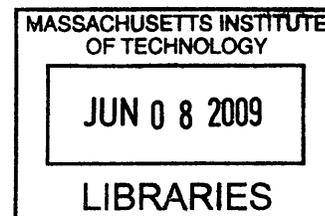


# The Experience and Image of American Elevated Railways: Rapid Transit Infrastructure in the Urban Consciousness

By

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B.A. in English  
Whitman College  
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**ARCHIVES**

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## Abstract

At the turn of the twentieth century, elevated railways were built out of a practical need to literally “elevate” traffic above the street. In most cases, these lines served two distinct purposes. They served existing neighborhoods with reliable and rapid access to the center of the city. In addition, they made feasible the creation of new communities that enhanced growth of the city itself. Built out of steel, iron, and sometimes concrete, these lines were utilitarian but often employed distinctive, architecturally significant station and structure designs. Although the negative effects were universal -- Els were noisy, blocked sunlight, and contributed to urban decay -- due to local context, response to the elevated lines in Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia differed among those who used, maintained, and lived by the line. For some, the line was a backbone of community commerce or memory; for others, the line was a very present symbol of political incompetence or apathy. In Boston especially, collective memory of these structures is continually evolving in online communities, the El’s legacy heightened among transit enthusiasts. In other cities, such as Philadelphia and Chicago, the transit agency’s reliance on these elevated lines has led to recent pushes for reconstruction, transit-oriented-development and community reinvestment. In these latter two cities, recent El-related projects indicate that city planners and transit officials have renewed hope in the vitality and capacity of elevated rail transport; and recent station renovations have acted in kind, emphasizing as much as possible light, celebratory historical architecture, and universal access. Furthermore, even as cities work to modernize elevated (now “aerial”) structures, new lines are being constructed around the world as cost-effective modes of urban transportation.

The aim of the thesis is twofold. First, the three city chapters offer a cohesive historical narrative of neighborhood responses to the elevated lines that served them. The goal is to illustrate the diverse array of impacts, meanings, reactions and responses that have emerged from the past. The second goal is to underscore that elevated rapid transit structures have more value in the urban consciousness than simply as a means of travel. Because they have, in the past, come to represent the communities they served, whether on a local, city-wide, or national level, planners must understand that elevated transit lines will continue to be imbued with meaning. Therefore, planners must internalize this relationship between image and actuality, and institute a new step in future elevated transit line renovations. A meeting should be held incorporating community groups, local institutions, and private individuals, to better understand the elevated transit line. Planners and designers would use this information to coordinate how local history, culture and artwork could direct station and structure design.

Thesis Supervisor: Sam Bass Warner  
Title: Visiting Professor of Urban History

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## A Personal Note

My interest in elevated railways begins in Boston. When I was young, my father and I used to take the commuter rail into town to indulge my passion – riding on the subways. Our point of entry was North Station. As many will recall, the old North Station/Boston Garden complex emptied out directly onto Causeway Street, which until 2004 was shaded by the Green Line’s elevated trolley structure. The rumble and the constant shade was a forceful symbol of the concurrent excitement and anachronism of the city. In my memory, it was grit and grime, active and alive, and above all, a special place. The Causeway Street elevated outlasted two North Stations, both stages of the West End eradication, and much of the Big Dig. But now it is indeed gone; and Boston has only snippets of elevated structures left (at Charles on the Red Line, and just before Lechmere on the Green Line). I am always quick to point out these details to visitors as vestiges of a different Boston, one that I barely knew.

Subsequent trips to Berlin, Chicago, New York, London, Paris, and Philadelphia have found me riding on the elevated railways there, too. The visuals are stunning from above; in fact, prior to writing this thesis, that is what I would say to others about elevateds -- there is no other view like it. Thus I must admit my underlying bias: I did not grow up alongside an EL, and perhaps irresponsibly I find them fascinating and beautiful. Regardless, I have always believed in the wonder of the ordinary, and the possibility of the overlooked. This thesis is borne out of a dedication to passion, research, and above all parity. I hope that I have presented equally the experiences from above and below, near and far, past and present.

