

BUILDING THE FORESHORE FREEWAYS: THE POLITICS OF A FREEWAY “ARTEFACT”

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ABSTRACT

During the 1940s and 1950s the engineers and planners of Cape Town were immersed in debates about proposed road infrastructure on Cape Town’s Foreshore. As various alternatives were discussed the tensions between National, Provincial and City government and the Foreshore Board surfaced. This paper highlights one aspect of the story using reports, archived correspondence and minutes of meetings from the time. The paper argues that Foreshore Freeway planning was an inherently political exercise and that Foreshore Freeway infrastructure, in common with other technological artefacts, has politics “embedded” into it.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the centre of Cape Town, overlooking the busiest intersection in the central City, en route to the major Waterfront tourist attraction, and snugly to one side of the International Convention Centre is a freeway, suspended and incomplete. Follow the arc which this road describes and you will see, at the opposite side of the intersection another stub of freeway, also suspended, also incomplete. Elsewhere, more hidden from public scrutiny are four more suspended, incomplete pieces of two lane freeway. These pieces of road form part of the so-called Foreshore Freeway of Cape Town. They are the focus of ridicule, the location for advertising creativity, the source of urban mythology and iconic Cape Town structures. They are also an anachronism of the transport planning process - a process which tends to finish what it starts. How did Cape Town come to have freeway stubs suspended above its centre? What can this “artefact” tell us about road engineering of that time? And what does it mean for us – engineers, planners, South Africans - today?

The story which emerges from these questions is rich and complex, and deeply rooted in Cape Town’s contemporary history. This Foreshore Freeway story touches east into District 6 and north to Government Avenue. It also connects across to the US and to the birth of transport planning in the 1950s, and with the associated development of traffic survey techniques, computers and modelling. The story was influenced by tensions between levels of government, between modes of transport and across professional boundaries and, inevitably, by the South African politics of race. Locating and forming the Foreshore Freeway was, in sum, a complex, protracted set of compromises between multiple actors with many agendas, and is the focus of a piece of research work in progress. This brief paper focuses on one part of that story, on some of the debates which ran from the 1940s to the early 1960s. The focus is particularly on the Eastern Boulevard, the road which runs into central Cape Town from the southern suburbs, and which cuts through the Woodstock/District 6 area.

The following material is drawn from many sources, but largely from the writings of Dr Solomon Morris and government files from the National Archives of Cape Town. Abbreviated referencing is provided, full referencing will be available in the upcoming PhD thesis of the author.

2 THE PRE 1950 FORESHORE DEBATES

The genesis of the Foreshore Freeway scheme can be placed as early as the Paris spring of 1940, when Monsieur Beaudouin (Chief Architect to the Government of France and “first placed town planner in the Grand Prix de Rome”), received a cable from WS Lunn (City Engineer, Cape Town) and JC Collings (Town Planning Branch in City Engineers Dept) requesting his planning advice for how best to use the land being created from the dredging for a new Cape Town harbor (Beaudouin, 1940). Expected to cover 480 acres and situated at the shoreline of Table Bay, between the existing city and the sea, Cape Town’s Council had long recognized the untapped potential of the land but were now in need of some strong planning advice. The Railway Administration, who were co-beneficiaries of the Foreshore land, were unhappy with Council’s plan for the area and had appointed Professor LW Thornton White (“former scholar of the British School in Rome”) and Longstreth Thompson (“town planning consultant of London”) to help them to develop an alternative. The cable to Beaudouin, requesting his input, was the Council’s response to the Railway Administration’s appointment of experts (Cape Town Foreshore Joint Technical Committee (CFJTC) 1948).

As war rumbled in Europe, Beaudouin started his three month sojourn in Cape Town. According to him, there was an easing of tensions between the Cape Town parties as they worked on their separate reports but with “a considerable degree of cross-reference and collaboration”. The resulting plans had a similar approach and “the same essential elements”, which were a largely at-grade Parisian inspired scheme with straight, wide Boulevards stretching to the East and West and a newly developed civic centre. The plan for a Monumental Approach from the harbor and vistas stretching in all directions, ensured that approach to Cape Town by sea (the focus, as this was in a time before commercial aviation) would be most impressive (CFJTC, 1948).

