Freeways, particularly urban freeways, have had a bad press for several decades now. They are accused of despoiling scenery, destroying habitat and causing urban sprawl. Many observers report with glee on the latest news of a small segment of urban freeway being dismantled.

This blanket condemnation makes it easy to overlook the remarkable contribution that these freeways have made to the American economy and to American culture. It is hard to imagine the growth in productivity in the country during the postwar years without these roads, which vastly increased the mobility of goods and people and connected parts of the country together in ways that were unprecedented.

The constant criticism also makes it difficult to appreciate these roads as cultural artifacts and a wonderful way to see the country. This is all the more surprising since Americans in recent years have been discovering the rich legacy of our nation’s highways. There has been spate of books that celebrate travel on America’s pre-freeway-era highways. Many authors wax eloquent over the remaining motels, fast food restaurants and drive in theatres along US 66 or advise motorists on finding abandoned segments of roadway by passed by later highway alignments. There has also been a remarkable surge of interest in America’s parkways, from the earliest parkways like the Bronx River Parkway in Westchester County New York, started in 1907, to parkways at the end of the parkway era in the years immediately before and after World War II when they gradually became more like freeways, for example the Arroyo Seco Parkway in Los Angeles, or the later segments of Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, the Taconic Parkway in New York State or the George Washington Parkway outside Washington.

America’s postwar freeways merit a similar rediscovery. I think that one of the biggest obstacles to appreciating them has been a question of scale. Driving along a two-lane roadway it is possible to pull off the pavement and look at an historic courthouse or a particularly interesting agricultural landscape or early gasoline station. That is not possible on a freeway. It is also true that the engineers who designed the nation’s postwar freeways were probably less conscious of the aesthetic dimensions of the roadways than the designers of the German autobahn, who set a standard for integration of landscape and roadway never surpassed, or American designers like landscape architect Gilmore Clarke who played important role in designing the parkways of metropolitan New York. There is, moreover, no doubt that the push to accommodate increasing traffic loads and to make freeways safer in this country has led to a certain uniformity of standards that some people find boring. Finally, the proliferation of sound walls over the last few decades all too often makes driving through urban areas like driving through a tunnel.

Still, there is no better way to get a good view of the larger features of the American landscape or cityscape than looking through the windshield of an automobile rolling along a freeway at 65 miles per hour. At that speed it is often easier than on a slower road to appreciate the changes that occur in plant species as the highway climbs a steep ridge or to appreciate the way massive cuts to lower the grades on the climb over a hill that provide a graphic illustration of the underlying geology. It might be difficult for many people to appreciate long stretches of flat country but, if a driver can put herself into the proper frame of mind, this
experience can have its own rewards because of the way it accentuates the scale of the landscape. Even the billboards, which many drivers consider simply objectionable intrusions into the natural landscape, can, by their style and content, illustrate a great many regional differences.

And fortunately, there has been over the last two decades a growing recognition of the aesthetic dimensions of freeways. In some ways this marks a reversion to ideas that were common in the parkway era when there was almost always a conscious attempt to integrate road and landscape into a successful composition reflecting the landscape and culture of the region through which it passed.

A pioneer postwar example of this push to bring conscious aesthetic design to the freeway can be seen in I-280, the Junipero Serra freeway, which runs between San Francisco and San Jose. Here the engineers worked with Lawrence Halprin, the landscape architect, and architect Mario Ciampi to create a road that was widely considered the “most beautiful freeway in the world” when the initial segment was opened in the 1960s. This highway, with its careful alignment, minimizing cut and fill, and the bold, sculptural concrete overpasses does little to diminish the spectacular landscape of the San Francisco Peninsula. In fact it affords a wonderful way to experience the golden hills on one side of the roadway and the coastal range on the other, often seen in the morning or late afternoon with fog pouring over the crest.

In recent years the highway departments in an increasing number of American states have attempted to be more attuned to the aesthetic dimensions of freeways and of the places through which the roads run. Wildflowers now bloom in medians and margins of a great many American freeways. In arid landscapes engineers and landscape architects have worked to preserve native plants and use them as elements in a kind of idealized desert landscape in the median and along the berms. In one of the most impressive achievements, a twelve mile stretch of I-70 passing through the tortuously narrow Glenwood Canyon west of Denver, opened in 1992, the designers went to great length to fit the roadway into the landscape in the least obtrusive way possible. They accomplished this by splitting the roadway alignments, reducing the section of the roadway structure to a minimum, cantilevering both alignments from the canyon walls to reduce their bulk, pushing tunnels through the most difficult spurs of land and even treating the rocks that were scarred by excavation so they would not produce jarring juxtapositions.

Even the urban freeway, target of the most vociferous criticism, offers interesting perspectives for those willing to look. Unlike the case in much of Europe, where planners have often attempted to create a parkway-like driving experience by providing a wide buffer between the roadway and nearby urban areas and tightly restricting new development along the highways, American freeways have become the new main streets of many cities. Driving along the ring roads around America’s large cities can offer some of the most compelling views of these metropolitan areas. For the motorist driving along I-80, the Ohio Turnpike, there is the view from the giant viaduct crossing the Cuyahoga River. There, 20 miles to the north, up the heavily wooded deep gash created by the river, the gleaming tip of the Key Bank Building peaks out above the intervening ridges in clear weather, unfortunately all too rare in Northeast Ohio. Likewise, very few urban views can compare with the panorama that suddenly unfolds for motorists as, emerging from I-376’s Fort Pitt Tunnel under Mount Washington, they suddenly burst out onto a bridge over the Monongahela River and a view of the Golden Triangle and the entire skyline of Pittsburgh.