From childhood to young adulthood, my rapid transit experiences have been altogether positive. They have led me here, peripherally through years of education, and primarily through this, my last, semester of graduate school. The writing has been tough; the research gratifying; the topic continually mesmerizing.

## Acknowledgments

To my father and my mother.

To everyone who has believed in me, and taught me love, respect, and responsibility.

To Sam Bass Warner, Jr, my thesis advisor, whose dedication to urban history is inspirational to planners and designers everywhere; and Susan Silberberg-Robinson, who has shown (and will continue to show!) steady dedication to the field (and my success). To Tunney Lee, for all his wonderful insights.

Special thanks to David Akiba, whose Orange Line photographs are both beautiful and alive; Aaron Schmidt at the Boston Public Library; John G. Allen (DUSP '96) of Chicago’s Regional Transportation Authority, for invaluable resources and advice; and to Sara Z., in many, many ways.

1.

What the “El”?

New York: Themes of Elevated Railways

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**Figure 1.**

Third Avenue El,  
ca. 1954. A once-  
familiar New York  
scene.

## Introduction

This thesis is informed by three initial research questions. First, how did the elevated railways in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia (and New York) influence the urban landscape and the neighborhoods they passed through? Secondly, what did they represent and why? Finally, how is this knowledge relevant in current city and transportation planning?

In this chapter, I will introduce various roles that Els played in American cities, through short vignettes of Manhattan's elevated lines. Because of its stature as a world city, as well as being where the history of American elevated railways began, New York City has been covered many times over -- from technical reports to social/cultural studies to tomes of personal history. This section is a literature review of sorts: because I intend to focus mainly on the cities that have not been looked at in such depth (Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia), I will identify key themes and highlight certain texts that have been referenced time and again when historians discuss New York City's elevated railways.

This chapter also begins the historical review of how elevated railways stimulated social responses amongst various constituencies affected by them. I will illustrate these responses in terms of the elevated's public image, its influence on suburban development, the visual impacts and aesthetic resources afforded to both riders and observers, station architecture, and the el's ability to engage public society. In subsequent chapters, we explore how these factors influenced history in other cities. In this thesis, I will use the shorthand term "El," except when referencing the vernacular terms appropriate to one of these cities.<sup>1</sup>

In the chapters that follow, I will begin with an **Introduction** that cites why a particular city has been chosen as a case study and explains its relevance in this thesis; next, in a section entitled **The El in Context**, I offer a brief history of the El in a city's transit history; then, I cover the general effects of the El on the city's physical landscape in **The El and Urban Design**. Thereafter, a lengthy section entitled **Neighborhood Studies** will, by way of a local historical narrative, will distill how associated development, abstract themes and symbols were tied to the El in various neighborhoods through which the line passed. Finally, I will offer city-specific **Conclusions** summarize the important symbols and themes that formed around the El. The final chapter will provide a synthesis of the case study findings and offer recommendations for city and transport planners now and in the future.

