Interstating Miami: Urban Expressways and the Changing American City

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In the 1950s, civic leaders in Miami leaped at the opportunity to solve local traffic problems with an urban expressway funded by federal and state dollars. They envisioned the new expressway system as a huge building project that might rejuvenate the languishing central business district. They also saw it as an opportunity to reorganize Miami's racial space. When Interstate-95 eventually arrived in downtown Miami in the mid -1960s, it ripped through the inner-city black community of Overtown, destroying thousands of housing units and leveling the black business district. A massive midtown highway interchange alone took up 40 blocks and demolished the housing of some 10,000 people. The bulldozing of Overtown's shotgun houses and concrete apartments triggered a reorganization of Miami's residential color line. Most of those displaced ended up settling in the more distant black community of Liberty City, which in turn began pushing out its boundaries into adjacent, white working-class residential areas. The interstate and related urban policy initiatives such as public housing and urban renewal thus produced a sprawling new "second ghetto" in northwest Miami-Dade County—a policy objective dating back to the 1930s. By the end of the expressway-building era, little remained of Overtown to recall its days as a thriving center of African American community life, and when it was widely known as the "Harlem of the South." Interstating Miami brought some devastating, long-term consequences.[1]

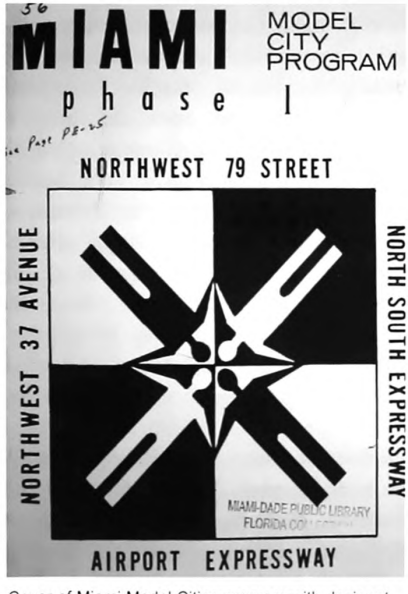
The Interstates and the Cities

What happened in Miami was not a unique outcome. In fact, construction of the massive, 42,500-mile interstate network in the late

1950s and early 1960s set into motion a vast process of urban change across the nation. Within metropolitan areas, interstate expressways linked central cities with sprawling postwar suburbs. They facilitated automobile commuting but undermined what was left of inner-city mass transit. The new urban interstates initially stimulated downtown physical development, but soon spurred rising, edge-city empires of suburban shopping malls, office parks, and sprawling residential subdivisions, as well. Huge expressway interchanges, cloverleafs and on-off ramps created enormous areas of dead and useless space in the central cities. The bulldozer and the wrecker's ball went to work on the American city, permanently altering metropolitan landscapes. Daniel P. Moynihan, an early critic of the interstates, wrote in 1970 that the highway program was one "of truly transcendent, continental consequence." It was a program, he predicted, that would have "more influence on the shape and development of American cities," on population distribution, industrial location, job opportunities and race relations than any other governmental initiative of the time. Moynihan also contended that "appalling mistakes were made." In retrospect, those mistakes are now apparent: they include the destruction of wide swaths of urban housing, the dislocation of people by the tens of thousands, and the uprooting of entire communities in the name of progress and automobility. By the mid-1960s, when interstate construction was well underway, it was generally believed that the new highway system would "displace a million people from their homes before it [was] completed."[2]

In the early years of the interstates, people dislocated by highway construction had few advocates in the government's road-building or housing agencies. One federal housing official noted in 1957: "It is my impression that regional personnel of the Bureau of Public Roads are not overly concerned with the problems of family relocation." As the National Commission on Urban Problems later put it, "the position of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads and the State highway departments was that their business was to finance and build highways," and that any social consequences of highway construction were the responsibility of other agencies. But during most of the expressway-building era, little was done to link the interstate highway program with urban renewal or new public housing construction, or even with

relocation assistance for those displaced. Financial advisors in the Eisenhower administration rejected federal housing assistance for those displaced by highway projects as too expensive. Such assistance was required for those uprooted by federal urban renewal projects, but not federal highway construction. Federal policy makers seemed undisturbed by the inconsistency. Eventually, Congressional legislation of 1962 required state highway departments to provide relocation assistance to displaced families and businesses, but the payments were minimal, and the law did not take effect until mid 1965. By that time, much of the damage to urban neighborhoods had already been done.[3]



Cover of Miami Model Cities program with designated northwest transition area, ca.1968. Courtesy of Raymond Mohl.

Not surprisingly, the neighborhoods destroyed and the people uprooted in the process of highway building tended to be overwhelmingly poor and black. A general pattern emerged, promoted by state and federal highway officials and by private agencies such as the Urban Land Institute (ULI), of using highway construction to eliminate "blighted" urban neighborhoods and redevelop valuable inner-city land. Created in 1936 as a research and lobby organization for big downtown real estate interests, the ULI played a major role in crafting the urban redevelopment policy contained in the important Housing Act of 1949. Urban redevelopment, and later urban renewal, relied on the "blight" argument to justify leveling and then rebuilding expansive central city areas. Thomas H. MacDonald,

director of the Bureau of Public Roads during the formative years of the interstate system, contended that urban expressways would eliminate blight and slums as well as traffic congestion. Combating blight with highways was also the policy of New York's influential public works builder, Robert Moses. Highway engineers and downtown redevelopers had a common interest in eliminating low-income housing and, as one redeveloper put it, freeing "blighted" areas "for higher and better uses." For most big-city mayors, planning officials and civic leaders, urban redevelopment and highway building seemed important ways to "save" the central cities, already under pressure from postwar decentralization of population, retailing and industry.[4]