A year later, in March 1941, the City Engineer presented three alternative schemes to Council: the Council’s scheme by Beaudouin of Paris; the Longstreth-Thompson’s scheme produced for the Railway Administration and the original Joint Town planning Scheme created before the various expert advisors joined the process. The tensions were many, but focused on the location of the railway station and the civic centre site. A Committee was set up to broker a compromise plan, but these negotiations broke down, with the City believing that no satisfactory solution could be found while the position of the Railway Administration on the siting of the railway station remained as it was. The Foreshore plan was deadlocked (CFJTC, 1948).

Two and a half years later, in October 1944, local parties lobbied national government to intervene in the stand-off and a Committee was appointed under the chair of Major-General Szlumper. The Foreshore Investigation Committee (Szlumper Committee) sat in February of the following year with the plans developed so far and the Committee made recommendations, mainly relating to the siting of the new railway terminal and following this the Minister of Transport approached the City Council with a suggestion for a new Foreshore Joint Technical Committee (JTC), which was formed and subsequently sat 34 times (CFJTC, 1948).

Monsieur Beaudouin was appointed by the JTC committee and returned to Cape Town in June 1945, where he developed another new plan. After he left, his scheme was handed over to the new Town Planning Office of the City, who developed yet another variant, which was submitted to the Minister for approval. The Minister expressed “keen interest” but wanted to get Beaudouin’s stamp of approval on this revised scheme and also wanted the concerns of the City Engineer who had expressed doubts about the adequacy of the scheme for “motor traffic and parking” to be considered. So, on Beaudouin’s return, the new Town Planning Officer, and Beaudouin developed another plan, which was unanimously accepted by Committee (CFJTC, 1948).

In June 1946, six and a half years after that first cable to Monsieur Beaudouin, and many versions of the plan later, a report, plan, and photos of a model of the proposed Foreshore Scheme were submitted to the Minister of Transport¹. It seemed that the scheme would now finally be built. But it was not to be so straightforward.

3 THE 1950’S: “METROPOLIS OF TOMORROW”

In 1949, Solomon Simon Morris became, at the age of 37, the City Engineer of Cape Town, a position which he held until his retirement in 1977. By 1951 “Solly” Morris (as he was affectionately known) and his team had developed somewhat different ideas to those published in the 1947 Plan. Morris argued that the 1947 Plan would require Boulevard gradients in excess of 1 in 10.5 and that there were many reasons to argue that the 1947 plan, so long in the making, was flawed, potentially very expensive and difficult to justify.

He proposed relocating the Eastern and Western Boulevards and adding a Ring Road to the original plan to “allow for circulation”, with “as little disturbance as possible”, and “speedy entrance and exit” for the vehicles travelling (Morris, 1951). By doing this Morris was evoking an emerging post-War view which wedded the fast-moving car with the inevitable, more hopeful, modern future.

In “Metropolis of Tomorrow”, Solly Morris countered the grand boulevards and vistas of the 1940’s scheme with a plan for a modern city. This was a new turn for the planning of the Foreshore. Morris argued for speed, economy and overcoming congestion:

“The importance of efficient traffic circulation in the central city has already been emphasised. The congestion which occurs in the central city to-day is strong testimony of the time-consuming, uneconomical and frustrating complication which ensues from the ineffectual traffic circulation.” (Morris, 1951, p34)

Unfortunately for Morris, through, his arguments for efficiency, commonsense and the objectivity presented in “Metropolis of Tomorrow” were not enough to generate funding and commitment to his plan. His proposals for a Ring Road to pass under the historic and well-loved Government Avenue were controversial and by 1956 another Committee had been formed by Province, with the specific and urgent brief to attend to the location of Boulevard East and its intersection with the Foreshore Schemes. The rest of this paper focuses in on at those particular debates, using records of the meetings held, now stored in the National Archives.

¹ Report published by Government printer as UG 48, of 1946 and tabled 12 February 1947.

4 BOULEVARD EAST

4.1 “Certain intersections”

The 1956 Committee, which consisted of representatives from the National, Provincial, City governments; the Railway authorities, the Foreshore Board and the University of Cape Town was briefed to:

“consider various questions relating to the engineering design of Boulevard East, in particular the location of the railway bridge and the traffic carrying capacity of certain intersections”².

These “certain intersections” were the central city junctions of the Eastern Boulevard with Oswald Pirow Street, Heerengracht, and Buitengracht.

