

# The Expressway Debate: Progress or Destruction?

## Projects in Baltimore and in New Orleans Stir Controversy

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A controversial design for an "18th century" elevated expressway to run along the edge of New Orleans's historic French Quarter, and a radical plan for a "21st century" bridge to link Baltimore's expressway system across the city's inner harbor, are focusing national attention on the urban expressway debate.

The debate, which has been growing in scope and intensity as the Interstate Highway System pushes toward its 1973 completion date, centers on the damage that critics contend urban freeways are doing to cities in terms of destruction of homes, neighborhoods, landmarks and natural features. New Orleans and Baltimore offer two of the country's most striking examples.

Few subjects have stirred more local controversy. Almost every city is split down the middle today between the need for new traffic arteries and the displacement and blight that the giant roadways seem to bring in their wake.

### Some Reject Freeways

Such cities as San Francisco have rejected their freeway, including 90 per cent Federal financing, and forced discontinuance of construction. Others, like Boston, have later regretted the destruction in the central city. Philadelphia carried its battle for a depressed and covered expressway to a top intergovernmental task force that was able to coordinate Federal departments for the desired results.

The New Orleans expressway, which has been under planning and attack for 10 years, will affect a historic district, the Vieux Carre, where its route crosses the edge of Jackson Square. The square is listed by the United States Department of the Interior as a National Historic Landmark.

The Baltimore bridge, which is to be part of the city's East-West Expressway, will change the appearance and use of the inner harbor.

The two projects are attracting national attention because they represent extremes of the expressway problem, and the lessons to be learned from their success or failure have country-wide implications. In both cities, controversy has been intensified by the solutions offered.

In New Orleans, the Louisiana State Department of Highways has released a design for the expressway, after 10 years of argument over the route. Preservationists do not believe that the road should be on the riverfront, adjacent, to the Vieux Carre, at all. In an attempt to make the elevated highway compatible with the oldest and most picturesque part of the city, and to counter the opposition, the Highway Department's design borrows some of the area's historical architectural details.

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### Reduces Effect

The proposal is meant to reduce the effect of the raised, six-lane expressway on the landmark quarter by giving the structure an "old French masonry" look, with 20-foot-high stone arches, wrought iron trim and ornamental copies of Jackson Square lamps. Opponents call the effect "window dressing" that does nothing to change the disruptive size or siting of the road.

The elevated expressway would permanently cut off the square from the open view of the Mississippi River, which is the traditional vista from Jackson Square, although the French Quarter is physically separated from the river by a floodwall and railroad tracks.

Opposition has come from local and national preservation and architectural groups, including the Congressionally chartered National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the American Institute of Architects.

The former president of the institute, Morris Ketchum, resigned from the Federal advisory board on highway beautification partly in protest against the New Orleans road. The expressway has been called "an act of barbarism" by John W. Lawrence, dean of the Tulane School of Architecture.

The city government is firm-

ly for the expressway, and wants to expedite its construction. It is backed by the Mayor, the City Planning Commission and the Central Area Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, which consider the present design an acceptable solution. They believe the highway is needed to clear the congested, narrow streets of the old city and bring new life to a deteriorating downtown.

With the State Department of Highways, they have consistently maintained that no other route is possible. It is the same riverfront road that was suggested to New Orleans by Robert Moses in 1946 who was then as now the chairman of New York's Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority.

A number of studies of the route made in the intervening years have been labeled by opponents as no more than rubber-stamp repetitions of the existing plan. They have called for fresh investigation and coordination of the city's total transportation needs and policies. Some planners have suggested correlation with waterfront development.

The Baltimore controversy represents the other side of the expressway coin. Unlike the one in New Orleans, the proposed solution is a radical departure from convention, rather than an attempt to make a massive engineering construction palatable with conventional disguises.

The startling inner harbor bridge design is the result of a study commissioned by Baltimore's Inner Harbor Steering Committee, a group of public officials and private interests, which hoped to find an alternative to a routine crossing proposed by city engineers. It was to have been a familiar, multi-level, low-span roadway that would have formed a visual wall across the inner harbor and blocked it to all but the smallest boats.

The "tension bridge" suggested by Lev Zetlin & Associates, consulting engineers of New York, is a completely new approach to highway design.

