

Spring 2005

# A Road as a Route and Place: The Evolution and Transformation of the Arroyo Seco Parkway

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris  
*University of California - Los Angeles*

Robert Gottlieb  
*Occidental College, gottlieb@oxy.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholar.oxy.edu/uep\\_faculty](http://scholar.oxy.edu/uep_faculty)

 Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Environmental Policy Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Other Public Affairs](#), [Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Public Policy Commons](#), [Urban Studies Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Loukaitou-Sideris, Anastasia and Gottlieb, Robert, "A Road as a Route and Place: The Evolution and Transformation of the Arroyo Seco Parkway" (2005). *UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship*.  
[http://scholar.oxy.edu/uep\\_faculty/8](http://scholar.oxy.edu/uep_faculty/8)

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Urban and Environmental Policy at OxyScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of OxyScholar. For more information, please contact [cdla@oxy.edu](mailto:cdla@oxy.edu).

**A ROAD AS A ROUTE AND PLACE:  
THE EVOLUTION AND TRANSFORMATION  
OF THE ARROYO SECO PARKWAY<sup>1</sup>**

**Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris<sup>2</sup>  
UCLA Department of Urban Planning  
Email sideris@ucla.edu**

**Robert Gottlieb<sup>3</sup>  
Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, Occidental College  
Email gottlieb@oxy.edu**

---

<sup>1</sup> A condensed version of the article appeared in *Access*, a journal of the University of California Transportation Center which highlights the Center's funded projects.

<sup>2</sup> Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris is professor and Chair of the Department of Urban Planning at UCLA. She specializes in urban design and physical planning. She is the co-author of the book *Urban Design Downtown: Poetics and Politics of Form* (UC Press: 1998) and the author of many articles on inner city revitalization, cultural uses of city spaces, and transit crime. She is the recipient of the 2003 Chester Rapkin award from the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gottlieb is the Henry R. Luce Professor of Urban Environmental Studies and Director of the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College. He is the author or co-author of ten books, including *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (UC Press)

**A ROAD AS A ROUTE AND PLACE:  
THE EVOLUTION AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE ARROYO SECO PARKWAY**

*Now I know how a package feels when it gets an unobstructed ride through a chute to the shipping department. I've just made a run out to Pasadena on the completed Arroyo Seco Parkway ... From the relatively narrow Figueroa tunnels you immediately find yourself launched like a speedboat in a calm, spacious, divided channel. Channel is the word, too, for it's in the arroyo, below the level of traffic-tormented streets. No brazen pedestrians nor kids riding bikes with their arms folded! No cross streets with too-bold or too-timid drivers jutting their radiators into your path. And no wonder I made it from Elysian Park to Broadway and Glenarm Street in Pasadena in 10 minutes without edging over a conservative 45 miles an hour (Westways, January 1941).<sup>1</sup>*

*If the engineers wish to rhapsodize over the quaint historic qualities of the Arroyo Seco Parkway, they should scrape up the whole miserable concrete mess and put it in the freeway museum. That highway has been obsolete for 25 years: It's dangerous and inadequate. The transition from the 110 north to the I-5 north is one of the worst freeway bottlenecks in the state (Los Angeles Times, July 31, 1999).<sup>2</sup>*

These two statements about the Arroyo Seco Parkway (now known as the Pasadena Freeway) are separated by half a century in time and a sea of difference in the authors' perception of the same roadway. Nevertheless, they epitomize eloquently the rise and fall of urban parkways. A predecessor of the modern freeway and a celebrated transportation model of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the urban parkway has fallen on difficult times. Designed for uninterrupted and pleasurable driving through park-like surroundings and a visual connection to the communities the driver passed through, parkways were once hailed as marvels of transportation innovation and design, and as safe and efficient alternatives to non-limited access arterials and boulevards. By the 1950s, however, the goals of pleasurable driving and visual connection had progressively faded in favor of engineering efficiency and higher capacity use. In the meantime, existing parkways became tangled in a web of problems. Originally designed for fewer cars at lower speeds, parkways like the Arroyo Seco Parkway had to accommodate significant increases

in vehicles at much higher speeds. This led to traffic congestion (the ten minute trip of 1941 along the Arroyo Seco might now take as long as 40 minutes), bottlenecks, and a major increase in traffic accidents.

Today, the Arroyo Seco Parkway stands as a representative example of an urban parkway still in use but fraught with problems due to its disjuncture between its original conception and ultimate evolution. These changes also symbolize some of the problems and challenges in a freeway-centered transportation system. In what follows we will revisit the history and goals of early parkways, focusing in particular on the “first freeway of the West,” the celebrated Arroyo Seco Parkway. We will examine the forces that brought about its painful evolution and transformation from a visually appealing roadway to an accident-ridden freeway. Drawing from the specific example of the Arroyo Seco Parkway, our investigation will trace the change of the parkway model over time. At the core of our discussion lies the desire to examine if early parkways have indeed become “dinosaurs,” obsolete roadways incapable of accommodating contemporary traffic demands, or if they can be revamped and reclaimed as successful elements of an integrated urban transportation network.

### **The Early Days: Genesis and Evolution of Urban Parkway**

The first use of the word parkway in the American context was made before the advent of the automobile. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in a report to the Board of Commissioners of Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York in 1866 recommended the addition of a *parkway* to the plans for the park, a road for private carriages which made its way through rows of trees planted along its sides.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by the celebrated landscaped boulevards of Paris and Berlin, Olmsted and Vaux viewed parkways as carriageways, surrounded and contained by the park and designed for pleasure riding.<sup>4</sup> Their first parkways, Eastern and Ocean Parkway,

provided carriage owners pleasant connections to and from Prospect Park, without the disruptions of crowded city streets.<sup>5</sup>

For early landscape architects like Olmsted and Vaux the term parkway connoted a strip of land of varying width, depending on immediate topographical conditions, which contained a roadway passing through park-like or landscaped surroundings. The roadway was meant for a comfortable and pleasurable ride; thus, the alignment was one of gentle curves, designed for speeds in keeping with the times that also allowed a visual connection to the surrounding landscape.<sup>6</sup> An important provision was that abutting property owners had no right of access over the parkway strip.

Pleasure parkways “designed with express reference to the pleasure with which they may be used for walking, riding, and the driving of carriages,” were built in Boston and in New York’s Central Park.<sup>7</sup> Olmsted and Vaux’s ideas for parkways were thoroughly described in their 1868 reports for Lakeshore Park in Buffalo. Parkway were envisioned as “plainly serving, not simply as branches or outworks of the parks with which they connect, but as part of the general street system of the city.”<sup>8</sup> Even the “cloverleaf design,” later to be frequently used in freeway ramp design,<sup>9</sup> was also proposed by Olmsted: “At the crossings of important streets, the parkways might, for greater convenience in crossing and turning, in the future, be expanded in a circular or elliptical form, and such points would, in the future, offer suitable positions for fountains, statues, trophies and public monuments.”<sup>10</sup>

Other landscaped boulevards called parkways were also built in eastern cities for non-foot carriage, and, with the advent of the automobile, the parkway concept as a specialized roadway was revived and elaborated in various forms.<sup>11</sup> One of these was the concept of the “townless highway” promoted by Benton MacKaye and his colleagues from the Regional

Planning Association of America (RPAA). MacKaye envisioned a transportation system that separated roads from pedestrians, thus increasing pedestrian-oriented public places in urban areas while connecting city and countryside.<sup>12</sup> The idea of connection to place through the pleasure ride was also central to the townless highway concept as well as the parkway movement as a whole. The first constructed parkway for automobiles along these lines was the Bronx River Parkway in Westchester County New York, built between 1916 and 1925, and designed to provide leisure driving and recreational opportunities.<sup>13</sup> This parkway was the first to introduce the concept of “limited access” favored by RPAA planners and other parkway advocates. The Bronx River Parkway’s great success in combination with a growing number of motorists led to the development of more of these roadways, most notably in New York City where Robert Moses oversaw the construction of several parkways, which were completed between 1934 and 1940.

