

Graeme MacKenzie

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Prof. Gene Gort

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Convincing America to Gut it's Cities

This paper will examine the effects of propaganda on the changing urban landscape in the latter half of the twentieth century. It will label those who were responsible for advocating changes and their motivation for doing so. This paper will deliver a convincing argument that the changes brought about were not beneficial to America and were motivated by corporate gain over the interests of American citizens.

As the automobile became a staple of the American lifestyle, changes began to occur all across the country. One of the most obvious changes that was occurring was the flight of city dwellers to the suburbs. The greater mobility that automobiles provided meant that people could commute to work from outside the city they were employed in. This caused cities to lose large portions of their population to the suburbs. Another change that was occurring as a result of the rise of the automobile was the construction of the interstate system which would allow people to cross the country with ease. This new focus on the automobile was also apparent in cities which widened their streets to accommodate cars and erected parking lots and garages to store them. Losing so many people to the suburbs made some cities reevaluate their structure and attempted to reinvent themselves to be more attractive to those lured to the suburbs; they began to implement what is today labeled *Urban Renewal*.

While some cities would benefit from Urban Renewal, many would find themselves in a worse position

than before, with highways dividing cities and neighborhoods destroyed by renewal. In Boston almost a third of the city would be leveled to make way for the interstate and high-rise building; destroying many historic areas in one of America's oldest cities. In Hartford, the highway would bisect the city and create a socio-economic border which it has yet to recover from. In Niagara Falls, urban renewal would ruin the once thriving downtown area with questionable planning decisions.

Why did American cities opt to adopt strategies of urban renewal? How were they convinced that such destructive practices would benefit them? And above all else who was trying to convince America? And for what purpose? The answer is fairly easy: the American automotive industry and architectural firms. From the destruction of America's trolleys to the construction of the highways system, the American Automotive companies have had a vested interest in the progress of America. Alexander Wilson in his book *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* hits on the automotive industry's ruthless marketing strategies, highlighting their implementation of planned obsolescence and aggression against mass transit. Implementation of the highway system was good for sales. Having these super roads that take people great distances fast and easily, makes the prospect of buying a new car very attractive. And not just the Auto companies are to blame, so too are the companies that supply the materials needed to build these roads, or the tires that will drive on them and so too are the firms that built from the ruins of destroyed neighborhoods.

An easy way for companies to get their point across and convince the people that the highway system is in their best interest is to make a Public Service Announcement or "PSA." A short video documenting the idea and success of cities that have adopted urban renewal. Throughout this paper we will be looking at PSA's that tried to convince Americans that the arrival of highways and the redevelopment of their neighborhoods was in their best interests. These PSA's while presented as documentaries are

nonetheless a vehicle to gain support for the interests of the companies that produced them. Many of these films use selective truths, that is telling the truth but avoiding the whole picture. An example of a selective truth would be showing only things that help your point, but not show anything that detracts from your point even if you are aware of it. In this case it could be a film extolling the virtues of urban renewal but avoid topics such as the destruction of historic areas or the removal of usually lower income families from their homes.

A discussion of this method can be found in Claire Richard's piece *Documentary / Propaganda : Porous Zones*. Which compares the 1935 Nazi propaganda piece *Triumph of the Will* with a British PSA from the same year called *Housing Problems* advocating for slum clearances. *Triumph of the Will* depicts a united Germany fully supporting the Nazi party despite infighting between the Sturmabteilung and the Schutzstaffel paramilitary organizations at the time. *Housing Problems* employs the same tactic by not interviewing the builders of the slums or city officials, by not taking the lives of those living in the slums nor offering a plan for improvement of their lives into account and offering only one answer to the problem they present to the viewer (the answer is: clear the slums so the film's sponsor The Gas Light and Coke Company can sell more gas to people in the buildings that will replace the slums.)