It would provide both a harbor crossing and a striking harbor landmark, making an asset out of what would have been a liability. But it would not solve the problem of layered, ground-cutting approaches at both ends of the bridge that still has local residents up in arms over neighborhood and landmark destruction.

The design's dramatic contemporary structure, which has been compared with abstract sculpture, derives from new engineering techniques that make

it possible to combine three parallel road spans of 14 lanes in a short, 600-foot length, with a soaring 70-foot water clearance. Cables of opposing, balanced tensions make a light roadbed and a steel cat's cradle held by canted, 220-foot high, Y-shaped abutments. Shown in the study in concrete, they would have a more delicate look in steel. The cost would be about \$14,600,000.

The spectacular bride has inspired a range of reactions from stunned shock to enthusiastic comment. Mayor Theodore R. McKeldin has called it an exciting symbol for the city, like the St. Louis arch.

"It could well become a trademark for Baltimore in this century and for centuries to come," he said.

It has also inspired the engineering consultants for the city's highway program, the J. E. Greiner Company, to come up with five alternate bridge designs for the original standard roadway that was proposed.

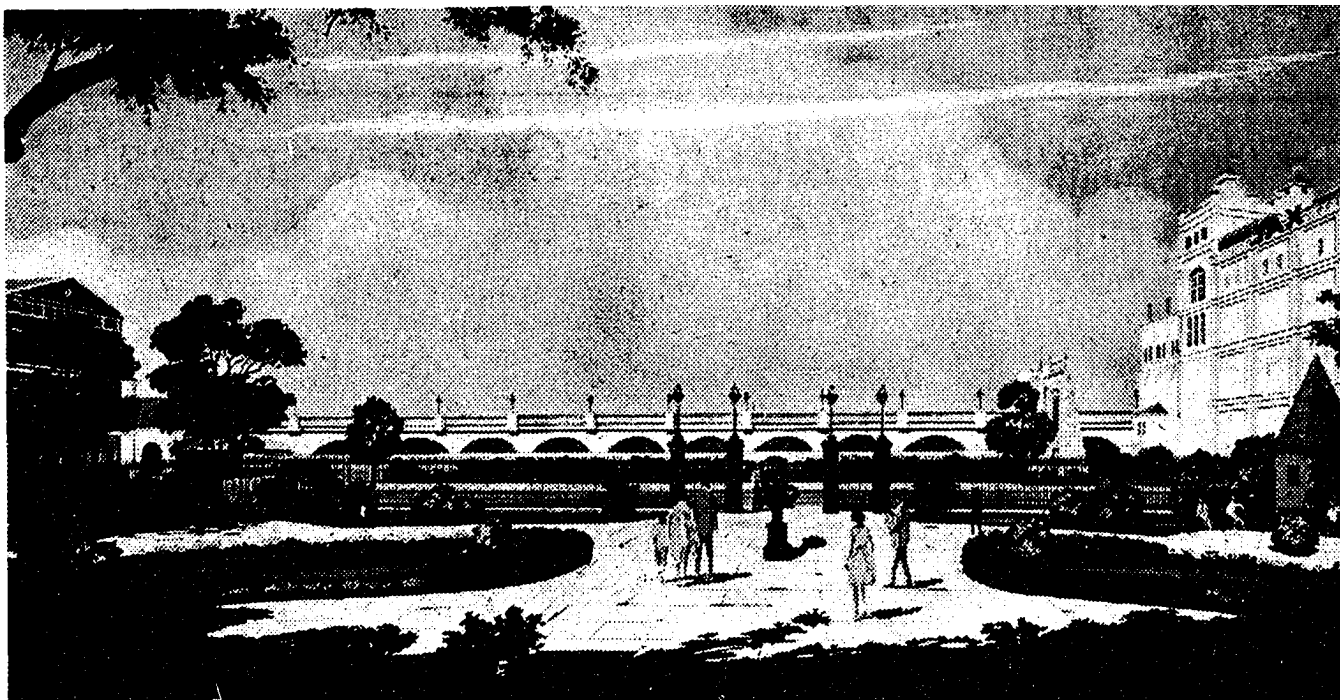
Eventually, all the designs will have to be submitted to the State Roads Commission and its design concept team for approval.