During the 1930s the modern parkway movement began to expand in other parts of the country with the construction of several federal parkways, such as the Skyline Drive in Virginia, Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina and Tennessee, Merritt Parkway in Connecticut, and others. These first parkways designed for the car followed serpentine routes, which enabled automobiles to flow at uniform speeds through naturalistic landscapes.<sup>14</sup>

During the same decade Los Angeles planners, aware of the parkway construction in eastern cities, started to envision the creation of ‘greenbelts across the city’ –parkways that would address the region’s increasing traffic while at the same time encourage “highway recreation” and “outdoor sightseeing.”<sup>15</sup> These ideas were elaborated in Frederick Olmsted Jr. and Harland Bartholomew’s 1930 report for the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, linking

parkway development with opportunities to create open spaces and parklands, including along the Arroyo Seco and Los Angeles River watershed from Pasadena to downtown Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup>

After a series of debates regarding feasibility, finances, and transportation and land use goals, the celebrated Arroyo Seco Parkway was commissioned and broke ground on March 21, 1938. Dubbed the “first freeway of the West” by then Governor Culbert Olson, the parkway was formally dedicated two years later in 1940.<sup>17</sup>

### **Parkway Goals**

Parkway concepts sought to incorporate the goals of pleasure driving, visual connection, and efficiency (moving large numbers of cars at a continuous speed). Pleasure driving was achieved through the visual qualities of the parkway that was designed as a serpentine roadway of variable width, well adjusted to topography and offering views and vistas of the immediate and more distant landscape. In urban areas considerable grading and planting was undertaken to achieve a park-like effect. The visual experience obtained on the parkway was a paramount factor in its planning and design. Views had to be uncluttered and for this reason billboards and other forms of outdoor advertising were prohibited. At the same time landscaping was utilized to frame views and restore natural appearances. In early parkways of the East only native materials were used for planting, while fencing was “indigenous”: walls of local stone, post-and-rail barricades, and zigzag snake fences of split rails.<sup>18</sup>

Essential to the success and excellence of the parkway was the skillful and land sensitive location of the route that included the opportunity to develop and visually connect with adjacent parklands. As a 1913 report of the Los Angeles Park Commission about the proposed Arroyo Seco Parkway stated, “If the parkway should end at an intermediate point, not connecting with the rest of the city park system, its value to the city, as well as to the sister communities, would

be greatly decreased.”<sup>19</sup> The goal was nothing less than the display of the physical and historic landscape of the region through the windshield. The roadway was perceived as connecting with the surrounding landscape, offering “an extensive interpretation” of the features located along roads (by means such as maps, guides, markers, displays, etc.), thus enhancing the meaning of the drive.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the protection, if not enhancement of adjacent landscapes and parklands was advocated by parkway design. For example, the city of South Pasadena insisted that in laying out the parkway, the road needed to curve around Arroyo Seco Park in order to prevent as little damage to the park site as possible.<sup>21</sup>

Safety, utility, and efficiency were additional goals of modern parkway design. To ensure an uninterrupted flow of traffic the parkway introduced the design concept of limited access to the road. Access from abutting properties was denied, traffic lights were eliminated, and crossings and left turns were prevented. Grade separation was provided when the parkway crossed other major arteries. Parkways were to be divided by wide median strips and their pavements had generous widths. But parkways were designed for passenger cars and for speeds ranging from 25 to 45 miles per hour.<sup>22</sup> As mentioned in the dedication ceremonies of the Arroyo Seco Parkway, “saving in time to motorists is based, not upon traffic flowing unduly at high speeds, but on its ability to flow continuously at reasonable speeds without delays caused by cross-traffic and left hand-turns.”<sup>23</sup>

Transportation efficiency and aesthetic delight were considered inseparable goals of parkway design, which in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was described as “bioengineering”—a marriage of architecture, landscaping and civil engineering in a three dimensional design.<sup>24</sup> These dual values which resulted in the design of a road as both a route and a place were carefully incorporated in the design of the Arroyo Seco Parkway.

## **The Arroyo Seco Parkway**

Beginning as a sandy trailway connecting the villages of Tongva or Gabrieliño Indians, the Arroyo had been recognized by the first Spanish settlers as the most direct route from the administrative center of the Los Angeles pueblo to the most important church in the region, Mission San Gabriel.<sup>25</sup> A logical and direct pedestrian route, this ancient roadway was to be adapted to speedier means of transportation, first of horse wagons, then bicycles, and finally automobiles.

A route connecting Downtown Los Angeles to Pasadena, and even further—linking the mountains to the sea-- had been talked about since T.D. Allen of Pasadena first surveyed the arroyo in 1895.<sup>26</sup> In 1900, the first vehicle traffic plan catering to the “mechanical marvel of the day: the bicycle” opened through the arroyo.<sup>27</sup> Then Pasadena Mayor, Horace Dobbins, began work on “the Cycleway,” which would have linked Pasadena with Los Angeles. This bicycle path on an elevated, multi-lane, wooden structure provided grade separation and is now regarded as a precursor of the parkway. But the path was only partly constructed and never fully completed because of lack of funds. As early as 1907, Dr. Dana W. Bartlett, a New England-raised minister and settlement house worker recognizing the beauty of the Arroyo Seco, wrote:

“Entering the river from the Pasadena side, is the Arroyo Seco, a stream whose bed is dry in the summer but which in winter carried quite a volume of water. This is bordered with a natural growth of trees and shrubs, live oaks, and sycamores. Along this can be made one of the most charming drives that any city could desire.”<sup>28</sup>

Discussion and debate about a roadway continued well into the 1910s and 1920s, influenced by the national impetus for the building of parkways. These discussions often

crystallized as specific proposals and plans. A 1911 drawing by Laurie Davidson Cox depicts the existing Los Angeles parks linked by a series of new or enhanced roadways. One of these roadways would connect the northeast corner of Elysian Park to the southeast reach of an Arroyo Seco Parkway.<sup>29</sup> The 1913 proposal for an Arroyo Seco Parkway by the Los Angeles Parks Commission also envisioned a metropolitan parkway through the cities of Los Angeles, South Pasadena, and Pasadena to the mountains of the National Forest Reserve.<sup>30</sup> The 1924 *Major Street Traffic Plan for Los Angeles* by Frederick Law Olmsted, Harland Bartholomew, and Charles H. Cheney proposed the first grade-separated parkway following the Arroyo Seco from Pasadena to Los Angeles, and was modeled after the suburban parkways of New York.<sup>31</sup> In 1930, observing that “parkways are wholly lacking in the Los Angeles Region” Olmsted and Bartholomew issued their report *Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region*, proposing a comprehensive and coordinated system of large parks and connecting parkways. The proposed Arroyo Seco Parkway would represent a North-South chain “from the mountains to the sea through the heart of the city.”<sup>32</sup>

