Imagining a Meshwork of Urban Nature – Lawrence Halprin and Panhandle Parkway in the San Francisco

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The unbuilt project of Panhandle Freeway in San Francisco from the early 1960s is a unique case in the politics of design during the heyday of urban renewal in the United States in the early 1960s. The close collaboration between highway engineers and landscape architect Lawrence Halprin on this project also exemplifies cross-disciplinary thinking in redefining natural processes in the city. While Halprin emphasized the visual and visceral experience of moving through the highways integrated with parks and residential apartments, the civic function of urban freeway clashed with the local communities that would be displaced by the construction. The aesthetics of mobility eulogized a regional vision shared by Halprin and his friends informed their active involvement with the infrastructural design of the Bay Area. It presents an alternative to the criticism of the urban renewal of the 1960s. Nevertheless, the residents worked with the city council on the successful revolt against Panhandle Freeway, and none of the alternative routes was constructed, leaving the gap between southern San Francisco and Golden Gate Bridge to local traffic. While some critics see Halprin's freeway design as an ameliorative disguise, his schemes open up a dialogue between social and aesthetic aspects of the mobility. In doing so, his interweaving of urban ecology and infrastructure marked the evolution of scenic parkways to urban freeway in landscape architectural practices. The lesson of Panhandle Freeway is not only a matter of coexistence, it also foreshadowed the open-ended methodology in planning and design.

Keywords: urban freeway, landscape urbanism, urban renewal, Lawrence Halprin

Introduction

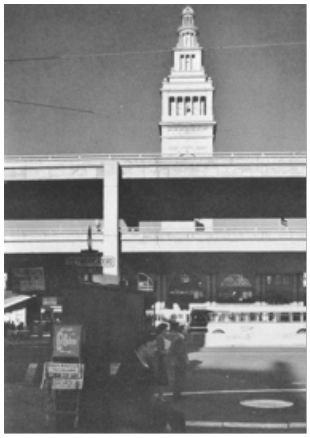
Geographer Tim Cresswell pondered two different ideas of mobility in the cities – the aesthetic experience of movement and the condition of social change. Both senses are favorable to their adherents. Aesthetic mobility invigorated modern arts and architecture, and larger capital and social mobility is key to viable economics. The unobstructed flow of people and businesses often displaced of the local community.[i] Landscape Architect Lawrence Halprin's design for the Panhandle Freeway addresses both senses of mobility. At its best, he proposed a series of sensitive interventions that address the imposing large-scale construction. Furthermore, he experimented with representation techniques to analyze the visual and visceral experiences of movements on the freeway.

The downtown businesses of San Francisco were eager to revive the declining central business district of San Francisco in the postwar years. In a way, they continued the desire to integrate the city into the larger bay area after the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge during the 1930s. Like other major cities in America, San Francisco faced serious traffic congestion during the peak hours of driving. The Chamber of Commerce worked with planners and city officials, hoping an unobstructed freeway system would attract more consumers and residents to the city.[ii] Various plans had been proposed, and the planning of the Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BARTD) was begun in the 1950s as well to facilitate the journey across the bay.

With the passing of a series of federal housing and highway acts and the booming populations after the World War II, the financing provided by the federal government spurred the construction of subsidized housings and statewide highway networks that often led to large-scale clearance of the "slum" areas. In addition to housing developments in Fillmore, South Market, and Embarcadero, the highway and the BART system constructions in the Bay Area included some of the most disastrous episodes, including the mostly black and lower income communities of West Oakland.[iii] Planners and theorists proposed policy with different ramifications. Planners and theorists proposed policy with different ramifications. Many observers fault the protests and riots on the

suburbanization of jobs and the lack of minority mobility. Furthermore, the demonstrators further valued stability and homeownership and pointed to the cult of mobility as the problem.[iv] Catherine Bauer Wurster, the prominent advocate for public housing, urged for more choices in housing and higher mobility among residents to remedy the increasing distance between housing and employment locales due to demographic and industrial shifts.[v]

The freeway revolt in San Francisco is one of the early successful counter actions to urban redevelopments that owes its success to the mostly middle-class based constituency. A strong network of Neighborhood associations organized a series of successful protests that pressured the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to vote in 1959 in opposition to state plans for freeway projects around the city. The extension of the elevated, double-deck Embarcadero Freeway, which had marred the vista of the landmark Ferry Building, was halted due to this



opposition (Figure 1).[vi]

Figure 1. Embarcadero Freeway, San Francisco, early 1960s.

