THE RISE, DECLINE AND POTENTIAL REBIRTH OF THE AMERICAN PARKWAY

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the history of the American parkway, showing how technical, cultural, and aesthetic factors contributed to the form's evolution and tracing popular and professional reactions to parkway development. It concludes with a brief consideration of contemporary attempts to invoke the lessons of traditional parkway design. The history of the American parkway constitutes one of the most important chapters in the annals of twentieth-century road civilization. As the first comprehensively designed limited-access public motorways, parkways paved the way for the express highways that transformed the developed world. As arteries of transportation and recreation, they were critical components of ambitious regional planning strategies. As symbols of progress and modernity, parkways embodied contemporary conceptions of modern design, efficiency and technological progress. At the same time, their naturalistic landscaping and historical allusions made modern technologies and Modernist principles palatable to those ambivalent about the social implications of modernity. The parkways' preeminence began to wane by the late 1930s as they were supplanted by more technically efficient designs such as the Reichsautobahnen and American freeways. Recently, both preservationists and roadway designers have begun to rediscover the cultural, aesthetic and pragmatic values of traditional parkways.

The Rise, Decline and Potential Rebirth of the American Parkway

The history of the American parkway constitutes one of the most important chapters in the annals of twentieth-century road civilization. As the first comprehensively designed limited-access public motorways, parkways paved the way for the express highways that transformed the landscape of the developed world. As arteries of transportation and recreation, they were critical components of the ambitious regional planning strategies favored by mid-century bureaucrats. As symbols of progress and modernity, parkways embodied contemporary conceptions of modern design, efficiency and technological progress. At the same time, their naturalistic landscaping and historical allusions reinforced traditional values and made modern technologies and Modernist principles palatable to those ambivalent about the social implications of modernity. The parkways' preeminence began to wane by the late 1930s as they were supplanted by more technically efficient designs such as the Reichsautobahnen and American freeways. Lately, however, both preservationists and roadway designers have begun to rediscover the cultural, aesthetic and pragmatic value of parkway-style developments. This essay provides an interdisciplinary history of the American parkway, showing how technical, cultural, aesthetic and administrative factors contributed to the form's evolution and tracing popular and professional reactions to parkway development. It concludes with a

brief consideration of contemporary attempts to invoke the lessons of traditional parkway design on both practical and symbolic levels. [1]

The American motor parkway rose to prominence in the 1920s and 1930s as an international model for the harmonious integration of engineering and landscape architecture. Parkways were praised by the popular and professional press, embraced by the driving public, and widely emulated in the United States and abroad. The primary reason parkways achieved such acclaim was that they reconciled a number of complex and often competing practical and symbolic concerns. At the height of their popularity, parkways were supported by a diverse array of interests including engineers, landscape architects, city & regional planners, tourism interests, public officials, popular journalists, and elite architectural critics. Parkways began to recede from prominence after World War II when changing social practices, technological developments, and cultural concerns made it increasingly difficult to accommodate such diverse demands in single, multi-purpose environments.

Parkways were widely regarded as the most technically advanced motorways in the world from the mid-1910s to the early 1930s. They were safer, faster, and more efficient than conventional highways. Aesthetically, parkways ameliorated the growing problem of roadside blight while adapting traditional picturesque scenery to the requirements of automobile travelers. They were more than just attractive and efficient transportation arteries, however. Parkway were integral components of municipal, regional, and national recreation networks, providing access to increasingly dispersed parks and frequently containing multipurpose recreational amenities within their rights of way. From a broader planning perspective, parkways were intended to revitalize rural regions and reshape the form and function of the modern metropolis. Parkways were also calculated economic investments. They were intended to improve their immediate surroundings, raise real estate values and tax revenues, and support the rapidly growing automobile-based tourism industry. Parkways were also understood as important ideological initiatives. With their healthful outdoor spaces, naturalistic scenery and pastoral allusions, they were intended counteract the destabilizing impacts of modernization, urbanization and immigration and help define and promote traditional American values. This was particularly true of federal parkways, which were explicitly meant to present an idealized vision of American history and national identity. While parkways trafficked in traditional values and conventional picturesque aesthetics, they also appealed to avant-garde critics, who celebrated their dynamic curvature and cast them as embodiments of modernist conceptions of space, time, and motion.