These discussions and proposals about an Arroyo Seco Parkway, provocative as they might have been, were not effectively pursued because of the anticipated cost during a Depression-era squeeze on local funding sources. The proposed roadway, each city thought, would be fine “as long as somebody else pays for it.”<sup>33</sup> By the late 1930’s this “somebody” was identified. By making the Arroyo Seco Parkway a state highway, and putting it in the care of the California Highway Commission, state funds became available, making the project feasible.<sup>34</sup> The state was able to provide half of the \$5 million needed for the first 6.8 miles of the parkway; the remaining half included federal money from the Work Progress Administration and the Public Works Administration, some city funds, and gas tax revenues from Los Angeles and

South Pasadena.<sup>35</sup> A final hurdle was overcome by the change of a state law that guaranteed property owners living next to public highways access to roads built with public funds. The 1939 *Freeway Law* in California recognized a new type of highway to which abutting property owners did not have the right of access.

There were reasons why the Arroyo Seco Parkway became the first grade-separated, limited access, high-speed divided road in the west. The building of the parkway was heavily supported by the wealthy and powerful residents of Pasadena and businessmen from downtown Los Angeles. By the mid-1930s, the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce, the Pasadena Realty Board, and the Pasadena City Planning Commission, all put their considerable weight behind the construction of the parkway. Despite opposition from the lower Arroyo community of Highland Park, whose residents argued that the road would destroy Arroyo park lands, the powerful Pasadena boosters along with businessmen from the Los Angeles Central Business District were able to lobby the State Legislature and include the Arroyo Seco Parkway in the state highway system.<sup>36</sup>

Built in three major stages from 1938 to 1953, the 8.2-mile parkway gave an easy commute from Pasadena to downtown Los Angeles. The road combined the best traditions of parkway design with engineering inventiveness and technological innovation. Designed as a roadway where the ingress and egress from abutting property was prohibited, where all crossings were separated, and all left turns were prevented, the parkway allowed for uninterrupted movement of vehicles and transportation efficiency.

The first segment of the Arroyo Seco Parkway, completed in 1939, cost less than \$1,000,000 per mile. This included the building of the Arroyo Seco flood control channel, as well as twenty-two bridge structures, two pedestrian overpasses, two railroad bridges, utility

reconstruction, and landscaping. For the construction of the parkway embankments, engineers utilized hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of material excavated from the Arroyo Seco Channel by the WPA and from the Los Angeles River by the US District Engineers.<sup>37</sup> This cut down considerably the cost of the parkway that was found to be "exceptionally low for a freeway of its character." Furthermore, the Automobile Club of Southern California hailed the new parkway as saving each motorist 6 cents per trip from Pasadena to downtown.<sup>38</sup>

In the construction of the Arroyo Seco Parkway traffic safety was of paramount importance. To reduce the possibility of head-on collisions a 6-foot median strip was designed. The shrubbery planted in the median was intended to shield drivers from the headlight glare of oncoming traffic.<sup>39</sup> Fences were erected to separate traffic from children and animals at the adjacent properties. The lanes were 11-feet wide, and a shoulder of 10-feet was originally planned for each side of the roadway. Different-colored types of concrete were used for different lanes to encourage drivers to stay in their lane. Other safety features included special safety lighting at all inlets and outlets of the parkway, warning and directional signals, and red reflectors and amber-colored flashers installed in curbs.<sup>40</sup> A 1945 study pointed to these safety features as an explanation of the remarkably low ratio of traffic accidents that the parkway enjoyed in comparison to other major highways with similar traffic volumes.<sup>41</sup>

Consistent with the dictums of parkway planning, the Arroyo Seco Parkway offered driving pleasure to motorists by exposing them to the scenic beauty of the surrounding landscape. As shown in the postcard of Figure 1, existing parklands were enhanced by the planting of approximately 4,000 plants of various varieties, which were selected and placed so that "a brilliant showing of color would be maintained throughout the year."<sup>42</sup> To enhance the

pleasure of the ride, engineers adjusted the road's contours to fit the landscape, installed "rustic" rails on rubble parapet walls and wooden railings along on- and off-ramps.<sup>43</sup>

### **From Parkway to Freeway**

“Travelling itself is becoming more of a chore and less of a pleasure. The road which once served for a pleasurable driving experience is now jammed with traffic and lined with signs; its alternative a super-highway designed for speeds of 70 miles an hour.”<sup>44</sup>

As times were changing fast, the goal of efficiency quickly overshadowed that of aesthetic delight. In the 1950s the nation witnessed the first decade of an era dominated by traffic engineering. The passage of the Federal Highway Act of 1956 led to the building of 43,000 miles of utilitarian roads, including 2175 miles within city limits. Multi-lane freeway systems that could move people and goods at higher speeds were superimposed over the land with little or no attention to aesthetics, scenic pleasure, community values, or environmental impacts. Decked overpasses supplanted the decorated stone bridges. Wooden rails and sculpted roadside surfaces gave way to concrete sound walls, and the gently winding roadway lanes were replaced by flat and curveless ribbons.<sup>45</sup> Parkways, considered products of a bygone era, quickly lost favor among traffic engineers. The adjustment of parkways to the freeway era has been problematic at best, as they were designed for fewer and slower cars, and for recreational driving.

Already by 1940, at the time of its dedication, the Arroyo Seco Parkway, with its crucial goal of aesthetic appeal and connection to a picturesque landscape, began to be identified as the first freeway of the West, with its more concentrated focus on speed, traffic volume, uninterrupted travel, and efficiency. Built in a transitional phase of road building, when the ideal

of a recreational parkway was about to give way to the concept of the high-speed freeway, the parkway was seeking to reconcile utilitarian purposes with traditional recreational motives.<sup>46</sup> The program prepared for the dedication ceremony of the Arroyo Seco Parkway emphasized modernity and progress, stating that the parkway would become “the first completed unit of the proposed system of modern express highways which is absolutely essential in this, the fastest growing and most congested metropolitan area in the West, to provide for the safe and expeditious handling of traffic.”<sup>47</sup>

In the years that followed, the Olmsted/Bartholomew vision of greenbelts and pleasure drives would become transformed into the high-speed freeway system. The completion of this “first freeway of the West” would in turn help define contemporary transportation design and planning and expand the sprawling land use patterns already started by the rail and interurban systems that had been developed during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. What had changed? Martin Wachs explains that the rise of the automobile “had a lot to do with images of modernity associated with the different transportation modes and also with the balance of political power within the Los Angeles area.” The private car was viewed as the epitome of modernity. At the same time, a coalition of automobile advocates (spearheaded by the Automobile Club of Southern California), civic leaders, and suburban land developers pushed hard for a regional transportation system focused around the automobile.<sup>48</sup> By 1940, the President of the Studebaker Corporation would declare that “in highways lies a new national frontier for the pessimist who thinks frontiers have disappeared.”<sup>49</sup> Economic expediencies also helped the shift from the vision of parkways to the reality of freeways. Despite its widespread popularity the Olmsted Bartholomew plan required resources that the city and county did not have. According to Wachs, the freeway system that emerged reflected the need to compromise in

order to obtain federal funding. Highway engineers from the Bureau of Public Roads adopted uniform standards that were consistent throughout the state, and indeed quite similar around the nation. Sensitivity to local context and topography gave way to standardization, uniformity, and efficiency.