The destruction of inner-city housing as a result of highway building, urban renewal and other redevelopment schemes created a housing crisis for blacks and other low-income urban residents in the 1950s and 1960s. In most cities, the forced relocation of people from central-city housing triggered a spatial reorganization of residential neighborhoods throughout metropolitan areas. Rising black population pressure meant that dislocated blacks began moving into neighborhoods of "transition," generally working-class white neighborhoods on the fringes of the black ghetto, whose residents were moving to the suburbs and where low-cost housing predominated. This process of postwar residential mobility and change underlay the creation of what has now been called, by historian Arnold Hirsch and others, the "second ghetto."[5]

Whitening Miami in the Pre-Interstate Era

In many respects, Miami's interstate experience mirrored national patterns. Highway construction left Overtown decimated as a functioning community, while the emerging, more distant second ghetto of Liberty City absorbed most of those displaced. Similar things happened in many other cities. What was unique about Miami, however, was that the destruction of Overtown in the expressway era represented the culmination of a three-decade campaign on the part of white civic leaders to move the entire black community outside Miami's city limits—an improbable and ultimately unsuccessful effort to make Miami an entirely white city.

The racial and spatial restructuring that characterized Miami in the 1950s and 1960s had a long history. From the city's beginnings in 1896, African Americans were racially zoned—that is, they legally were forced to live only in designated residential spaces, a common pattern throughout the South. New ideas about racial control of Miami's urban space emerged in the depression-era 1930s. At that time, the city had a relatively small central business district, hemmed in by the Miami River and Biscayne Bay on the south and east, and by black Overtown on the north and west. Miami's political and business leaders sought to recapture black inner-city living space for what they considered higher, better and whiter uses. Applying contemporary racist conceptions of slum clearance and city planning, they hoped to "resettle" African Americans in "model towns" in undeveloped fringe areas of Dade County. By pushing the blacks out, the Dade County Planning Board wrote in 1936, "present Negro slum sections can give place gradually to the logical white development indicated by their geographical and other potentialities." In a stunning articulation of this agenda, powerful Miami civic leader George Merrick proposed making Miami a completely white city. In a 1937 speech to local realtors, Merrick urged "a complete slum clearance effectively removing every Negro family from the present city limits." Merrick also used his position as chairman of the Dade County Planning Board to promote the white-city plan.[6]

Over the next several decades, Miami officials developed various strategies for carrying out the prescriptions of Merrick and others for racially inspired city planning. In the late 1930s, for example, the New Deal public housing program provided a new opportunity for black removal from downtown Miami. When local authorities completed the large Liberty Square public housing project for blacks in 1937, it was located five miles northwest of downtown Miami and mostly outside municipal limits. Civic leader John Gramling confided to federal housing officials that the goal was to "remove the entire colored population" to the Liberty Square area. In fact, Liberty Square, as well as subsequent nearby public housing projects eventually did become the nucleus of a sprawling new black community known as Liberty City. Other New Deal housing agencies,

such as the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), also contributed to changing racial patterns. Through its appraisal policies, developed locally by a committee of Miami realtors and bankers, the HOLC "redlined" the city's black community and nearby white "transitional" neighborhoods, hastening the physical decay of the inner-city area. The FHA advocated residential segregation as a means of maintaining community stability, setting itself up, according to scholar Charles Abrams, "as the protector of the all-white neighborhood." During the New Deal era, Miami's civic leaders, city planners, and housing officials developed a racial agenda that over time pushed or pulled many Overtown residents away from downtown Miami and put greater distance between white and black communities.[7]

Plans to whiten Miami did not end with New Deal housing agencies. Numerous proposals emerged in subsequent years to move remaining blacks out of Overtown, thus permitting expansion of the downtown business district. In the 1940s, a series of racial zoning decisions by the Dade County Commission opened new residential space for blacks in outlying areas of metropolitan Miami to accommodate black population growth. In 1945, *The Miami Herald* reported on plans for "the creation of a new Negro village that would be a model for the entire United States." A Miami slum clearance program in 1946 called for the removal of African Americans from the city's central area to a distant new housing development west of Liberty City. In the 1950s, the Dade County Commission, working with the Miami Housing Authority, concentrated new black public housing projects in the Liberty City area. By the early 1950s, apartment owners on the white fringes of Liberty City began renting to blacks, triggering bombing incidents by the Ku Klux Klan but also a rapid racial turnover of nearby neighborhoods. A tacit agreement among city and county officials, real estate developers and some black leaders designated the northwest quadrant of Dade County for future black settlement. By the late 1950s, the making of Miami's second ghetto was well underway.[8]

Interstate-95 and its Consequences

None of these racially inspired planning efforts fully succeeded in completely eliminating Overtown and opening the way for expansion

of Miami's Central Business District. In the late 1950s, however, the coming of the interstate highway program provided a dramatic new opportunity to reshape the city spatially and racially. The interstate highway legislation of 1956 provided that 90 percent of construction costs would be paid by the federal government, only 10 percent by the states, but that the roads would be planned and built by the state highway departments, with some federal oversight. Through the mid-1950s, Florida officials closely followed progress of federal interstate highway legislation in Congress. As early as 1955, state road department head Wilbur E. Jones submitted a report to Governor LeRoy Collins on "The Highway Problem," anticipating the positive economic benefits of expressways in the state's largest cities. With passage of the interstate legislation in June 1956, Florida highway officials moved quickly in contracting with private engineering firms to design urban expressway systems in Tampa, St. Petersburg, Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Orlando and Miami. For Miami, they selected the nationally recognized firm of Wilbur Smith and Associates to locate and design the exact route of Interstate-95 into downtown Miami.[9]