1965's *No Time for Ugliness*, made by the American Institute of Architecture tries to make a convincing point for urban renewal. The PSA tries it's best to convince the viewer that the roads of the time were chaotic, scary places matching scenes of congestion and chaos with a foreboding soundtrack. The video cites examples of urban renewal projects across the country, from Washington DC, San-Francisco, San Antonio and Hartford. The video makes a strong point of trying to incorporate the natural features of the area to be redeveloped, citing Washington DC's Potomac river as an underutilized feature. They

make a point to mention that it is hidden from the public's view and a place of constant littering. It is then suggested that rivers and people should intertwine and use San Antonio Texas's riverfront walk as an example. This is ironically right before the video moves on to Hartford, Connecticut a city that stands in stark contrast to the movie's pro-riverfront stance. Hartford would lose it's Park River that used to wind through it's heart in order to prevent flooding, but also to use the land it covered to build a highway. That same highway (Interstate 91) runs parallel to the Connecticut river, the presence of this highway has caused the riverfront to be cut off for many decades to Hartford's pedestrians until recently.

Of course Hartford's segment doesn't mention it's river problems, instead focusing on the then new Constitution Plaza; an elevated pedestrian path that sought to separate pedestrians from vehicles. The video tries to speak of it's perceived "variety" and it's pedestrian purpose. These statements seen from today's standpoint are night and day in comparison. The construction of Constitution plaza came at the expense of the Front Street district, a historic Italian neighborhood who's destruction is still heart felt today (with the city trying to emulate some elements of it in a new Front Street project.) The video shows us the hotel at Constitution Plaza which is today slated for demolition, having been abandoned for many years. The variety and beauty that is spoken of is a tough sell given the presence of three puce colored towers across the street. It's elevated pedestrian plaza is a failure with it's paths empty and it's defining features removed over the years. It's intention to separate the pedestrians from the streets is now an admonished idea, it being found to be a detriment to a successful downtown area.

The piece on Hartford is followed by a piece on Georgetown and the success it found by revitalizing it's old houses. This is an ironic followup to Hartford given not only the previously discussed Front Street demolition but also the destruction of many of the city's greatest treasures such as the Hartford Public

High School building, The YMCA building and many others destroyed by urban renewal and the introduction of the interstate through Hartford. It is a point felt even today as historic buildings have been demolished in more recent years with the intention of putting modern skyscrapers in their place. While this did occur in some instances, in many instances the buildings were destroyed and nothing was built in their place; leaving an empty lot. One might think to Hartford again during the close of the PSA which asks how one might see the cities shown in the film ten, twenty or even forty years in the future; in Hartford's case not so well.

These mid 20th century PSA's often use questionable data and reasoning for explaining the need to redevelop cities, films such as *Our Oakland City* from 1950 which chronicles the urban redevelopment of the Eastlake neighborhood of Oakland California. The PSA explains that without upgrading the existing buildings, the neighborhood will deteriorate. An interesting point considering the success of some cities due to their historic buildings attracting residents and tourist alike. We see buildings that aren't obviously blighted held up as examples for the need to redevelop and see victorian homes replaced with bland modern homes.

Not all PSA's of the time are pro-automobile, as demonstrated in the 1950's piece *Lets go to Town* from General Motor's Truck and Coach Division. The film opens with a brief piece about Boston's congestion, ironic given that the city has only recently repaired some of the damage that was brought to Boston due to the highway being put through the city. This piece actually advocates for less parking and not widening roads in cities to make way for the automotive age. This is of course because they are trying to sell their busses as a method of public transportation, but it is interesting considering their parent company's primary business is the sale of cars and especially considering the piece that General Motors put out separately which is discussed later in this article. This piece breaks the trend of

advocating for the transformation of the city to fill the car's needs, saying that widening roads, parking on the streets, putting in expressways leads to more congestion. It is also of note that they stress the importance of the pedestrian experience and “moving people, not cars.” They reject the notion of parking lots, stating that they are wastes of money and a bad use of land.

This anti parking sentiment is in stark contrast to 1954's *Give yourself the Green Light* from General Motors which provides a completely different point of view, saying that parking is as important as shelf space to a business and the best investment a town can make. This complete change in message speaks to General Motor's use of these PSA's to sell the idea of making America more car friendly, not improve people's lives. *Give Yourself the Green Light* opens by calling the highway system the “American Dream” something that would be repeated during the film's close. In a further departure from *Lets go to Town*, this piece advocates widening roads, complaining that they were built with horses in mind, not cars; saying that our forebears “didn't dream big enough” when they were planning our cities.