While pragmatic factors were undoubtedly paramount, this double-edged symbolism contributed significantly to the parkway’s contemporary popularity. By functioning simultaneously as icons of modernity and repositories of traditional values, parkways helped mediate the tension between progress and nostalgia, which was a pressing cultural concern in the United States and throughout the modern world. Most Americans embraced the practical benefits of modernization, but few sought a complete break with

the past. By combining traditional aesthetics and historical allusions with advanced highway engineering, parkways reconciled modern desires for material and social progress with the paradoxical longing to recapture the simple virtues commonly ascribed to the pre-modern era. By combining nature, history, and technological progress in harmonious compositions that could be experienced from behind the wheel of private automobiles, parkways united America=s most rapidly growing popular pastime with three of the most prominent themes of national identity (Figure 1).

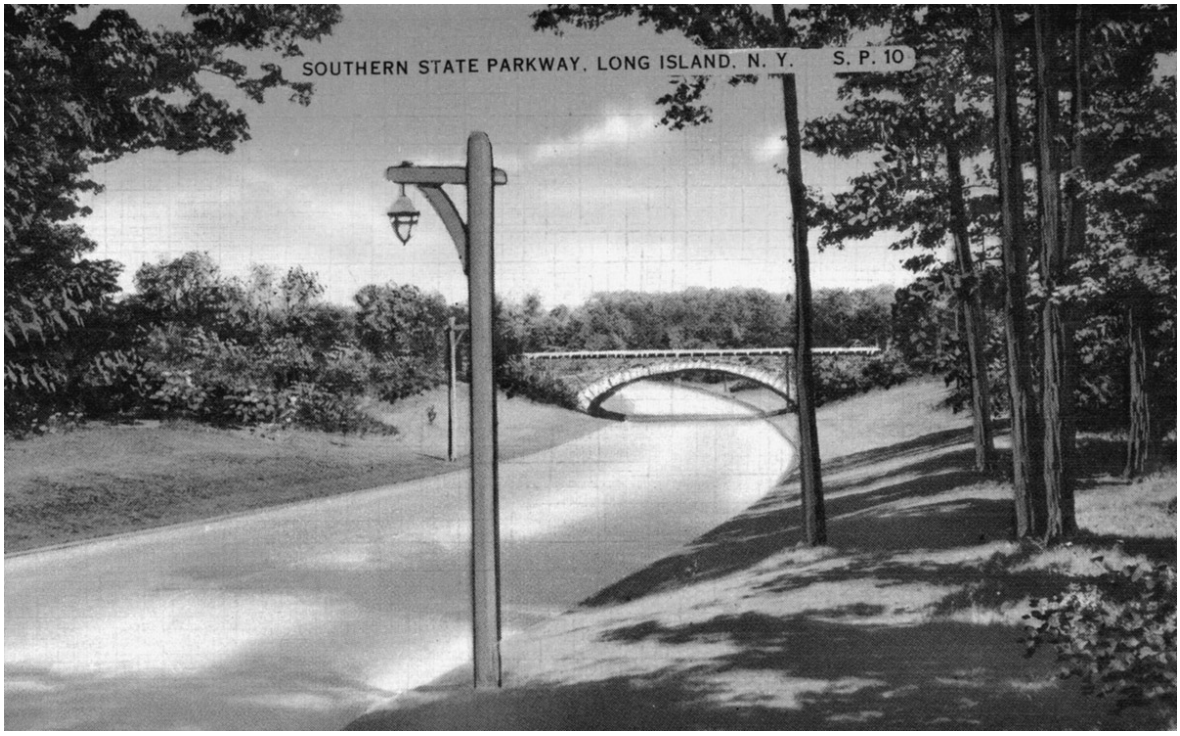

Figure 1 – Southern State Parkway, Long Island, New York, ca. 1930
(vintage postcard: author)

Parkways were not twentieth-century innovations, of course. Grand avenues and boulevards had graced European cities for centuries and the tradition of recreational driving in picturesque parks dated back to eighteenth-century England. Parkways were a nineteenth-century American invention, however, combining the urban transportation function of continental avenues with the picturesque aesthetics of English parks and the nascent stirrings of modern urban planning. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux introduced the term “park-way” to describe the tree-lined approaches they designed for Brooklyn’s Prospect Park in late 1860s. Connecting large parks with urban centers and elite residential developments by means of attractively landscaped parkways soon became a key element of American city planning. Parkways were seen as means of spreading the benefits of parks throughout rapidly expanding cities and as economic stimulants that enhanced property values, encouraged high-class residential

development, and bolstered a city's status as place for business, residence, and tourism. As the connecting fabric of metropolitan park systems, moreover, parkways played an important role in enlarging the scope of American city planning from isolated projects to comprehensive improvements. [2]