### Public Image

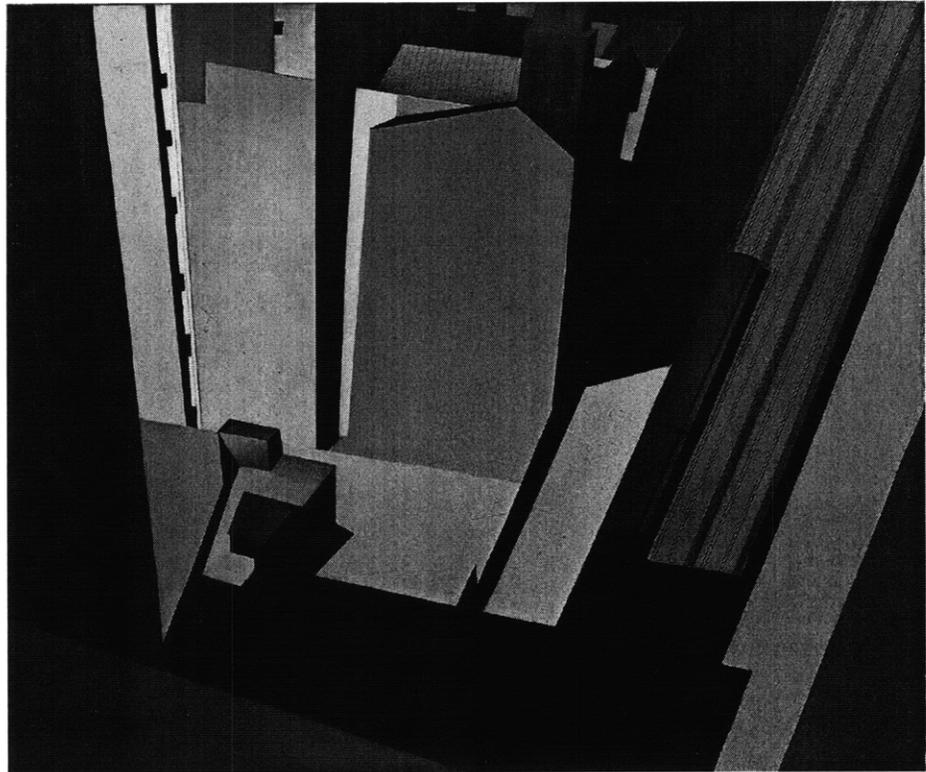
In cities, individual experiences merge through daily interactions to form collective histories; these are then recorded, harnessed, and disseminated as a city or neighborhood's "public image" by government officials, and media outlets, and artists. The full history of the elevated cannot be explained through technical reports, equipment rosters, and service change chronologies alone. Indeed, New York's elevateds, like Boston's, live on -- in collective memory, artwork, photographs, writing, and even the physical landscapes they shaped. In this context, "public image" refers to

---

<sup>1</sup> Each city has its own spelling and/or verbal identity of elevated railways. In New York, the lines came to be known as elevated portions of the subway; in pre-1947 Boston, the "El" was the go-to term for all of the city's subway and elevated lines (for the operator, the Boston Elevated Railway Company); in Philadelphia, there were "els"; and in Chicago, people rode on the "L."

**Figure 2.**

Public Image, in Art:  
“Church Street El,” by  
Charles Sheeler, 1921.



views of the elevated itself, as well as representations of contemporary New York.

In their early days, the elevateds prompted mixed reactions. Even before they were constructed, Robert Fogelson points out, many New Yorkers sought to stop the plans in their tracks, citing many of the negative impacts that would indeed come to pass -- lack of light, noise, falling debris, etc. (48-9). In his history of Chicago, Donald Miller cites one of many arguments used against bringing the El to that city: “The New York Academy of Medicine warned that ‘el’ (elevated) trains ‘prevented the normal development of children, threw convalescing patients into relapses, and caused insomnia, exhaustion, hysteria, paralysis, meningitis, deafness, and death.’” (270). For others, the Els were fascinating phenomena, and symbols of a more modern, efficient, and better city. In fact, they were to do what London had also intended. Fogelson highlights the comments of Cyrus Field of the New York Elevated company: the elevateds “will take [the] working class out of the tenement houses, the breeding-places of cholera, where they sicken and die, and give them neat little homes, where they can have pure air, and a bit of green grass before the door” (67).

In the artistic world, at least, the Els were powerful symbols and images. The distance afforded by canvas, book-print, and photographic lens allowed for a greater range of meanings; as with any physical element in a city, in eulogies and some academic reports on the elevateds, these mixed-media images are conflated with fading memories to create fuller, if sometimes alternate, histories. The irony is that media objects offer, by virtue of their being either output of instruments (e.g., a camera) or creative selectivity (i.e., what to include in a painting or book), a certain *distance* from the line and its adjacent neighborhoods. The passage of time extends this gulf.

Still, there are major works of art and literature that offer go-to depictions and symbolism of New York’s Els. William Dean Howells’ 1890 novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* offers many

portraits, some romanticized, of the Third Avenue line. At one point, he writes that “At the Forty-second Street station” the book’s main characters “stopped a minute on the bridge that crosses the track to the branch road for the Central Depot, and looked up and down the long stretch of the Elevated to north and south. The track that found and lost itself a thousand times in the flare and tremor of the innumerable lights; the moony sheen of the electrics mixing with the reddish points and blots of gas far and near; the architectural shapes of houses and churches and towers, rescued by the obscurity from all that was ignoble in them, and the coming and going of the trains marking the stations with vider [sic] or fainter plumes of flame-shot steam-formed an incomparable perspective” (76). Music tried to capture the experience of the El, too, but mainly by adding instrumental accompaniment behind lyrics about peering into upper-level windows.

