ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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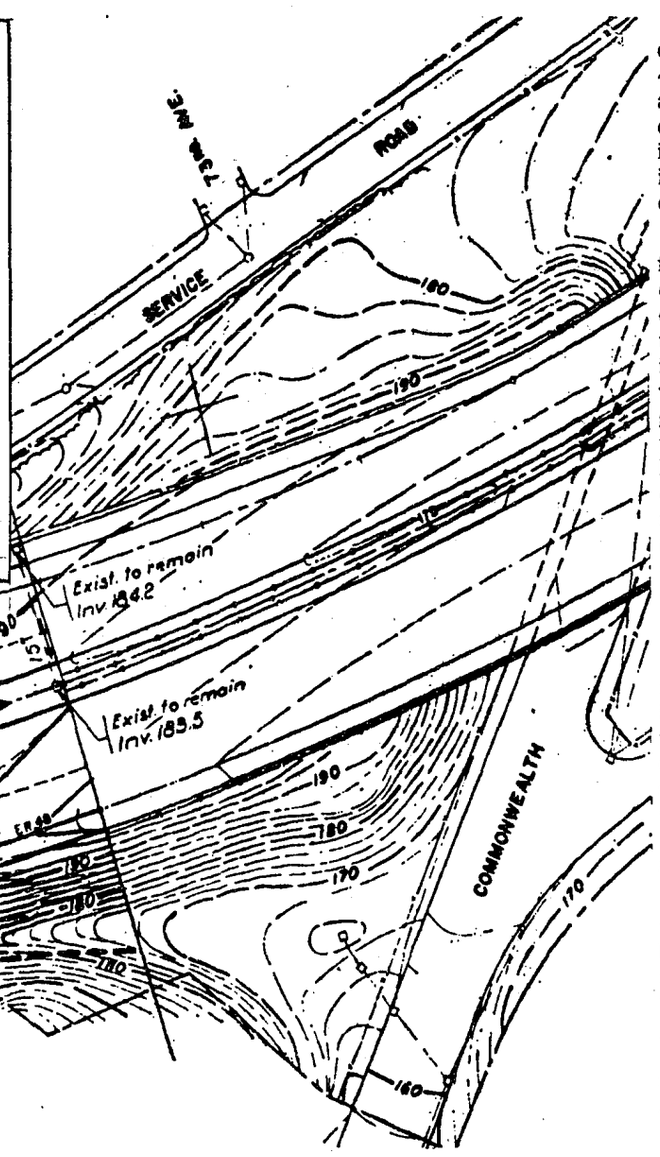
Believe It Or Not, Highways Don't Have To Be Ugly

Art / *"Today highways are prime, dramatic examples of the relatively new concept of environmental design."*



Sketch courtesy of New York State Dept. of Transportation

Highways can blend into their environments.

American cities and American roads are the two benchmarks of 20th-century American civilization. The expressways that lead in and out of cities have profoundly affected their growth and decline. They have also made the suburbs possible. Highways have created the contemporary cultural pattern of rapid personal mobility. Their routes have changed the landscape and cityscape with traumatic impact. In the process they have engendered controversies and crises that have led to a startled awareness of the highway as environment. Today highways are prime, dramatic examples of the relatively new concept of environmental design.

This awareness combines an awakened understanding and a demand for accountability. Now we look at the highway not only as a means of transportation but also in terms of conservation of beauty, natural resources, ecology, history and urban health. There is a raised consciousness learned from rural and urban damage, destruction and displacement. The environmental and human costs of the lesson have been high.

It will therefore surprise those who see the Federal Highway Administration as the villain that both the Highway Administration and the Department of Transportation have been thinking about these matters for seven years. In each of those years, DOT has held a national competition on "The Highway and Its Environment," devoted specifically to sensitivities of highway design. Some years have drawn more than a thousand entries from as many as 50 states. The seventh competition has just been judged under the direction of Marilyn H. Johnson, program coordinator and landscape architect of the Highway Administration's Landscape Branch. A photographic exhibition of the prizewinners is on display in the lower plaza of the McGraw-Hill Building.