### Radical Road Design

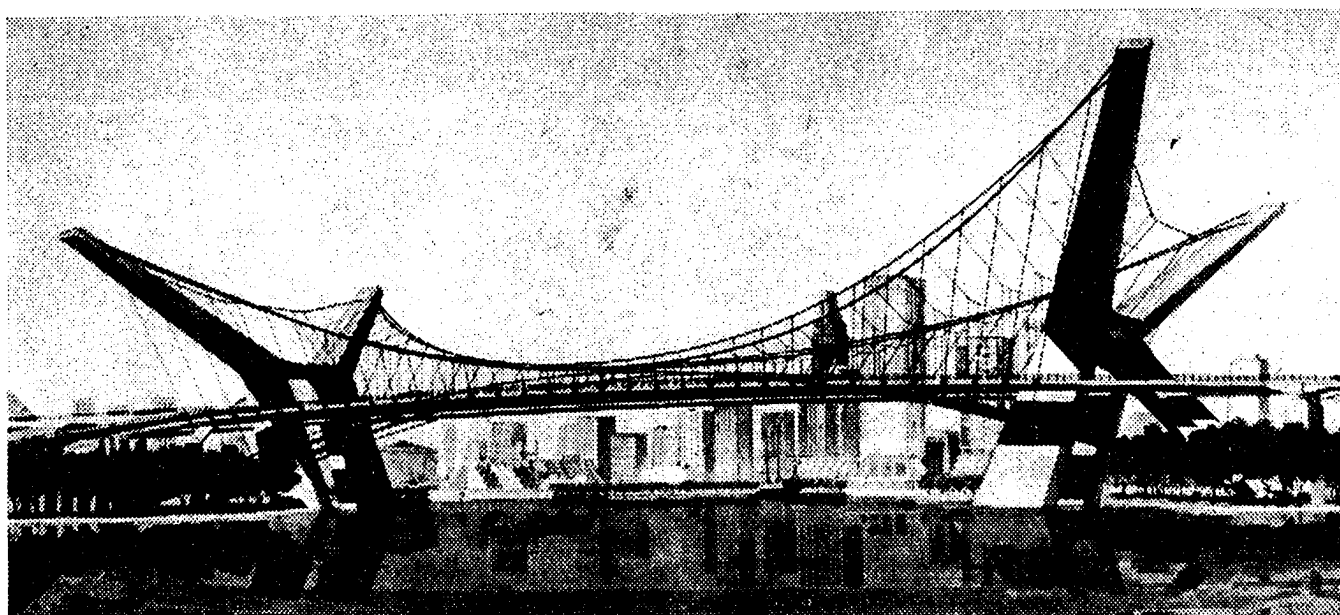
The design concept team represents another radical road design departure in Baltimore. It is the city's answer to the consultant criticism of standard highways done by highway department engineers. Appointed by the Maryland State Roads Commission, it consists of engineers, architects, landscape architects and graphics experts who will function not just as a review board, but who will initiate and determine the format for the entire road system, with special solutions for sensitive areas. The state engineers are there to be charged with carrying it out.

With a change in the state administration and a new Roads Commission chairman, the team is in process of reappointment.

At present, the bridge issue



New Orleans expressway, at rear in rendering, as it would appear crossing Jackson Square in the Vieux Carre



Rendering of the "tension bridge," designed by Zev Zetlin and Associates to span the inner harbor in Baltimore

not only awaits the new design concept team, but is tied up with the entire inner harbor urban renewal plan, which turns on action on road right-of-way acquisition by the City Council. The city's renewal plan consultants are Wallace, McHarg, Roberts & Todd of Philadelphia, architects and planners.

The New Orleans expressway awaits action by the Federal Bureau of Public Roads, which head a presentation against it by local citizens last week. It will, according to a spokesman for Lowell K. Birdwell, the bureau's administrator, "take a lot of study." The bureau confirmed that the decision would have to be heavily weighted by esthetic and environmental consideration, factors that critics contend have not been dominant in past Federal rulings.

Both the New Orleans and Baltimore decisions are being watched by planners and urban experts as a possible indication of a significant change of standards in urban highway design.