To connect the Bay Bridge and the existing Southern and Central Freeways to the Golden Gate Bridge, the State Highway Division sought alternative routes: one through the Panhandle area east to the Golden Gate Park, and another through the area north of the City Hall.[vii] These three legislative routes all together are named Panhandle Parkway and Cross-town Tunnel Corridors, often dubbed as the Panhandle Freeway. At the request of the City, the State hired Halprin to "ensure incorporation of the highest aesthetic qualities of landscaping and special design."[viii] Halprin was concerned with the civic value of infrastructure based on the regional vision of his colleagues, mainly the loosely organized planners, architects, and landscape architects in the Bay Area called *Telesis*.[ix] More recently, architect DeMars and landscape architect Theodore Osmundson had served on the Design Committee of the Ferry Building Park in the mid-1950s and had proposed several alternatives to address the impact of the Embarcadero Freeway.[x] Upon accepting the commission of the Panhandle Freeway, Halprin wrote to Kevin Lynch, the renowned urban planner and theorist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, requesting a draft of his forthcoming book, *The View from the Road*.[xi] Lynch responded with enthusiasm, saying that "You have been given a marvelous task! I envy you, and will be very much interested to see the results that come of it."[xii]

Mediating Two Kinds of Mobilities

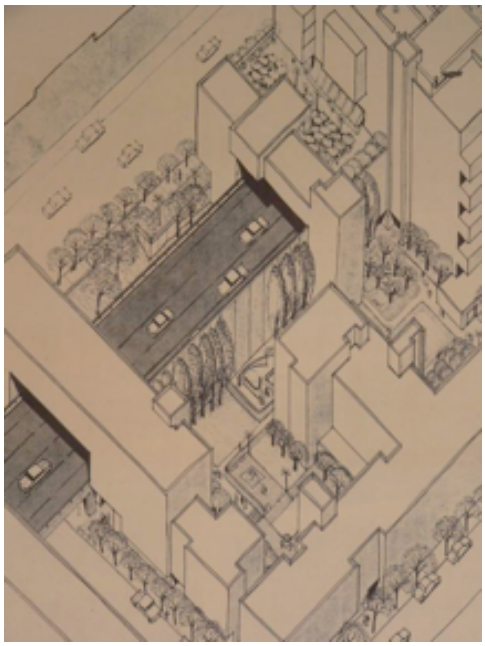
The urban freeways of the early 1960s facilitated the dynamic spatial organization and movement among the emerging regional complexes. Like the comprehensive highway systems developed among American cities during the interwar era, they also served the desired political and economic continuum.[xiii] Halprin's collaboration with engineers of the California Department of Transportation on Panhandle Freeway reacted to the previous highway revolts. The aesthetics of an urban freeway he promised fulfilled the need of drivers, pedestrians, and

the community on both regional and bodily scales. As a daily automobile commuter between Marin County and downtown San Francisco office via the Golden Gate Bridge, he described the dual identity of city dweller cum car driver as a "Dr. Jykell and Mr. Hyde contrast."[xiv] Valuing experience for its function in unifying the varied scales of the freeway and the city, he also contended that "the pedestrians and automobile should be friends."[xv]