Artwork followed the El from popularity into oblivion. After covering several late 1800s works that feature the El as “at once, physically transcending the confusion of the city yet integral to it,” Tallack brings attention to numerous works of modernist art and film that feature the elevated, summarizing that “the El’s role in photographic and more traditional painterly representations of New York City created little sense of dynamism or modernistic transitoriness” (60, 80).<sup>2</sup> Stalter highlights other films and artwork that were inspired by experiences on the El, including a number of Joseph Cornell’s so-called “shadowboxes.” In one such series of collages, the “Window Façade boxes,” Cornell’s creation “is made up of vertically oriented grids of windows: the box suggests the façade of an apartment building seen from a passing elevated train, and viewers expect that [isolated] scenes will be glimpsed inside” (873). Stalter and Tallack’s articles are laden with El-related art history and interpretation, but for the sake of time will not be explored further. Suffice to say that personal experiences of elevateds, both on the ground and in the air, inspired many artists and authors to explore themes of modernity and industry in the American city, using the El as a guide.

In summary, elevateds garnered different perspectives from different types of citizens and citizen groups. Those living along the line had mostly negative images, inspired by the lines’ noise, dirt, and shadow. Others held a more positive image -- for them, the line provided an opportunity to live in an improved environment while allowing rapid access to work. Amongst artists of all kinds, the El was a rich source of imagery, both pro and con.

### The Elevated & Suburban Development

To begin, I will offer a brief overview of how and when the initial elevated railroads existed, and how they acted as agents of “spatial arrangement.” First, the elevated railroad acts/acted as a supra-grid, superimposed over the streets and thoroughfares deemed at time of construction to be the most profitable and heavily trafficked. Due to government legislation (and often bribery), public and private opposition, and goals of efficiency, sometimes these supra-grid structures needed to zig and zag, rise and climb with the grade, or abruptly end in mid-air.

Manhattan’s first elevated railroad, somewhat of an experiment, opened as a cable-driven route in 1867 in Greenwich Village. After many false starts, construction of numerous lines took place in earnest during the 1870s, and by “1880 elevated lines stretching from the Battery to the Harlem River were in full operation not only above Ninth Avenue, but also Second and Third,

<sup>2</sup> Among others, the paintings “Church Street El,” Charles Sheeler, 1920 (Figure 2); “New York,” Max Weber, 1913; “Sixth Avenue El,” Stuart Davis, 1931; the film Manhatta, by Paul Strand, 1920; et al.

while [another line] above Sixth Avenue reached Central Park” (Post, 126). Brooklyn, too, received its first elevated line in 1885. Over the following fifty years, these systems saw numerous inter- and intra-borough extensions, interconnections, consolidations and abandonments. While elevated lines still exist at the northern tip of Manhattan, and in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, the bulk of the Second, Third, Sixth, and Ninth Avenue trunk lines were all demolished between the 1930s and the 1950s (Post). The Els were nevertheless a great improvement for New York’s transportation, however brief or temporary a solution. The city’s first non-transit railroads ran at-grade as early as the 1830s, further crowding streets already choked with pedestrian, cart, horse, and other traffic (Homberger, 77). Once the technology was available and speculators determined that money could be made (though it took a while), elevated railroads seemed like a logical solution to surface congestion.

New York’s urban railways changed the look of the inner city while creating better access to lesser-developed areas. Whereas London’s surface and viaduct railways largely ignored existing street patterns, New York’s elevateds followed streets and avenues delineated in the 1811 Commissioner’s Plan of Manhattan. Let us, for the sake of comparison, deem Manhattan’s Upper West Side to be an early example of a “suburb” -- until the 1870s, it was an edge of the densely developed city.