Throughout the South, and in the North as well, racial agendas often dictated interstate routing. In Miami, Wilbur Smith's engineers worked with Florida highway officials and local civic elites in developing the Overtown route of what was originally called the North-South Expressway (later Interstate-95). The Wilbur Smith firm rejected an earlier expressway plan, developed in 1955 by Miami city planners, that utilized an abandoned rail corridor into downtown Miami. Instead, the new expressway plan shifted the highway corridor several blocks to the west. The purpose, as the Wilbur Smith report noted, was to provide "ample room for the future expansion of the central business district in a westerly direction." But shifting the downtown expressway to the west now placed the route squarely through Miami's large black inner-city residential district. Most ominously, the highway planners located a massive, elevated four-level, midtown interchange, connecting with an East-West Expressway, at the center of Overtown's black business district. The East-West Expressway (later Interstate-395) sliced through other sections of Overtown on its way east to Miami Beach and west to the airport and developing suburbs. The Wilbur Smith expressway plan

tapped into the long campaign dating back to the 1930s of moving all the blacks out of Overtown and making Miami a white city. Thirty years of racially driven politics lay behind the Wilbur Smith expressway plan.[10]

Public disclosure of the Wilbur Smith plan in November 1956 touched off years of local debate over the merits of the Miami expressway system. Advocates of the new highway plan emphasized the theme of progress. Miami's major newspapers and television stations quickly endorsed the expressway plan, as did the governing commissions of Dade County, Miami, and Miami Beach. Local politicians, businessmen and developers rallied in support of the highway plan. The expressway was good for business and tourism, it was argued, and it would solve Miami's intensifying traffic congestion problems. Local realtors liked the expressway because, as one wrote to Florida highway director Wilbur Jones, it would "stimulate building in this downtown area, which is vital at this time." For a Miami Beach businessman, nothing was "more important to the prosperity and well-being of the citizens of Florida than the interstate highway program." Miami's powerful civic elite lined up in support of the new expressway.[11]

Opposition to the state's expressway plan flared up almost immediately, mostly among white property and small business owners. In February 1957, over 500 angry citizens showed up at a state road department public hearing on the Miami expressway. A transcript of the hearing revealed that at least 50 citizens expressed concern about losing their property, the large number of street closings that would be required, and the negative impact of elevated portions of the expressway. A week later, according to *The Miami Herald*, a group of protesting property owners broke into a Dade County Commission meeting with a petition demanding alterations in the expressway route and challenging the need for an elevated highway. Several Miamians wrote Governor Collins and federal highway officials, suggesting an alternate north-south route built on stilts over Biscayne Bay—a route, they claimed, that would be less expensive, more scenic, and cause less displacement, disruption and blight. One astute expressway critic pointed out a significant consequence of the

Wilbur Smith route: "Displacement of over 10,000 negro families from the Central Negro district [Overtown] with no proper planning for their future." Expressway supporters from the Miami-Dade Chamber of Commerce, in a statement sent to Governor Collins, quickly denounced the "small, but vocal" group of self-interested opponents, and then fell back on the theme of growth and progress: "This community can no longer afford to allow timidity and indecision to stand in the way of progress." The Miami expressway plan was merely two months old, but it had already become a deeply contested issue in the white community. John D. Pennekamp, an editor at *The Miami Herald*, wrote Collins of "the extent and intensity of this very real opposition to any elevated highways through Miami." Pennekamp went on to say that "this is the same program of which you said in my office, 'Nothing will be jammed down the people's throats.'"[12]

The sense that the state road department had imposed the expressway on Miamians with little public consultation had some citizens up in arms. At public meetings in early 1957, former Miami Mayor Abe Aronovitz emerged as a spokesman for expressway opponents, attacking the elevated structure planned for downtown as "a monstrosity straddling the City of Miami" that would create new slums and destroy property values. Aronovitz blasted the state road plan in an angry speech at the February 1957 public hearing. A few weeks later, he continued the attack on the expressway in a blistering address at a mass outdoor meeting at Miami's downtown Bayfront Park band shell. In letters to Governor Collins and other Florida public officials, Aronovitz complained that the public hearing had been a farce and that state road engineers had no interest in responding to overwhelming citizen opposition to the expressway. Florida road chief Jones wrote Collins that Aronovitz was an irrational obstructionist and "completely off base in his arguments." Aronovitz kept up his campaign for several months, meeting with Collins and seeking support from Florida Senators George Smathers and Spessard Holland, all to no avail. Protest letters from angry citizens poured into the governor's office and the state road department. Writing to road chief Jones, a North Miami woman borrowed from Aronovitz's imagery in suggesting that the expressway would "be a monstrosity which would

arch like the back of a huge dinosaur" over the city, depreciating property values and displacing homeowners. More importantly, she argued, "it would cause dissatisfaction and dissension between the races here, because it would necessarily displace many of the Negro race. They would have to move into the outer fringe of white sections, with the accompanying flaring up of hatreds." Her racial analysis was essentially correct. Displaced inner-city blacks did, in fact, move to white transition areas, eventually transforming northwest Dade County into an enormous, sprawling second-ghetto community.[13]

Initial opposition to the Miami expressway mostly died out within a few months of the February 1957 public hearing, with one exception. Elizabeth Virrick, a white, middle-aged housing reformer, launched a one-woman campaign against the Miami expressway system that lasted a decade. Virrick had been involved in an interracial movement for slum clearance and public housing since the late 1940s, fighting mostly against Miami slumlords, rental agents, black housing developers, and local politicians and housing officials who failed to enforce building and housing codes. As the Miami expressway plans became public in 1956 and 1957, Virrick quickly recognized the devastating consequences for black Miami. Black concerns had not been expressed at public hearings, but now Virrick campaigned to raise public consciousness over housing demo-

