

# Book Review: City Limits: Infrastructure, Inequality, and the Future of America's Highways

By Megan Kimble

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## Introduction

*“Highways are the anti-place . . . Where highways expands and where highways grow,  
place is literally destroyed.”*

—Hexel Colorado (qtd. in Kimble, 2024: 166)

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People cannot be economically mobile if they are not able to be mobile. People cannot access employment, healthcare, or education if they cannot get there. Transportation policy and decision-making has been dominated by white, male, able-bodied, cisgender engineers (Frisch, 2002; Lowe, 2021). As a result, many of the decisions made by transportation policymakers lack the grounding in racial justice or the life experiences of the most vulnerable users (Barajas, 2021; Frisch, 2002; Lowe, 2021; Lowe et al., 2023; Vigar, 2017).

In *City Limits*, Megan Kimble aims to pull back the curtain on transportation decision-making and the effects of those decisions as she takes the reader through the journey of how a highway gets built and who it violently destroys in the process. Divided into three sections, *City Limits: Infrastructure, Inequality, and the Future of America's Highways*, uses three Texas cities and freeways as case studies to detail the fight for and against Houston's I-45, Austin's I-35, and Dallas' I-345 through the eyes of several community members, elected officials, government staff, small businesses, and community organizations.

Some might think this is a book about today's fight for transportation justice and equity, but Kimble is clear that achieving transportation equity without first understanding the relationship—historically and presently—between space, race, and access to opportunities could lead to policy decisions that do not actually help the Black and Latino communities she centers in the book. Kimble details how highways contribute to residential segregation that has resulted in the spatial isolation of Black and Latino Texans. Though zeroing in on conflicts between people in Houston, Austin, and Dallas and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), *City Limits*, tells the universal American story of cars, space, highways and the violence they have enacted throughout this country.

### **Cars and Freedom**

Kimble starts with a familiar story of the automobile and its promise of access and freedom for Americans. In the chapter titled "Future," Kimble details the story of "a young industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes" and his goal to bring his vision of the future—with automobiles as the key to progress—to the 1939 New York World's Fair (Kimble, 2024: 21). Bel Geddes and others believed in the promise of automobiles to unlock the promise of "freedom, progress, and autonomy" (Kimble, 2024: 25).

Kimble then spends the rest of the book acknowledging the value of freedom, progress, and autonomy, but asking to whom those things are afforded through the building of this

country's highway system—and who is left behind, disregarded, and thrown away. As a journalist, Kimble is a master storyteller and uses deep ethnographic work to make the stories of people and places from Austin to Dallas to Houston interesting and easy to read. Yet, she does not hide her harsh and pointed critique that has long been documented by transportation and mobility scholars. Like them, Kimble argues that the legacy of cars is not simply one of freedom, but also one of pain, violence, and arrested mobility (Brown, 2023) for people of color.

Kimble's vivid description of how highway construction was harmful and both displaced communities of color and benefited the suburban white communities that had discriminatorily excluded Black people from moving there aligns with the stories told by other scholars and details generational tales of state harm (Archer, 2020; Avila, 2014; Taylor, 2019). She notes that throughout Texas history, "suburbs and highways were mutually reinforcing: The suburbs justified the highways, and the highways enabled the growth of the suburbs" (Kimble, 2024: 41). From the late 1950s to 60s (coinciding with the Civil Rights struggle), highways violently destroyed homes, families, and cultural centers (Barajas, 2021; Kimble, 2024; Mohl, 2004). Redlining maps were utilized to displace residents of color and make way and routes for new, more affluent, and whiter commuters (Archer, 2020; Avila, 2014; Barajas, 2021; Kimble, 2024).

### **Highway Legacy**

In Austin, we meet the families and staff of Escuelita del Alma and learn about their building (with a surprise Hollywood tie) that faces destruction due to the expansion of I-35. We see the worry, stress, and frustration that the threat of the school's second highway expansion-related move causes to the over 200 families who are members of their school community. In Dallas, we learn about I-345 and how Grammy award-winning artist and local, Erykah Badu, could not restore the Black historical cultural district anchored by the Forest Theater. She bought and renovated the space hoping to uplift and rebuild the thriving Black community that had long be displaced and forgotten but eventually had to abandon the investment as I-345 destroyed the neighborhood and displaced dedicated patrons. Finally, in Houston, we follow the stories of Elda and Jesus Reyes, O'Nari Guidry, and Modesti Cooper as they detail the generations of their families' lives that have been continually steamrolled and paved over by I-45's expansion and push for progress. They share their belief that TxDOT and the federal government care more about this so-called progress over Black and brown families, cultural centers, and lives.

What Kimble depicts through these stories is the underdevelopment of Black and Latino communities (Marable, 2015). Kimble alludes to what Marable (2015) states clearly: white wealth is built on the backs of Black and brown people through "slavery, segregation, and

discrimination” (p. xi). Said another way, for white residential areas to thrive, Black communities necessarily had to be destroyed and/or underdeveloped. Kimble focuses on how expansion, speed, and movement are part of the Texan identity—after all, everything is bigger in Texas.

Yet, the stories of highways go beyond Texas and must centralize the role of race. Black studies scholar George Lipsitz says that urban renewal and the building of the highway system was a systematic government effort to institutionalize a white group identity toward the “possessive investment in whiteness” (Lipsitz, 1995: 371). Perhaps this underdevelopment of Black and Latino communities is best described by sociologist Robert Bullard who states that highways resulted in communities of color receiving fewer benefits while enduring heavier burdens from our country’s policies around transportation, policy, investment, and infrastructure (Bullard et al., 2004). He states that highways continue to plague communities of color because of their effect on both the physical and mental health of those living close to them, with Black and Latino people shouldering many environmental injustices due to being isolated and segregated next to highways (Bullard et al., 2004; Quillian, 2014). Elda and Jesus Reyes, the staff of Escuelita, and the countless advocates introduced throughout *City Limits* embody stories full of these physical and mental health effects.