The first parkways resembled traditional boulevards. Brooklyn's Eastern Parkway was a central pleasure drive bordered by formally arrayed tree-lined strips, which were flanked by minor roadways for commercial vehicles and residential access. The series of drives and bordering parkland that Olmsted planned for Boston's Muddy River in the 1880s, now known collectively as "The Emerald Necklace," redefined the parkway concept from a conventional avenue to a picturesque roadway winding through an informally landscaped park. The project represented a middle stage in the progression from traditional boulevard to modern parkway in circulation terms, as well. The riverside location limited access on one side of the main roadway, but turning and entering traffic from adjacent streets remained a source of danger and disruption. Despite these improvements, the advent of the automobile rendered traditional parkways obsolete on both practical and aesthetic grounds. Not only were the frequent intersections and circuitous alignments unsuited for automobile traffic, but the intimate picturesque compositions favored by nineteenth-century landscape architects became increasingly difficult to appreciate as travel rates rose above twenty miles per hour.

The primary impetus for the parkway's popularity had less to do with sophisticated aesthetic issues than with pragmatic concerns for safety and efficiency, augmented by a more a broadly shared distaste for the excesses of commercial roadside development. Conventional highway departments had made significant progress in basic engineering matters, alleviating dust and mud problems through with modern paving methods. By the 1920s, however, it was apparent that simply repaving old roadways would not solve America's highway crisis. Even with improved payments, conventional roadways were still plagued by poorly designed intersections and hazardous alignments. In terms of highway fatalities per passenger mile, the 1920s and 1930s were the deadliest decades in American history. Compounding the dangers posed by at-grade intersections, deadly curves and unregulated side streets was the long-standing legal precedent that guaranteed direct access to abutting property owners. Not only did a wide array of business interests line roadways with distracting and scenery-destroying billboards, but they constructed haphazard arrays of gas stations, eating establishments and lodging facilities to capitalize on the burgeoning market of motoring Americans, turning popular roadways into dangerous, unsightly and inefficient linear slums. The unregulated entrances to these establishments disrupted traffic and caused numerous accidents. The consensus among highway engineers, planners, landscape architects, and the motoring public was that outmoded and unconstrained highway development was endangering motorists, complicating urban and suburban growth, desecrating the countryside, and preventing Americans from enjoying the full benefits of modern life. Professional journals were filled with prescriptions for highway improvements, scenic improvement groups condemned the billboard and roadside merchandising industries,

and middle-brow magazines railed about the intolerable condition of American roadsides. *Life* magazine complained that the American roadside had become “the supreme honky-tonk of all time,” while the *Saturday Evening Post*, called for "a new and happier era of highway construction," in which better regulations and improved designed would make "motor travel as stimulating to the eye as it is to the speedometer." Regional planner Benton Mackaye and historian/design critic Lewis Mumford used the pages of *Harpers* and the *Atlantic Monthly* to call for a new approach to highway development based on “motor age principles” – a demand that was embraced by popular and professional audiences alike. [3]

By the mid 1920s, it was becoming apparent that the most significant progress in developing this new type of roadway was taking place in the rapidly expanding network of parkways spreading from New York City into Westchester County and Long Island. By combining traditional parkway design techniques with new technologies and adapting them to higher speeds and longer distances, engineers and landscape architects collaborated to produce a new type of roadway that accommodated modern automobile traffic without sacrificing traditional scenic, recreational, and environmental functions**.** The new parkways along the Bronx, Sawmill, and Hutchinson rivers were bordered by wide tree-lined strip that screened out unsightly billboards and roadside commerce. The safety and efficiency of these parkways was enhanced by greatly reducing the number of accident-prone entrances and exits and employing grade separations to eliminate cross traffic at busy intersections. Roadway alignments wound in graceful curves and rose and flowed in harmony with the surrounding terrain. This made driving more enjoyable while minimizing unsightly excavations, reducing hazardous curves, and eliminating dangerous hill-top blind-spots. Careful attention to the three-dimensional quality of road design improved sight-lines and eliminated the dangerous and unpleasant roller-coaster effect of climbing up and down hills in rapid succession. While broad landscaped median strips were employed in select locations to preserve particularly attractive terrain, the expense of constructing two separate roadways kept this desirable safety feature from being employed on a wide scale during the first decades of motor parkway development. The modern concrete bridges and grade separations that radically improved the parkway’s safety and efficiency were given rustic surface treatments and embellished with picturesque plantings. Together with the naturalistic landscaping and rustic guard rails and light posts, these traditional attributes tempered the striking modernity of the parkway’s sophisticated engineering and circulation features. [4]