Elizabeth Virrick and City Commissioner Leslie Quigg supported slum clearance on housing reform. Early 1950s. Courtesy of Raymond Mohl.

tion and relocation issues. She had been moved by the San Francisco freeway revolt and the writings of Jane Jacobs. "Hasn't anyone heard of San Francisco," Virrick asked in her monthly newsletter, *The Journal of Civic Affairs*, "where the road program was stopped and re-planned because an alert citizenry demanded it?" In 1959, Virrick helped organize the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council of Dade County, which studied relocation needs of expressway displacees and pushed Dade County to develop a coherent relocation policy. Virrick kept the expressway issue barely alive into the mid-1960s, when the final downtown leg through Overtown was completed. She was the closest thing Miami had to a freeway revolt, but a one-woman crusade was not enough to stop the highway builders in Miami.[14]

Expressway Relocation and the Second Ghetto

Elizabeth Virrick was not alone in her concern about the relocation and racial consequences of the North-South Expressway. In March 1957, a month after the state road department's public hearing, *The Miami Herald* published an unattributed article headlined, "What about the Negroes Uprooted by Expressway?"— the first of several *Herald* articles raising this question. The unnamed news reporter also answered his own question: "Nobody seems to know. Nobody is doing any planning about it. ... So far as we know, no agency on either the state or local level has started to tackle the problem." The piece went on to point out that the central core of Overtown would be demolished, leaving an estimated six thousand or more blacks homeless. Miami blacks had been pushing out of the central city into Liberty City and adjacent white areas for a decade or more, especially in the northwest quadrant of Dade County. *The Herald* reporter expected that process inevitably to accelerate and expand as a result of the expressway.[15]

Considering the enormous ramifications of the expressway project, Miami's black community seemed mostly stunned and immobilized by the anticipated housing losses. There were no demonstrations, public meetings or protest movements in the black community. In 1956 and 1957, Miami's African Americans had little political clout (as late as 1962, not a single African American held elective public office anywhere in the state of Florida) and the local civil rights movement was in its infancy. The Miami branch of the NAACP had

begun to challenge school segregation in the courts and threatened a bus boycott to desegregate the local transit system. Beginning in 1956, however, the organization came under attack from a state legislative committee, which targeted Miami NAACP leader, the Reverend Theodore R. Gibson, and charged that the civil rights group had been penetrated by communists. These McCarthyite attacks diverted the NAACP's focus for several years from issues such as housing and residential segregation. Black militancy would have to wait until the late 1960s. The planned Miami expressway route through Overtown was widely known by the late 1950s, a decade before it was actually built, but this knowledge did not stimulate a black opposition movement at the time.[16]

The city's black weekly newspaper, the *Miami Times*, weighed in on the expressway plan, but its first response was relatively muted. In a March 2, 1957, editorial, "Miami's Expressway," the *Miami Times* regretted that some blacks would lose their homes, but went on to say that "with the expansion and progress of a city, there is little you can do about it." But two weeks later, after a city survey estimated that almost 5,700 blacks would have to move out of Overtown, the *Miami Times* backtracked somewhat, expressing serious concern about where those displaced would find new homes: "There is plenty of land around, but the fact it, it is not for sale to Negroes." It took another two years before the newspaper commented again on anticipated consequences of the interstate highway plan. In November 1959, an editorial pointed out that the expressway "has brought and will continue to bring panic and consternation to the people who live in its pathway." Looking on the positive side, however, the *Miami Times* urged local officials to seize the "golden opportunity" provided by expressway construction both to eliminate slum housing and to relocate Overtown's dispossessed in decent housing elsewhere. From the beginning of the expressway controversy, the paper spent little time challenging the state's road plans, emphasizing instead the importance of an effective relocation program for Overtown's displaced African Americans.[17]

The Greater Miami Urban League, which worked to improve black social and economic conditions, also seemed pulled in different

directions on the North-South Expressway. On the one hand, the organization bought into the local boosterism on the road plan, noting in an April 1957 statement that "the Greater Miami Urban League feels that the proposed Miami Expressway is necessary for the continued progress of our city and commends the plan." On the other hand, Urban League president J. E. Preston's statement went on to document the potentially devastating impact of the expressway on black housing in Overtown. The area was already densely overcrowded, with many families doubling up on account of low incomes. Displacement and relocation inevitably meant, Preston wrote, the replication of existing conditions, essentially "starting a new slum elsewhere." Preston urged the immediate establishment of a city or county relocation agency that would plan for re-housing the eventual thousands of displaced blacks, as well as work with federal housing and mortgage agencies in obtaining necessary funding. He pointed to the experience of Columbus, Ohio, where public agencies worked with private builders in supplying attractive housing in integrated neighborhoods at moderate cost to minority families, suggesting that the Columbus experience offered "a blue-print for the Miami community." Over the next several years, the Miami Urban League continued its advocacy for a relocation agency and provided various social welfare services for those affected by the expressway, but the organization never directly challenged the Overtown route of the North-South Expressway.[18]

Elizabeth Virrick, the *Miami Times* and the Greater Miami Urban League all pressed for an official relocation agency to assist several thousand African Americans expected to be displaced by expressway construction. So also did Paul C. Watt, a planner in the Dade County manager's office. In a February 1959 report, Watt noted that "in excess of 10,000 persons will be displaced by highway construction in Dade County in the next ten years." He anticipated that still others would be displaced by building code enforcement, slum clearance, urban renewal, and eviction from public housing due to rising income levels. Watt's report recommended establishment of a local relocation agency, as well as participation in federal urban renewal and low-income mortgage assistance programs. But things moved slowly. Interstate right-of-way acquisition and construction slowed during a late 1950s recession that temporarily cut the flow of federal dollars to