*City Limits* aligns with the work of Seamster and Purifoy (2021) and Pulido (2000), who like Lipsitz (1995) before them, described the way in which white people and communities thriving is dependent on Black and Latino people and communities barely surviving. Like Kimble, they all assert that transportation planning often requires violence against Black and Latino people and communities. Seamster and Purifoy (2021) assert an argument founded in racial capitalism that environmental harms to Black communities are “spatial violence” and “that such spoilage is what produces white places” (p. 110). This spoilage is certainly what has produced Houston, Austin, and Dallas and the highways that divide them.

### **Highway Revolts**

The heart of the book is the advocates fighting for a different future despite how hard it is to get past the fact that “[f]or most of us, highways simply *are*—the essential shape of the built environment, never to be unbuilt” (Kimble, 2024: 210). In his foundational book on highways, *The Folklore of the Freeway*, Avila (2014) details highway revolts. By the 1960s, Americans were reading urbanists like Herbert Gans, Lewis Mumford, and Jane Jacobs and began revolting as they questioned if the benefits of highways outweighed the harms (Avila, 2014; Mohl, 2004). Yet, these “freeway revolts” were often led by middle-class, affluent whites who did not work in coalition with Black communities (Avila, 2004). Instead, these groups often focused on environmental, preservation, and walkability ramifications of highway development (Avila, 2014). This meant ignoring long-standing destruction and disinvestment in urban communities of

color and previously discriminatory policies like redlining in favor of advocating to maintain the status quo of racial residential segregation (Avila, 2014).

That is not the goal of the new freeway fighters highlighted by Kimble. In Austin and Houston, the fighters pushed for alternatives to TxDOT's proposed highway expansions. Dallas activists fought to have an underutilized part of the highway removed and turned into a walkable and bikeable boulevard full of local businesses and opportunities for community interactions outside of an automobile. In all three cities, providing affordable housing and preventing displacement is a key part of the freeway fighters' agendas. Kimble follows these freeway fighters and tells the stories of local Texans leading the coalitions, Rethink35 and Stop TxDOT I-45, and national leaders like Beth Osborne of Transportation for America and Ben Crowther of Congress for New Urbanism (now the Policy Director at America Walks). She details these campaigns and policy thinkers as they fight freeways but also build community by knocking on their neighbors' doors, protesting at groundbreaking, showing up for public meetings, and celebrating victories at happy hours. Through these advocates, the reader is inspired and sees the hope and despair that causes a congestion of emotions in the lives of freeway fighters. The reader also sees people fighting to bring decision-making from behind closed doors as they demonstrate the power of approaching democracy and decision-making as something for and by the people on porches, in community centers, and in the streets.

## Conclusion

I enjoyed reading *City Limits* and appreciated the depth and care with which Kimble handled the personal stories of so many people on the frontlines of TxDOT's freeway violence. Yet, the interweaving of different stories, cities, projects, and players was at times hard to follow. It was a maze of different decisions and lawsuits, groundbreaking and funding delays, and generational dreams and nightmares. Perhaps this was intentional to give the reader the feeling of driving around upper and lower loops of freeways of destruction, making progress on a journey, but never being sure of why or how it must be such a struggle.

She ends the book by reminding the reader of the question that started *City Limits*: "If widening highways does not fix traffic, why were we spending billions of dollars to widen highways" (Kimble, 2024: 274)? The reader leaves the book understanding the concept of induced demand and the fact that the decisions made by those in power are "ideological" in nature as:

For nearly a century, we have been sold the idea that automobiles made us freer and more prosperous. The automobile affirmed the

American commitment to individualism—its very name means autonomous machine. A car gave you the ability to control your own personal destiny. What was more American than that? (Kimble, 2024: 274)

Violence. What is more American is violence. Kimble makes it clear that highways are violence. This book is a compelling tool for activists, urban planners, and elected officials hoping to understand the true toll that their built environment and policy decisions take on people's lives in ways that go beyond travel time. Megan Kimble offers several geographic examples of how the government built highways in ways that destroyed Black and Latino communities and culminated her case-study research by stating that: "[t]here is essentially no urban highway in the United States that didn't unleash...violence on Black and Hispanic people so that white people could get home faster. Over two decades, half a million homes were demolished and paved over" (Kimble, 2024: 17).

Once something is destroyed by a highway, there is no undoing it. Communities can be rebuilt, but community members, their homes, and their sense of place are forever lost. Creating a different ending to this all-American tale requires doing things differently. It requires understanding that "cities have always been layered places, colonized and disputed and reclaimed. It's all just construction" (Kimble, 2024: 210).

We must construct a different vision for our cities. We must change federal funding formulas that prioritize highways over active transportation. We must deprioritize speed and white mobility while centering the stories of people of color. We must cherish the rich culture of Black and Latino places and fight their demise by anti-place violent highways.

As Kimble says, ". . . once a highway is built, it is almost impossible to imagine it gone" (2024: 210). She knows that the advocates she highlighted throughout the nearly 300 pages of *City Limits* believe imaging a different future is both possible and necessary. They know this new future means changing the narrative that infrastructure is inevitable and permanent. This means allowing people to take up space in places that have too long been neglected and covered in cement. The last line of the book says that "[t]earing down a highway is just the beginning" (Kimble, 2024: 290). It may just be a place to start a new journey, but after reading *City Limits* it is clear this new journey is one of hope, powered by the people, and completely worthy of fighting freeways for—one that pushes the limits of our collective imaginations and changes the paradigms for how we view and build cities.

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