

# End of the road

**In 1989 an earthquake damaged major freeways in San Francisco. After the dust had settled, the city decided it was better off without them and removed them completely. Road-building is not always irreversible, as Andrew Nash explains.**

AS YOU walk along San Francisco's Embarcadero with its palm trees waving in the fresh ocean breeze watching historical streetcars rumble by while admiring views of the bay, it's hard to imagine just ten years ago you would have been walking in the dark, smelly, and ugly street under two levels of freeway. That freeway was damaged by the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake and ultimately torn down to make way for today's spectacular boulevard.

Demolishing the Embarcadero Freeway was quite controversial since it led directly to Chinatown and Fisherman's Wharf. Merchants complained that visitors could not reach their restaurants and shops without it. However, a large group of sealions had settled in a nearby marina at Pier 39 following the earthquake. The sealions pushed Pier 39 attendance to record levels despite the closed freeway, proving that visitor declines were not created by the lack of freeway access.

Demolition of San Francisco's Central Freeway, also damaged in the earthquake, was even more controversial since it provided freeway access for a large portion of the city. Part of the freeway had been demolished immediately following the earthquake and Hayes Valley, a once marginal neighbourhood, blossomed with new shops, restaurants, and activity. Residents quickly realised that demolishing the remaining freeway could have similar benefits and began fighting reconstruction plans. Between 1996 and 1999, San Franciscans voted four times on whether to rebuild the Central Freeway, ultimately deciding to replace it with a boulevard along Octavia Street.

The Embarcadero is now complete

and Octavia Boulevard is under construction. Early results are nothing short of extraordinary: both areas have redeveloped into vital, attractive and exciting neighbourhoods. The Embarcadero is a major regional shopping and entertainment district, real estate values have skyrocketed and billions of dollars have been invested in the area. Hayes Valley has been transformed into one of San Francisco's most hip and arty neighbourhoods: an area once filled with drugs, prostitution and parking lots is now restaurants, art galleries and new apartments.

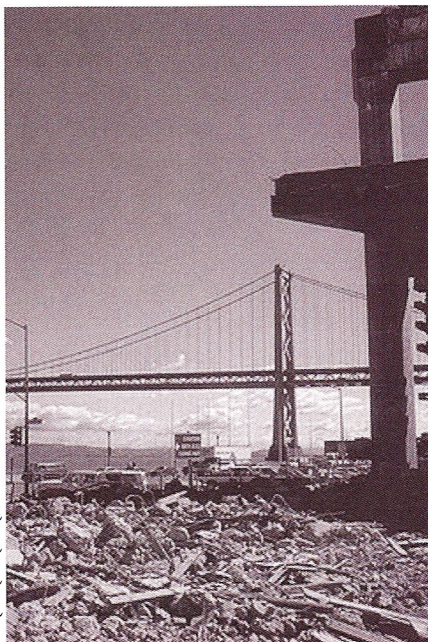
The primary argument against freeway demolition was traffic congestion: many feared gridlock and the loss of customer access. But San Francisco's experience proves that gridlock need not occur and

that customers can get where they want to go even when a heavily used freeway is demolished. These results are consistent with a growing body of transportation research that evaluates planned and unplanned traffic reductions. The research generally has found that reducing road space for cars has reduced car use but not necessarily economic activity. This is especially true in places like San Francisco with good public transit and alternative mode access.

In San Francisco, demolishing the freeways provided two fundamental ingredients for urban revitalisation: land and an improved environment. The freeways themselves took up an incredible amount of space (even though they were constructed above surface streets) and their environmental impacts (noise, air pollution, visual intrusion and shadow) destroyed any possibility of economic vitality. With freeways these areas were urban wastelands; without them they became the most highly sought after property in San Francisco. Urban revitalisation started immediately after the freeways were torn down and was, especially in the case of Hayes Valley, spontaneous and neighbourhood-driven.

Looking back it's hard to believe that tearing down the Embarcadero and Central Freeways was controversial, but making such major changes always creates fear. Change is always hard to achieve, but without change cities become stagnant and die. One only need look at 'Rustbelt' cities in the United States and Britain for examples of what happens to places too scared to change. The earthquake helped push San Francisco into the future, but we hope that other cities around the world can get there without the need for a natural disaster!

*-Andrew Nash is a Transportation Consultant living in Zurich. He was formerly Executive Director of the San Francisco County Transportation Authority.*



**Road closed: San Francisco decided not to rebuild earthquake-damaged freeways.**