Dedicated in 1923, the Bronx River Parkway was the first of these new parkways to be completed. The Bronx River Parkway proved to be tremendously successful, both as a scenic pleasure drive and as a commuter thoroughfare. With the new parkway providing convenient access to New York City, formerly remote areas of Westchester County experienced a tremendous real estate boom. This parkway-driven prosperity stimulated realtors and civic boosters to join forces with park promoters to advocate the construction of similar attractively landscaped, limited-access parkways throughout the region. Soon Westchester County and southern Long Island were in the midst of a

parkway-building frenzy. Westchester County constructed another 70 miles of parkway over the next twenty years. These additions included the Saw Mill River Parkway, the Hutchinson River Parkway, and the Cross County Parkway. New York park czar Robert Moses pressed construction of a series of parkways heading from New York City to the beaches and parks he was developing on Long Island. The Southern and Northern State parkways employed many of the same design features that characterized their Westchester County contemporaries. As parkway designers gained more experience, enhanced power, and better funding, their constructions became even better-adapted to automobile travel, with longer, more gradual curves and even fewer entrances and un-grade-separated interchanges. Super-elevation, or "banking" began to be employed more consistently and with greater sophistication and full or partial medians became more common, though economic and political factors continued to limit their widespread adoption.

Parkways were celebrated as the safest and most efficient motor roads in America during the 1920s and early 1930s, but it is important to remember that they were developed by park commissions and intended to function as mixed-used recreational environments. In almost every case, they were implemented as integral components of ambitious local and regional park systems. The sophisticated modern motorways were often flanked by bridle paths and walking trails. At select locations the parkway corridors broadened to include local parks, golf courses, lakes, and athletic fields. Many led to state parks and beaches that were heavily used by urban and suburban residents. Another key element of traditional park and parkway design – the prohibition of buses, trucks, and commercial vehicles – ensured a more relaxed and attractive driving environment and allowed designers to work with narrower roadways and more sinuous curvature. Most of these parkways were designed by teams of landscape architects and engineers working in close collaboration, with landscape architects playing the leading roll in matters of road layout and landscape design.

Despite the success of the Westchester County and Long Island parkways, the highway engineering community did not rush to embrace parkway design principles. Westchester County's Jay Downer, an engineer, and Gilmore Clarke, a landscape architect, repeatedly appealed to the highway building fraternity, presenting the county's parkways as paradigms not just for modern motorway design but for the benefits of professional collaboration. Senior officials of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads quickly recognized that the new parkways were not just more attractive than ordinary roadways, but safer and more efficient as well. The problem, however, was to convince skeptical state highway engineers, budget-strapped planners, and tight-fisted politicians that parkway-style design principles could be translated to large-scale highway development. Most engineers and highway officials viewed landscape architects as extravagant artistes intent on driving up development costs with gratuitous ornamentation. Parkways might be appropriate for a small number of limited recreational developments in well-heeled suburbs, they believed, but accommodating the landscape architects' desire for serpentine curves, expensive grade-separations,

and broad landscaped rights-of-way was as far from the highway engineers' way of doing business as acceding to the demands of the woman-dominated scenic beautification groups that regularly chastised mainstream highway development. Highway engineers often belittled both groups as illogical "prettifiers" with little understanding of the rational and masculine business of highway development.

The long-awaited development of a memorial roadway from Washington to Mount Vernon provided U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) officials with an ideal forum for convincing skeptical engineers that parkway-style techniques could be applied to mainstream arterial highway construction in an efficient and economical manner. When the BPR was put in charge of the project in 1928, the agency went to great lengths to present Mount Vernon Memorial Highway as a "model modern motorway" – a national – and even international – paradigm of modern motorway design. Even the name "Mount Vernon Memorial Highway" was calculated to further the goal of convincing mainstream engineers to adopt parkway-style design principals. As a tourist-oriented roadway restricted to private vehicles and ensconced in a wide band of parkland, the new road clearly fit the conventional definition of a parkway. Calling it a memorial highway and promoting it with a barrage of publicity in mainstream highway engineering circles maximized the project's potential to convince conservative highway engineers of the practical value of parkway-style motorway development.

The BPR conducted tours for highway officials from across the country, planted articles in professional journals, and produced attractive booklets and detailed technical pamphlets outlining the project's design features. The most elaborate of these was the 1934 booklet *Roadside Improvement*. *Roadside Improvement* so impressed Nazi highway engineer Fritz Todt that he reprinted it in German to help guide development of the *Reichsautobahnen*, which, it should be noted, were constructed after Mount Vernon Memorial Highway and the pioneering Westchester County parkways – which Nazi designers inspected in great detail in the company of Clarke and his associates. The BPR also hosted the 1930 International Road Congress in Washington, D.C., showcasing the parkway to an international audience of engineers and highway planners who reported on the new development to their colleagues back home. [5]

Grading plans, road cross-sections, and intersection arrangements were widely published to emphasize the practical value of free-flowing traffic provisions and underscore the harmonious integration of landscape architecture and highway engineering. Carefully staged before, during, and after photographs documented the transition from tangled woodland or cluttered roadside to attractive and efficient parkway landscape. Agency spokesmen emphasized that design decisions were not made according to abstract aesthetic principles or artistic whims, but through rational and rigorous analysis. Virtually all of the parkway's aesthetic attributes were presented as having practical value. Graceful, smoothly flowing curves were not just more attractive, but safer and more efficient as well. The elimination of roadside commerce and strict limitations on access were not just more fitting for the road's recreational and symbolic function, but integral to its safety and efficient function. Even the seemingly elaborate

and expensive landscaping was cast as more practical and cost-effective than conventional practices. Not only did adapting the roadway to existing contours reduce excavation expenses, but the gently sculpted and sodded slopes were more stable and easier to maintain than conventional steep and raw roadside embankments. Rather than spend money on expensive nursery stock, highway departments could fine-tune their alignments in the field to preserve outstanding specimen trees, selectively improving existing roadside vegetation and transplanting plant material from the surrounding countryside or from the path of the roadway itself. Stripping and stockpiling topsoil similarly reduced material costs and facilitated the rehabilitation process. Emphasizing the pragmatic value of naturalistic landscaping in this manner contributed to the BPR's objective of presenting the memorial highway as a paradigm for mainstream arterial highway development rather than as an elitist recreational landscape.

As part of its efforts to promote parkway design principles, the BPR constructed elaborate models that were presented in the U.S. Capitol and then displayed at road congresses throughout the country. The agency also produced a thirty-minute film singing the parkway's praises and portraying the processes of grading, surveying, paving, and planting in meticulous detail [6]. Toward the end of the film, the parkway's appeal was underscored in a series of thrilling views of late-model automobiles whizzing in carefully choreographed formation along the shores of the Potomac. The BPR's film expressed the road-building establishment's perception of the attractions of modern parkway design, but the vision of gleaming concrete motorways, free of hazardous intersections, with sinuous curves stretching into the tree-lined distance was calculated to appeal to a broad spectrum of Americans who embraced the image of a modern road, a modern car, and an attractive sweep of nature as the apotheosis of landscape beauty, material progress, and social achievement.

While the BPR promoted the memorial highway as "America's Most Modern Motorway," the agency also called attention to the parkway's historical associations and ideological implications. Not only did it connect the nation's capital with the home and tomb of its first president, but the route passed by numerous landmarks associated with George Washington and other founding fathers. The trip from Washington to Mount Vernon was presented as a linear lesson in American history and values. In addition to enjoying the usual parkway benefits of outdoor recreation and safe and efficient transportation, the motorist was expected, in the words of one supporter, to experience "a thrill of Americanism" while driving along the shores of the Potomac [7]. The broken pediment signboards and Colonial Revival concession stand were intended to underscore the parkway's cultural associations.

The popular and professional press heralded the memorial highway as an exemplary union of modern engineering, landscape design and patriotic expression. Mainstream engineering publications provided detailed technical information and repeatedly invoked the BPR's characterization of the project as "America's Most Modern Motorway." The

leading city planning journal, *American City*, proclaimed it “the most advanced type of highway development that this country can command," predicting that, "The nation, upon the completion of the memorial highway, will proclaim the practical wisdom and sound sense of combining beauty with utility in our road building." Landscape architects were equally enthusiastic, extolling the memorial highway's virtues in *Landscape Architecture*, *Parks and Recreation*, *American Forests*, and *The American Magazine of Art*. General publications were just as lavish in their praise. *Literary Digest* praised the memorial highway as “a yardstick among highways” and proclaimed that the new roadway would be "as pleasing to the eye as it is to the rumble seat." Invoking the three themes of nature, patriotism, and modern design, *American Motorist* applauded the BPR for having "perpetuated Washington's memory by a boulevard of which he would be proud from a practical, patriotic, and picturesque point of view." Continuing in this vein, the magazine enthused, "At last there is a highway built for beauty with history for its roadbed and the American ideal for its goal.” [8]

While the National Park Service (NPS) was not directly involved in the development of Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, the agency embraced the notion that parkways could cater to the rapidly growing legions of recreational motorists while providing linear lessons in American history and values. Colonial Parkway, begun in 1930 and largely completed in the 1930s, similarly united modern highway engineering with automobile-based heritage tourism. The modern concrete bridges were clad in red-brick veneer, the modern concrete pavement was textured to evoke Colonial era shell roads, and the route connected three of Virginia’s most venerated historic sites, Jamestown, Yorktown, and Williamsburg. The Blue Ridge and Natchez Trace Parkways were meant to tell a more humble story. Along with providing recreational opportunities and presenting spectacular views of seemingly untarnished nature, these long-distance parkways were intended, in the words of NPS landscape architect Stanley Abbott, to “provide the look of homespun in an east that is mostly silk and rayon.” [9] The sleepy pastures, split-rail fences, and quaint log cabins evoked America’s pioneer roots and agrarian heritage, providing motorists with pastoral respites from modern urban life.

It may be tempting to dismiss this aspect of parkway design as a sentimental diversion from the primary narrative of progress in road development, but the ability to be both modern and anti-modern was an essential attribute of the mid-twentieth-century parkway that allied it with other important realms of cultural expression. Just as New Deal painters appropriated modern graphic techniques to adorn public buildings with parables of pre-modern America, parkway designers employed modern design and construction methods, modern means of locomotion, and modern cinematographic sensibilities to create dynamic visual narratives of pioneer hardihood, natural beauty, and homespun values. By using the medium of the streamlined motorway to reinterpret the iconographic American landscape, parkway designers joined avant garde artists such as Aaron Copeland and Martha Graham in expressing traditional idioms and values through modern modes of expression.

The rapidly growing network of suburban commuter parkways was even more

dramatically modern, and was celebrated as such by contemporary commentators. As the New York continued its parkway-building binge with projects like the Grand Central, Henry Hudson, Belt, and Shore Parkways, the British art magazine *The Studio* proclaimed that these attractive and efficient roadways embodied “The New York of Tomorrow,” which promised “a new way of living and working” based on “a fusing of the arts and technical skills and close collaboration with nature.” Thanks to the parkway’s ability to unite practical and aesthetic concerns, the magazine declared, “the highway has become munificent and a thing of beauty.” [10] *Fortune* magazine joined the chorus, asserting that parkways had joined skyscrapers as icons of progress that visitors to the world's most modern metropolis “simply *must* see.” [11] Parkways were also celebrated through the popular medium of postcards. One visitor wrote “Everything is Parkways back in New York” on the front of postcard of Bronx River Parkway. On the back he observed, “I though L.A. and vicinity had a lot of paved roads & highways, but I never saw anything like N.Y. & vicinity.” [12]

The noted architectural critic Sigfried Giedion touted parkways as multi-faceted icons of modernity. Giedion praised parkways as quintessentially modern landscapes that demonstrated the wisdom of large-scale planning and exemplified the fundamental ethos of Modernist perception. Extolling “the great sweep of the highway, the beauty of its alignment, the graceful sequence of its curves,” Giedion enthused, "The space-time feeling of our period can seldom be felt so keenly as when driving, the wheel under one's hand, up and down hills, beneath overpasses, up ramps, and over giant bridges.. [13] For less theoretically inclined commentators, the most common rhetorical device for emphasizing the parkways’ modernity was to align them with the streamlined aesthetic of contemporary industrial design. Extolling the virtues of Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, BPR landscape architect Simonson enthused, “this broad paved highway will simulate in its flowing lines, the spiral curves, the horizontal and vertical transitions, and the banked turns of a fast transport aircraft in flight.” [14] Not only was "streamlining" one of the dominant popular symbols of modernity, but the association had legitimate technical underpinnings as well. Traffic experts had developed elaborate theories ascribing automobile accidents to the "friction" produced by poorly designed roadways, hazards that parkway designers literally “streamlined” away [15].Simonson insisted that “’streamlining’ the flow of high speed modern motor traffic” with teardrop safety islands, spiral curves, beveled curbs, gently rounded side-slopes, and outwardly flared guard rails exemplified the designer's determination to ensure that “the practical needs of traffic circulation and aesthetic attractiveness are harmonized.” [16]