Hoffman, the National Department of Transport representative, did not think that it would be possible to disperse quickly enough all of the traffic which would enter Cape Town and his concern was that these intersections would restrict the free flow of traffic. Hoffman offered up some calculations to help the discussions using the road capacities of the three approach roads. He proposed a series of flyovers on the Foreshore to give a free flow of traffic. In turn, the City Engineer’s Department did their own traffic analysis, and developed different forecasts. Faced with two conflicting versions of the future, the City and the National Department were at stalemate, and Morris argued “it might well be that the only way to satisfactorily resolve this difference of views would be to await the results of the traffic survey at present being undertaken.”³

Another Committee member, meanwhile, Mr Hugo of the Provincial Roads department, appeared to be getting rather frustrated. He argued that if the matter were held over until the traffic survey was completed, it might be found that the properties along the Eastern Boulevard route (frozen in preparation for scheme development) might be “defrozen” and the construction of the Eastern Blvd would become very difficult. He felt that the Committee should continue with their efforts to find a solution and not await the results of the traffic survey.

It is unclear from the correspondence what Hugo’s urgency was, but we do know that the City Engineer before Morris, W.S. Lunn, had already put together a plan for compulsory purchase for the Eastern Boulevard through District 6 in the late 1940’s⁴, and that there had been plans for clearing so-called slum properties in District 6 since 1940. In 1953/4 a Master Plan for Housing had been developed, including District 6, and so there was momentum to finalise road plans⁵. By March 1956 we have two sets of traffic forecasts (one from Morris and Rudner at the City and one from Hoffman, the National Government representative), and we also have Hugo from Province urging them both along because of frozen properties in District 6.

² National Archives Box PAR G14/1 and G14/2, Provincial Administration of the Western Cape of Good Hope file P480 Batch 1.

³ 19 March 1956 Minutes of Meeting from National Archives box PAR G14/1 and G14/2 027, Provincial Administration of the Cape of Good Hope file.

⁴ National Archives box 3/CT 4/1/11/682, file G53/1VOL1.

⁵ The Corporation of the City of Cape Town (1953 and 1954) Annual Report of the City Engineer. Cape Times Limited.

In some ways this is story of deadlock is very particular to Cape Town, 1956 and yet in other ways this is a timeless story of transport planning: competing tiers of government, personal rivalries, struggles over methods of planning, and agendas or interests masked behind it all but pushing through in various ways.

What was the solution? At the next meeting in May the Provincial representative talked of the attempts made to “cut the gap” between the forecast figures already submitted by the City and National Government, but Mr Hugo argued a third perspective, that the flow along Eastern Boulevard would not be as heavy “as first feared” because of the constrained width of de Waal Drive. It may seem strange in 2011 to hear Mr Hugo voice, in an official document, such a personal opinion, a hunch really, and without the backing of traffic survey but prior to this time much planning of roads was based on estimates of existing flows, judgment and some basic predictions of the future.

4.2 Shopping Diversion

The matter of what to do was unresolved despite the arguments from all sides, but at this meeting these concerns about traffic analyses were superseded by another issue, this time questioning whether the Foreshore Board, who were part owners of the Foreshore land, would want a flyover bridge or a busy road through their planned shopping precinct at the intersection of Hertzog Boulevard and Heerengracht. It was resolved that a report be drawn up for the Board, in order to get their approval and so to be able to address the question of the suggested flyover at the shopping precinct. In conclusion the report of the Committee to the Foreshore Board argued that the 1947 plan was unworkable in its current form and that “desirable though a shopping precinct may be in its present location, from a traffic point of view it can hardly be considered suitable” and that “if ultimate traffic flow is to be efficiently handled some major modification to the 1947 Plan appears inevitable.”⁶

4.3 Back to the Eastern Boulevard

Morris, meanwhile, was not convinced about the necessity for the Eastern Boulevard, and so unsurprisingly the Committee waived over the wording of the report on it. In a draft which was *not* sent they said:

“The Committee has not addressed itself – as indeed it was not in a position to – to the question of when or even whether at all in the foreseeable future the Blvd East should actually be built...certain facts have appeared in the course of this conversation which must inevitably give rise to some concern. The present capacity per se of the approach roads appears to be more than adequate for some considerable time; yet the construction of the Blvd East, paradoxically enough, may well give rise to fresh traffic difficulties at its intersections in the Foreshore which are sufficiently serious to necessitate reconsideration of the fundamental concepts of the 1947 Plan”.⁷

⁶ Report of the Technical Committee appointed to consider the route, location of bridges and ancillary traffic problems connected with Boulevard East, to be submitted to Provincial secretary. National Archives, Cape Town file PAR/P480 Batch 1.