The rising pillars for I-95 on the edge of Downtown Miami. Miami News Collection HMSF 1989-011-5421.

state highway departments. Construction of the huge downtown interchange would not begin for another six years, thus postponing the anticipated relocation housing crunch and making it seem less urgent. As late as April 1965, Miami Housing Authority director Haley Sofge noted that "the impact of displacement of families in the expressway and urban areas is yet to be felt." Governing officials in metropolitan Miami seemed slow in planning for the housing crisis looming in the near future.[19]

Local government in the Miami area was in flux in the late 1950s, complicating official responses to the expressway relocation problem. A 1957 referendum had created a powerful new metropolitan government for Dade County—a metro government that eventually absorbed most of the powers of the city of Miami and 26 other municipalities. Disputes between metro and the municipalities over

who controlled what, as well as numerous court challenges to metro, hampered the governmental transition for several years. Antagonism and conflict among housing and urban renewal agency heads and boards further set back official implementation of expressway relocation plans until the late 1960s. And there were other problems, as well. The Miami Housing Authority, which handled Dade County's public housing, initially sought to retain its powers, but eventually yielded to Metro Dade's new Department of Housing and Urban Development (called "Little HUD"), consolidating with the new county agency in 1968. Fighting the southern battle against federal interference through the 1950s, the Florida State Legislature refused to authorize urban redevelopment or renewal legislation for almost a decade. Subsequent legal challenges to eminent domain postponed the beginning of urban renewal in Miami until the early 1960s. When a large urban renewal project in Overtown finally did get underway, Virrick complained, the state road department routed "the Expressway and an interchange running smack down the middle of it." Urban renewal was a disaster as far as providing replacement housing for expressway victims. In September 1968, the *Miami News* reported that "the urban renewal program in Miami soon will be five years old and it hasn't created housing for one family." Miami's urban renewal agency eventually was taken over by Dade's Little HUD, but it was almost too late to provide any assistance to expressway displacees. Not until early 1969 was Dade County's first urban renewal project completed—47 townhouses in a cleared section of Overtown. By that time, the downtown interchange had been completed and thousands of Overtown residents already displaced.[20]

Eventually, the huge dimensions of the expressway relocation problem dawned on public officials and civic groups. In the mid-1960s, the Miami Housing Authority (MHA) finally developed a sense of urgency about the fate of Overtown's low-income families—families, MHA director Sofge wrote, that "have suddenly been brought to the attention of the public by the imminence of the bulldozer." In response, MHA developed a scattered-site plan for more than 1,000 new public housing units on 35 different sites. Many of these housing units were "turnkey" projects, in which public funding enabled private developers to locate construction sites, hire architects and contractors,

build the housing, and then turn the keys over to public housing authorities. In cooperation with MHA, Miami's anti-poverty agency, Equal Opportunity Program, Inc. (EOPI), found additional low-rent housing for some 500 families through the rent-subsidy program of the federal Office of Equal Opportunity. EOPI neighborhood centers and block clubs played a key role in these efforts. In the Brownsville community, for example, the EOPI neighborhood agency not only aided in the relocation process but worked "to prevent the development of slum housing in the area as families continue to move from the Downtown District into the Northwest area." MHA and EOPI provided much of the early official support for expressway relocation, but the housing crisis only deepened in 1965.[21]

The relocation problem drew in many other agencies, as well. In November 1965, Dade County Manager Porter Homer appointed a public/private Inter-Agency Relocation Committee to co-ordinate the work of relocating "expressway families"—a task eventually taken over by Dade County's "Little HUD" in 1968. When Metro Dade's Model Cities program geared up in 1967, the agency sought federal funds to provide decent, safe and integrated housing for displaced expressway families, most of whom ended up in the designated Model Cities area in northwest Dade County—an area already in the process of becoming Miami's second ghetto. The Citizens Advisory Board of the City of Miami played a watchdog role over public housing, urban renewal and relocation activities. The Dade County Community Relations Board (CRB) sought to maintain racial peace in the Miami area during the volatile 1960s, but the agency also warned of the dangers of reconcentrating dislocated African Americans in what was now being called the "northwest transition area." Instead, the CRB pushed for integrated public housing and enforcement of fair housing legislation, but it was a hard sell in those troubled racial times. The Greater Miami Urban League remained concerned about expressway relocation, focusing especially on neighborhood integration and the question of "open occupancy." The Miami Board of Realtors developed a small "demonstration program" relocating and subsidizing elderly tenants in private housing. Public agencies, civic groups and churches dedicated enormous local resources to resolving the housing and social needs of those displaced by Miami's expressway projects, but the ultimate outcome was a newer, more expansive black ghetto.[22]