This shift had two major consequences. On the one hand, it thoroughly undermined proposals made by various public transportation advocates during the 1920s and 1930s to establish a linked transportation system that included parkways, rail (including a rail system along the median strip of a parkway), bus, and even bicycle. At the same time, as the parkway gave way to the freeway, the goals of the “pleasure drive” and connection to place became even more problematic. New freeways were straightened in order to maximize speed and efficiency. Their locations were determined in relation to an interconnected grid system that paralleled the old interurban routes and the real estate speculation and growth patterns of the region while paying little if any attention to the surrounding landscape and even existing built environments.

By the 1950s, with the parkway concept having become an historical curiosity, Los Angeles (as well as other metropolitan areas) embarked on highway construction frenzy, financed by the Federal Interstate Highway Act that effectively divided neighborhoods, reconfigured cities, and promoted suburban sprawl. Los Angeles already led the country in its myriad manifestations of car-centered growth, culture, architecture, politics, and residential development. The dominant auto-based system not only encouraged new suburban residential development at the urban edge, but also led to a shift of supermarkets away from the urban core to the suburbs, the rise of gated communities, and the making of a built environment of strip malls, drive-thrus, and fast food outlets. The car and the freeway became the very symbols of Los Angeles, with the region’s patterns of long-distance commuting, daily episodes of

air pollution, traffic congestion, carved up neighborhoods, and endless, monochrome suburban vistas and sprawling development.

### **Contemporary Issues and Problems**

While the Arroyo Seco Parkway had been viewed in the 1940s as a model for roadway design, sixty years later it has become plagued by a number of problems. Originally built to carry 27,000 automobiles per day at 45mph, the parkway carries today an average daily traffic load of over 130,000 cars (at its southern end) at speeds often exceeding the official limit of 55mph (when not congested). An analysis of data from the California Department of Transportation shows that the average daily traffic has increased consistently since the parkway opened (Figures 2 and 3). Congestion can be found on the parkway during many times of the day and evening. As shown in Figure 3, traffic builds continuously heading south, with a peak of 8,000 cars per hour in the middle of the parkway and about 14,000 cars per hour where it intersects with Interstate 5. Originally built for a leisurely drive, the parkway has only three rather narrow lanes on each direction. Given the greater volume of vehicles, higher speeds, and, as discussed below, high accident rates, bottlenecks are daily occurrences for what has become the main thoroughfare connecting Pasadena to downtown Los Angeles.

Today the parkway is the most unsafe route in the region based on accident rates (Figure 5). The majority of the accidents on the parkway happen because of speeding (62%) or because of improper turns (17%). The parkway was not designed for today's high speeds. As a result, fast driving along its tight curves and narrow lanes often result in traffic collisions. A serious safety issue concerns the on- and off-ramps where motorists need to brake or accelerate quickly due to the lack of merge lanes.<sup>50</sup> A 1940s article in *Westways* described the challenge for motorists, even in the early days, of waiting at a dead stop and having to merge onto the curving

roadway “with teeth clenched, pushing the accelerator all the way to the floor, . . . afraid to look back and see if anything was gaining on you.”<sup>51</sup> These ingress and egress points have become more problematic with the multiplication of cars (Figure 6). A thorough analysis of the spatial distribution of accidents along the Arroyo Seco Parkway showed that the percentage of total accidents increases as the distance from an on- or off-ramp decreases (Figure 7).

An experiential analysis of driving along the parkway found that visual delight is certainly greater along this parkway than along the drive on other freeways in the region. The elements of parkway design, such as graceful turns following the natural topography, generous vistas, decorative bridges, and greenery, make for a distinct driving experience, if one could drive at a slower speed in order to enjoy it. Yet some of the initial intentions have been compromised or abandoned. Some of the original aesthetic features of the parkway have been removed or damaged, and concrete median barriers have replaced the historic guardrail. Overgrown and untrimmed planting areas and misplaced bushes and trees have hidden some of the important views of the hillsides. Along the sides of the parkway, chain link fences, barbed wire, and metal guardrails have often replaced the rustic wooden fencing. At certain segments, sound walls hinder views of the parkway surroundings.

By 2004, the drive along the Arroyo Seco Parkway has become as unsafe and unpleasurable in bumper-to-bumper congested traffic as any freeway in southern California, a far cry from the pleasure ride it was originally designed for. The question then becomes: what, if anything, can be done?

### **Strategies and Efforts for Change**

By the early 1990s, community concerns about congestion, high accident rates, lack of maintenance, and the deteriorating visual quality of the drive had risen to high levels. In

response, under pressure from State Senator Richard Polanco, a community task force (the Arroyo Seco Task Force) was established. Working with officials from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), the Task Force was charged with exploring strategies to reduce accident rates and enhance the visual quality of the roadway. Caltrans officials had previously explored re-engineering the roadway and its on-and-off ramps to make the original parkway function more like a high-speed freeway, only to find those approaches blocked by a number of factors, including legislation that had protected adjacent parklands and the historic nature of the roadway. The community task force sought to focus the attention of the highway planners on two core strategies: 1) achieving historic parkway status that could lead to landscape changes consistent with the original parkway concept; and 2) traffic calming approaches (including a reduction of the speed limit to its original 45 mph) to help reduce accidents and ultimately relieve congestion.

The response by Caltrans focused on three possible options to address the concerns raised by the Task Force: create new signage that identified the freeway as an historic scenic parkway; emphasize that the facility was not built for modern freeway conditions (e.g., through warning signs); or physically re-engineer the freeway to function more as a freeway and thereby address some of its more protracted accident problems. Although some preliminary studies were undertaken to explore the option of redesign, Caltrans engineers, planners, and legal staff ultimately decided that any effort along these lines would impact parkland and undermine the historic nature of the parkway, which in turn would have triggered legislative obstacles. And while Caltrans explored briefly the options of lowering speed limits or pursuing other traffic calming strategies, agency staff decided these options were also limited by administrative code regulations that limited the capacity of the agency to *lower* rather than raise a speed limit.

Nevertheless, the efforts of the task force did lead to some important changes. Its work helped to bring about the designation of the Arroyo Seco Parkway as an American Civil Engineering Landmark, and establish National Scenic Byway status. At the same time, community advocates and resident groups began to refocus attention on the traffic, accident, speed limit and other freeway/parkway issues. An Arroyo Seco Collaborative of community organizations was formed in 2000 and plans were made to host an unprecedented event called ArroyoFest involving a walk and bike ride ON the Pasadena Freeway, which took place on a Sunday morning on June 15, 2003. This event was designed in part to bring renewed attention to those parkway/freeway issues. The ArroyoFest collaborators reintroduced the concept of traffic calming, including reduced speed limits in the context of a broader approach to transportation in the Arroyo Seco corridor that would take advantage of a multi-modal transportation system that included light rail, expanded bus service, commuter bikeways, and pedestrian walkways. At the same time, the ArroyoFest event promised to bring attention to the historical role and significance of the parkway concept and its potential role in 21<sup>st</sup> century transportation and land use planning. In ways reminiscent of the debates of the 1920s and 1930s, this new visibility regarding the historic parkway established a dialogue about transportation planning that included re-envisioning the role of its primary transportation corridors.