The obvious must be stated, which is that DOT and the Highway Administration have not always been effective proselytizers for environmental design. It also must be stated that concern at the top has not filtered down with any consistency to other levels.

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Highway design is actually done at the state level by state agencies. Some states, such as California and Oregon, rack up more successes and sensitivities than others. But state programs have had to be reversed at the Federal level with impressive frequency, as in the case of the damaging impact of a proposed New Orleans expressway on the Vieux Carré.

Citizen groups have become extraordinarily shrewd about fighting bad plans; and there are even very professional brochures on how to do it at every step of the road-building process. Until the juggernaut is halted, people will continue to chain themselves to trees and throw themselves in front of bulldozers (a new American folk custom). DOT would have to be pretty dumb not to get the message. If there were any doubts left, the requirements of an environmental impact statement after the passage of the 1969 Environmental Policy Act made the message clear.

The annual DOT competition reviews 10 design categories, including outstanding sections of highways in their rural or urban settings; the best bridges, tunnels, overpasses and other structural features; superior safety rests; examples of preservation of nature, wildlife or historic sites; good roadside landscaping; effective multiple uses and integration of mass transit, and non-eyesore service stations.

There are citations for such things as proper placement of roads in the contours and features of the natural landscape, grading of slopes to blend with existing topography, and appropriate retaining walls and structures compatible with the site. Examples range from spectacular scenic routes to the environmental relocation of desert tortoises in advance of road construction. But the basic point is that the impact of a road on its setting can be esthetically or sociologically or environmentally good or bad, depending on the details and niceties of its design and execution.

Among this year's winners are two from Oregon—a handsome concrete bridge and a bikeway-walkway adjacent to a highway. Rural honors go to Colorado for a road that is at once dramatic and sensitive to the open country in which it is set. Birmingham, Ala., receives an urban accolade for an in-town roadway with the least disturbing impact on its community. Also cited are the fine multiple use of a right-of-way in Louisville, Ky., and a stone arch bridge of 1813 preserved in Maryland.

The impact of highways in this country cannot be overestimated: 42,064 miles, or 99 per cent of the 42,500-mile Interstate Highway System begun in 1956, are either completed or under construction, with a completion deadline of June, 1979. The cost to date is $53.23 billion, and another $13-billion worth of miles is in the works. The Federal government pays 90 per cent of the costs, and localities pay the remainder.

Unfortunately, other costs have been equally formidable. By the 1960's a complex pattern of violation of man and nature had become evident. It was painfully clear that the areas least able to bear the damage were the most vulnerable, and that environmental losses were irreversible. Tenuously stable low income neighborhoods were slashed through to spare the high rent districts; ghettos were lacerated in preference to disturbing the politically powerful middle class areas. More low income housing was destroyed by road building than had been constructed by Federal low-income housing programs. The movement of traffic through cities was favored over the preservation of communities and neighborhoods, and parks, waterfronts, wildlife refuges and historic areas were lost.

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The critical problem of how to integrate a highway constructively into the nation's communities and culture is very complex. In an effort to solve it, a joint design team approach has been developed. It brings together engineers, cost accountants, architects, landscape architects, sociologists, naturalists, historians and other specialists. As long as there are dismembered communities for every prize-winning Adirondack throughway, such collaborative answers must be sought.

Right now, with the downturn in the economy, environmental issues are being devalued. We are moving back to the philosophy that roads make jobs and jobs make money and money makes the country turn. Whether the environment will be torn asunder, as it has been in the past, is a matter of public conscience and concern.

"The Highway and Its Environment" at the McGraw-Hill Building, lower plaza, through Nov. 14. Open from 11 A.M. to 6 P.M. Mondays through Saturdays.