Even as the classic 1930s motor parkways were being heralded for their masterful integration of naturalistic landscape aesthetics, technological progress, and traditional American values, these competing concerns were beginning to pull the disparate elements of the parkway movement apart. Changing cultural and technological factors made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for a single environment to accommodate the conflicting demands for higher speeds and larger traffic volumes, extensive reaches of undeveloped scenery, and increasingly elaborate public history presentations. Not

only did highway engineers realize they could adopt the basic parkway circulation features without wasting time and money on scenic improvement and recreational development, but landscape architects and environmentalists were coming to the conclusion that high speed motor road development was incompatible with evolving park and preservation ideals. Multi-purpose parkways gradually gave way to more specialized environments: urban expressways, toll roads, remote scenic parkways, and an ever-broadening but increasingly specialized array of recreational areas, wilderness preserves, and historical parks.

By the late-1930s, the parkway movement was clearly diverging in two directions: the relatively low speed scenic and recreational parkways promoted by the National Park Service, and the commuter parkways proliferating around major American cities. Connecticut's Merritt Parkway was the mostly widely celebrated of this new generation of parkways. It was heralded as both a marvel of modern motorway development and an engaging example of landscape design. Despite its tree-lined borders and prolific plantings, the Merritt was decried by parkway purists because its relentless straightaways and lack of associated recreational features made it more of a glorified traffic artery than a comprehensively designed and context-sensitive multi-purpose recreational development. Los Angeles's first true modern motorway epitomized the parkway's changing fortunes. The Arroyo Seco Parkway was conceived as a classic recreational amenity, but by the time it was completed in the early 1940s it had become a stripped-down traffic artery. Its new name, the Pasadena Freeway, heralded the changing form and function of urban motorways. Freeways – the term was coined in 1930 by E.M. Bassett to denote freedom of movement, not the absence of tolls – would reshape the American landscape in the postwar era, with a distinctly different balance between the competing concerns of efficiency and landscape aesthetics. [17]

Two seminal events occurred in 1939 that prepared the way for this revolution, one popular and the other bureaucratic and technocratic. The GM Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair introduced the world to "Futurama" a thrilling vision of the highway system of the future. Conceived by the noted industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes, the sprawling diorama of high-speed streamlined motorways spreading across the American continent captured the public's imagination and made a profound impact on the politicians that controlled highway-building purse-strings. [18] That same year, the newly retitled Public Roads Administration released the results of a detailed study that was intended to set the blueprint for federally sponsored highway construction. *Toll Roads and Free Roads* devoted less than three paragraphs to aesthetic and recreational issues. The few illustrations that accompanied the report echoed Bel Geddes' vision of stark high-speed motorways arcing across the countryside with no apparent concern for local topography or landscape development. While federal highway engineers appropriated the parkway's limited-access circulation system and briefly acknowledged the practical benefits of gentle side-sloping, the more diverse aspects of parkway development received no attention and landscape architects were placed in a distinctly subordinate position. No longer equal partners in the design process, their contribution was reduced to the cosmetic adornment of intersections and

embankments constructed according to strictly utilitarian engineering principles. Adding insult to injury, the federal highway establishment re-interpreted the term parkway in a manner that reflected complete contempt for the comprehensive design principles formerly associated with the term. “Parkway,” in the PRA’s new lexicon, referred simply to the minimally landscaped sodded strips lying alongside the gleaming expanses of concrete that remained the central focus of the engineers’ endeavors. [19]

The first major American roadway to embody this new approach was the Pennsylvania Turnpike, opened with great fanfare in 1940 and immediately touted as “America’s Dream Highway.” This 160-mile thoroughfare allowed motorists to speed at 70 or miles-per-hour along a fully-divided and grade-separated four-lane concrete motorway with minimal curves and gentle grades. Highway engineers and the motoring public loved it. Along with dramatically improving regional transportation, the Pennsylvania Turnpike rapidly became an attraction in and of itself. Motorists flocked to the new roadway to enjoy the thrilling sensation of driving at high speeds without interruptions or distractions. Landscape architects assailed the turnpike’s numbing straightaways and strip-mine-like excavations, casting it as a giant step backward in motorway design. The journal *Landscape Architecture* published a series of articles critiquing the turnpike’s design and bemoaning the profession’s marginalization from meaningful participation in motorway development. [20]

Parkways would continue to be built in the postwar era, but they did not capture the same broad-ranging attention as they did during the 1920s and 1930s. The National Park Service pressed on with the long-distance recreational parkways it began before World War II. As scenic, recreational, and historic landscapes these parkways continued to be immensely popular, but no one would claim that their narrow, winding roadways reflected state-of-the-art engineering principles. Freeways, expressways, and interstate highways won favor with engineers, planners, business interests, and politicians, for their ability to accommodate large volumes of traffic safely and efficiently. The public also appeared to be enamored with high-speed motorways. Magazines, booklets postcards, games, movies, songs, and other expressions of popular culture celebrated their streamlined aesthetics, form-follows-function pragmatism, and promise of seemingly limitless thrills and opportunities. In the 1950s, much of America was moving forward and embracing modernity and its throw-out-the-old-and-celebrate-the-new sensibilities. The picturesque aesthetics and anti-modernist overtones of traditional parkways must have appeared distinctly dated and out-of-synch with contemporary concerns. Many commuter parkways were updated during the 1950s and 60s in the hopes of creasing their safety and efficiency. Curves were straightened, pavements widened, and picturesque landscapes either pared away or dramatically degraded by mismanagement and neglect. Rustic guardrails and lamp posts gave way to mass-produced steel beams and light standards that were easier to maintain and less vulnerable to lawsuits by parties intent on blaming outdated designs for accidents caused by inappropriate speeds and inattentive drivers. Traditional wooden signs were often replaced with large, high-visibility signage that dominated the landscape instead of

harmonizing with it.

Traditional parkways continued to have their place, of course, but as specialized landscapes to be enjoyed on rare and carefully bracketed occasions, like a trip to the museum or a stroll in the backcountry. With changing recreational practices and environmental sensitivities growing by leaps and bounds in the 1950s, motoring was no longer seen as the ideal way to experience America's scenic splendors. A number of proposed parkway developments were stopped by environmentalist opposition. Others languished for lack of funds, no longer able to attract the attention and political support they commanded during the parkway movement's heyday. While they were overshadowed by mainstream highway developments, the last generation of regionally oriented parkways demonstrated that it was possible to adapt classic parkway design techniques to higher speeds and traffic volumes. Completed during the 1950s and 1960s, the Taconic, Garden State, Palisades, and Baltimore-Washington Parkways might not have been as fast and efficient as conventional expressways and interstates, but by continuing to prohibit trucks and employ traditional parkway design principles, they managed to combine reasonably high-speeds and enhanced safety with varied and attractive landscape design. (Figure 2)

Figure-2 Postwar Section of George Washington Memorial Parkway, ca. 1955
(U.S. Bureau of Public Roads: National Archives)

Over the last decade or so, there has been a resurgence of interest in parkways, both as historical artifacts and as precedents for contemporary roadway design. Several parkways have spawned historic preservation efforts aimed calling attention to their cultural significance, preventing further alterations, and even undoing inappropriate modifications. The Historic American Engineering Record has documented parkways across the country, several have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a National Historic Landmark form is being prepared for the Blue Ridge Parkway, and academics and popular writers are chronicling parkway development and ruminating on their cultural significance.

Negative reaction to the excesses of conventional freeway development has also forced the highway-building establishment to relearn the lessons of traditional parkway-style design. By the late-1960s, even mainstream highway builders were beginning to acknowledge the advantages of paying greater attention to aesthetic and environmental concerns. The legacy of classic mid-twentieth parkway design can be seen in the sinuous curves and relatively sensitive landscape sensibility of some of the later interstates developed in scenic regions such as Vermont, New Hampshire, and Colorado. While the wide pavements and minimal curvature mandated by modern interstate highway standards prevent a return to the intimate picturesque qualities of classic parkway design, these developments suggest that it is still possible to harmonize concerns for safety and efficiency with attractive and context-sensitive landscape design.

The term parkway itself has regained popularity both as an honorific designation and as a means of elevating the status of suburban roadways, speculative residential developments, and mundane industrial parks. Public entities are resurrecting the term to cloak controversial road-building projects in a more comforting guise or enhance the cachet of modestly landscaped suburban boulevards. In preparation for the development of one of these nominal parkways, the North Texas Tollway Authority recently conducted tours of historic parkway across the United States. [21] Given the resurgence of early-twentieth century urban design techniques under the guise of The New Urbanism, a return to parkway-based urban and regional roadway development would seem logical. Even Robert Moses is gaining renewed appreciation for the many positive contributions he made on the way to becoming the bête noire of post-Modern planning critics, including New York's unmatched regional parkway system. [22] Given all these developments, parkways may once again return to favor as multi-purpose environments capable of reconciling the perennial tensions between progress and nostalgia, nature and technology, recreation and transportation.

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