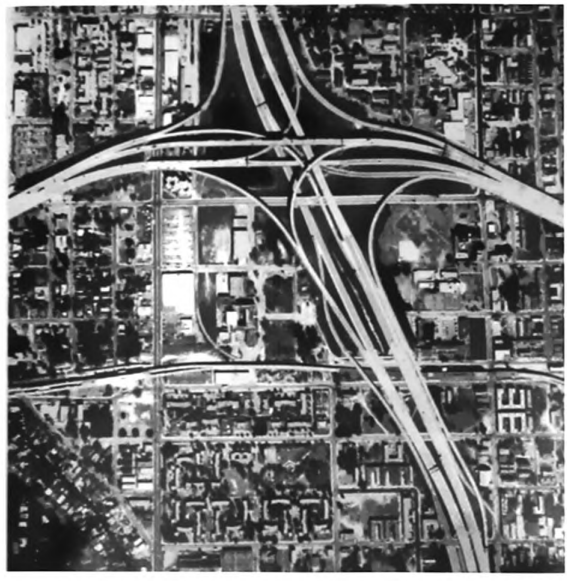
Elements of the local real estate industry also played a crucial role in the outcome of Miami's expressway housing and relocation crisis. Absentee owners and slumlords owned most of the rental housing in Overtown. Luther Brooks, manager and later owner of the Bonded Collection Agency, collected rents on some 10,000 rental units in black Miami for over 1,000 white and black property owners. Brooks also became a public spokesman for the slumlords in their decade long battle against urban renewal and public housing. Both programs threatened rental property interests in the black ghetto, prompting the formation of the Property Owners Development Association and the Free Enterprise Association to challenge public action in housing. Given their financial investments in Overtown real estate, Brooks and the Overtown property owners initially opposed the state's expressway plans for downtown Miami, as well. However, once they recognized that the state road department remained committed to the Overtown expressway route, they realized that they could both manage and profit from housing transitions in the racially changing area around and beyond Liberty City in northwest Dade County.[23]

For years, the Overtown landlords had resisted the encroachments of the central business district. But the potential of managing second-ghetto expansion brought them into harmony with the thinking of the downtown civic elite. Signaling this shift in May 1961, Luther Brooks tipped *Miami Herald* metro reporter Juanita Greene to the convergence of views on the future of Overtown. According to Greene, Brooks proposed a plan that "would gradually erase the Central Negro District and make it part of a new downtown Miami." At the same time, Overtown's black residents "would move north to the 11-square mile Liberty City area." Blockbusters had already triggered early second ghetto neighborhood transitions in the wake of Dade County school integration in the late 1950s. In response to the downtown expressway, the Brooks plan envisioned a reorganization of residential space in northwest Dade County—the same area that city and county housing, urban renewal, and model cities officials eventually targeted for expressway displacees. Long before official relocation programs, blockbusters were buying up homes in the northwest transition area. Brooks' Bonded Collection Agency then provided the moving trucks and the rental housing for those in the path of the expressway or

related urban renewal projects. As Greene wrote a few years later, Brooks "helped break the boundaries of the old Negro ghettos," moving black families "into border areas, then pushing the borders."[24]

Miami's second ghetto transitions in northwest Dade County had already begun by mid-century, but the North-South Expressway and the destruction of Overtown dramatically expanded and accelerated that process. Blockbusters and real estate speculators were especially active in neighborhoods along the expressway route and around Liberty City and further north in white communities such as Carol City. In a 1961 letter, Haskell Lazere, executive director of Miami's American Jewish Congress chapter, described the process in one northwest Miami neighborhood (Earlington Heights): "A real estate agent deliberately cracked the neighborhood and the real estate agents in the area are making very fast money on the sales. ... Speculators are using this panic selling as a means of cleaning up." White homeowners in the northwest area recognized that central-city housing demolitions from expressway construction eventually meant black encroachment in their neighborhoods. Many gave in to prejudice and panic, quickly selling and moving away. Complicating the shifting residential housing market was the fact that massive numbers of Cuban exiles began pouring into Miami after 1959. The Cubans settled primarily in sprawling neighborhoods west and southwest of downtown Miami, limiting black housing choices as the relocation crisis approached. As they lost their Overtown properties through eminent domain, slumlords over several years quietly transferred their real estate investments to vulnerable white communities in the northwest area, now made even more vulnerable by blockbusting operations. Within a decade, expressway demolitions, real estate speculations and Cuban immigrant settlement produced a drastically altered, but still racially driven, residential pattern in Dade County.[25]

Facing an enormous housing crisis, local housing and urban renewal agencies worked at relocation but never accepted the idea or the reality of integrated neighborhoods. As *The Miami Herald* noted in 1966, the county's urban renewal plan "would replace one Negro ghetto with another." Above all, the notion that expressways brought needed "progress" to the Miami area seemingly justified the housing



Aerial View of I-95 downtown interchange that destroyed much of Overtown. Courtesy of Raymond Mohl.

demolitions, the poorly planned relocation programs, and expansion of segregated neighborhoods across northwest Dade County. Still focusing on the positives in an August 1967 editorial, "Negro Housing Problem," the *Miami Times* offered a cost-benefit assessment of Miami's interstate: "Well, we have our expressway and no doubt it's appreciated. But it certainly caused the loss of many homes to persons who have spent the best part of their lives securing them. But certainly, we can't stand in the way of progress."[26]

The mantra of progress provided a rationale for public actions such as expressway building and urban renewal, but the social consequences of such programs were dismissed by state and local officials as an unfortunate by-product of rebuilding and reform. By 1971, according to the Dade County Community Relations Board, highway construction, urban renewal, and building code enforcement had dislocated 18,000 people from Overtown, a little more than half of the community's 1960 population. Those who remained lived in the "concrete monster"

apartment houses that survived code enforcement, mired in hard-core poverty, unemployment, social isolation, and fatherless families. Most of those displaced from Overtown ended up in what relocation officials labeled the "northwest transition area," some in scattered-site public housing, but most in houses and apartments where white people formerly lived. Racial transitions created social isolation in these sprawling neighborhoods, made worse by the absence of the long-standing community institutions and leadership that had held the more compact Overtown community together over many decades. In an odd twist, the North-South Expressway in north Dade County served as a major racial barrier, separating neat white homes to the east from the much larger and rapidly developing second ghetto to the west. Little more than a decade later, in the wake of the 1980 Liberty City riots, *The Miami Herald* admitted the devastating consequences of the North-South Expressway through Overtown: "Construction of the interstate highway system irrevocably disrupted the black community, uprooting families and shattering the social heart of black Miami."[27]