### **Prospects for Urban Parkways**

The rising community interest around the use of the Arroyo Seco Parkway prompts us to reconsider the relevance of parkways today. The evolution of idyllic carriageways to serpentine automobile parkways and the replacement of the latter by expressways and freeways reflect the nation's changing social and technological circumstances from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Parkways belonged to a transitional phase of the nation's social history.<sup>52</sup>

They were built during an era which sought to come to terms with new technologies by humanizing the internal combustion engine and bringing it into a sympathetic relationship with its surroundings. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the emphasis on aesthetics and pleasurable driving embodied in parkway design was sacrificed for the promise of efficiency and speed that the freeways seemed to offer. But fifty years later the once efficient freeway system is clogged and congested. Communities do not want the intrusion of new freeways in their neighborhoods, and in certain cases have effectively stopped their expansion. At the same time debates over parkways and freeways have now come full circle. From an emphasis on efficiency, volume, and speed, with the predominance of single driver automobiles defining the parameters of transportation planning, there is an increasing interest in such concepts as multi-modal transportation, traffic calming, and a broader set of community, aesthetic, historical, and environmental goals associated with the drive.

But can existing parkways overcome their contemporary woes and be successfully reclaimed? We believe that urban parkways such as the Arroyo Seco in Los Angeles or Route 163 in San Diego can be seen as assets rather than liabilities if they are considered as one piece of an integrated transportation network that may include parallel road alignments, light rail, busways, and bikeways. The additional transportation modes bring the possibility of easing traffic along the parkways. To reduce the large number of speeding accidents speed limits should be lowered to their original 45 miles per hour—a change that, in the case of the Arroyo Seco Parkway only adds two extra minutes to the ride from Pasadena to the I-5 intersection just north of downtown Los Angeles. The lower speed limit is more appropriate for the narrow and curvy lanes of parkways, and also allows entering cars to merge more smoothly into parkway traffic.

Parkways would be seen as assets by motorists if their compromised aesthetics were to be restored and emphasis again placed on making the drive pleasurable. The restoration of the design and landscaping features of the roadway, the bridges and overpasses, the guardrails, signs, light fixtures, and trees would give back the roadway its “human scale” that could be appreciated by motorists at lower speeds.

The efforts to restore key parkway features and re-envision the role of parkways in current transportation planning has been aided by the growth of historic preservation movements, including parkway-related conservancy organizations like the Merritt Parkway Conservancy in Connecticut. These groups have also begun to make alliances with neighborhood groups, transit advocates, and planners to both promote alternative transportation strategies while primarily focusing on preserving key landscape and design features of existing parkways. These alliances have adopted strategies that focus on specific roadways achieving historic landmark and/or scenic byway status as a means of enhancing the open space and natural landscape of areas adjacent to parkways.<sup>53</sup>

These alliances have taken root in southern California in the debates about the future of the Pasadena Freeway/Arroyo Seco Parkway. Community activism and interest in the re-envisioning of the Arroyo Seco Parkway further demonstrate that parkways can be valued by their adjacent communities if they are perceived as connectors rather than separators of neighborhoods. Modern freeways have typically excluded and negated the surrounding urban context, arrogantly soaring over the city, or diving below it. In the process they carved and separated neighborhoods, and made them invisible by utilizing miles of concrete walls to make the separation more effective. In contrast, the border between the parkway and the city was often soft, consisting of trees, vegetation, and parkland, allowing the motorist wide vistas and an

appreciation of the surrounding historic and cultural context. This more sympathetic approach to the urban surroundings with its inherent connection to place makes today's parkways – even those that have seen some of their original design aspects compromised -- more palatable to communities than freeways.

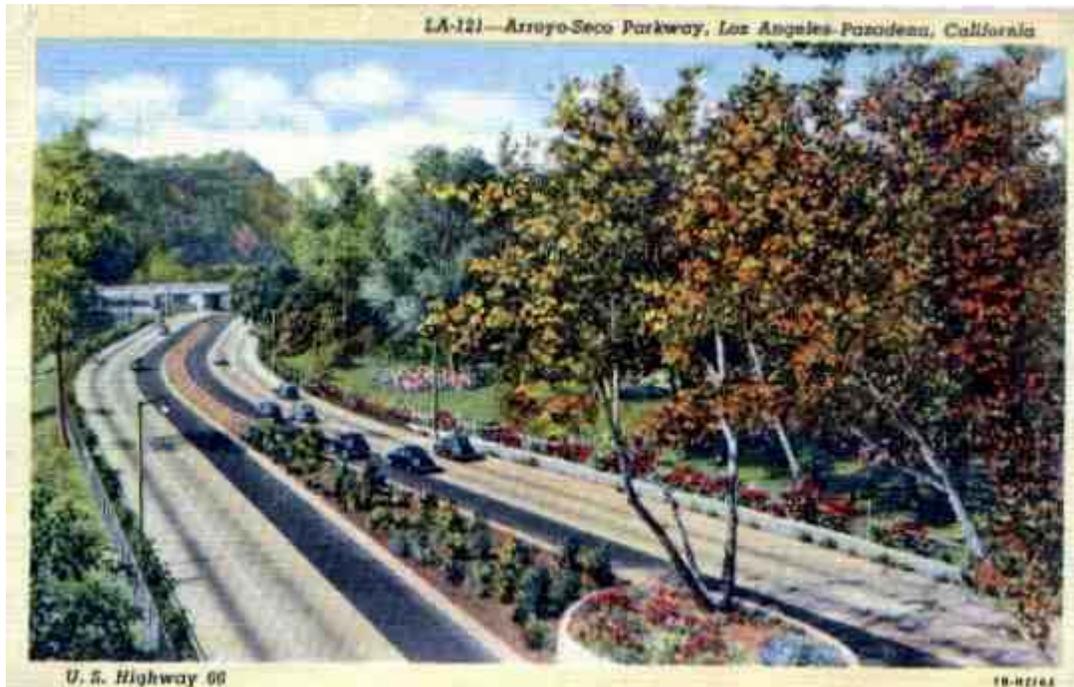
Ultimately, we see a future for urban parkways if transportation planners stop treating them as something they are not—freeways—and look closer to restoring their original values, those of combining the qualities of route and place. Parkways were built for specific traffic capacities and speeds. Transportation planning should seek to relieve traffic volumes by offering additional modal choices. By re-orienting transportation planning to the value of the parkway, the lessons from the Arroyo Seco can ultimately help turn a “dangerous and inadequate” relic into a more supple and appealing transportation experience; they can indeed put back more of the pleasure in the drive and connect rather than separate the communities they pass through.