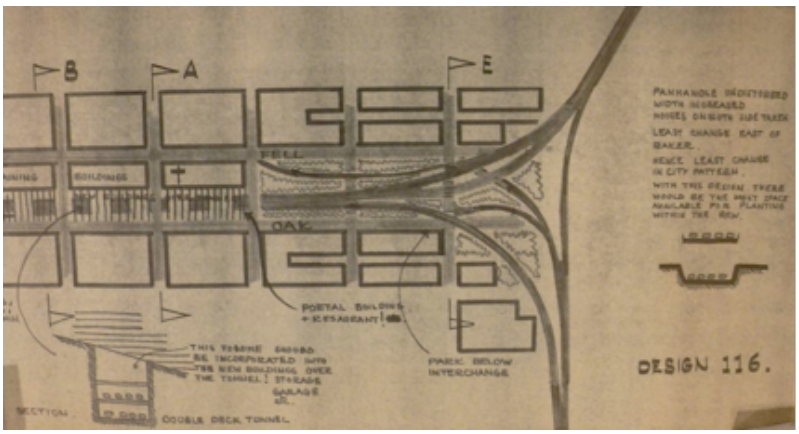
The beginning of the 1960s witnessed a sea change in the discourse of urban design, when influential writings by Jane Jacobs and Herbert Gans eroded the faith in total design of the city as a system and fomented an ensuing disillusionment of the grand manner.[xvi] Despite their different positions on suburban culture but common to the sociological wisdom of Jacobs and Gans, is the limited role of the physical environment in the formation of collective and individual experiences, and, therefore, a call to relinquish total control over design in order to enable social processes to take place. In the American Institute of Planners conference in December 1961, Halprin scribbled down his thought on "How do we achieve visual heterogeneity" in six points: leave holes for building to be done some years later; get various hands at work – architects; encourage naïve design – builders [and] people; allow for chance occurrences. . . the unpredictable; multiple use zoning; and do away with architectural commissions which tend to standardize things.[xvii] These immediate concerns were echoed in his freeway projects.

Seeing the city as both a system as well as experiences also defines Halprin's approaches to urban freeway. For Halprin, who commuted from Marin County to his downtown San Francisco office for work, via the Golden Gate Bridge, the dual identity of city dweller cum car driver is a "Dr. Jykell and Mr. Hyde contrast." Valuing experience for its function in unifying the varied scales of the freeway and the city, he also contended that "the pedestrians and automobile should be friends."[xviii] As automobile circulation shapes the armature of the city, Halprin's open strategies for urban design depends on the mapping of planar relations of the urban elements. On the pedestrian side, he appropriated the ground condition at a smaller scale and engaged the boundaries of urban infrastructure.

After a more general *Report on the Aesthetics of Urban Freeways*,[xix] Halprin went on to explore the site-specific issues of topography, local streets, and the neighborhoods(Figure 4). The first comments on the set of road geometries passed from the State office were based on three aspects: community, pedestrians, and drivers. Many of his favorite alternative devices appear as depressed, tunneled, and double-deck roadways interspersed with lush plantings. For example, the eight-lane, two-level road geometry of no. 116 caused less impact because "after construction there would be more space for buffer planting and other coordinated redevelopment which would speed the integration of the freeway." Its pedestrian experience was preferred, for the freeway was blended "into its surroundings, so helping the pedestrian and the community in the immediate vicinity." The driving experience was pleasant because of the "varied interesting route."[xx] The route was developed into



Alternative L3 where one sees a separated circulation of highway lanes, local streets, and pedestrian walkways



(Figure 2, 3).

Figure 2. Working drawing of road geometry no. 116, Panhandle Freeways, c. 1963.

Figure 3. Proposal for a redevelopment area integrated with the freeway based on the concept of staging in road geometry no. 116, c.1964

Concentration is another strategy found in Halprin's proposal that would reduce the footprints of an urban freeway. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom of parkway designers who seek to achieve picturesque effects, Halprin criticized a wide right-of-way as unfit in urban areas. As a result, he preferred devices of multiple-decking and tunneling as mentioned above. The interchanges that served as connections between the freeway and urban systems are also significant. Halprin suggested a lower speed design to reduce the radii of the ramp. He also studied the movement of traffic in order to eliminate unnecessary interchange roadways.[xxi] The no. 118 road geometry shows a compressed interchange at the Civic Center, contained by a tunnel entrance with a "park below structure (Figure 4)." At the interchange at Park Presidio, Halprin considered "the situation of the

remaining houses could be improved by detail design of the spaces between narrow roads and ramps," such as "earth mounds, retaining walls, planting."[xxii]