⁷ Draft of Report of the Technical Committee appointed to consider the route, location of bridges and ancillary traffic problems connected with Boulevard East, to be submitted to Provincial secretary. Dated 1956 Aug 29. National Archives, Cape Town file PAR/P480 Batch 1.

In the *final* draft of August 1956 the Committee was more constrained:

“...the Committee wishes to record that it has been expressly given to understand that the Boulevard East Project is to be considered as a *fait accompli*. For this reason, and bearing in mind that this proposal has been accepted by the authorities concerned, and that development along the route of the Boulevard has been frozen for many years, it desires specifically to refrain from expressing any opinion on the necessity or otherwise of this highway.”⁸

The response of the Board to this report is not on record, but almost a year later Morris (from the City) and Hugo (from the Province) are still exchanging correspondence about it. In a Confidential memo, Morris remains unconvinced of Boulevard East’s necessity:

“Recent discussions...have made it clear that subsidy for construction of the Boulevard East will not be made available unless certain major design amendments are made...”

“As a consequence two important issues are raised: firstly whether the proposed amendments are justifiable; secondly, in view of all of the difficulties that have arisen in regard to Boulevard East, whether the benefits that would arise from construction of this roadway are, in fact, commensurate with its cost.”

Continuing, Morris argues against the Boulevard East not only from traffic considerations, but also other points of view:

“The route and probably the road itself, was perceived on architectural, or perhaps geometric considerations, rather than those of topography and traffic flow.”

“It is not a true “radial” or “tangent” road. It lies on a route which, from a traffic engineering point of view, appears arbitrary or forced, striking as it does over, and interfering with, three other radials: De Waal Drive, the Main Road and Strand St extension.”

“A truly adequate traffic plan using this [Eastern Boulevard] has not yet been evolved; for example it is hard to see how some form of congestion could be avoided at [four intersections].”

“It therefore seems possible that the principal problem is not the provision of adequate roadway capacity leading into the City; and in any event even if it is, then Boulevard East – bearing in mind its heavy expense – makes a relatively ineffective contribution to its solution.”⁹

Morris opposes the construction of Boulevard through District 6 for many explicit reasons and perhaps also for reasons we are not party to. A terse and dramatic response comes from Hugo in return, in July 1957. There is talk about a new Committee, but Hugo is threatening to remove himself from any Committee which does not agree to Boulevard East. A new “Western Exit Technical Committee” is set up, with the terms of reference that make it clear: Boulevard East is a “*fait accompli*”. Once again it looks like the debate is closed and a new Foreshore Plan can finally be put in place. Or can it?

4.4 Shopping revisited

Early in 1958 an alternative for Shopping Precinct problem is proposed, a deviation of the Eastern and Western Boulevards which would bypass the proposed Shopping Precinct completely but the National Department of Transport are not convinced and argue that

⁸ Report of the Technical Committee appointed to consider the route, location of bridges and ancillary traffic problems connected with Boulevard East, to be submitted to Provincial secretary. National Archives, Cape Town file PAR/P480 Batch 1.

⁹ Memo June 27, 1957, National Archives file PAR/P480 Batch 1.

long term plans *must* include linking Boulevard East and West. There is a breakdown in communication. The City are prioritising a Ring Road; for the Railway and Harbour's Board the Shopping Precinct (presumably important for revenue raising) is key; the Province are anxious to get the Eastern Boulevard built while the National Department of Transport are prioritising efficient flow of long-distance through traffic. Morris, meanwhile, is hopeful that the results of the traffic survey can resolve the many tensions.