Recent nominations of some of the nation's parkways to the National Register of Historic Places or the Federal Highway Administration's list of “All-American Roads,” the preservation of existing parkways (e.g. the Merritt Parkway), and even the development of some new parkways (e.g. the Franconia Notch Parkway of Interstate 93 in New Hampshire and the Glenwood Canyon Parkway of Interstate 70 in Colorado), point to a new-found value for a road design once considered obsolete. Ultimately, the lesson that the parkway model brings from the past to the future is the notion of the road as both a *route* facilitating movement and a *place* connecting to the surrounding context and landscape.<sup>54</sup>

### **Acknowledgement**

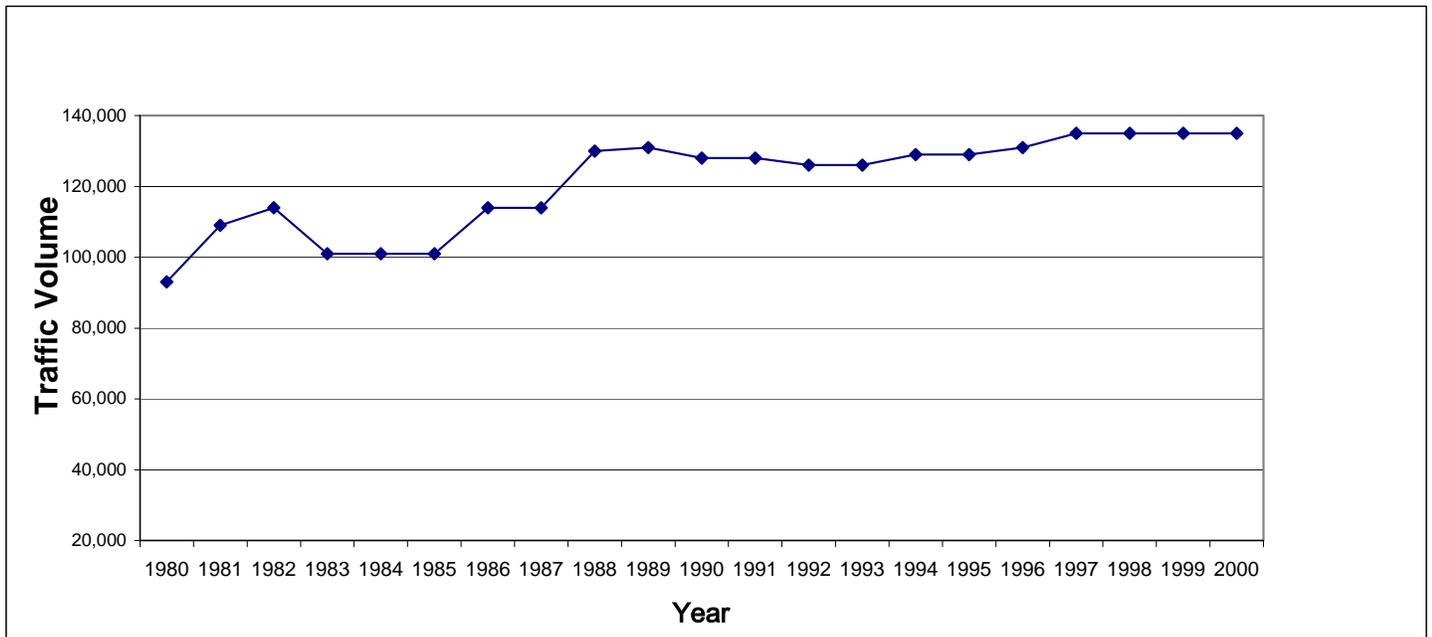
This study was partly supported by a grant from the University of California Transportation Center.

Figure 1: Postcard of the 1940s depicting the Arroyo Seco Parkway



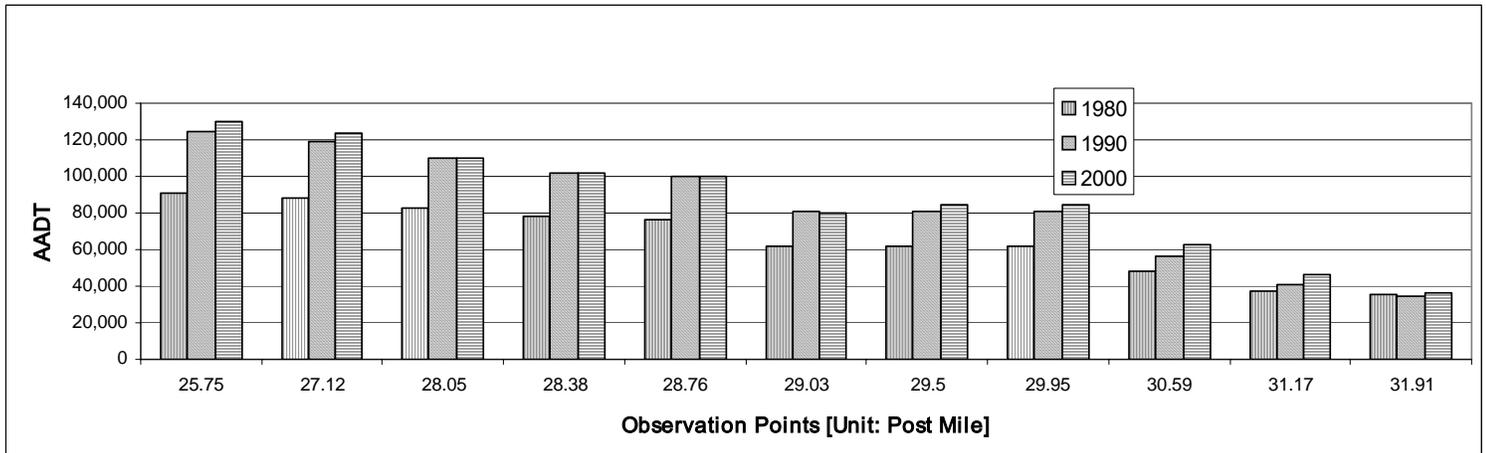
Courtesy: Arroyo Seco Foundation

Figure 2: Average Daily Traffic on the Arroyo Seco Parkway and I-5 Intersection (1980-2000)



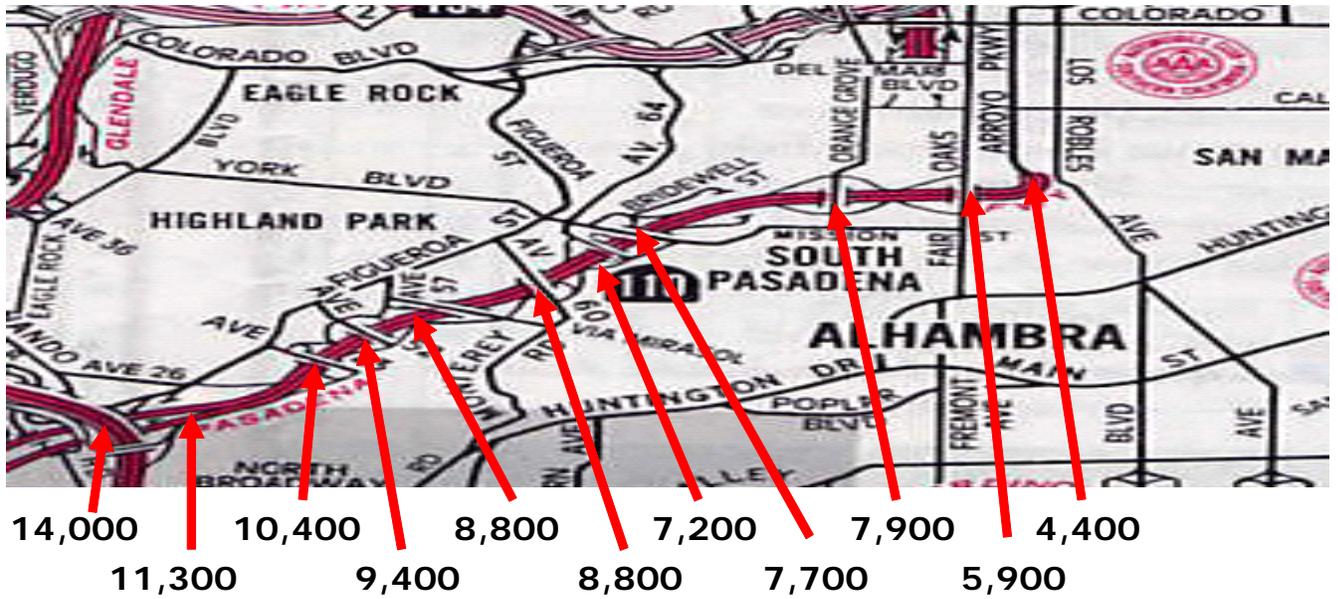
Source: California Department of Transportation, District 7