In Manhattan and the boroughs, the elevated railroad generally did not so much create patterns of form as draw development along their lines; unlike London, however, the El inspired new heights and uses of development downtown and uptown. In a historical profile of New York’s growth Northward, Lockwood summarizes,



**Figure 3.**

The El as suburban developer: 9th Avenue & 83rd Street, 1878-9.

The elevated trains opened up for development large tracts of uptown Manhattan by bringing hitherto inaccessible areas within a reasonable commuting distance of downtown jobs. Moreover, the els permitted an even greater concentration of office buildings downtown, because the people who worked in all the skyscrapers could now reach their jobs without jamming the already overcrowded streets and omnibuses. (284)

Yet the Upper West Side took longer to develop than anticipated, partly because of the 1873-1878 economic depression. Still, despite the presence of the Ninth Avenue (Columbus Avenue) El, as seen in Figure 3, by 1880 “thirty-four streets between West Fifty-ninth to West One Hundred Twenty-fifth streets were not yet completely opened, and even the avenues were still unpaved dirty roads” (315). The elevated did, though, serve as a backbone of development in the early 1880s, wherein “[construction] operations clustered around [a few] Ninth Avenue el stations,” thus rendering the stops, if briefly, nodes of neighborhood form (317). By 1900 the Upper West Side was mostly built-up, and, like most elsewhere adjacent to the elevateds, developed a land value gradient from the covered street. Thus, tenements on Amsterdam Avenue, for instance, were “of a better class than those on el-shaded Columbus” (319).

However local the negative consequences, the elevated certainly helped generate clientele and visuality for the “suburb.” Similar schemes were to be repeated along extensions of other elevated (and subway) routes around New York City in the years to come (especially along the Queens-Flushing line). Partly as a result of its role in catalyzing adjacent development, ridership along the Manhattan lines reached dizzy heights: in 1891 alone, over 195 million rode the elevated (Burrows and Wallace, 1058). Still, downtown residents abutting the lines questioned whether their sacrifices of well-being were worth the benefits of developing further uptown. Said Carpenter William E. King, of No. 333 Bowery: “I do not think that the Elevated railroad is any benefit to those living on the line of the road, but only to those living out in Harlem, who want to get down town quick...” (Anon., 1879 Oral Statements).

### Aesthetic Patterns & Public Space

The El made both physical and visual impacts on the lives of people nearby -- for those at a distance, the structure was an emblem of modern, technological beauty; for those living under the line, however, the elevated compromised the openness of public space.

Without drastically altering the streets below them, the elevateds forged a new pattern of their own, sometimes with architecturally dramatic and beautiful twists and turns high above the rigid grids below (Figure 5). Yet, while they were sometimes seen as dividing elements, the elevated railways were porous boundaries. Though imposing, they were not the freeway’s (or English railways’) solid walls, viaducts or depressed gulfs. Comparing them to elevated highways, Fogelson notes the els “allowed light to seep through the gaps between the ties” (279). At a distance, however, Tallack describes of an 1889 Shinn view of the Lower East Side (Figure 4), “the El supplies, in conjunction with other structures, a ‘back’ to the painting, thereby enclosing the space and making it something of a place rather than a space that is merely transversed on our way to the horizon” (69).

The construction and operation of the elevated railroads amplified a dualistic relationship that is familiar within architectural and urban design theory and practice: the public/private



**Figures 4 & 5.**

The Aesthetic El. Above, the El serves as a backdrop to urban activity in Everett Shinn's 1899 "Cross Streets of New York." At right, the El assumes an organic shape at Coenties Slip.

debate. Because of their unique role as both a physical presence in public spaces, and as an enabler of streetside views into private landowners' and tenants' second- and third-story windows, the privately-owned els heralded an invasion of open air and ground traffic. The boom of Manhattan's elevateds, Burrows and Wallace explain, began after an "availability of cheap labor" during the depression of the early 1870s "galvanized promoters to win passage of a Rapid Transit Act (1875), which authorized handing out franchises to private entrepreneurs" to build in heretofore public ways (1053). Indeed, these rights-of-way were "free gift[s]" to companies in order to keep rapid transit costs low, according to King's Handbook of New York (138). Brooklyn's first elevated company, however, "experienced a bewildering sequence of false starts, operational frustration, economic downturns, and political machinations" that, while frustrating to the company, took an undue toll on the public domain (Cudahy 109). After a false start in 1876, the Brooklyn Elevated company tried again in May 1879: the new president of the company

believed that a state charter the company had earlier been awarded was itself all the legal authority that was required for his crews to start digging up Brooklyn streets to build foundations for the railway's support columns. The Brooklyn Common Council took a decidedly different view...(109)

Nevertheless, on May 12, 1879, under threat of forceful cessation by the police commissioner, the president "told the group of [workers]...to take picks and shovels in hand and begin to excavate the street so construction of the railway could resume" (109-10). Again, construction was stopped; and it would not begin in earnest until the summer. While entertaining, the anecdote overlooks the fate of the public space in question. In this period of starts and stops, was the space completely compromised? What of the people who used it on a daily basis? The degree to which public life was affected by the construction of New York's elevated railways is not well documented.

After construction, residents adjacent to elevated lines complained of the impartial treatment of public space, and the degree to which private companies were afforded extraordinary control of the street. In an oral statement given in 1879, a Third Avenue shoe dealer named Charles Eitenbenz complained,

If I want to put up a pole, I have to go and ask for leave and pay for it; but they put their posts up all along the street and never pay a cent for it...we even have to get a permit to put up an awning; why should not they be made to pay for putting up posts in the middle of the street?

While his sentiments echo those of many others recorded in the study, his bewilderment is telling. The elevated railroad was not only a divisive force as an urban element, but also a physical reminder of the compromise between public space, rapid transit, and uptown development. For many, too, the elevated was not only a “roof of ties and tracks and stations and trains,” but also a dark “forest of pillars” in the middle of the street” (Stalter, 880). Complaints of the darkness under elevated structures were also common, as were tales of falling debris throughout the steam locomotive era.

As noted above, the views from the elevated could be unparalleled. Guidebooks celebrated the “wonderful changing panorama of the Empire city...in a fresh and wholesome atmosphere” (Kings, 138) and promoted “looking down [to] enjoy all the sights in the roadway and on the sidewalk below” (McCabe, 190). Of course, these views were from a private space, fare-controlled and accessible only by stairway. Above the ground, train-car windows were the manifestation of the public/private dividing line.

Abutting the public delights below were the buildings in which tenants and owners kept their private lives and businesses. Both Chicago’s “Alley-L” and Manhattan’s elevated railroads afford(ed) views into these second- and third-floor rooms. Although these views were technically from one private space to another, the added dimension of movement turned viewers into voyeurs.

### The View From Above: What Riders See

From the beginning, the elevated railroads were encapsulations of movement -- after all, they were developed to provide rapid transit that was literally above the fray. Their structures and traincars were immediate symbols of modernity, technology and freedom from congestion. Using Mitchell Schwarzer’s Zoomscape: Architecture in Motion and Media as a foundation, I will examine the forms of urban movement, and deconstruct the views from outside and inside the elevated.

Broadly, Schwarzer’s Zoomscape “explores the impact of mechanized transportation and camera reproduction on the perception of architecture,” though his definition of “architecture” extends to a “range of cultural landscapes,” including “engineering structures and infrastructures, streets and freeways, cities, suburbs, and skylines” (12, 13). For the purposes of this thesis, I will explore New York City as a generalized cultural landscape, and the particular effects of the elevated railway as an element of infrastructure. Our concept of motion is of course rooted in how we perceive series of patterns and parts: do they coalesce into a blur? Or do they retain their individual qualities, albeit in short bursts? Both, of course. The uniqueness of all rail

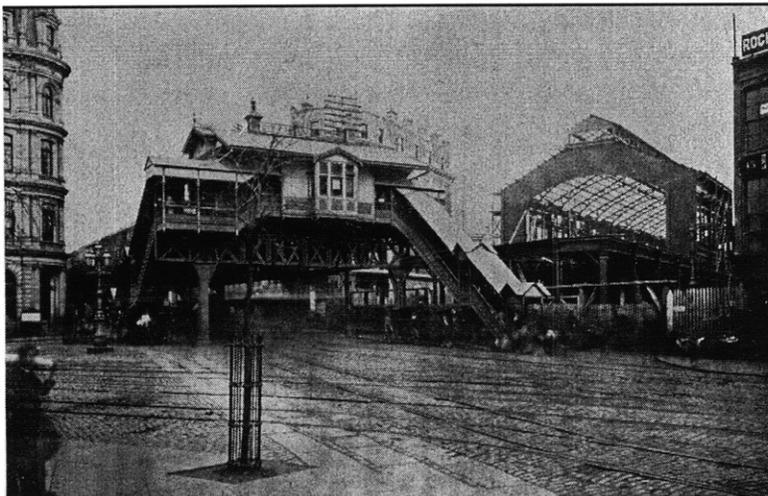
transportation, Schwarzer explains, “is its relentless framing of landscape...” (50). The public has had access to the vastness of rural as well as urban landscapes through the frames of regular railroads since the 1840s; however, the elevated offered an altogether new frame of view -- the landscape was the excitement of the city, adjacent and below.

The Chicago ‘L’, for example, “a cinema streaming across the city,” the author writes, where “along its narrow corridor, twenty to thirty feet above the street, fleeting intimacies are formed with countless facades and interiors” (66-7). Chicago’s neighborhood elevated lines are different than the bulk of New York City’s routes, in that they are situated over alleyways. Because it runs over city streets, however, the downtown Loop is more akin to Manhattan’s old elevated railroads.

In the Loop, Schwarzer attests, “the spatiality and dynamism of the neighborhoods is... replaced by intimate encounter” with architectural details (66). Such an observation ebbs at the notion of elevated systems as being wholly separate from the surrounding city (as their support pillars might suggest), in that riders are afforded, should they choose to accept it, a relatively cohesive view of the urban landscape. More powerful is Schwarzer’s reminder that “on the train, the buildings and streets do not move past our eyes. Our eyes move past them” (67). In this moment, having enabled such a view to take place, the elevated is as much an affirmer of city form as an agent of division. This is partly due to the sense of permanence afforded by the elevated railroad, which during its years of operation remains a constant element amid changing buildings, automobiles, and fashions. Finally, it important to recognize that what riders see is shielded from the negative aspects of the experience below the structure: the view from above lacks shadows, excessive noise, and falling soot.

### Architecture in the Sky

Here, the discussion posits elevated structures (stations and struts) as forms of stylized urban architecture. To an extent, great feats of engineering can, in turn, pose as beautiful architecture. But the details of the elevated railroads deserve mention as well. Interestingly, as Burrows and Wallace reveal in their voluminous history of Gotham,



**Figure 6.**

Architecture in the Sky: City Hall Station of the Third Avenue Elevated Line, with the Brooklyn Bridge transit terminal in the background, 1880.

Different lines served different clientele and had correspondingly different styles. Manhattan's Sixth Avenue El, which transported a predominantly middle-class ridership, was built for delight as well as convenience. Its dainty green stations, topped by graceful iron pavilion roofs, were designed by landscape artist J.F. Cropsey to simulate tasteful cottages ["Swiss Chalets"] and contained heated, gas-lit waiting rooms for gentlemen and for ladies.

The Third-Avenue El, by contrast, was "a working-class conveyance," and as such "was not quite as spiffy" (1055). These same amenities, or lack thereof, would more or less endure until demolition. An understated quality of these stations was that they hovered over cross streets in an era when most street-spanning structures were either gateways or monumental arches (and "floating hospitals" were boats, not buildings). Guidebooks of the time praised the stations, while recasting the entire structure as "a sort of arcade in the middle of the street," that seems such a "light and graceful affair" that it "appears scarcely capable of sustaining the immense strain put upon it" (McCabe, 181). The Kings Handbook of New York City also unites the el's engineering with the critic's thesaurus in deeming "the crowded junction points of the lines, the stations in mid-air, the swallow-flight of the light trains, the perfect system and discipline of the arrangements" worthy of "admiring wonder" (139).