The housing relocations of the expressway era recalled Miami's racial zoning policies of earlier decades. In the 1960s, the Miami Housing Authority (MHA) officially rejected housing segregation, but nevertheless began locating scattered-site housing projects in a sector of Dade County that was already undergoing racial transition and eventually became predominantly black. On a visit to Miami in 1965, Whitney Young of the National Urban League charged the MHA with "trying to place relocation housing in the path of ghetto expansion." As expressway relocation began in 1966, the Miami NAACP and the Miami Urban League criticized the MHA's policy of "locating new public housing in already segregated areas." That same year, a federal lawsuit challenged MHA's site-location policy, arguing that "sites were purposely selected for the purpose of effecting de facto segregation." However, the federal district court's decision in *Thompson v. Housing Authority of Miami* (1966) rejected the racial intent argument as an explanation of MHA policy, opening the way for new public housing projects in the northwest area and speeding the white exodus. Rather than breaking up Miami's segregated housing patterns, the expressway and subsequent relocation policies further concentrated African

Americans in a newer, larger and sprawling second ghetto. By 1970, despite national civil rights and fair housing legislation, Miami remained one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the United States.[28]

Urban Expressways: The National Pattern

The Miami expressway experience, and especially its racial dimensions, was replicated in cities across the nation. For example, in St. Paul, Minnesota, Interstate-94 cut directly through the city's black community, displacing one-seventh of St. Paul's black residents. As one critic put it, "very few blacks lived in Minnesota, but the road builders found them."[29] In Kansas City, Missouri, a midtown freeway originally slated to pass through an affluent white neighborhood ultimately sliced through a racially integrated Model Cities area instead, destroying 1,800 buildings and displacing several thousand people.[30] In Camden, New Jersey, Interstate-95 destroyed several thousand low-income housing units for blacks and Puerto Ricans.[31] In Columbus, Ohio, an inner-city expressway leveled an entire black community. As Ohio highway engineer Warren Cremean recalled in an interview, in Columbus "we married highway money with urban renewal money and wiped out ... the worst slum in the state of Ohio."[32] In Milwaukee, the North-South Expressway cleared a path through 16 blocks in the city's black community, uprooting 600 families and ultimately intensifying patterns of racial segregation. Overall, between 1959 and 1971, freeway construction in Milwaukee demolished 6,300 housing units and displaced about 20,000 residents.[33] Likewise, a network of expressways in Cleveland displaced some 19,000 people by the early 1970s, both blacks and white ethnics.[34] In Atlanta, highways were purposely planned and built "to sustain racial ghettos and control black migration" in the metro area; a similar racial pattern occurred in Birmingham.[35] Freeway construction in Pasadena, California, displaced over 4,000 black and Mexican-American residents, most of whom were forced back into inner-city Los Angeles ghettos. As one black Pasadena resident put it: "They put the freeways where the resistance and the power was the weakest, and now we have the biggest intersection in the world where a lot of black families used to live."[36]

In the American South, racially inspired expressways coincided with the civil rights activism of the 1960s. In Montgomery, Alabama, Interstate-85 targeted the city's major black community, including the church of Rev. Ralph Abernathy, an associate of Martin Luther King in the Montgomery civil rights movement. Sam Englehardt, the state's highway director and also head of Alabama's White Citizens' Council, told Abernathy that he was going to "get" his church. Only a telegram from Abernathy to President Kennedy prevented that from happening, but interstate construction in Montgomery dissected other sections of the black community.[37] In Nashville, Tennessee, highway builders went out of their way to put a kink in the urban link of Interstate-40 as it passed through the city, gouging a concrete swath through the North Nashville black community. An anti-freeway group, the I-40 Steering Committee, charged that routing an interstate highway through a black community legally constituted racial discrimination. Federal courts disagreed, and the I-40 expressway ultimately destroyed hundreds of homes and businesses, permanently divided the black community, and left a lasting scar on the urban environment.[38] In 1968, the NAACP organized the black community of Columbia, South Carolina, in protest against the route of the Bull Street Expressway, an Interstate-20 spur that penetrated the central city. Franchot Brown, a black community leader, charged the South Carolina Highway Department with "a general pattern of racial discrimination" in attempting "to restrict the Negroes to the ghettos." Despite extensive protests, the Bull Street Expressway was built anyway.[39] In New Orleans, white historic preservationists

Note that a portion of this rendering brings the expressway through Bayfront Park into Biscayne Bay. Courtesy of Raymond Mohl.

fought off a planned riverfront expressway along the edge of the French Quarter, but remained silent when a mile away Interstate-10 rolled through a devastated black community, a concrete jungle left in the shadows by a massive elevated expressway.[40] Interstate highways similarly targeted black communities in Charlotte, Richmond, Memphis, St. Petersburg, Florida, Washington, D.C., and other cities large and small.