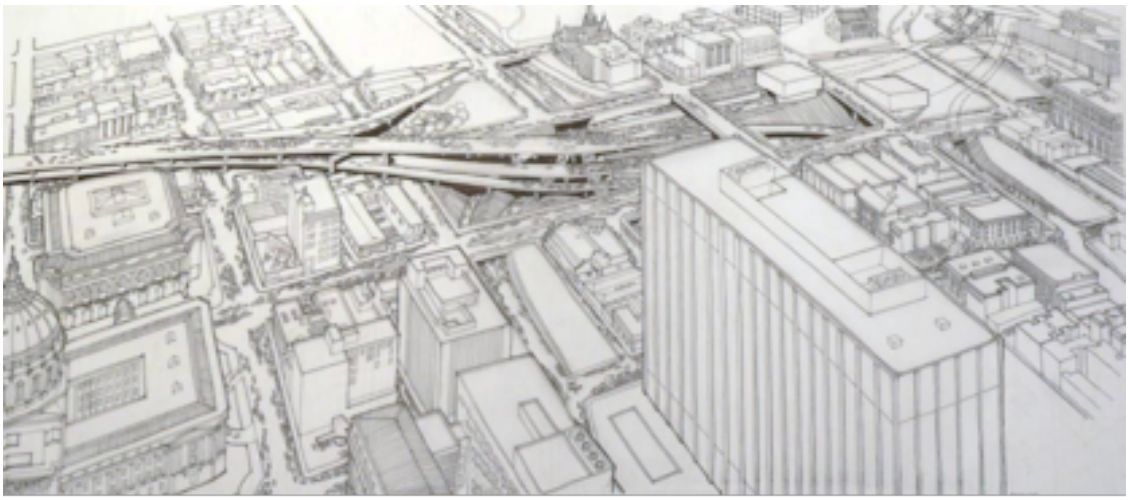


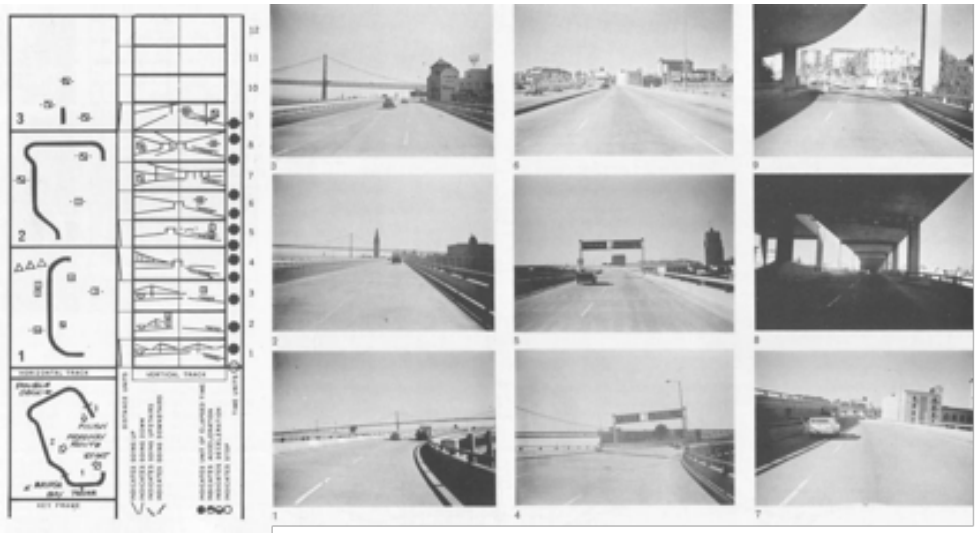
Figure 4. Proposed Interchange at the Civic Center, Lawrence Halprin and Associates, 1964.

On the pedestrians' human scale, Panhandle Freeway benefit from the spontaneous cultivation of body and its engagement with the urban environment as found. Halprin's latter book *Freeway* shows Anna holding a kerchief, sometimes standing and posing, sometimes dancing, shuttling around and between the buttresses underneath an elevated highway.[xxiii] The matrix of photos resembles Edward Muybridge's motion study photographs. Both break down continuous actions into still frames which imply a sense of time. Just as Anna's spontaneous approach invites a give-and-take between the body and the environment, Halprin sees urban design as an "inclusive" rather than "compulsive" practice.[xxiv]

Representing Urban Freeways

Halprin's work on the San Francisco freeway project coincides with the formulation of his scoring system in landscape design.[xxv] The *Program of Phase I Study* of the Panhandle Freeway indicates an attempt to develop a "continuous 'strip' technique" for graphics presentation,[xxvi] by which Halprin referred to the notational system as he used in representing the experience of walking at the Capitol Tower Apartments.[xxvii] Here the objects in the space are projected in relation to the moving body rather than a three-dimensional Cartesian coordination. His course assignment for students at the University of California at Berkeley, "Recording of Actual and Perceptual Events," attempted to negotiate the conflict between "what is seen" and "what is felt."[xxviii] The students' collective work appeared as a score depicting the travel from north San Francisco to Sausalito via the Golden Gate Bridge.[xxix] This notational system evolved into a combination of image matrices and strip symbols,

together with a plan indicating the trail of the movement. When Halprin published his article "Motation" in



1965, he included a graphic of a driving experience on the Embarcadero Freeway as an example (Figure 5).[xxx]

Figure 5. Embarcadero Freeway "Motation" score, Lawrence Halprin and Associates, 1965.