Figure 3: Changes of Average Annual Daily Traffic (AADT) from 1980 to 2000



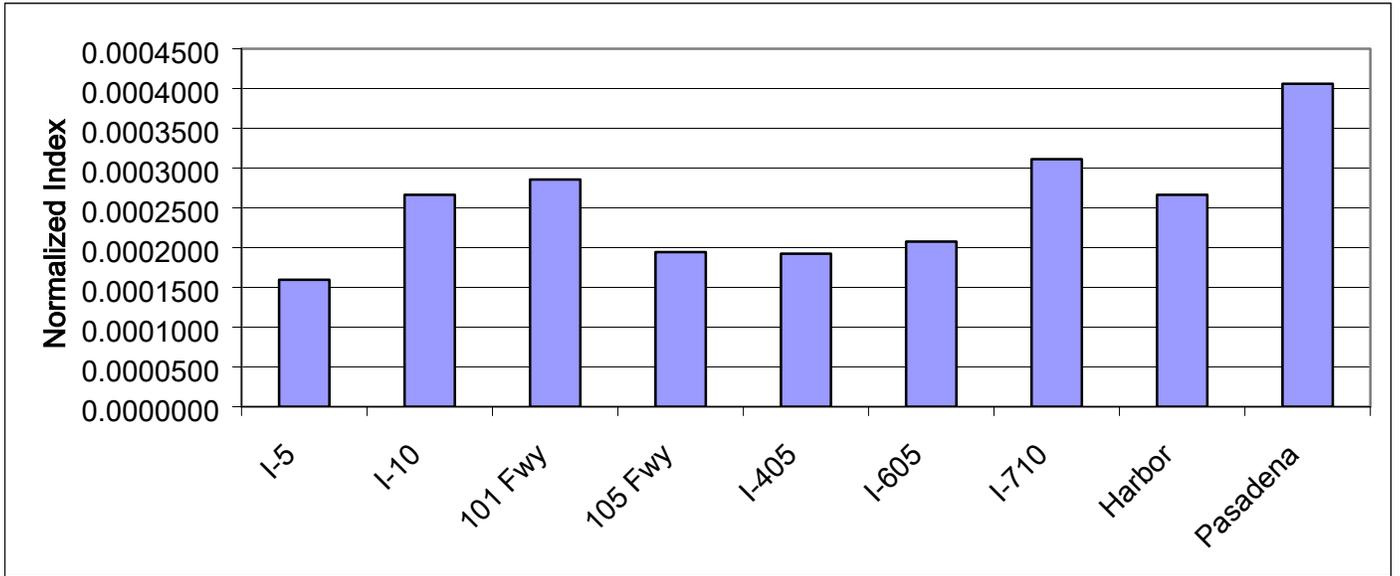
Source: California Department of Transportation, District 7

Figure 4: Peak Hour Volumes on the Arroyo Seco Parkway



Source: California Department of Transportation, District 7

Figure 5: Adjusted Number of Total Accidents on Freeways on Los Angeles Freeways



$$\text{Normalized Index} = \frac{\text{Number of accidents}}{(\text{AADT}) * (\text{Length of Freeway}) * (\text{Investigated Period})}$$

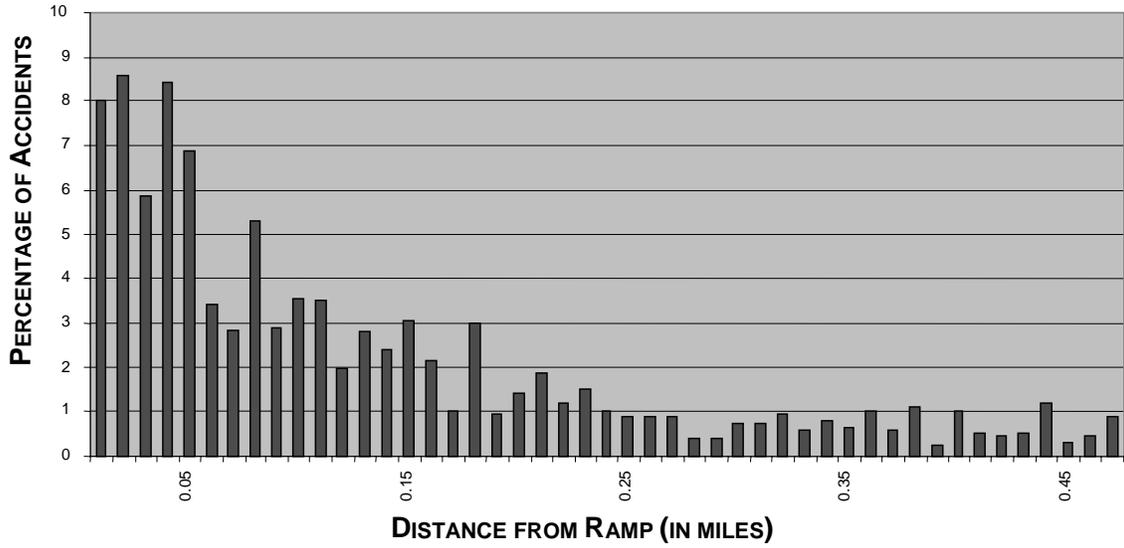
Source: Accident numbers given by the California Department of Transportation;  
Index calculated by the researchers.

Figure 6: On-ramp along the Arroyo Seco Parkway at Via Marisol



Photo Credit: Former UCLA graduate students Brent Boyd and Melissa Chow

Figure 7: Proximity of Accidents to Ramps (1996-2000)



Source: Accident numbers given by the California Department of Transportation; spatial analysis conducted by the researchers