In a number of cities, citizen-led freeway revolts had some success. A handful of urban interstates were cancelled or relocated. Beginning in 1966, new congressional planning, housing, relocation and environmental mandates forced highway builders to tred more carefully in urban areas. In addition, public sentiment in many large cities shifted from highways to mass transit alternatives. However, by the time congressional action and community opposition emerged in the mid to late 1960s, much of the damage had already been done to the physical landscape and to the social and racial fabric of urban America. As one former federal highway official conceded in a 1972 interview, the urban interstates gave local officials everywhere "a good opportunity to get rid of the local 'niggertown.'"[41]

Historic Memory in Black Miami

For Miami's black community, the expressway left a sad and bitter legacy. Nearly 35,000 blacks made Overtown home before the expressway came, but less than 9,500 now remain in an urban wasteland dominated by the expressway. A once thriving community, full of economic and cultural vitality, is gone—a victim of the automobile and the highwaymen, of the politicians and planners and realtors and businessmen who pushed for or profited from the new expressway. As anticipated as early as the 1930s, Miami's CBD functions have gradually expanded into the former confines of Overtown—city, county, state and federal government office buildings, parking lots and parking garages, transit facilities, an enormous but now demolished sports arena, new middle-class condominiums, even trendy shops and upscale townhouses in one eastern fringe area. Miami civic leaders traditionally argued that the nearness of Overtown was to blame "for stifling the economic growth of the central business district." The building of Interstate-95 and related urban redevelopment activities mostly took care of that problem.[42]

Expressway building through Overtown also left a legacy of mistrust and suspicion. The story of what happened to Overtown has become part of the political folklore of black Miami. Black politicians and civic leaders regularly reminded the white establishment of what they did to Overtown. "Overtown still bears the scars of the highway," a black city planner in Miami noted in 1981. Another observer of the Miami scene, the late Rev. Bryan O. Walsh, director of the Catholic Services Bureau in Miami and a long-time community activist, asserted in a 1981 interview: "I believe that I-95 represents a sociological disaster for Miami. Many of the problems faced by the city today are traceable to I-95 and not to the [Cuban] refugee influx ... What is clear is that the planners had little understanding or concern for the human problems involved." Long after Interstate-95 ripped through the black community, the painful memory lingered on. When the Miami sports arena and the redevelopment scheme called Park-West got underway in 1986, the *Miami Times* ran an editorial entitled "Doing It to Overtown Again." Subsequent plans for additional transportation corridors through Overtown in 1995 and for a huge gentrification project known as Crosswinds in 2006 and 2007 unleashed new waves of outrage about Overtown's past and future. Numerous Overtown development plans failed to satisfy a diverse black constituency and were shelved. As one *Miami Herald* reporter put it, "a whole generation of wary black leaders suspect the latest redevelopment plans are the final land grab in a long history of official deceit."[43]

Debate over what happened to Overtown in the expressway era has persisted to the present. Those who lived there had their own memories of what happened. "Overtown had a history," black attorney Jesse McCrary told an interviewer in 1990, but government and the business leadership acting together destroyed the community: "They took a little at a time. First they cut the finger off, and then they cut the hand off, and then they cut the arm off, and pretty soon Overtown is dead." In the late 1990s, a series of interviews with former Overtown residents, conducted by Miami's Black Archives Foundation, revealed the persisting sense of powerlessness, sadness, and loss, of mistrust, anger and outrage, over the fate of the historic Overtown community. In 1998, a careful study of the expressway's impact on Overtown by social scientists at Florida International

University confirmed the traditional account of community destruction and black decline.[44]

Around the same time, in a 1997 interview T. Willard Fair of the Miami Urban League offered an alternative assessment of the expressway experience. While not disputing the devastating outcome, Fair suggested that the city's black leadership had been fooled or co-opted by official promises. As Fair put it, "the Overtown community did not fight back because the ... packaging of the product said that things are going to get better. That if you are to be relocated, you will be relocated into better housing. That by the coming of the expressway this is a sign of progress." As noted earlier, considerable evidence suggests that this may indeed have been the case, especially in the early years of expressway planning, when some black leaders trustingly accepted vague promises of better housing. The theme of progress—of better housing, especially—had power initially, but it did not survive the relocation crisis of the mid-1960s, when it became clear that relocation housing simply meant the persistence of residential segregation in a relocated ghetto.[45]

The debate over the meaning of the Overtown experience has continued into the 21st century. In 2001, Nathaniel Q. Belcher, a black architecture professor at Florida International University, published an article on Overtown's "African-American legends." As elsewhere, black Miami's nostalgia for the past has led to a contemporary effort to create a "folklore village" in Overtown and to promote a form of heritage tourism. For Belcher, however, the memory of Overtown as a "legendary and idyllic place" glossed over the uncomfortable realities of black Miami in the segregation era. The expressway network that bisected Overtown had significant consequences, Belcher wrote, but the Overtown community was already decentralizing out of central Miami. Belcher contended that the civil rights movement, black suburban dispersal, and Cuban immigration all had similarly powerful impacts on the reorganization of black residential space and community identity. The Interstate-95 expressway, he wrote, was only "one of a series of factors that define Overtown today." He might have added slum clearance, real estate speculation, code enforcement, urban renewal, public housing, and school integration to the list of

policy and market forces producing residential and community change. Despite Belcher's revisionist interpretation of Overtown's mid-20th century history, however, the powerful and imposing structures of the interstate highway remain integrally linked in the public mind to the decline of Overtown. They stand as a fixed, permanent, and physical reminder of the past, whereas immigration, suburbanization, and civil rights are somehow more conceptual, less tangible, less a physical part of the urban landscape. Belcher's argument reminds us that the traumatic events of the expressway building era have remained vividly etched in the historic memory of black Miami. His writing also suggests that not all agree on the meaning of those memories, or on how to properly memorialize the past.[46]

In conclusion, the history of Interstate-95 in Miami and Miami-Dade County provides a powerful example of racially motivated decision-making with long-term metropolitan consequences. By 1990, according to official Miami-Dade County planning maps, the entire northwest quadrant of the county had become primarily black.[47] The plans of those who carried out the racial zoning of the 1930s and 1940s, and who promoted the Overtown route of the North-South Expressway in the 1950s and 1960s, had come to fruition. Like many other cities in the expressway era, Miami had been interstated.

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