Halprin's representation of moving through the urban streets and freeways was paradoxical. The bodily experience of urban infrastructure and its non-perspective representations in his investigations are at once ameliorative veneer and progressive proposal. On the one hand, these drawings worked as the aestheticized mask of the ruthless urban clearance. The combination of section and perspective drawings of the San Francisco freeway, as well as the many conceptual renderings made by Denis Wilkinson, the firm's draftsman, have their political intention to persuade the public in the face of their opposition. After all, the vocabulary of "plant buffer" and "landscaping" was prevalent in the newspaper and design documents. On the other hand, the national system also worked as the mediator, or even the embodiment, of the automobile movement through the city. The various physical and intangible connections in Halprin's freeway design testify to his ideas to extend the civic function of infrastructures. He saw aesthetic elegance in the freeway structures' expression of movement, like an "action painting,"[xxxi] within which one can literally participate and experience "the sensation of motion through space."[xxxii]

In a way, the delineation of overpasses and bridges in the drawings manifests Halprin's aim in connecting the body to the act of seeing. A photograph in Halprin's *Freeway* shows the unfinished end of the elevated Embarcadero Freeway, which became a spot overlooking the city's port. The idea climaxed into a whimsical ventilation tower above the tunnel that also serves as a belvedere. The reclining figures and the passing cars depicted in some of the freeway drawings imply an interpenetration of sight-seers, some static, some moving, on different elevations of highway, local streets, and walkways (Figure 6). These site-specific appropriations of the

city negotiate the visual (what is seen) and visceral (what is felt), aspects that Halprin intended to mediate across

different scales in experiencing the city.

Figure 6. The Franklin D. Roosevelt East River Drive, Manhattan, 1937-1942.

Through the Panhandle Freeway, Halprin argued for a different type of road from that which was prevalent in parkway discourse. Frederick Law Olmsted had defined the civic function of urban roads in his writing on the concept of "park ways."[xxxiii] In fact, the Panhandle area, called "the Avenue" in the nineteenth century, reflects Olmsted's unrealized Promenade that would connect different parts of the city to his proposed Rural Ground for San Francisco (Figure 13).[xxxiv] This dialogue between Halprin and Olmsted reinforces Jacqueline Tatom's summary of the formal and functional evolution of urban roads from boulevard to parkway to urban freeway which is also echoed in Halprin's favorite contrast between the Henry Hudson Parkway and East River Drive on two sides of the Manhattan waterfront.[xxxv] Since the nineteenth century, the theory of parkway design had been inculcated by apologists of technological modernism. For Sigfried Geidion, the parkway represents a new design genre expressive of the new space-time conception. Using the Henry Hudson Parkway in Manhattan as an example, Giedion declared an ultimatum for the city which was to be bulldozed for parks along the way:

> The use of a new and larger scale in town planning which would coincide with the scale already being used in the parkway system is an imperative necessity for the salvation of the city. This scale must permeate all urban projects.[xxxvi]

Similarly, according to socio-economic perspective, an urban freeway design manual published by American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO). One of its telling paragraphs maintains:

> Expressways developed to desirable standards, with emphasis on ample right-of-way and landscape features, provide a park-like atmosphere and thereby enhance the value of adjoining property and the general area served by the arterial improvement.[xxxvii]

The dilemma in assessing this technological aesthetics has been best summarized in urban historian Matthew Gandy's assessment of the parkway system as established by Robert Moses and Gilmer Clarke in New York State. Gandy maintains that it is difficult to separate Moses' "aesthetic dimensions to his infrastructural projects"

from "the wider social and economic dynamics of urban change underpinned by their construction."[xxxviii] This separation is most salient in the catastrophic destructions caused by the urban freeways Moses had built in his later years, such as the Cross Bronx Expressway. His proposal for the Mid-Manhattan Expressway was even illustrated in AASHO's design manual.[xxxix]