Give Yourself the Green Light paints a grim picture of our current road system, making it seem that the then current roads were dangerous and in a bad state of repair. They act out a scene where a tractor and a milk man almost collide, not due to their shown irresponsible driving but due to the condition of the roads. The PSA then invokes the “think of the children” card by switching to a school bus driver who complains that the roads are unsafe and put children at risk, we are meant to think that without upgrading our road system we are putting children in danger. This method of guilt tripping the audience is an easy way to manipulate the audience to come around to the idea of putting down more roads.

This love of roads is also reflected in 1956's *Highway Hearing* from Dow Chemical Company. This

PSA tells the story of a town divided when it is decided that the highway that goes through the center of town will soon be upgraded to an interstate that will go around the town. The video opens at the ribbon-cutting ceremony of the highway. The scene is highly patriotic with a marching band playing the star-spangled banner and flags flying all about. The construction of the interstate is being portrayed as a patriotic endeavor. The scene then switches to a town hall scene with a representative from the government explaining the plans for the pending interstate. A PSA is shown in this scene which explains all the economic benefits that the new interstate will bring, saying the interstate is “the solution to all the problems,” never saying what problems they were. The government rep ends his presentation explaining that the highway will bypass the center of town, instead going around it through farmland. The town becomes irritable at this bit of information and wants it to run through town to get the business of passerby’s. This is an interesting gripe considering the effect that running highways through towns and cities has had in Boston, Hartford, Cleveland, Worcester and many other cities that have experienced the debilitating effect of running an interstate through their town lines. In most cases it severed one part of a city from another.

Perhaps the most curious response comes from the farmer who's land is to be taken from him to erect the highway. His gripe is not that he will be losing his land, but that he won't have access to the road. The people in this PSA's problem isn't that they hate that the highway is going to be cutting through their land, their problem is that they love roads and want to use them. Towards the end of the video the local school teacher stands up (and again we see the “think of the children” tactic) saying how if the highway is erected their children will live in a better world where they can cross the country with ease and how they will be safer with the interstate going around them. The viewer is made to feel again, that by opposing the construction of the interstate they are opposing the potential success of children. The school teacher is rewarded for her speech by being able to cut the ribbon on the day the highway opens,

she cuts it and is mobbed by children. This suggests to the viewer that advocacy of building the interstate system will be rewarding to those who stand up for it. During the entire town hall scene we are shown a woman knitting. She doesn't say a word throughout the entire piece, but we see her opinion change throughout the course of the film. We are meant to sympathize with the knitting lady, this film hopes she will influence the viewer with her silence and observation; a mirror of our own.

One of the more noteworthy PSA's for urban renewal is 1968's *A City Reborn*. Which was shown at the White House as an example of the potential for urban renewal. The PSA was made by Victor Gruen Associates, an architecture firm noted for their plans to fight suburbanism by making outdoor shopping malls at the center of cities. This piece deals with just that, using the Fulton Mall in Fresno California as an example of Urban Renewal working. *A City Reborn's* main point is that cities must be fun places to be a pedestrian in order to combat the flight of Americans from cities to the suburbs. The piece says that without revitalization, urban environments will become ghost towns. This is a debatable point as the use of urban renewal has in multiple instances caused cities to become ghost towns that people don't want to go to due to poor planning, putting the needs of cars ahead of pedestrians.

The Ironic thing about this PSA is that Victor Gruen, the man that was attempting to fight suburbanism was the man who invented the shopping mall; an invention that took shoppers out of downtown and to suburbia where they could get all their shopping done in one place. Victor Gruen is just as guilty of swaying public opinion to benefit his business interests as General Motors or Dow.

The PSA's mentioned are examples of how companies used the prospect of urban renewal as a method for reaching their own goals, we see how architecture firms tried to make convincing arguments for the construction of new buildings throughout America; something that would keep them in business. We

also see the interests of the automotive companies like General Motors and companies that supply materials for the highways like Dow Chemical, we see their arguments for and against parking depending on what they are trying to sell.

These films speak to the control that companies possess by influencing the decisions of the masses by making one-sided arguments that, taken at face value, seem to be the right course of action. As a country, we must remain ever vigilant in the face of the control that corporations can assume when they want something done.

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