4.5 Traffic survey

By February 1958 the traffic survey had been completed and the analysis work done. The traffic analysis report confirmed what many had argued, that there would indeed be congestion at the Shopping Precinct/ Close intersection, but Mr De Bruyn, the representative from the Foreshore Board was cynical, arguing that traffic congestion would occur "not only on the Hertzog Boulevard/ Heerengracht intersection which had been specifically singled out, but also at every intersection in the City."¹⁰

Although the traffic analysis had given information, it had not resolved the Committee debates. Not surprisingly, the Board were unimpressed. In June 1958 the Board Chair noted that although this Committee had been in existence since August 1957, no progress on their brief - the actual planning of the Western Exit of the Eastern Boulevard - had yet been made. The Board insisted that the Shopping Close must stay and in reply the National Government threatened to withdraw funding explaining that "National Road Funds had perforce to be spent on the best schemes only, and if the scheme was not a workmanlike one from the engineering point of view, there would be no alternative but to withdraw from the scheme."¹¹

In retrospect this position of the National Government sounds like brinkmanship masquerading as professionalism. Who was to judge the "best" and most "workmanlike" scheme? Clearly there were several contested and competing views between layers of government about what "best" for the Foreshore actually was.

5 THE "RESOLUTION"

As we know, the eventual scheme built on the Foreshore was dramatically different from the one debated here, and the idea of bypassing the Shopping Precinct intersection completely was the one which did ultimately win through, as the whole Foreshore development was bypassed by the Foreshore Freeway in a plan developed in the early 1960s using a new generation of overseas experts. Ironically the shopping precinct so beloved of the Foreshore Board (now called Piers Place) did not develop in any significant way, perhaps bypassed itself by suburban developments elsewhere. The eventual Foreshore Freeway scheme adopted in the early 1960s was far more substantial than anything discussed in the late 1950s.

In 1959 the Chair of the Foreshore Board told the press that it was "too late" to review the plan for the Eastern Boulevard¹² and the Eastern Boulevard, which had been part of a provisional town planning scheme for the redevelopment of the District 6 "slum" area since 1940, was one of the few sections of Solly Morris's promised "Metropolis of Tomorrow" built (Barnett, 1994; p178). The Eastern Boulevard, which the City argued against but which the National and Provincial governments eventually insisted upon has the dubious

¹⁰ Minutes of Meeting 3, 26 February 1958, National Archives box TRE/7/6/D Vol 1.

¹¹ Minutes of meeting 18 June 1958, National Archives box TRE/7/6/D Vol 1.

¹² Cape Times 3 September 1959.

distinction of being the cause of the first large scale demolitions in District 6, starting in 1960.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Given South Africa's history of Apartheid planning it is easy to draw conclusions about the politicised nature of South African *urban* planning and housing. Whether *transport* planning is as politicized is more debatable – with some still advocating, as Solly Morris did in the 1950s, that transport planning is a more objective process, based on scientific data collection and modeling. After researching the detail of road planning practices, however, the conclusion must surely be reached that road planning is as politicized as urban planning. Struggles for power between levels of government, and between individuals and institutions, permeated the engineering meetings of the 1940s and 1950s as surely as they permeated the urban planning of the day. We can conclude then, that road planning, is political, but what does saying that mean for the Foreshore Freeways, and for transport planning practice today?

Studies of technology from elsewhere offer some pointers. Langdon Winner asked “do artefacts have politics?” and describes the case of Long Island's parkways, which were built as access routes from New York City to the beaches of Long Island from the 1920s (Winner, 1986). They were important as they provided one of the few means for New Yorkers to leave the crowded city and experience leisure in the open. The bridges over the parkways have achieved some notoriety for their embedded racism, as they were low enough to stop buses (mainly used by poorer African-Americans) to use, but suitable for rich car owners to pass under. Hence the bridges embedded politics of race which permeated the use of the road long after those who were involved in their planning and construction had gone.

Given that the debates about the form and location of Cape Town's freeways were clearly politicised exercises, what can we say about the *artefacts* of those debates, the constructed (and incomplete) freeways which remain? The general argument made here, and repeated through many other case studies of technical artefacts and systems, is that the seemingly neutral urban road infrastructure we now live with have *embedded in them* their social and political histories (Hughes, 1983; Bijker et al, 1987; Bijker and Law, 1992; Garb, 2004). As we have seen above, these histories are not neutral, and they are not simple. In the case of the Foreshore Freeways they reflect the power politics of decades of negotiations, and so the conclusion is: the *Foreshore Freeways have politics*. The politics of the Foreshore Freeways may not be as simple as the politics of the Long Island Parkway but they, too privilege some actors and interest groups over others as they continue to describe the transport infrastructure, and city, which was seen as “best” by the engineering and planning of the 1940s to 1950s.

When considering what to do with these political artefacts from the past we would do well to reflect on their histories, and on what politics are embedded in them.

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