The freeway is a two-way lane that holds up and drains the urban economy and culture at the same time. In retrospect, whether San Francisco needs a limited-access highway from downtown to the Golden Gate Bridge is still debatable. Here Halprin's contribution lies in his ability to reify the transitional quality of the urban freeway while diminishing its footprints within the city. As Halprin imagined it, a good urban road embodies his view of cities as process and change.[xl] Therefore, his design for the Panhandle Freeway is not only a lesson of coexistence between the outsider drivers and insider dwellers, but one that encourages the crossing over of permanent as well as intangible boundaries. Like many modernist architects and planners of his time, Halprin viewed physical design as an instrument of social change. Moreover, his social sensitivity was augmented by his keen observation and willingness to tackle the realities of urban problems. For cultural historian Marshall Berman, the separation of political and aesthetic messages after World War II, the so-called depoliticization of art, ceases to produce a dialogue between the modernization of the environment and modernist art and thoughts. In the Panhandle Freeway project, Halprin has embodied Berman's call for the necessity to imagine and engage the present in the life of the postwar cities and societies.[xli]

Notes on contributor(s)

A Ph.D. candidate at the Graduate Institute of Architecture at National Chiao-Tung University in Taiwan, Meng-Tsun Su also teach courses on the histories of landscape architecture in Tunghai University and Chung Yuan Christian University. His dissertation focuses on the inclusive and open-ended works of landscape architect Lawrence Halprin in the ways city and nature infiltrates each other in the environment of the San Francisco Bay Area.

Endnotes

[i] Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York, NY.: Routledge, 2006).
[ii] Joseph A. Rodriguez, *City Against Suburb: The Culture Wars in an American Metropolis* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1999), 24.
[iii] For the history of highway revolts and BART controversies, see Joseph Rodriguez, *City Against Suburb: The Culture Wars in an American Metropolis*, 21-74 and Katherine M. Johnson, "Captain Blake Versus the Highwaymen: Or, how San Francisco Won the Freeway Revolt," *Journal of Planning History* 8, no. 1 (2009), 56-83; For institutional segregation in relation to the planning of highway and BART in West Oakland, see Robert Self, "'to Plan our Liberation': Black Power and the Politics of Place in Oakland, California, 1965-1977," *Journal of Urban History* 26, no. 6 (September, 2000), 759-792; For controversies of the BART construction in downtown Berkeley, see Henry Malcolm Steiner, *Conflict in Urban Transportation : The People Against the Planners* (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1978), 33-48.
[iv] Rodriguez, *City Against Suburb : The Culture Wars in an American Metropolis*, 1999, 64-65.
[v] Catherine Bauer Wurster, *Housing and the Future of Cities in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Berkeley, Calif: Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, 1963), 26-29; For a urban history of the San Francisco Bay Area according to the ideal of a balanced regional development, See Mel Scott, *The San Francisco Bay Area; a Metropolis in Perspective* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1959).
[vi] Rodriguez, *City Against Suburb : The Culture Wars in an American Metropolis*, 32-36.
[vii] California Department of Public Works, *Freeway Studies: Panhandle Parkway and Crosstown Tunnel Corridors, Legislative Routes 2, 56 and 223, a Digest of Studies* (Sacramento: California Department of Public Works, California Division of Highways, 1964). Documents related to the Panhandle Freeway can be found in the Halprin Archive housed in the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania (office files 014.I.A.763-768, box 19; flat files 014.II.A.054).

[viii] Draft of letter from J. P. Sinclair to Board of Supervisors, City and County of San Francisco, [November 1962?], Halprin Archives, box 19, 014.I.A.763.
[ix] For brief discussions on *Telesis*, see Gwendolyn Wright, "A Partnership: Catherine Bauer and William Wurster" In *A Everyday Modernism: The Houses of William Wurster*, ed. Marc Treib (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1995); Marc Treib and Dorothée Imbert, *Garrett Eckbo : Modern Landscapes for Living* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1997).
[x] For details of DeMars and Osmundson's participation in the design of the Embarcadero Freeway, See Vernon DeMars, "The Embarcadero Freeway Vs. the Ferry Building Park: Selected Correspondence and News Clippings from August 1955 to December 1957" Frank Violich Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley. 1985.
[xi] See Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch and John R. Myer, *The View from the Road* (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1964).
[xii] Letter from Lynch to Halprin, dated 7 March 1962, Halprin Archives, box 19, 014.I.A.763.
[xiii] The thesis is proposed by Matthew Gandy in his analysis of Robert Moses' parkway systems in New York State. See Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 133-135.
[xiv] From 'Outline of May 1963 Presentation' document, Halprin Archives, box 19, 014.I.A.768.
[xv] Lawrence Halprin, *Freeways* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1966), 27.
[xvi] When consulted on the redevelopment of Chinatown in Honolulu, Hawaii, Halprin advised the inquirer to "read Jane Jacobs about the qualities of life in a city." Letter from Halprin to Lindley, dated 25 February 1966, Halprin Archives, box 194, 014.I.A.6050. Halprin was referring to the influential book by Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, Random House, 1961). In his typescript comment as a panelist in the meeting of the American Institute of Planners in December 1961, Halprin expressed great admiration for Herbert Gans' essay on community life. See untitled typescript, Halprin Archives, box 195, 014.I.A.6147; Herbert J. Gans, "The Balanced Community: Homogeneity Or Heterogeneity in Residential Areas?" *Journal of the American Planning Association* 27, no. 3 (1961), 176-184. Gans was to developed this thesis on the positive side of homogeneity in his important book on suburban culture. See Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967).
[xvii] 'How do we achieve visual heterogeneity' manuscript, Halprin Archives, 014.I.A.6147.
[xviii] Lawrence Halprin, *Freeways* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1966), 27.
[xix] See 'Report on the Aesthetics of Urban Freeways, Second Draft' document, dated 23 May 1963, Halprin Archives, box 19, 014.I.A.768.
[xx] See enclosures of letter from Halprin to Sinclair, dated 21 October 1963, Halprin Archives, box 19, 014.I.A.763, for comments on these road geometries.
[xxi] This is evidenced in the studies for a new interchange in Akron, Ohio. See Lawrence Halprin, *Freeways*, 104-105.
[xxii] Letter from Halprin to Sinclair, dated 21 October 1963.
[xxiii] Halprin, *Freeways*, 20-21.
[xxiv] 'AIA Northern California Chapter, San Francisco' typescript, dated 9 March 1964, Halprin Archives, box 195, 014.I.A.6164.
[xxv] See 'Notes on a Notation System' in Lawrence Halprin, *Notebooks, 1959-1971* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1972), 95-104; Lawrence Halprin, "Motation," *Progressive Architecture* 46 (July, 1965), 126-133.
[xxvi] 'Program of Phase I Study' document, dated 26 February 1962, Halprin Archives, box 19, 014.I.A.768.
[xxvii] Lawrence Halprin, *Cities* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1963), 212-213.
[xxviii] 'Recording of Actual and Perceptual Events' document, dated 10 October 1962, and the student works can be found in Halprin Archives, box 194, 014.I.A.6042.
[xxix] Lawrence Halprin, *Cities*, 208-209.
[xxx] Halprin, *Motation*, 126-133; A more detailed presentation of this example is included in Halprin, *Freeways*, 88-89.
[xxxi] 'Hawaii Governor's Conference on Natural Beauty and Community Appearance, Honolulu' typescript, dated 4 February 1966, Halprin Archives, box 195, 014.I.A.6164.
[xxxii] Halprin, *Freeways*, 17..
[xxxiii] Frederick Law Olmsted, "Report of the Landscape Architects and Superintendents" In *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted. Supplementary Series. Vol.1, Writings on Public Parks, Parkways, and Park Systems.*, eds. Charles E. Beveridge and Carolyn F. Hoffman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 112-146.
[xxxiv] Terence Young, *Building San Francisco's Parks, 1850-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 76-77.

[xxxv] Jacqueline Tatom, "Urban Highways and the Reluctant Public Realm" In *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, ed. Charles Waldheim (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), 182-183.
[xxxvi] Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge, Ma.: The Harvard University Press, 1947), 569.
[xxxvii] American Association of State Highway Officials, *A Policy on Arterial Highways in Urban Areas* (Washington D. C.: American Association of State Highway Officials General Offices, 1957), 138.
[xxxviii] Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*, 135.
[xxxix] American Association of State Highway Officials, *A Policy on Arterial Highways in Urban Areas*, 444.
[xl] Halprin, *Freeways*, 85-86.
[xli] Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 309.