A drive along a city’s freeways is often the best way to get a good grasp of a region’s economic geography. It would be hard to miss the contrast between the view from the Indiana Toll Road across the grimy industrial landscape of steel mills and refineries just east of Chicago, on the one hand, with the landscape of heavily planted berms and expensive new houses along the Tri-State Expressway in the north suburbs.

Many of the earliest freeways have crossed the 50 year threshold and deserve a closer look as some of the country’s most important historical and cultural artifacts. And they provide a wonderful way to observe America’s landscape and cityscape.
Mountains from the Kensico Dam in Westchester County to Chatham near Albany, was not finished until 1960, but it maintains the earlier parkway standards rather than those of the later freeway era. Because of its careful alignment and roadway design by landscape architect Gilmore Clarke and the beauty of the rugged countryside which it runs, it remains one of the country’s great driving experiences.
I-280, Junipero Serra freeway, south of San Francisco. Although a much wider highway than the prewar parkways, this road, constructed in the 1960s, maintains much of the feel of the earlier parkways though the use of alignments carefully fitted into the rolling hills, integrating the road beautifully into the spectacular landscape of the San Francisco peninsula.

I-20 east of Birmingham Alabama. The undulating line that marks the edge of the pine forest and the beginning of the
mowed grass in the freeway margins recalls the long curving vistas of English 18th century picturesque landscape tradition. On an overcast morning the resemblance to the British landscape tradition is particularly striking.

California. No place in the United States is so associated with freeways as the Los Angeles region, but actually this region has fewer lane miles of freeway than most large American metropolitan areas. Because freeway construction pretty much stopped in the 1970s but the population continued to grow and the density rose, this region has some of the most congested roads in the country. If there is any consolation, they offer some remarkable displays of engineering bravado and urban intensity.
I-70 west of Denver, Colorado. The construction of this roadway through the Glenwood Canyon in the Rockies is both an engineering feat and an aesthetic tour de force. By separating the alignments and cantilevering the roadway from the canyon wall, the designers were able to minimize the visual impact of the road and provide spectacular vistas for travelers.

US 75 approaching downtown Dallas. This short piece of roadway completes a loop around downtown Dallas that allows two interstate roads to bypass downtown. A drive around the loop provides a kaleidoscopic sequence of views of tall buildings and a highly effective orientation to downtown Dallas.

I-10 east of Blythe Arizona. Perhaps even more than in the East, the great distances of the American West make the freeway a lifeline for residents who live far from population centers. The smooth roadway makes a striking contrast with the great rock outcrops and vast stretches of scrubland.

I-80 and I-94 Pennsylvania Turnpike north of Pittsburgh. The era of the parkway ended at about the time of the second world war as a new generation of freeways started to emerge. One of the interesting features of the interstate system today is the way it provides testimony to the shifting ideals of roadway design. Although large stretches of the Pennsylvania turnpike, whose initial segment opened in 1940, have been upgraded, the narrow right of ways and steep gradients of the older portions of the road as well as the streamlined design of
overpasses recall the transition from one age to the next.
I-20 between Covington and Augusta Georgia. A classic piece of interstate road with the smooth ribbon of pavement gliding effortlessly through a landscape of low hills and dense forest.
downtown Phoenix. The state of Arizona has been particularly active in trying to create an appropriate landscape for the state’s highways. They have pioneered techniques for saving cacti and other native species in the path of the roadway and then re-installing them alongside the new roads to create an idealized desert landscape.
approaching downtown Los Angeles, California. The advent of sound walls has changed the driving experience in some profound ways. In places it has severed the visual connection between the roadway and the city around it. On the other hand, in some places, as here, when vines and other plants grow up over the walls and trees overtop them, the result is a curious but not entirely unpleasant sensation of floating through a city without being part of it. Until the traffic backs up, of course.
northwest Texas produce an almost hypnotic effect. Even highway signs and telephone poles take on a monumental character, and train elevators loom up in the distance like the skyline of a great city.
Although freeways can seem intrusive and over-scaled in the city, they are often dwarfed by the huge open spaces in states like Utah or Nevada.
Longview, Washington. A trip across the country on the interstate roadway system allows for a panoramic view of the regional differences between, for example, the flat, semi-tropical landscape of central Florida and the deep green evergreen forests of the Pacific Northwest.
State route 99, the Alaskan Way Viaduct,

downtown Seattle. Completed in 1953, this roadway, this roadway like a number of freeways built in the heart of American cities, created a barrier in the city. Some of these highways, for example the Central Artery in Boston have been relocated underground. In other cases, like the Embarcadero Freeway in San Francisco the replacement was a surface boulevard. In this case, after a considerable debate, officials made the decision to create a massive tunnel. It is difficult to argue that a road like this should be preserved, given its structural problems and the way it cuts off Seattle from its waterfront. Still, it is almost inevitable that some of the drivers navigating the new tunnel will keenly miss the spectacular urban spectacle that unfolds today as they sweep along the viaduct.

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