Figure 8: Arroyo Seco Parkway in 1941, soon after its opening



Source/copyright: To be determined

## Notes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> John Cornell, "Riverbed Route, UN-Ltd.," *Westways*, January 1941, p.13.
- <sup>2</sup> William Leidenthal, "Historic Pasadena Freeway," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1999.
- <sup>3</sup> Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path*, (New York: Columbia University Press. 1994).
- <sup>4</sup> California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. *A Landscape Framework Plan for the Arroyo Seco Parkway Corridor*. (The 606 Studio Graduate Program, Department of Landscape Architecture, 2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Timothy Davis, "A Pleasant Illusion of Unspoiled Countryside," in Alison Hoagland and Kenneth Breisch (eds.) *Constructing Image, Identity, and Place: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003, pp. 228-246).
- <sup>6</sup> Norman T. Newton, *Design on the Land: The Development of Landscape Architecture*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
- <sup>7</sup> Olmstead, Vaux, Co., *Observations on the Progress of Improvements in Street Plans with Special Reference to the Park-Way Proposed to Be Laid Out in Brooklyn*, p. 18, quoted in McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path*, p. 35.
- <sup>8</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, Excerpts from "Buffalo: A Lakeshore Park and Pleasing Parkways," in *Civilizing American Cities*, Cambridge, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1878, reprinted 1971).
- <sup>9</sup> The first cloverleaf interchange was constructed in New Jersey in 1928.
- <sup>10</sup> Charles E. Beveridge and Carolyn F. Hoffman, (eds.) *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted. Supplementary Series Volume 1, Writings on Public Parks, Parkways, and Park Systems*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 166).
- <sup>11</sup> David Brodsky, *LA Freeway: An Appreciative Essay*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981).
- <sup>12</sup> Benton MacKaye, "The Townless Highway," *The New Republic*, (March 12, 1930).
- <sup>13</sup> Paul Daniel Marriott, *Saving Historic Roads: Design and Policy Guidelines*. (John Wiley & Sons, 1998).
- <sup>14</sup> Kathleen Lafrank, "Real and Ideal Landscapes Along the Taconic State Parkway," in Alison Hoagland and Kenneth Breisch (eds.) *Constructing Image, Identity, and Place: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003, pp.247-262.
- <sup>15</sup> Henstell, "Happy Birthday, Dear Freeway," *Los Angeles*, (December 1985, pp. 218-226).

- 
- <sup>16</sup> Greg Hise and William Deverell, *Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).
- <sup>17</sup> Culbert L. Olson, “Traffic Death Toll Emphasizes Need for Arroyo Seco Parkway,” in *The Arroyo Seco Parkway: The West’s First Freeway*,” Dedication Ceremonies, Dec. 30, 1940.
- <sup>18</sup> Newton, *Design on the Land: The Development of Landscape Architecture*, 613.
- <sup>19</sup> Los Angeles Parks Commission. *Arroyo Seco Parkway: A Brief Discussion of the Proposal and its Relation to a Boulevard from the Mountains to the Sea*, 1913, 8
- <sup>20</sup> California Department of Parks and Recreation. *California Parkways: A Plan for a State Parkway System*. 1967.
- <sup>21</sup> Henstell, “Happy Birthday, Dear Freeway,” 1985.
- <sup>22</sup> California Department of Parks and Recreation. *California Parkways: A Plan for a State Parkway System*. 1967.
- <sup>23</sup> S.V. Cortelyou, “Men, Steel and Concrete Work Miracles in the Arroyo Seco,” in *The Arroyo Seco Parkway: The West’s First Freeway*,” Dedication Ceremonies, Dec. 30, 1940.
- <sup>24</sup> The description of parkway design as “bioengineering” was offered by landscape architect Wilbur Simonson, who is quoted in Benjamin Forgey, “Parkway Design: A Lost Art?” *Landscape Architecture*. 1989, p. 2.
- <sup>25</sup> Henstell, “Happy Birthday, Dear Freeway.” 1985.
- <sup>26</sup> Patt Morrison, “50 Years of Moving History,” *Los Angeles Times*, (December 21, 1990).
- <sup>27</sup> Henstell, “Happy Birthday, Dear Freeway,” 1985.
- <sup>28</sup> Dana W. Bartlett, *The Better City: A Sociological Study of a Modern City*. (Los Angeles: The Neuner Company Press, 1907, 32).
- <sup>29</sup> Hise and Deverell, *Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region*.
- <sup>30</sup> Los Angeles Parks Commission. *Arroyo Seco Parkway: A Brief Discussion of the Proposal and its Relation to a Boulevard from the Mountains to the Sea*, 1913.
- <sup>31</sup> Martin Wachs, “The Evolution of Transportation Policy in Los Angeles: Images of Past Policies and Future Prospects,” in Allan J. Scott and Edward W. Soja, (eds.) *The City*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- <sup>32</sup> Hise and Deverell, *Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region*, p. 98 of the plan as reproduced in the Hise and Deverell book on p. 202.

---

<sup>33</sup> Henstell, "Happy Birthday, Dear Freeway," 224.

<sup>34</sup> This was proceeded by intensive lobbying from the part of the Automobile Club of Southern California in the late 1930s. The board of the Automobile Club also had recommended that the City of Los Angeles keep the shoulders of the parkway free from development, to take advantage of recent State legislation, which allowed municipalities to limit access to the use of new expressways and to the land abutting them., See Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987, p. 220).

<sup>35</sup> Brodsky, *LA Freeway: An Appreciative Essay*. 1981.

<sup>36</sup> H. Marshall Goodwin, Jr. "The Arroyo Seco: From Dry Gulch to Freeway," *The Historical Society of Southern California*, May 1965, pp. 73-95.

<sup>37</sup> R. D. Spencer, "Flood Control Channel Assures Protection of Parkway," in *The Arroyo Seco Parkway: The West's First Freeway*, "Dedication Ceremonies, Dec. 30, 1940.

<sup>38</sup> E.E. East, "Motorist Saves Six Cents On Each Trip Over New Parkway," in *The Arroyo Seco Parkway: The West's First Freeway*, "Dedication Ceremonies, Dec. 30, 1940.

<sup>39</sup> Westways article quoted in Cecilia Rasmussen, "Harrowing Drive on State's Oldest Freeway," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 2001.

<sup>40</sup> S.V. Cortelyou, "Men, Steel and Concrete Work Miracles in the Arroyo Seco," 1940.

<sup>41</sup> R. E. Pierce, "Study Shows Accidents on Arroyo Seco Parkway are Less than on Some Los Angeles City Streets," *California Highway and Public Works* 23, No 7-8, (July-August 1945, pp. 1-3).

<sup>42</sup> Cortelyou, (original document is unpaginated).

<sup>43</sup> Historical American Engineering Record (HAER) *Arroyo Seco Parkway*, No. CA-265, 1999.

<sup>44</sup> California Department of Parks and Recreation. *California Parkways: A Plan for a State Parkway System*, 1967, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Leccesse, "Roadways Recovered," *Landscape Architecture* (April 1989).

<sup>46</sup> Historical American Engineering Record (HAER), *Arroyo Seco Parkway*, No CA-265, 1999.

<sup>47</sup> Cortelyou

<sup>48</sup> Wachs, 1996, pp. 117-118.

---

<sup>49</sup> Mark H. Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1941-1956* (Lawrence, Kansas: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979).

<sup>50</sup> In some locations the difficult topographic conditions and the narrow right-of-way had forced parkway engineers to create what they referred to as “compressed cloverleaf,” or “compressed ramp types.” See S.V. Cortelyou, “Arroyo Seco 6-Lane Freeway,” *California Highways and Public Works*, 17:6, June, 1939, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Cecilia Rasmussen, “Harrowing Drive on State’s Oldest Freeway,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 2001.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin Forgey, “Parkway Design A Lost Art?” *Landscape Architecture*, April 1989.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Daniel Marriott, *Saving Historic Roads: Design and Policy Guidelines*

<sup>54</sup> For a distinction between road as a route and road as a place see Jim McCluskey *Road Form and Townscape*. (Butterworth Architecture, 1992, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition).