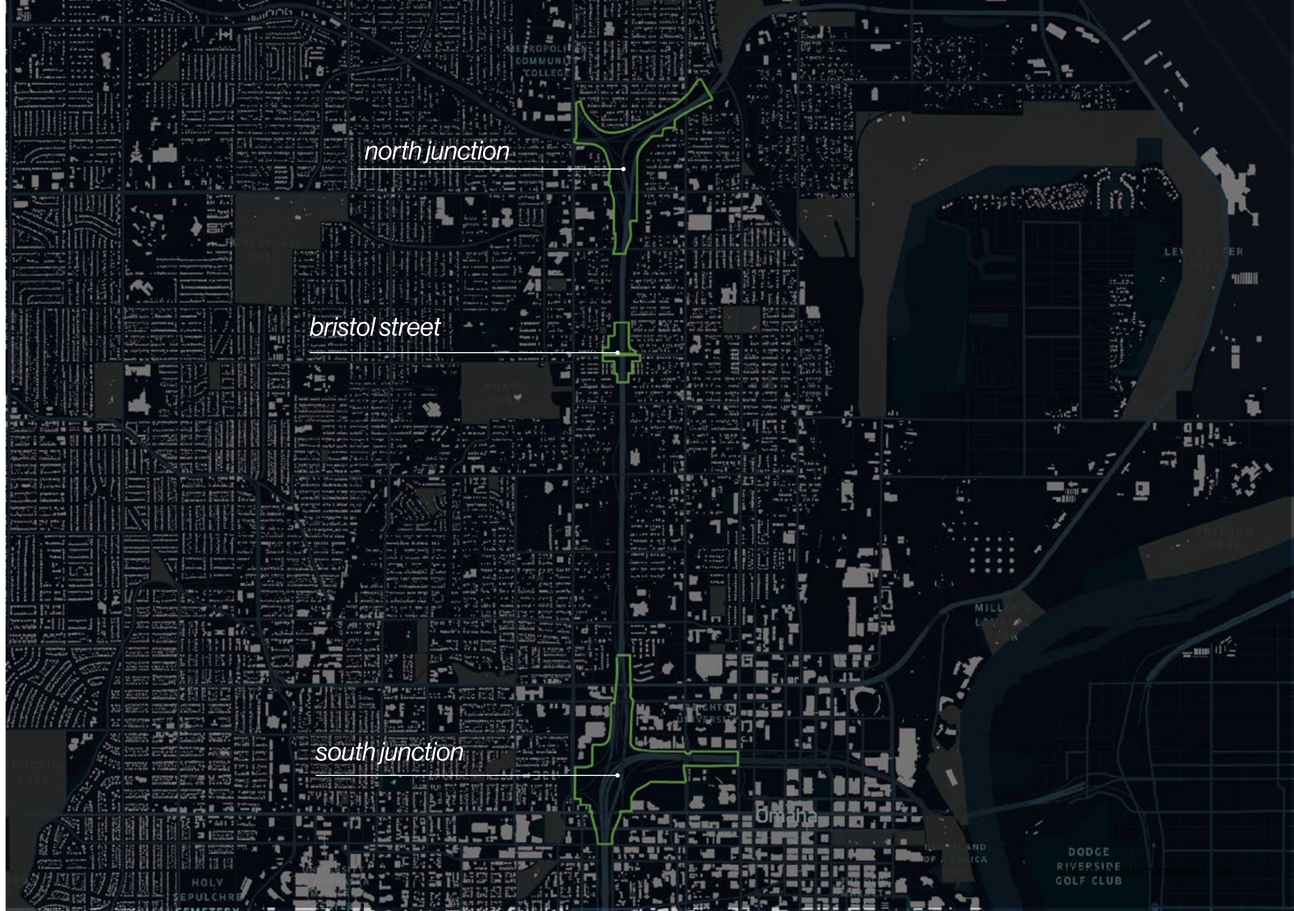
Long-Term Consequences

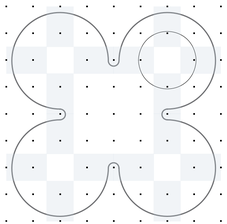
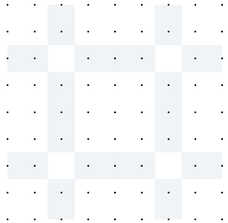
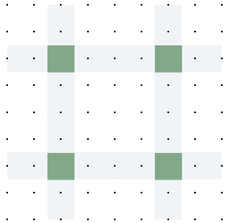
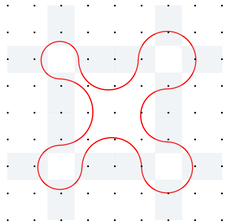
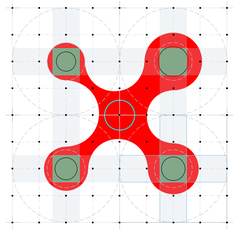
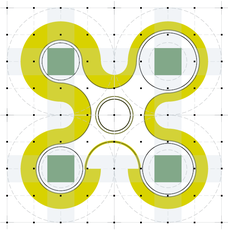
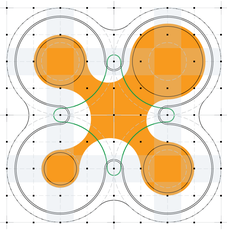
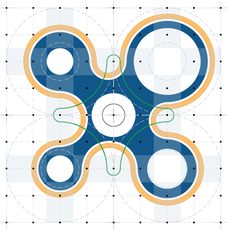
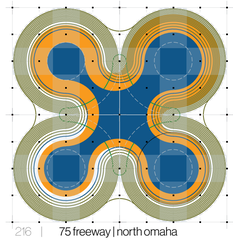
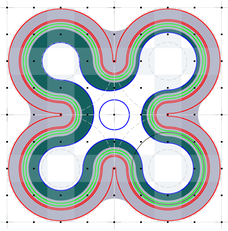
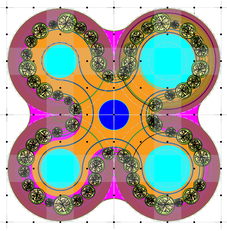
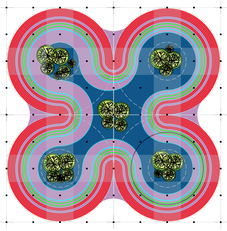
The aftermath of the freeway constructions had enduring effects on the community. The displacement contributed to a decline in property values and deterred investment in the area, leading to economic stagnation. The disruption of social networks and the loss of communal spaces resulted in weakened community cohesion. Furthermore, the neighborhood experienced increased crime rates and other socio-economic challenges in the years following the freeways' completion.

Contemporary Reflections

In recent years, efforts have been made to address the historical impacts of these infrastructural projects. For instance, the construction of a pedestrian bridge in 2019 re-established a connection between the historic Gifford Park neighborhood and Creighton University, symbolizing a step toward reconnecting the divided community. Additionally, redevelopment projects, such as the transformation of the former Creighton University Medical Center into a mixed-use development, aim to restore a sense of community and address the isolation caused by the freeway constructions

The area surrounding the southern junction onramp near Creighton University and North 30th Street serves as a poignant example of how large-scale infrastructural developments can profoundly alter the trajectory of established communities. The experiences of the residents in this area underscore the importance of inclusive and community-centered planning processes that honor and preserve the social and cultural fabric of neighborhoods.



CONNECTING IMPACT

The diagrammatic grid system offers a theoretical and participatory framework capable of translating collective needs into tangible spatial and civic infrastructure. Each cell in the grid represents more than a single land use or zone; it is a layered typology that interweaves multiple functions—circulatory pathways, green infrastructure, cultural landmarks, educational and recreational programming, and mixed-use residential and commercial life. In this way, the framework breaks from conventional zoning paradigms and instead imagines each cell as a micro-ecosystem, adaptable to evolving conditions while reinforcing a broader structural coherence. The modularity of the system does not mean uniformity; rather, it provides a replicable grammar for spatial transformation—enabling participatory customization while maintaining integrity at the district and corridor scale.

When applied to the North 75 corridor, especially in the focused neighborhood sites, this framework provides a restorative toolkit for re-stitching fractured neighborhoods. Each of these sites reflects distinct conditions—ranging from eroded civic spaces and fragmented street grids to economic dislocation and speculative pressure. The cell framework responds to these challenges not with singular solutions but through composite interventions—placing land, mobility, housing, culture, and sustainability in direct conversation with one another.

The layered model allows multiple systems to be superimposed within each cell, providing a coherent yet adaptable matrix for urban regeneration. For instance, a single cell may function simultaneously as a mobility hub, a green infrastructure zone, and a site of cultural memory—linking reparative monumentality with practical concerns like air quality and pedestrian access. In this way, each intervention is not isolated, but synergistic—supporting the spatial and social DNA of the neighborhood as a whole.

What makes the grid cell framework transformative is its commitment to both memory and innovation. Its logic is scalable: cells can function at the scale of a street corner or expand into block-wide or district-wide configurations, always rooted in community-informed priorities and regenerative goals.

In the case of the North 75 Freeway, these cells become more than design units; they become the grammar of a reparative process—a place where built form is accountable to historical harm and reoriented toward equity, sustainability, and belonging. By embedding ecological, infrastructural, and cultural regeneration into a single cohesive framework, the grid cell model allows us to imagine an Omaha where every block participates in the reconstruction of shared value, spatial dignity, and just development.

1. Land Cell
Base layer for implementing land use priorities, with flexibility for community-led development

Significance: Repositions land as a shared resource through community stewardship or trust models.

2. Circulatory Pathway Cell
Establishes a coherent, walkable and bikeable grid to ensure permeability across formerly disconnected neighborhoods.

Significance: Repairs severed street networks caused by the freeway, reconnecting residential enclaves and fostering mobility justice.

3. Public Space Cell
Introduces a rhythm of open, shared spaces for gathering, rest, play, and organizing.

Significance: Counters privatization of space; fosters civic trust and inclusive access to amenities.

4. Mobility Hubs Cell
Points of convergence for multi-modal transit—buses, bikes, scooters, walking paths—coordinated with urban corridors.

Significance: Replaces the car-dominant legacy of the freeway with an equitable transportation ecosystem.

5. Recreational Assets Cell
Offers athletic fields, parks, and fitness zones.

Significance: Promotes physical health, especially in historically underserved neighborhoods with poor SDH outcomes.

6. Cultural Assets Cell
Spaces for community memory—performance venues, galleries, or historic markers.

Significance: Activates Reparative Monumentality by acknowledging cultural erasure and rebuilding narrative presence.

7. Residential Assets Cell
Restorative housing clusters, including limited-equity co-ops, affordable rental, and transitional housing

Significance: Anchors Perpetual Stewardship strategies for affordability and place-based stability.

8. Commercial Assets Cell
Flexible storefronts and market areas to support local enterprise and reinvestment

Significance: Counters economic isolation with job creation and neighborhood wealth circulation.

9. Educational Assets Cell
Spaces for learning, literacy, and workforce development—schools, libraries, tech labs.

Significance: Targets long-term SDH transformation and intergenerational opportunity.

10. Mixed Use Cell
Vertical layering of programs—housing above retail, learning centers near recreation.

Significance: Builds density without displacement; ensures efficiency and economic vibrancy.

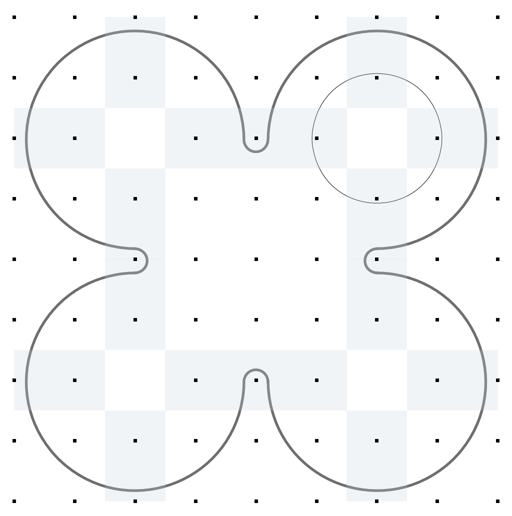
11. Agriculture Cell
Urban farms, gardens, aquaponics, and food forests

Significance: Advances food justice, environmental sustainability, and community self-sufficiency.

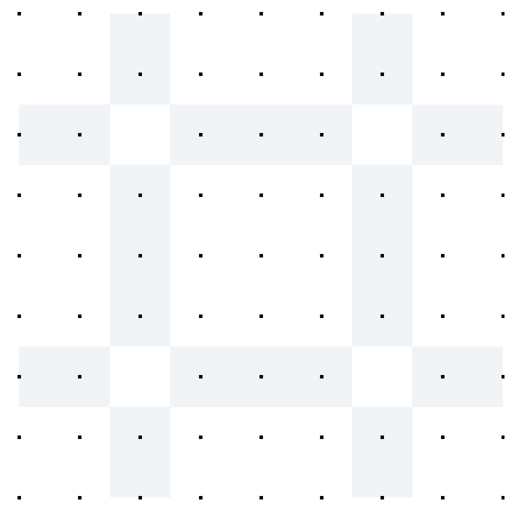
12. Green Spaces Function
Tree canopy, pollinator corridors, bioswales, and passive stormwater retention areas

Significance: Improves air quality and climate resilience while beautifying scarred landscapes

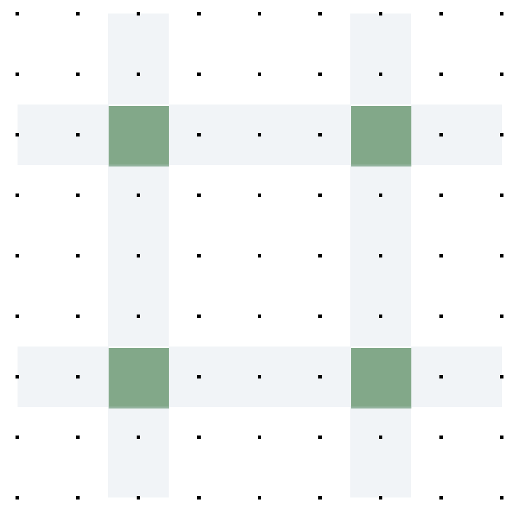
cellular grid



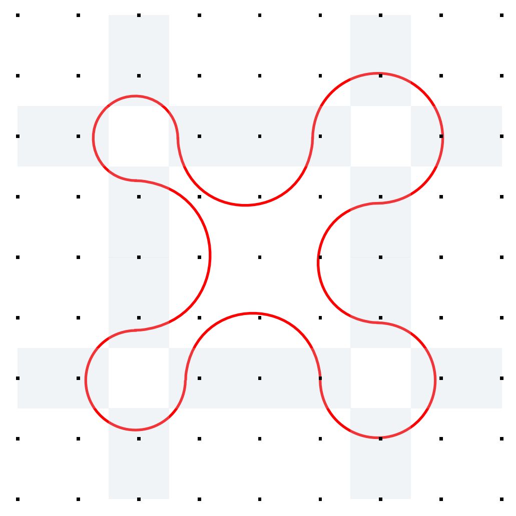
land



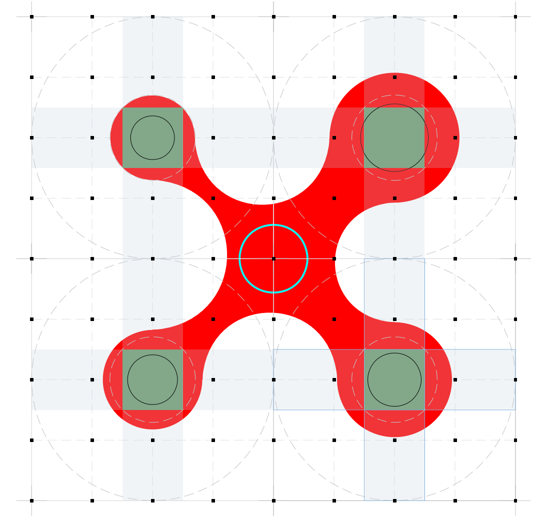
circulatory pathway (formal & informal)



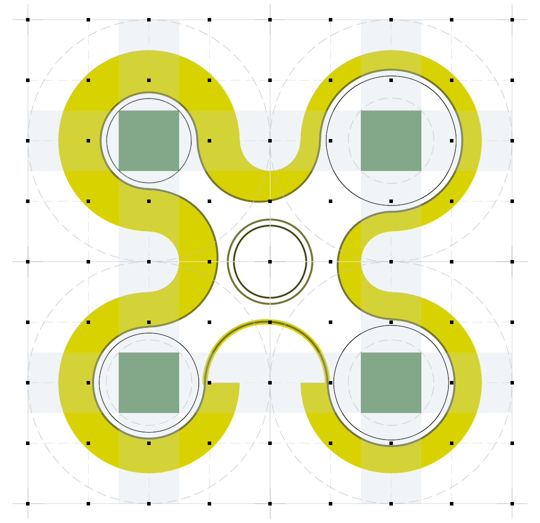
public space



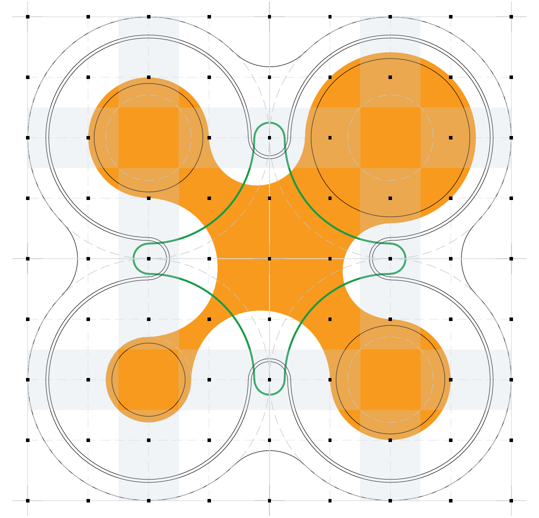
mobility hubs



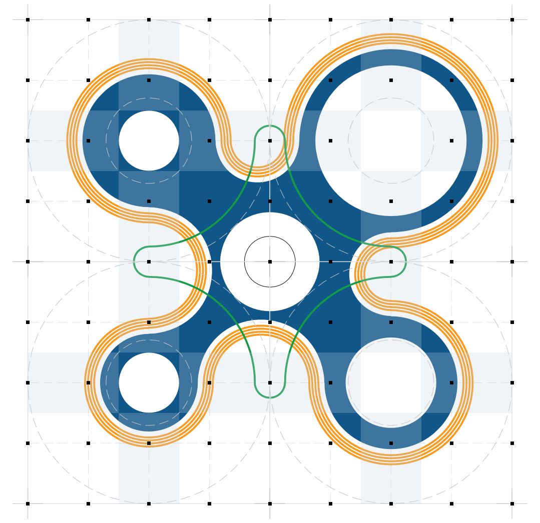
residential assets



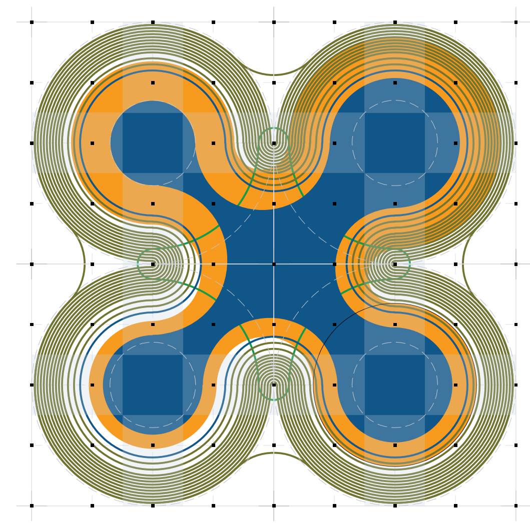
commercial assets



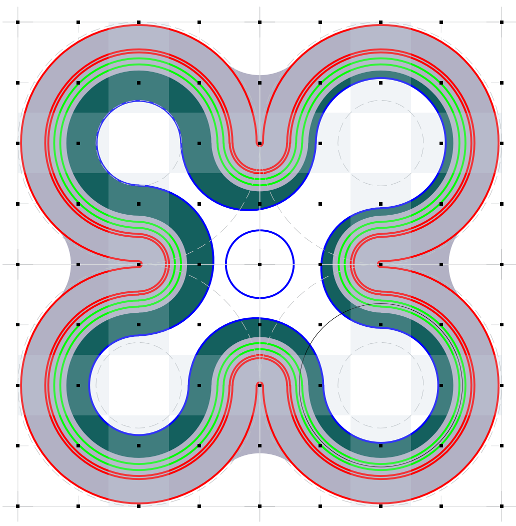
educational assets



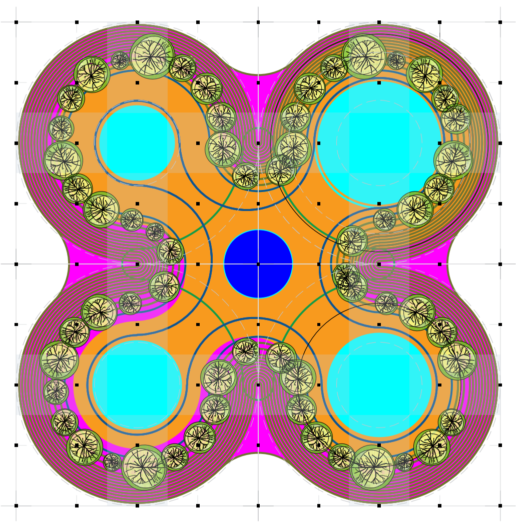
recreational assets



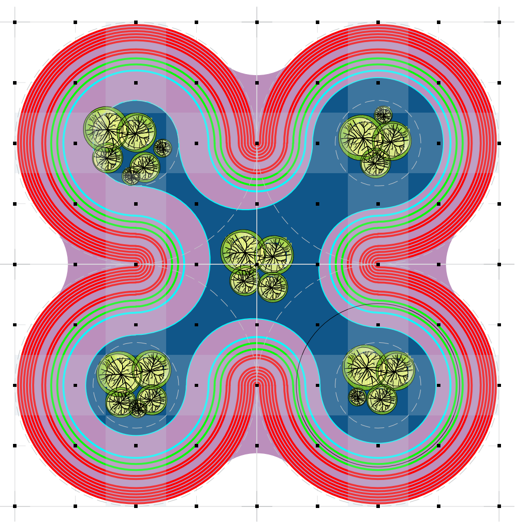
cultural assets



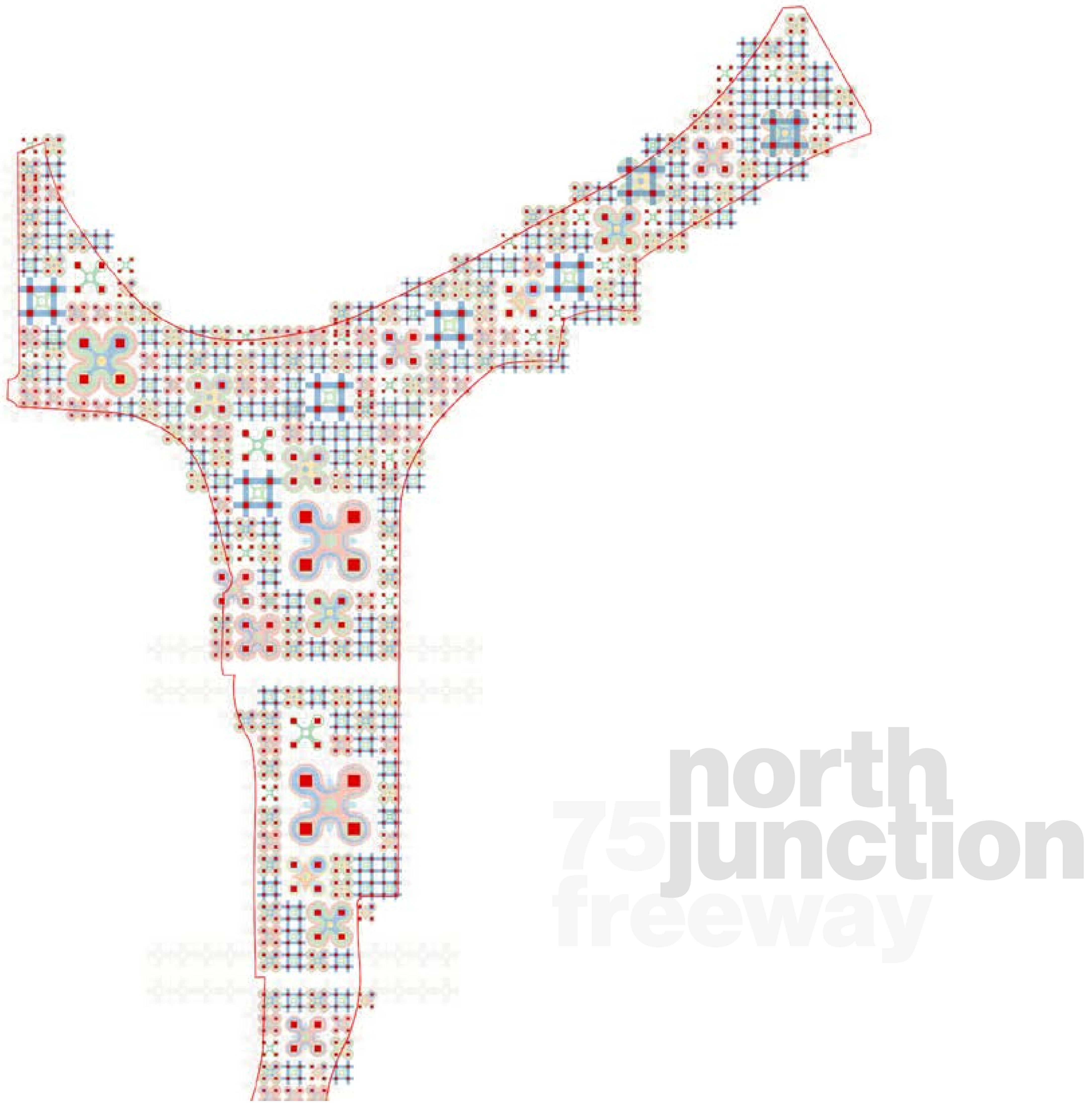
mix use



agriculture



green spaces

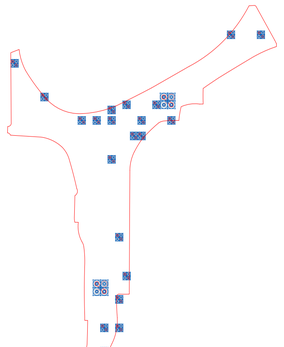


Applying the Cell Grid

Land Cell

The land module outlines parcels available for neighborhood development, land trusts, conservation, or adaptive reuse. This cell supports evaluations of zoning, ownership, and environmental suitability.

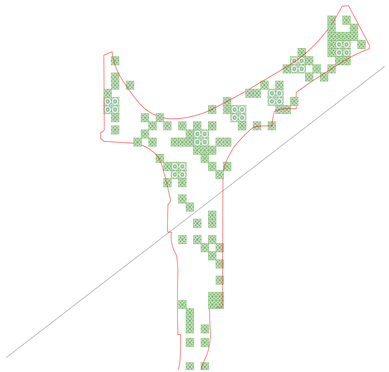
Design Considerations:
- Identifies opportunity zones for new development
- Flags environmentally sensitive or legally restricted parcels
- Informs potential shifts in zoning classifications
- Identifies Reparative Land Practices For Community Ownership



Circulatory Pathway (formal & informal)

This component establishes a basic movement framework by identifying and organizing pathways for pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular flow. It serves as the initial armature for the grid, ensuring logical and accessible circulation patterns across the site.

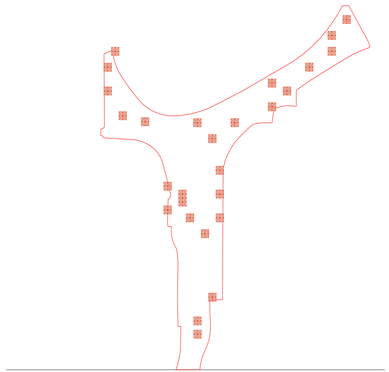
Design Considerations:
- Aligns with existing road or trail networks
- Ensures logical intersection points
- Accommodates multimodal transport needs Land Cell



Public Space

This layer identifies open, non-commercial land designated for general community use. These spaces may accommodate events, informal gatherings, or passive recreation, serving as flexible-use nodes within the larger network.

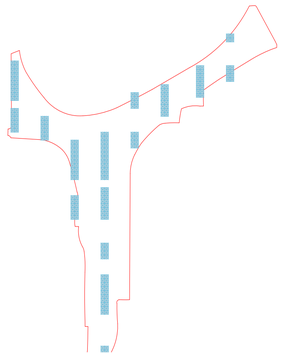
Design Considerations:
- Spatially distributed to promote equitable access
- Connected to transit, walkways, and adjacent land uses
- Capable of accommodating modular functions (e.g., pop-up markets, outdoor seating)



Mobility Hubs

Mobility hubs are designated nodes where various modes of transportation intersect. This includes public transit access points, bike share stations, parking zones, and pedestrian drop-off/pick-up areas

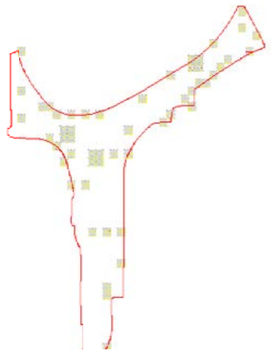
Design Considerations:
- Strategically placed for optimal connectivity
- Designed for intermodal transitions
- Includes supporting infrastructure (e.g., signage, seating, lighting)



Residential Assets

This module addresses the location, density, and typology of housing. It prioritizes integration with existing residential fabrics and supports diversified housing strategies, including affordable and transitional units

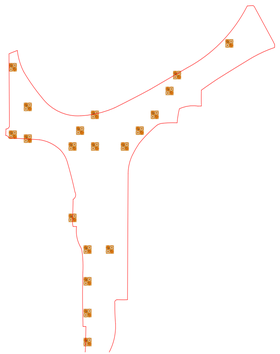
Design Considerations:
- Distributed across a range of parcel sizes
- Proximity to amenities and transit prioritized
- Designed to support long-term occupancy and flexibility of use
- Community and Individual Wealth Building Opportunities



Commercial Assets

Commercial cells house retail, service, and office functions. These nodes facilitate local economic activity and are configured to balance accessibility with visibility.

Design Considerations:
Clustered near mobility hubs or main arterials
Allows for small- and medium-scale businesses
Built to accommodate adaptable interior uses

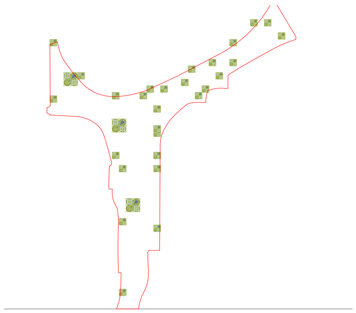


Applying the Cell Grid

Educational Assets

Educational assets comprise facilities for formal and informal learning, including schools, libraries, training centers, or satellite classroom space

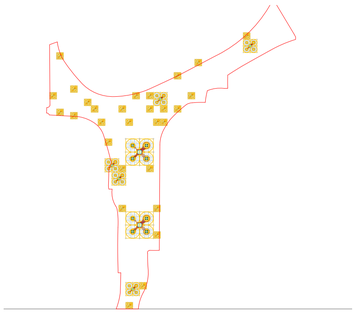
Design Considerations:
- Positioned within accessible radius to residential cells
- Includes spatial flexibility for evolving educational models
- Supports safe pedestrian access and service circulation



Recreational Assets

This layer defines locations intended for sports, fitness, and active recreational use. These sites contribute to community health and well-being and are often programmed for youth and multigenerational users

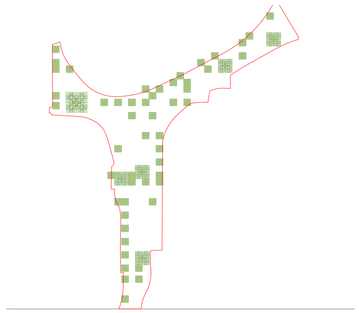
Design Considerations:
- Integrates with pathway systems for safe access
- Co-locates with public facilities when feasible
- Supports durable, low-maintenance surfaces and equipment



Cultural Assets

Cultural assets refer to buildings or spaces that support heritage, arts, and civic expression. These cells may house galleries, cultural institutions, or local heritage markers.

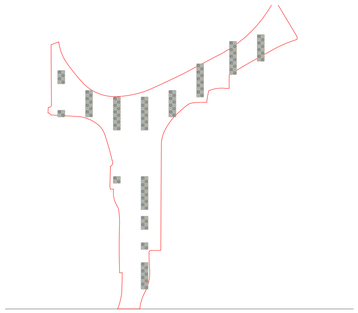
Design Considerations:
- Contextually sited based on community history
- Structured to allow programming flexibility
- Contributes to identity and place-recognition strategies



Mixed Use

This category enables vertical or horizontal integration of multiple functions, typically housing, retail, and community services. Mixed-use zones provide efficiency and flexibility in constrained sites.

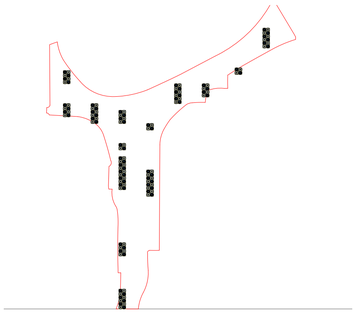
Design Considerations:
- Balances intensity of use with neighborhood character
- Supports modular development phases
- Prioritizes adaptive reuse and reduced vacancy risk



Agriculture

This cell supports productive land uses such as community gardens, urban farms, or food production systems. These spaces contribute to local food resilience and education.

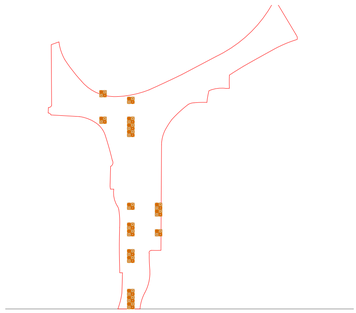
Design Considerations:
- Requires adequate solar exposure and drainage
- Can be temporary or permanent installations
- Opportunities for school or nonprofit partnerships



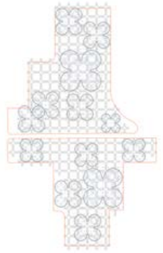
Green Spaces

Green space modules provide ecological services, including stormwater management, habitat support, and heat mitigation. These spaces can also offer passive recreation and visual relief.

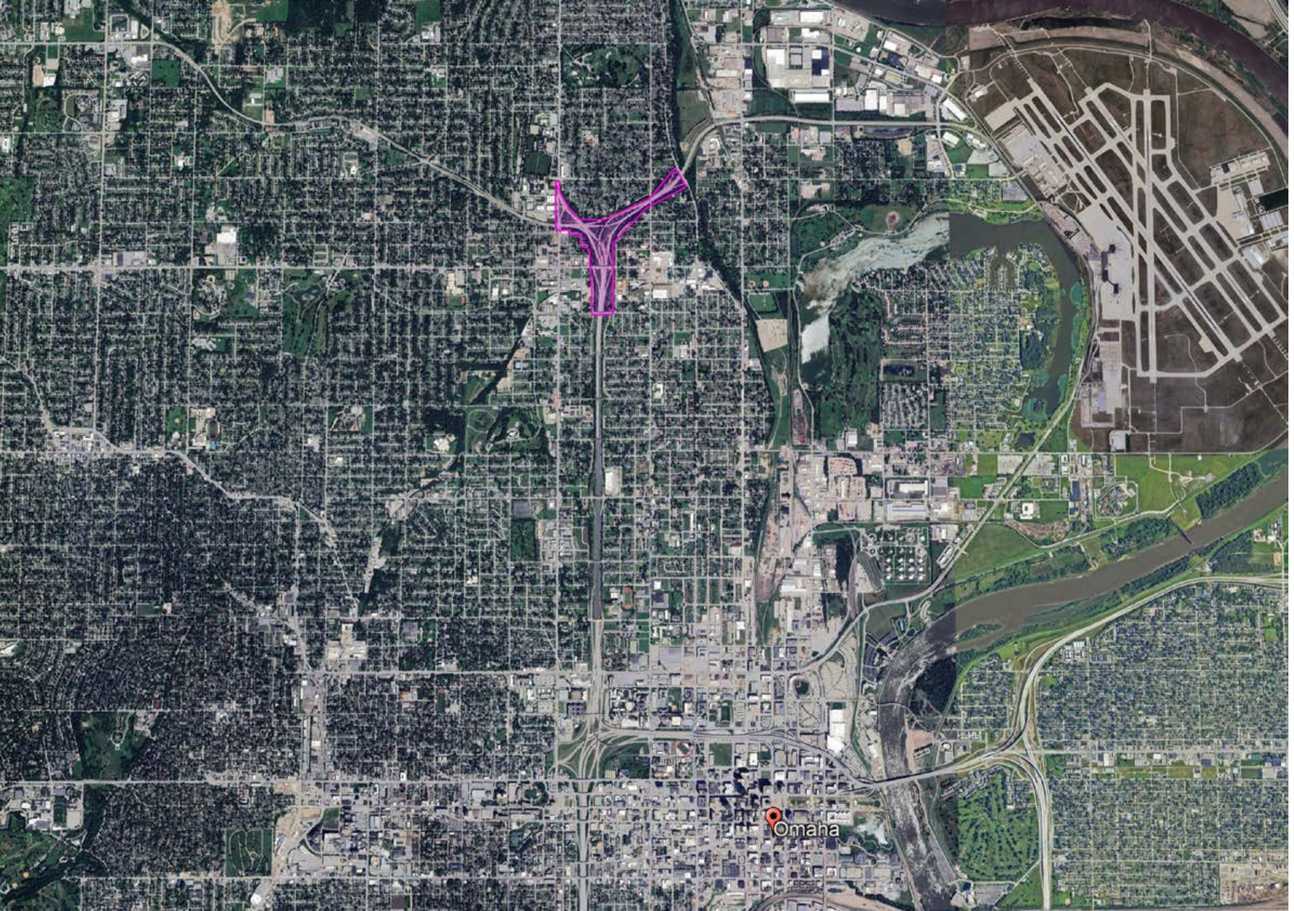
Design Considerations:
- Designed with native vegetation for resilience
- Integrates bioswales, permeable surfaces, or retention areas
- Positioned to create buffers or connect fragmented open space systems



BRISTOL STREET



SOUTH JUNCTION



north 75 junction freeway

NORTH JUNCTION

The northern interchange where US-75 connects with Sorensen Parkway and Storz Expressway represents an important transportation node in Omaha's mobility system. It facilitates vehicular access between downtown, Eppley Airfield, and surrounding neighborhoods. However, beyond its functionality as a transportation corridor, this interchange has had a long-standing impact on the surrounding community—particularly neighborhoods in North Omaha. This analysis explores how the interchange's design and development have intersected with patterns of land use, economic opportunity, and neighborhood connectivity.

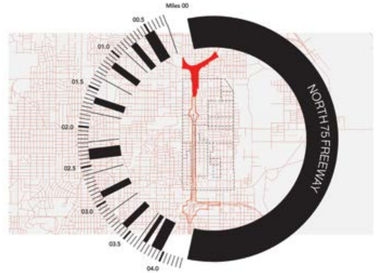
The interchange's layout and surrounding land use have not been conducive to commercial growth. While traffic volume is high, there is minimal economic activity at street level. Businesses in the area face challenges related to visibility, walkability, and limited clustering of complementary services. Compared to other economic nodes in Omaha, this interchange does not currently function as a commercial anchor.

The design of the interchange primarily supports car travel. Residents who rely on public transit or other forms of mobility, including walking or biking, experience limited access through this corridor. Bus routes are available, but connections are not always direct, and transit frequency can be a barrier. These conditions affect access to jobs, healthcare, and education for residents in nearby neighborhoods.

The highway and its related infrastructure form a noticeable barrier between neighborhoods. With few pedestrian or cycling connections across the interchange, daily mobility is shaped by the need to use cars, which can be a limiting factor for residents without reliable transportation. This limits informal interactions between neighborhoods and contributes to spatial separation.

Large swaths of land adjacent to the ramps and overpasses remain undeveloped or are used for limited public functions. These spaces, while technically accessible, often lack amenities or public infrastructure that support community use. Opportunities for activating these areas—for example, through parks, transit hubs, or mixed-use development—have yet to be fully explored.

Moving forward, the northern interchange could become a site for integrated planning that incorporates transportation goals alongside housing, economic development, and environmental resilience. With strategic investment and engagement, this location can evolve from a transportation junction into a more inclusive neighborhood connector.



STREET SCENES

NORTH JUNCTION

















HOW DOES THE ORIGINAL INTENT AND VISION BEHIND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NORTH 75 FREEWAY COMPARE TO ITS LONG-TERM SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND SPATIAL IMPACTS?

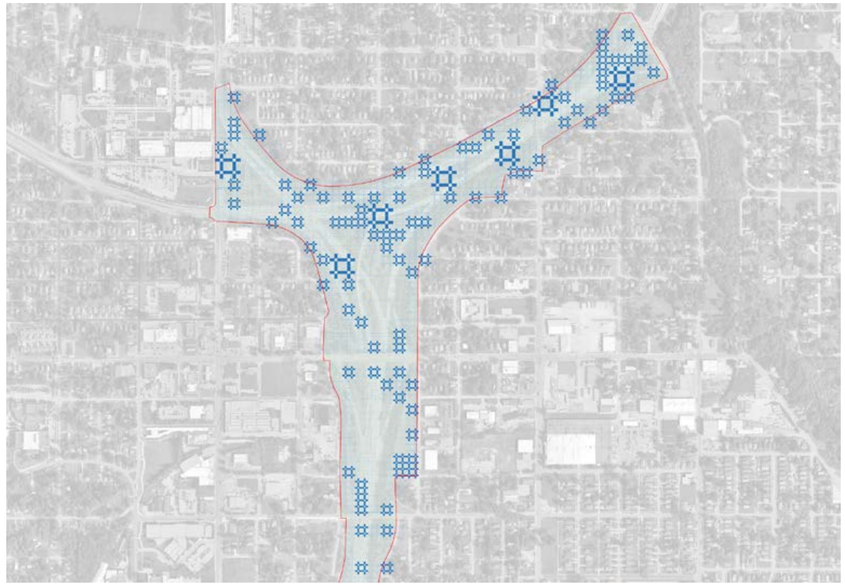
WHAT FUTURE IS IMAGINED BY CURRENT REDEVELOPMENT EFFORTS, AND HOW DOES THAT FUTURE ACCOUNT FOR (OR OVERLOOK) THE TEMPORAL LAYERS OF PAST HARM AND RESILIENCE?

Captions

HOW MIGHT A REIMAGINED OR REPURPOSED NORTH FREEWAY TRANSFORM DOMINANT NARRATIVES OF PROGRESS AND DEVELOPMENT IN OMAHA?

Captions

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO UNDO OR RECONFIGURE INFRASTRUCTURE THAT WAS ONCE SEEN AS PERMANENT?



Captions

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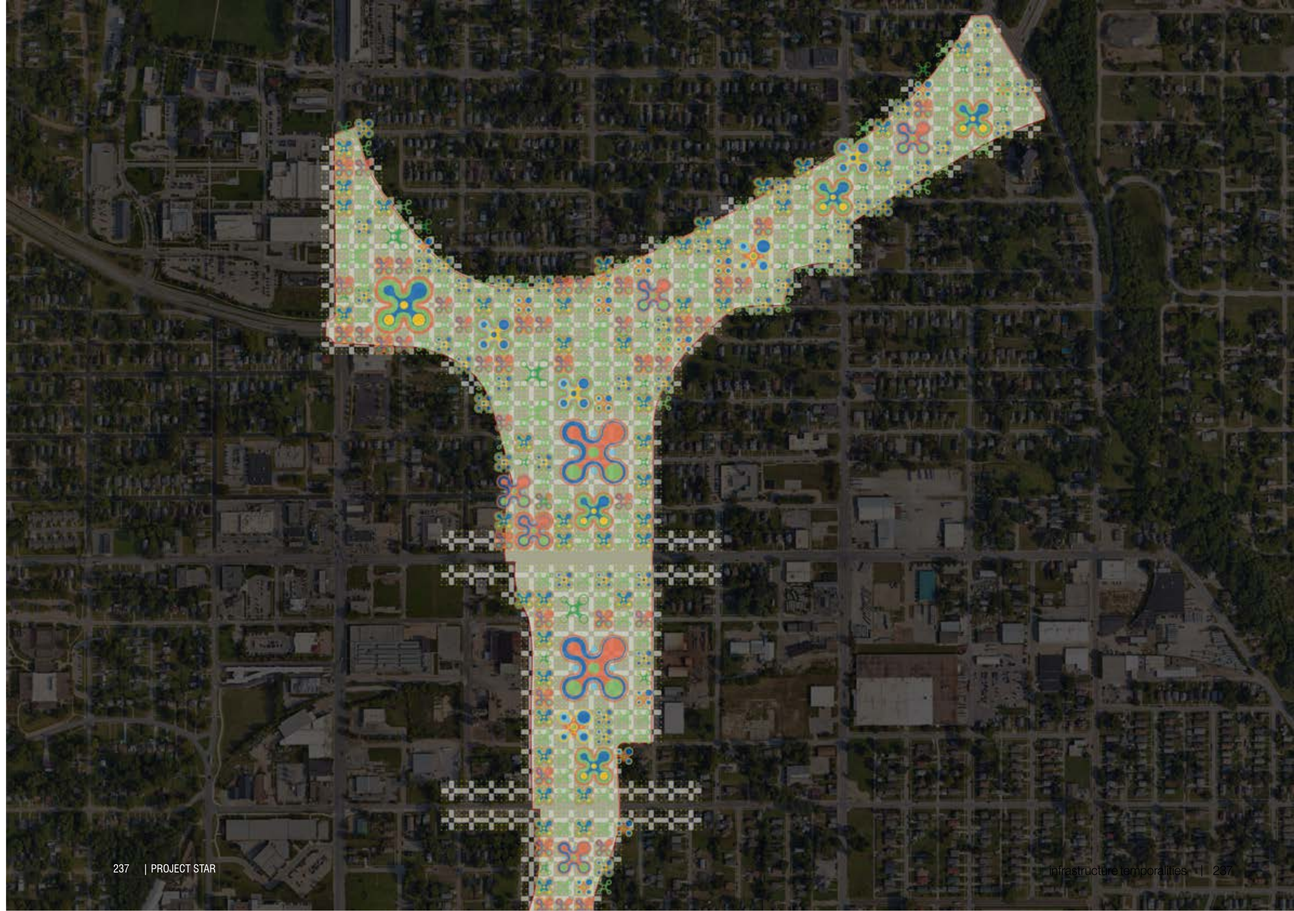
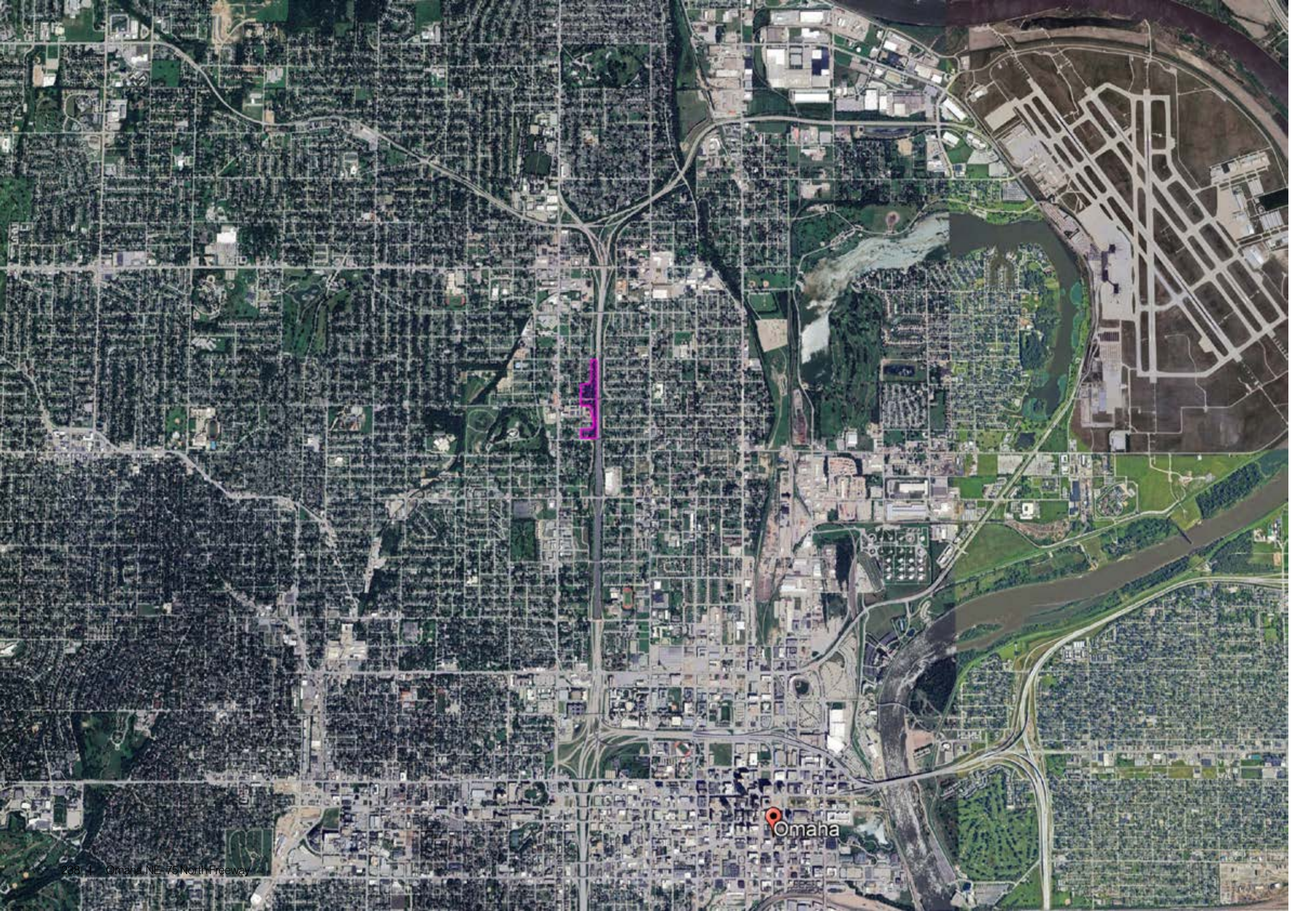




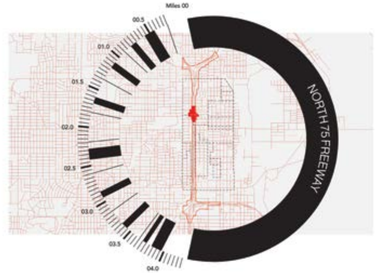
BRISTOL STREET

The Bristol Street block—located near North 28th Street and Bristol Avenue—presents a microcosm of North Omaha's broader relationship with freeway infrastructure. While not directly under the highway, the block sits within the shadow of the North Freeway and was shaped by its proximity to major transportation interventions. This area is emblematic of smaller-scale neighborhood disruptions that occurred as part of larger regional infrastructure investments.

Historically, this block supported modest single-family homes and community-serving institutions, situated within a tightly knit street grid. Over time, gradual property disinvestment and demolition, partially linked to proximity to the freeway and economic divestment from surrounding corridors, led to increased vacancy and decreased cohesion. While some original homes remain, others have been replaced with open parcels or surface parking, contributing to fragmented land use.

From a planning perspective, the Bristol block offers a manageable scale for pilot interventions. Its spatial characteristics allow for testing of integrated design strategies such as infill housing, multi-use streetscapes, and public green spaces that serve both environmental and social functions. Community stewardship models could be explored here, linking land use to local investment. The area's relative quietness and residential character also make it a suitable candidate for pedestrian improvements and shared mobility strategies, particularly those tied to schools, parks, or nearby trail extensions like the North Omaha Trail.

75 bristol street freeway



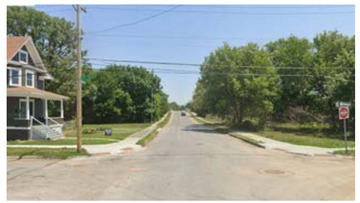
STREET SCENES

BRISTOL STREET









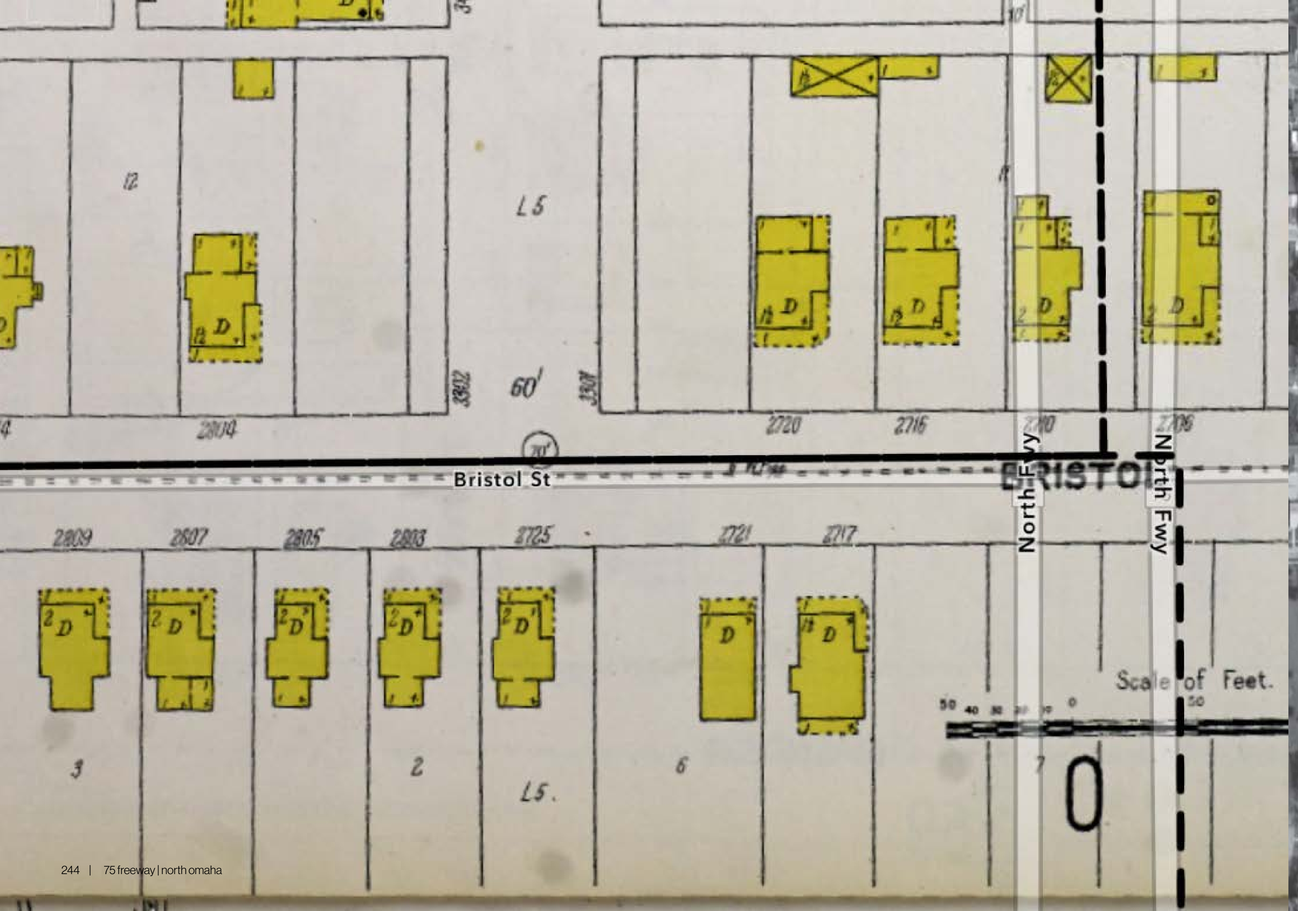







STREET SCENES

BRISTOL STREET


Bristol St
North Fwy
North Fwy
Scale of Feet.
0

HOW CAN THE BRISTOL BLOCK RECONNECT WITH NEARBY COMMERCIAL AND CULTURAL CORRIDORS IN NORTH OMAHA?

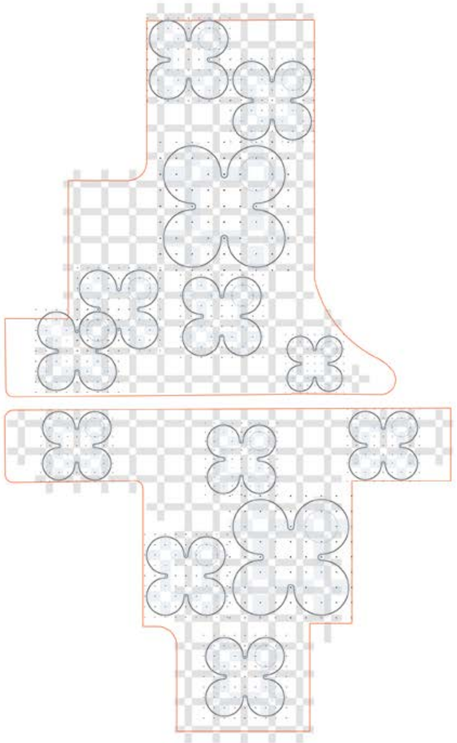
HOW CAN UNDERUTILIZED LOTS ON BRISTOL STREET BE REPURPOSED TO SUPPORT AFFORDABLE HOUSING, URBAN GREENING, OR COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING?

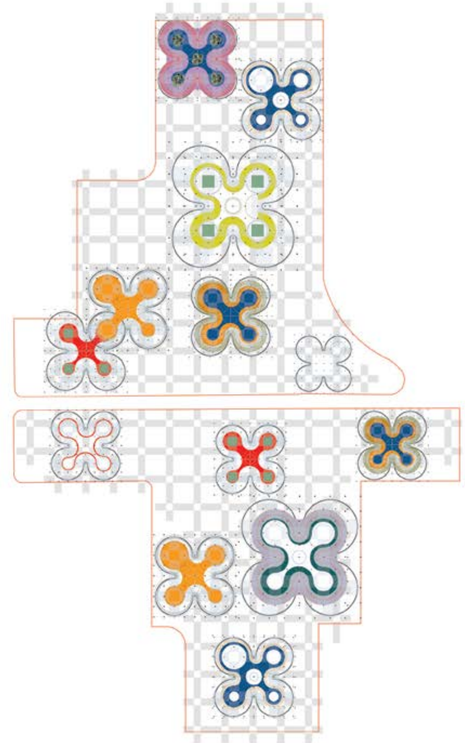
Captions

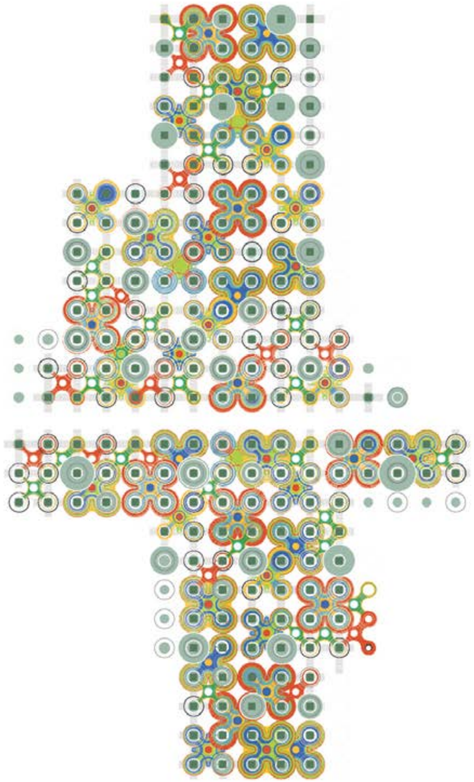
WHAT SMALL-SCALE DESIGN INTERVENTIONS COULD ENHANCE NEIGHBORHOOD COHESION WITHOUT DISPLACING CURRENT RESIDENTS

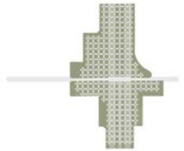
WHAT FUTURE IS IMAGINED BY CURRENT REDEVELOPMENT EFFORTS, AND HOW DOES THAT FUTURE ACCOUNT FOR (OR OVERLOOK) THE TEMPORAL LAYERS OF PAST HARM AND RESILIENCE?

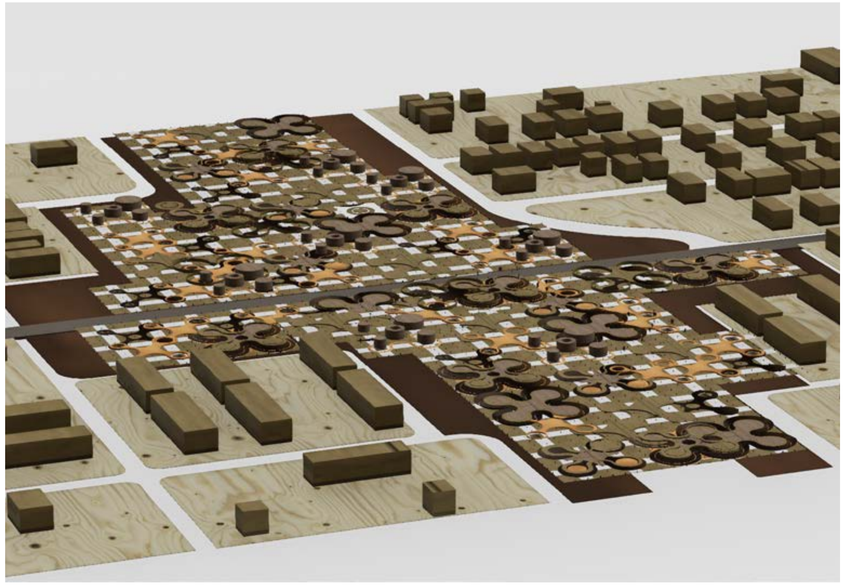
Captions

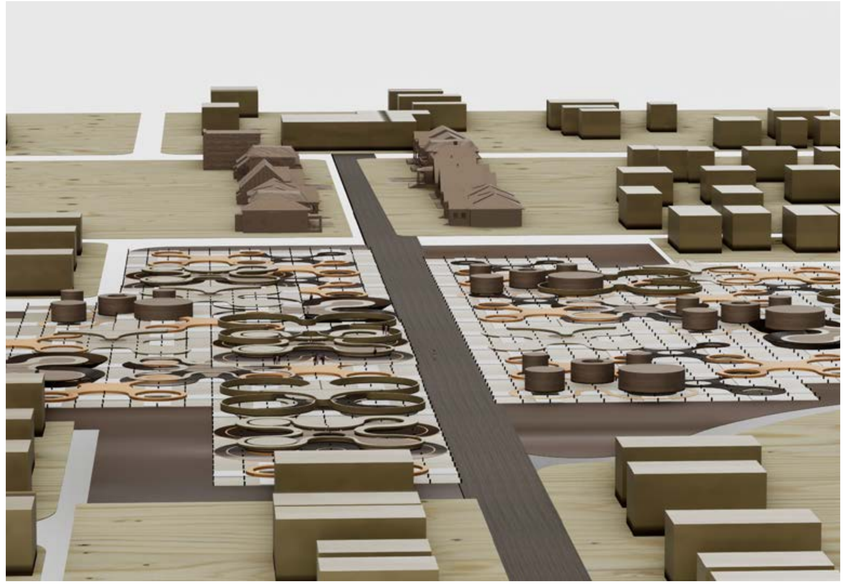


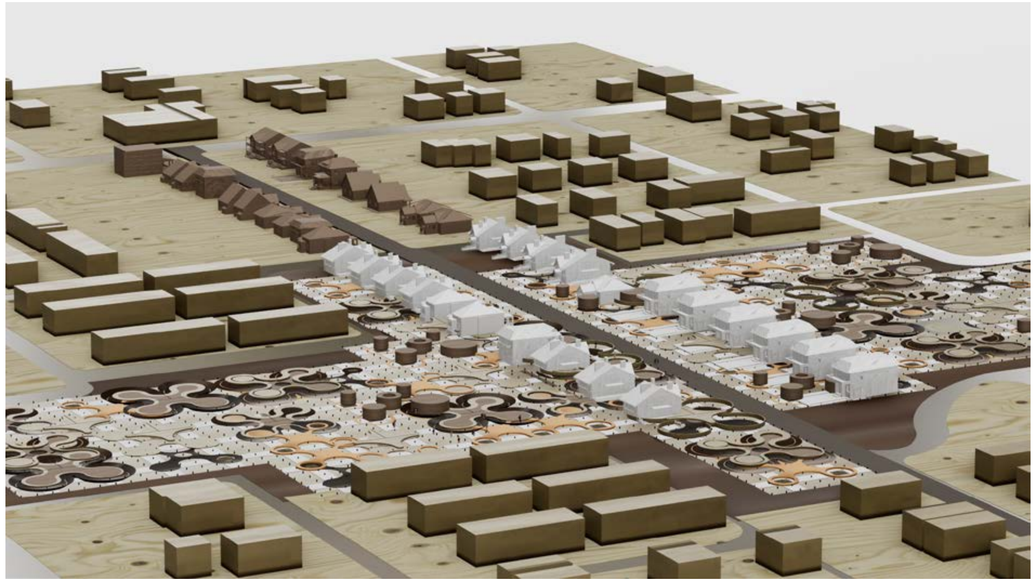


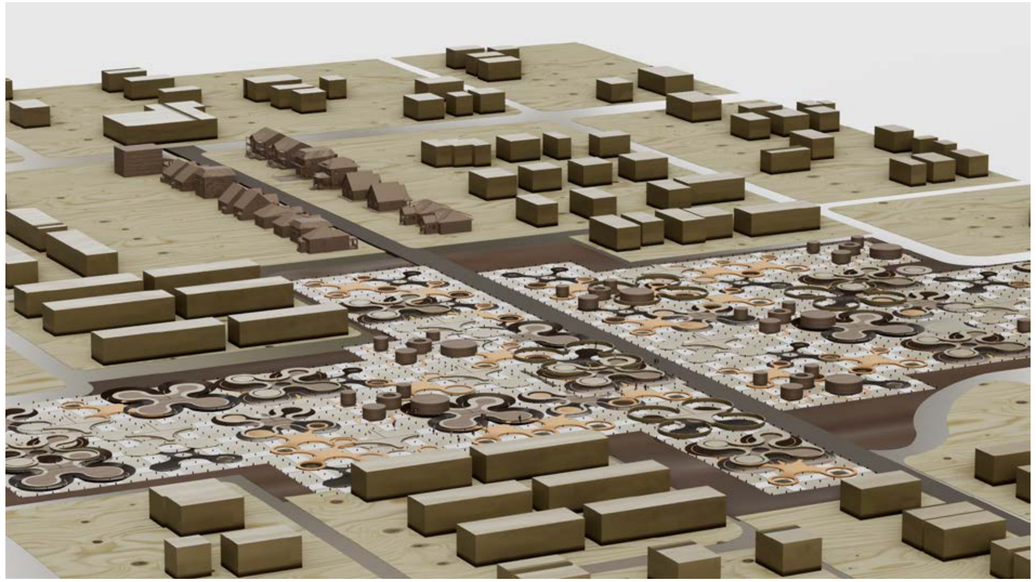


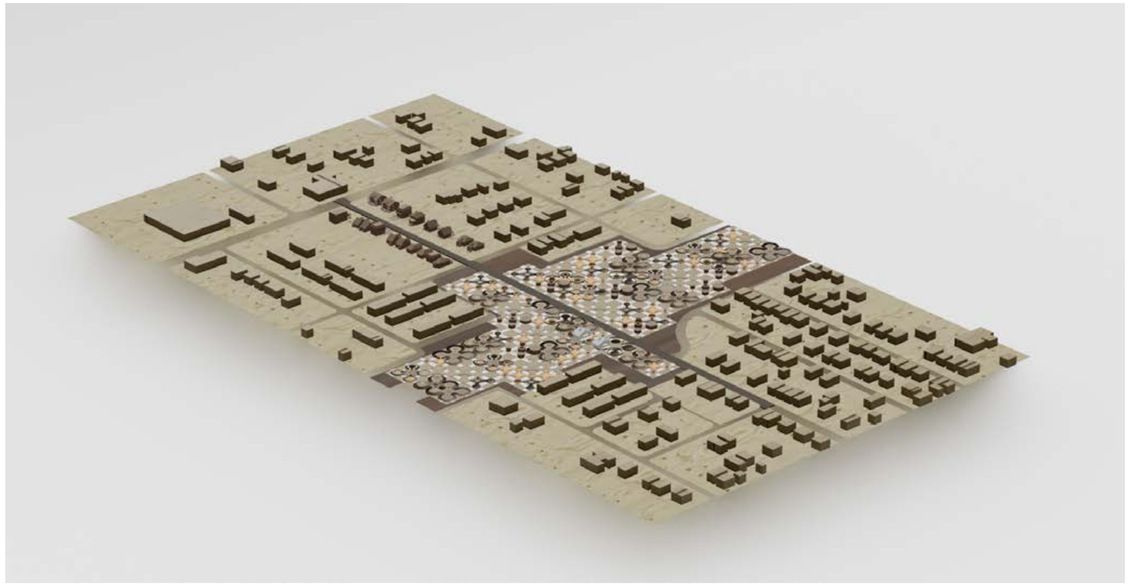


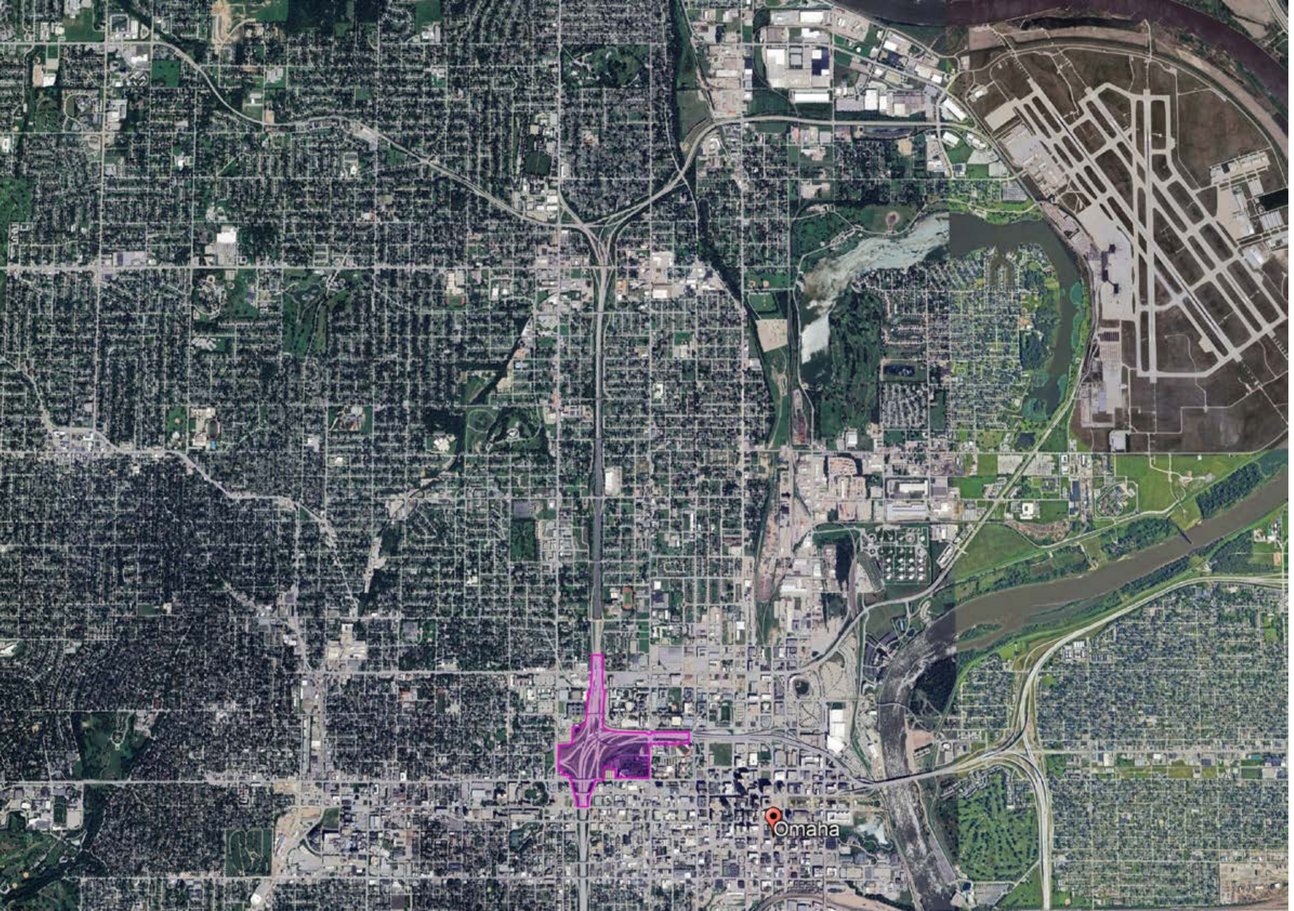












SOUTH JUNCTION

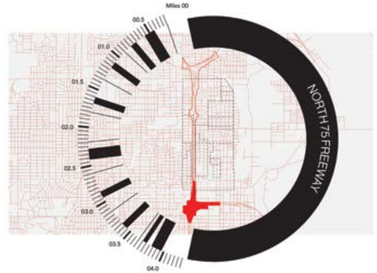
The southern junction of the North Freeway, near Cuming Street and adjacent to Creighton University, represents a more complex interface between institutional land use, freeway design, and transitional urban neighborhoods. This location serves as a southern entry point into the freeway corridor and functions as a major connector to downtown Omaha and the I-480 interchange. As such, it plays a distinct role in shaping regional mobility while also influencing adjacent neighborhoods.

In this area, the freeway infrastructure is expansive—comprised of overpasses, ramps, and grade separations. While designed to facilitate vehicular throughput, the layout limits pedestrian access and has contributed to physical fragmentation along Cuming and North 30th Streets. The surrounding neighborhoods, historically residential, experienced incremental land use changes due to the freeway's footprint and subsequent institutional expansion, particularly from Creighton University

Over the years, university-owned properties have increased, and the character of the surrounding blocks has shifted—often toward surface parking, transitional housing, or university-serving facilities. While these developments provide institutional stability, they also signal challenges in achieving mixed-use vibrancy and community integration. Public infrastructure in the vicinity—such as sidewalks, crossings, and public transit amenities—varies in quality and consistency.

The South Junction thus offers an opportunity to better integrate institutional, residential, and transportation functions. Future strategies could explore university-community partnerships, small-scale placemaking, and context-sensitive infill development. Emphasizing shared amenities and improved walkability could better connect the area to downtown and the rest of North Omaha. As a transitional node between major city zones, the South Junction has the potential to serve as a bridge—not only in infrastructure, but in equitable planning and shared benefit.

75 south junction freeway



STREET SCENES

BRISTOL STREET









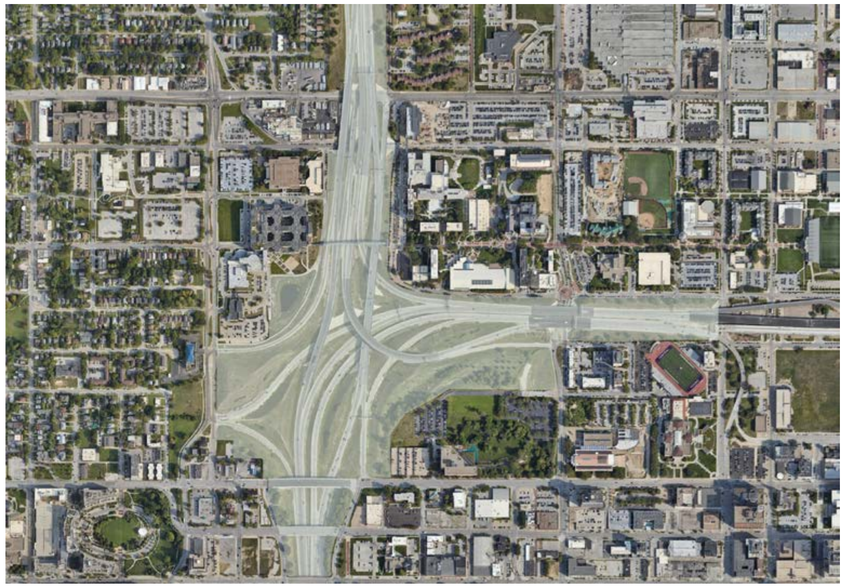








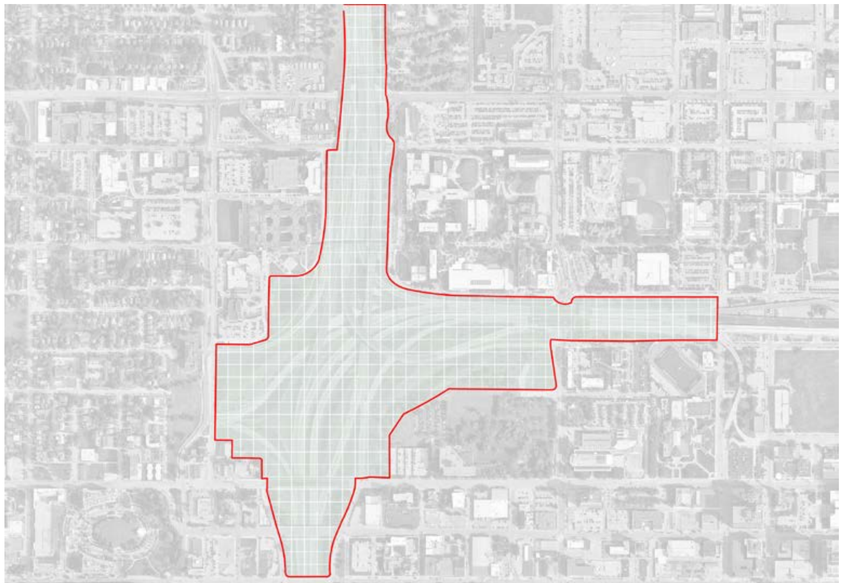
HOW DOES THE ORIGINAL INTENT AND VISION BEHIND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NORTH 75 FREEWAY COMPARE TO ITS LONG-TERM SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND SPATIAL IMPACTS?



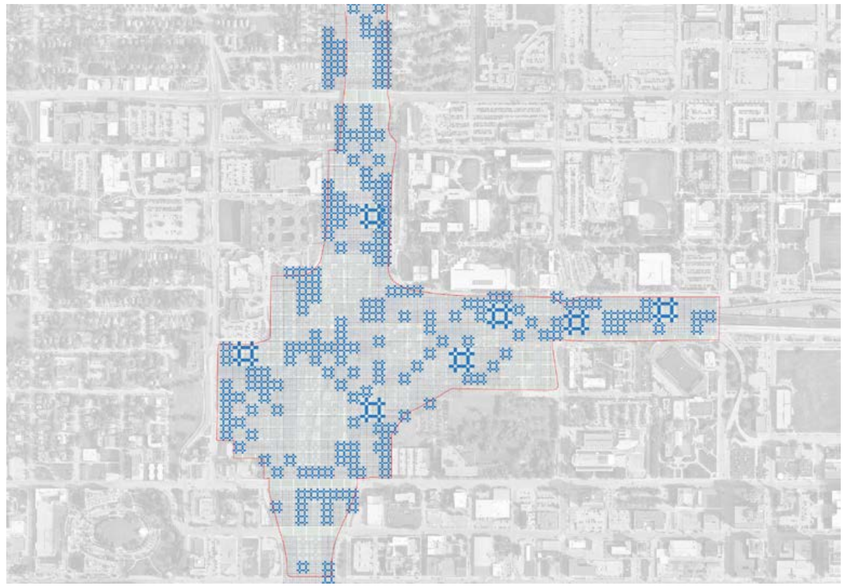
HOW CAN MOBILITY INFRASTRUCTURE IN THIS AREA BETTER SERVE PEDESTRIANS, CYCLISTS, AND TRANSIT USERS?

Captions

WHAT DESIGN STRATEGIES COULD SOFTEN THE EDGES BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL EXPANSION AND HISTORIC RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS?



WHAT FORMS OF SHARED VALUE (E.G., COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS, CO-OPS, PERPETUAL TRUSTS) CAN BE INTEGRATED INTO REDEVELOPMENT PLANS?



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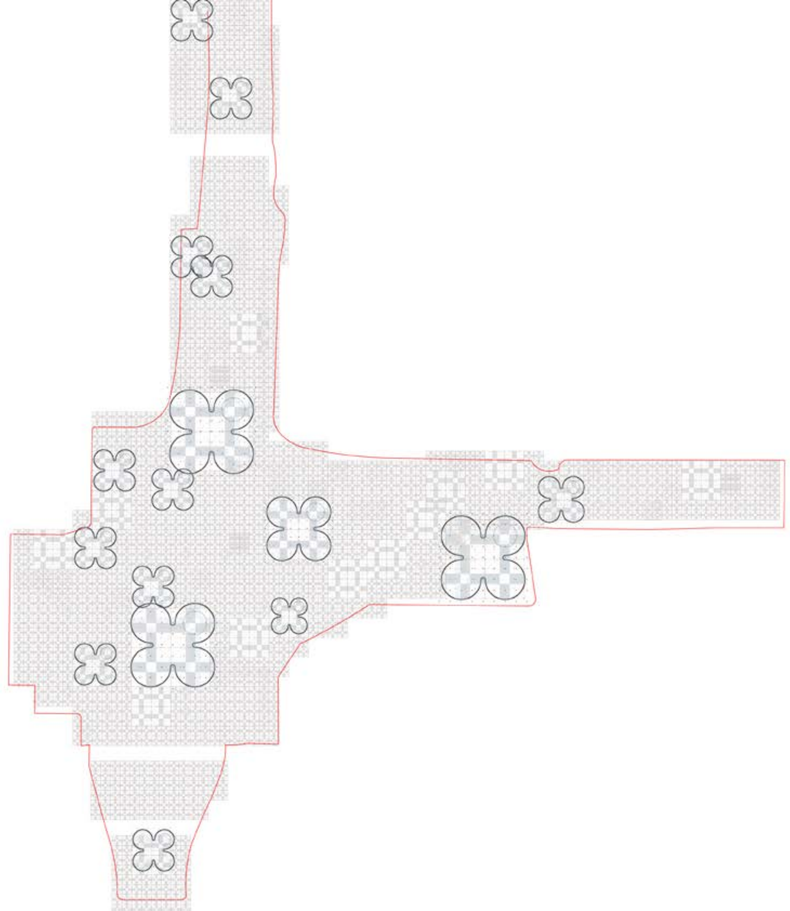
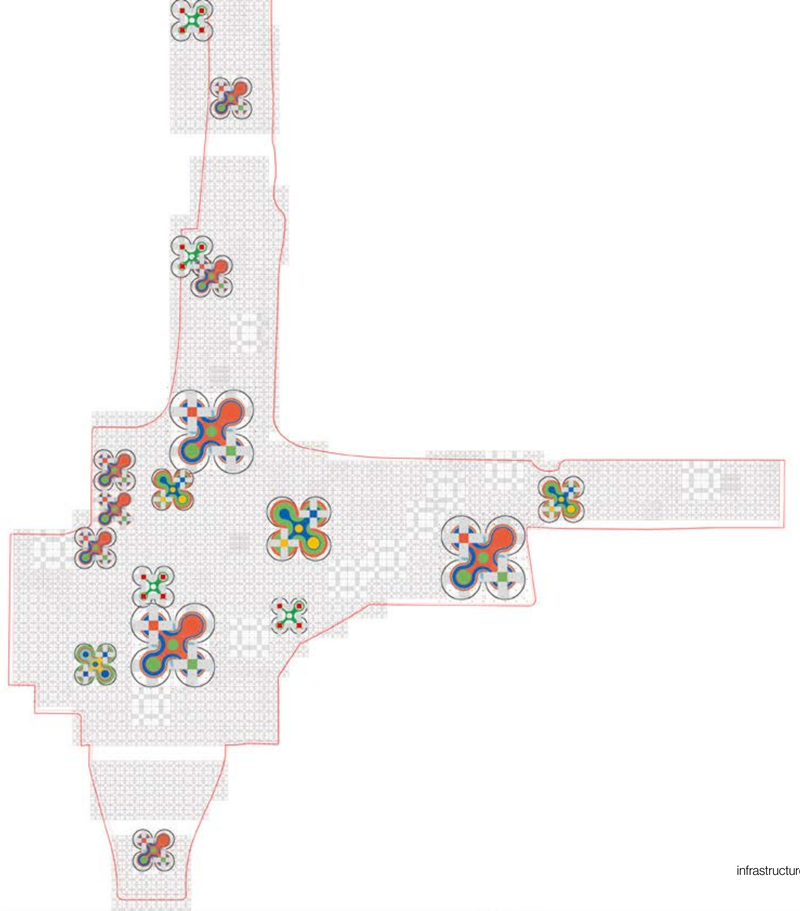
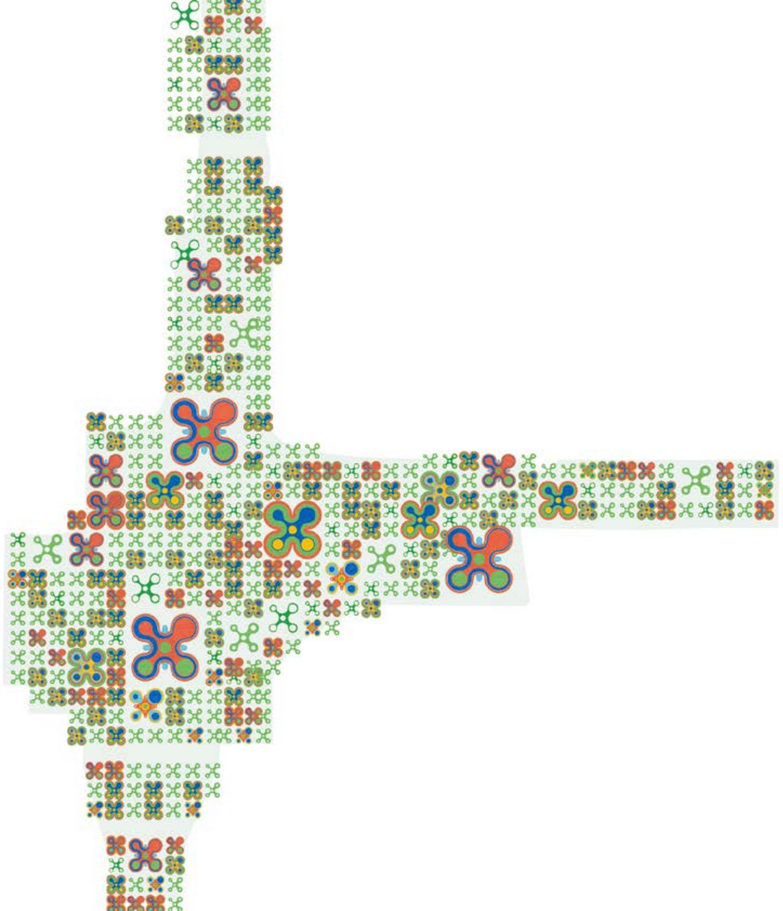






VII. stewarding shared value

beyond repair, towards stewardship

“MOBILITY IS A MEASURE OF FREEDOM, AND ACCESS TO MOBILITY IS ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY.”

PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, 1963

Beyond Repair, Towards Stewardship

Building Together

A Pathway Forward

To steward shared value is to ask: who benefits, who decides, and who remembers? It is to ensure that infrastructure is not built over people but with them—that our bridges connect rather than sever; that our roads carry more than cars—they carry histories, hopes, and the right to remain in place.

The path ahead is not pre-written. But if we are serious about the infusion of democratic values in the storng belief in freedom, and mobility we must treat infrastructure as a form of democratic restoration, a living system to honor and practice such. North Omaha is a proving ground for what just futures can look like when stewardship becomes our shared practice.

What most clearly emerges from this body of work is the need for long-term, thoughtful stewardship of infrastructure that serves the broadest public interest. The story of North Omaha—its people, its neighborhoods, and the long arc of decisions that shaped them—demonstrates that infrastructure is not only about roads or buildings, but about the lasting relationships between place, policy, and community. Moving forward, the goal is not simply to correct the mistakes of the past, but to establish a more deliberate and inclusive approach to shaping the built environment—one that is responsive to local histories, reflective of community priorities, and flexible enough to meet future challenges. In doing so, the process of planning itself can become a tool for building trust, supporting resilience, and laying the foundation for more connected and equitable neighborhoods.

This research has revealed the multiplicy of ways that infrastructure has long served as both scaffold and symbol of national ambition. Yet, as this volume has made clear, its historical deployment—particularly in places like North Omaha—has often reproduced undemocratic practices that indict the very principles of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

As we stand in the even of the 250th year anniversary of aa moment of renewed federal investment and community-based momentum, the challenge is no longer whether we will build, but how we will build differently. This chapter explores what it means to steward shared value in infrastructure policy and practice, offering both a theoretical lens and pragmatic pathway to support a new era of spatial justice, democratic design, and place-based restoration.

The concept of "shared value," as applied here, transcends conventional definitions of cost-benefit analysis or stakeholder engagement. Instead, it serves as a multidimensional framework for aligning physical investments with ethical obligations—recognizing communities as co-authors of infrastructure, not simply its recipients or casualties. Stewardship, in this context, is not merely fiscal oversight or technical maintenance—it is an ongoing commitment to honor the cultural, ecological, and social fabric of place.

The stewardship of shared values must be rooted in intentionality, not a one-time event but as a discipline of continuity. Commitment to a process undoing systems that have been centuries in the making, requires mechanisms for revisiting decisions, tracking impact, and adapting over time. The lessons from past infrastructure failures highlight the dangers of static, technocratic planning that fails to account for lived realities or future consequences.

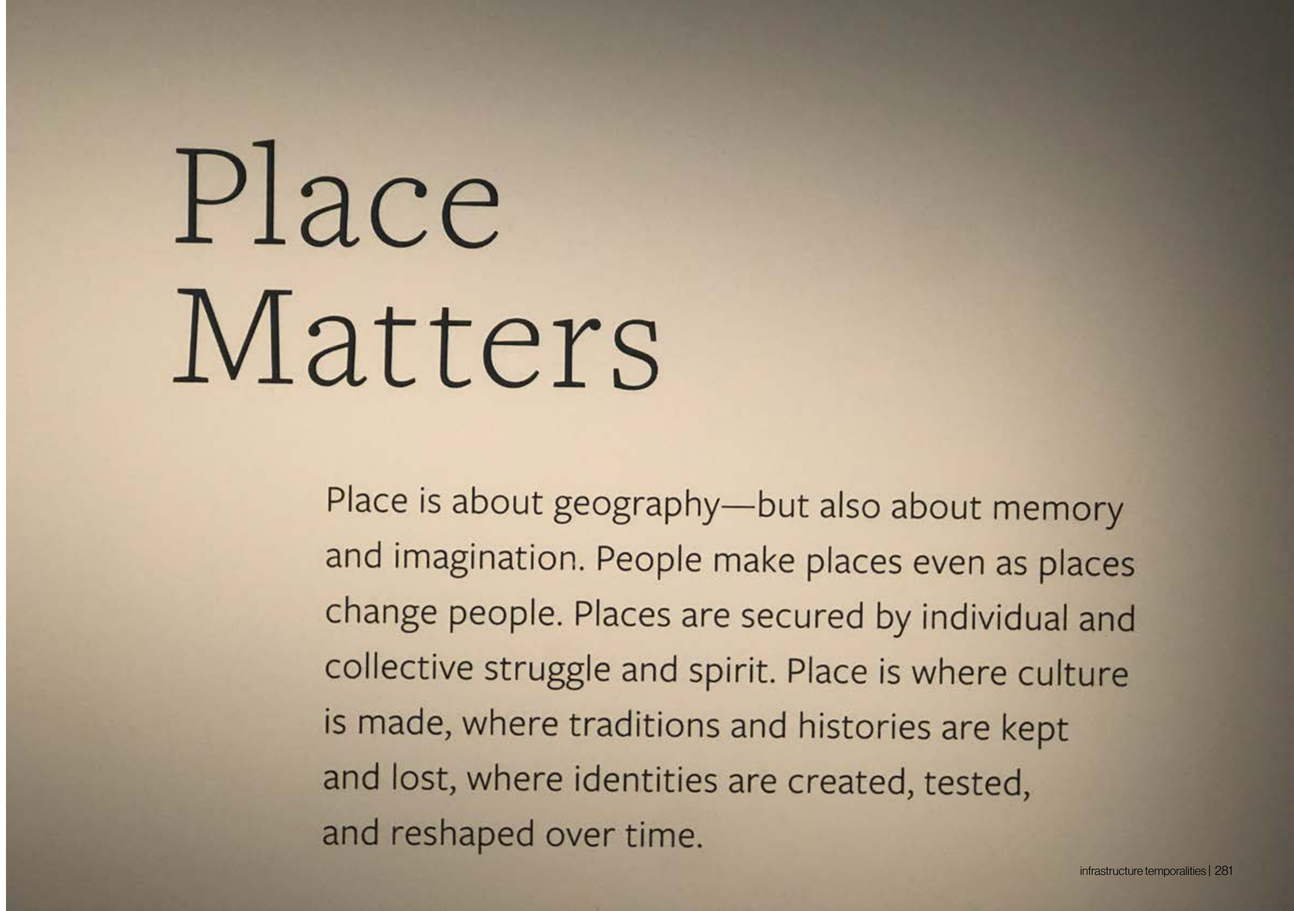
By contrast, an intentional approach centers the long arc of stewardship:

How do we create governance structures that include future generations?

How do we evaluate success beyond short-term returns?

How do we ensure that communities displaced by past decisions are not erased from future maps?

If infrastructure has long been a tool of fragmentation, it can now become a platform for reconnection. If policy once functioned to displace, it can now be designed to heal. And if the future once seemed shaped only by experts, it can now be held, shaped, and stewarded by the people who live it.



GLOSSARY

AASHO (American Association of State Highway Officials)
An organization formed to coordinate state-level highway efforts, establish best practices, and advocate for federal support for road projects.
Active Design
Design strategies that encourage physical activity through walkability, bike paths, and recreational spaces.
Affordable Housing
Housing that is economically accessible to low- and moderate-income individuals or families.
Affordable Housing Advocacy
Promoting policies that increase the availability of affordable housing.
Affordable Housing Accessibility
Ensuring that affordable housing is available to all, particularly vulnerable populations.
Affordable Housing Design Solutions
Innovative approaches to designing affordable, sustainable housing options.
Affordable Housing Supply Chain
Processes and structures supporting the creation and delivery of affordable housing.
Affordable Housing & Mixed-Use Development
Combining affordable housing with commercial or recreational spaces to enhance community cohesion.
Agri-Solar
The integration of solar energy production with agricultural use, fostering sustainable farming.
Art Installations
Public art pieces designed to engage communities and enhance public spaces.

Backbone Infrastructure
Core infrastructure such as transportation, water systems, and utilities essential for urban development.
Bioswales
Landscape elements designed to manage stormwater through natural filtration methods.
Buffer Zones
Areas separating different land uses, often used to reduce conflicts or protect ecological areas.
Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)
Public transportation system with dedicated lanes to improve efficiency and reduce congestion.

Carbon Footprint
The total greenhouse gas emissions produced by an individual or entity.
Civic Engagement
Active participation by citizens in decision-making processes affecting their community.
Climate Change Mitigation
Actions aimed at reducing or preventing the impacts of climate change.
Circular Economy
An economic model that minimizes waste and maximizes the reuse and recycling of resources.
Cultural Heritage Preservation
Efforts to protect historical and cultural landmarks from degradation or destruction.
Community Empowerment
Enabling communities to have control and decision-making power in addressing their issues.
Community-Led Design
Design processes driven by the needs and desires of the local community.
Community Displacement
The forced relocation of residents due to urban development or gentrification.
Compact Urban Development
Designing high-density, mixed-use areas to reduce sprawl and maximize land use.
Connectivity
The ease with which different parts of a city are linked through transportation and infrastructure.
Cultural and Creative Industries
Economic sectors involving the creation and distribution of cultural goods and services.

Data-Driven Design
Urban design informed by data and analytics to improve decision-making processes.
Disaster Resilience Planning
Designing urban areas to withstand and recover from natural or man-made disasters.
Displacement Prevention
Efforts to protect vulnerable residents from being pushed out of their communities due to rising rents or redevelopment.

Ecological Footprint
A measure of human demand on Earth's resources and ecosystems.
Ecological Urbanism
Urban planning focused on environmental sustainability and integrating nature into urban spaces.

Energy-Efficient Design
Building design aimed at minimizing energy consumption through efficient technologies.
Environmental Justice
Ensuring fair treatment of all people regarding environmental policies and practices.
Environmental & Health Barriers
The negative health effects children face due to their proximity to the freeway, including exposure to air and noise pollution. These pollutants lead to respiratory illnesses, cognitive impairments, and other health problems that hinder learning and academic performance.

Fair Housing
Policies ensuring equal housing opportunities, free from discrimination.
Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
A U.S. government agency that oversees road and freeway projects, including those impacting Omaha's freeway systems.
Federal Aid Road Act of 1916
A landmark law that established federal funding for state road construction, formalizing the federal government's role in highway infrastructure.
Federal Highway Act of 1921
An act that created a national highway development plan, leading to the creation of a comprehensive road network for interstate travel.

Gentrification Resistance
Efforts to prevent the displacement of low-income residents due to rising property values.
Green Buffers
Vegetated spaces along highways or between residential areas to reduce noise and pollution.
Green Infrastructure
Natural systems and practices that manage water and improve urban sustainability.
Green Urbanism
An urban planning philosophy emphasizing sustainable living and environmental responsibility.

Historic Housing Stock
Older housing units, often with architectural significance, that provide affordable housing.

Inclusive Urban Design
Designing urban spaces that are accessible and beneficial to all residents, regardless of background.
Integrated Green Corridor
A continuous, connected network of green spaces that fosters ecological and social connections.
Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS)
A model where urban infrastructure is treated as a service that is accessible to all users, often through digital platforms.
Integrated Mobility Systems
Transport systems that are well-connected, allowing for seamless transitions between modes of transport, such as buses, trains, and bicycles.
Interstate Highway System
A nationwide network of highways that was developed after World War II to improve national defense, connect cities, and facilitate suburbanization and economic growth. While it contributed to economic development, it also divided communities, particularly marginalized ones.

Land Use Zoning
Regulations defining the allowable uses for land in a specific area, such as residential, commercial, or industrial.
Livable Streets
Streets that prioritize pedestrian and cyclist safety, encourage social interaction, and integrate green spaces into the urban fabric.

Livability
The overall quality of life in a city, influenced by factors like safety, amenities, and environmental quality.

Miller Park Connection
Efforts to improve the link between Miller Park and surrounding neighborhoods through enhanced transportation infrastructure.
Mixed-Use Development
Development that combines residential, commercial, and recreational spaces in one area.
Mixed-Income Housing
Housing developments that combine units affordable to low- and moderate-income residents with those for higher-income individuals.

Neighborhood Cohesion
The social bonds and sense of community that hold neighborhoods together.
North Freeway (US-75)
A major interstate highway running through North Omaha, which has historically fragmented neighborhoods and caused significant displacement due to its construction.
Significance: The North Freeway serves as both a barrier and a focal point for efforts to address urban fragmentation, with potential for improving green spaces and enhancing community connectivity.

Open Spaces
Publicly accessible areas like parks and plazas that serve as recreational spaces.

Pedestrian-Friendly Design
Designing urban spaces to prioritize walking and ensure safety and accessibility for pedestrians.
Place-Making
The process of creating public spaces that foster community engagement and a sense of belonging.
Public Amenities & Culture
Public spaces and cultural institutions that contribute to community interaction and well-being.
Public Realm
All publicly accessible spaces, including streets, parks, and squares, that contribute to urban life.
Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)
Collaborative ventures between the public and private sectors to fund urban development projects.

Railroad Right-of-Way
A strip of land originally designated for use by railroads, which can be repurposed for other types of infrastructure. In the case of Sorensen Parkway, the City of Omaha acquired the former Chicago and Northwestern Railroad right-of-way in 1977 to develop the parkway.
Redlining Practices
Discriminatory policies, such as redlining, that marginalized Black and minority communities by denying them access to loans, insurance, and other services, particularly in certain neighborhoods.
Regenerative Development
Urban development aimed at restoring ecological balance and fostering community well-being.
Resilient Cities
Cities designed to adapt to and recover from environmental, social, and economic challenges.

Social Determinants of Health (SDH):
The non-clinical factors—such as economic stability, environment, mobility, education, and social connections—that influence health outcomes and overall well-being.
Social Housing
Housing provided by the government or non-profits to low-income individuals or families.
Social Infrastructure Development
Building and enhancing institutions like schools, healthcare, and recreational facilities to support community welfare.
Social Innovation
Creative solutions to social problems, typically through new practices, technologies, or organizational models.
Social Integration
Efforts to ensure that all members of a community, particularly marginalized groups, are included in the social fabric of the city.
Sustainable Housing Models
Housing solutions that prioritize environmental sustainability, social equity, and economic feasibility.
Sustainable Urban Design
Urban design that minimizes environmental impact, fosters inclusivity, and promotes long-term sustainability.
Sustainable Urban Systems
A holistic approach to urban planning that integrates ecological, economic, and social dimensions to ensure sustainability.
Suburban Sprawl
The expansion of suburban areas beyond the city's original borders, a phenomenon affecting Omaha and its surrounding regions.

Traffic Calming & Transit Improvements
Urban measures designed to reduce traffic speed and enhance public transportation access to improve safety and mobility.
Transit-Oriented Development (TOD)
Development focused around public transport hubs to encourage transit use and reduce car dependency.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs)
A set of 17 global goals aimed at addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental sustainability, and peace. Infrastructure planning increasingly aligns with these goals to ensure equity and sustainability.
Urban Agriculture
Growing food within urban environments, helping reduce food insecurity and promote sustainable practices.
Urban Environmentalism
The advocacy for green spaces, sustainable practices, and ecological balance within urban areas.
Urban Form
The physical shape and layout of a city, which influences how people interact with the space.
Urban Heat Island Effect
The increased temperature in urban areas compared to surrounding rural areas due to human activity and infrastructure.
Urban Land Use Zoning
Zoning regulations that dictate how land in a city is developed, including residential, commercial, and industrial areas.
Urban Migration Patterns
Trends in population movement, particularly from rural to urban areas.
Urban Mobility Systems
Transportation networks that facilitate the movement of people and goods within urban environments.
Urban Planning Equity
Ensuring that urban development policies and practices are inclusive, fair, and address the needs of all communities.
Urban Poverty and Inequality
The presence of socio-economic disparities and poverty in urban areas, often leading to social and spatial segregation.
Urban Public Health
Policies and design strategies aimed at improving the health and well-being of urban residents.
Urban Regeneration Policy
Policies and strategies aimed at revitalizing areas of a city that are economically or socially distressed.
Urban Renewal
Efforts to improve or redevelop older parts of the city, often addressing areas affected by freeways like in Omaha.
Urban Resilience
The capacity of a city to absorb, adapt to, and recover from disruptions, whether environmental or social.
Urban Social Innovation
The development of new ideas or practices to address social challenges in urban areas.
Urban Social Integration
Ensuring that all residents, particularly vulnerable groups, have equal access to opportunities in urban spaces.
Urban Sprawl
The uncontrolled expansion of cities into surrounding rural areas, leading to environmental and infrastructural issues.
Urban Sustainability Indicators
Metrics used to assess the environmental, social, and economic sustainability of urban development.

Vacant Lot Development
Transforming unused land into useful spaces, such as housing, parks, or small businesses.