As mentioned in the first theoretical lens, occasionally the twists and turns of the elevated systems could be seen to create a sense of organicism amid Manhattan's more formal grid system, particularly at Coenties Slip (between Hanover Square and the Battery). Tallack disagrees, arguing that at least for photographers at the turn of the century, the curve "emphasize[d] the elevated sweeping over the surrounding disorder" (60). Like any stylized form of architecture, the elevated inspired (and still inspires) a variety of critical and artistic responses.

### Civic Visuality & Engagement

The idea here is that because of their high visibility and popularity, the New York El's became stages for large crowds of people. Often, these crowds would approach crush levels -- beyond the platform, there simply was no where else to stand. Usually, these events were nothing but annoyances; however, at least in Chicago they could be deadly. In 1906, a crowded elevated train took the life of a teenage girl -- "reeling from the car's momentum," the girl stepped backward and fell "screaming to the muddy alley thirty feet below" (Barrett, 11). There were more positive moments, too, though the most famous of which was laced with melancholy. After September 11th, 2001, The New Yorker ran a piece about New Yorkers' ability to find "refuge" in public solidarity:

On May 7, 1915, the Lusitania was sunk by a German torpedo, taking with it more than a thousand lives. Later that day, in downtown Manhattan, an insurance executive and part-time composer named Charles Ives was standing on an Elevated-train platform when he heard a barrel organ playing "In the Sweet Bye and Bye." One by one, those around him began to sing along: first, a workman with a shovel, then a Wall Street banker in white spats, and finally the entire motley crowd. "They didn't seem to be singing in fun," Ives recalled, "but as a natural outlet for what their feelings had been going through all day long." Ives recorded the experience in an orchestral work entitled "From Hanover Square North, at the End of a Tragic Day, the Voice of the People Again Arose." It was intended to capture "the sense of many people

living, working, and occasionally going through the same deep experience together.” (“Requiems,” October 8, 2001)

Even in its last days, and into demolition, the elevated represented not only antiquated solutions but also patriotic support. During World War Two, the scrap steel from the old lines (in New York and Boston) went into sustaining the war effort. Philadelphia’s Delaware Avenue (Waterfront) line was also repurposed prior to the war, but -- perhaps unfortunately -- its steel went to Japan.

### Anachronistic Relic

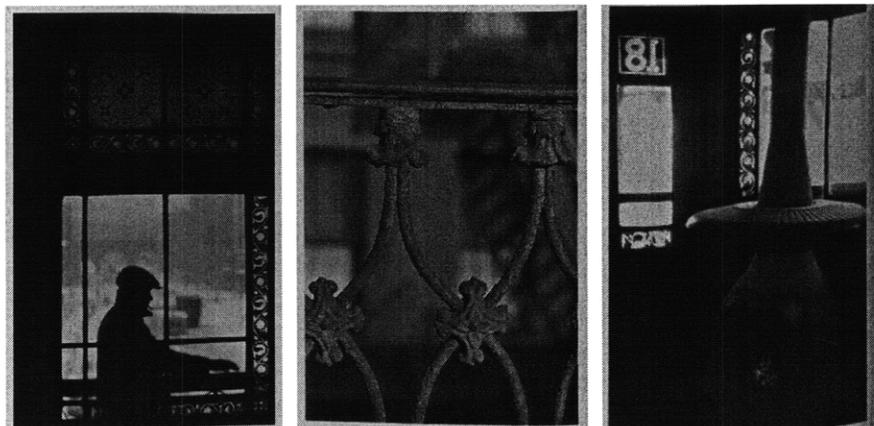
Finally, it is interesting to note why and how responses to elevated railways did or did not change over time. Though it is difficult to form a cohesive narrative given the variety of actors involved in the railroads, it is true that time and distance tend to smooth rough edges, and people grow accustomed to patterns of daily life, no matter how loud or intrusive they may be. Distance in time also leads to cultural myth-making and nostalgia, whether by the aggrandizement of simpler things, or the oversimplification of a complex relationship.

Because Manhattan’s elevated railroads enjoyed popular support from the beginning, the effects of time on their romanticization may be limited. Yet any questions raised by time-induced shifts in perception of the elevated also raise questions about how time passage affects the perception and collective identity of the city as a whole. I begin with a short anecdote about time and image from a neighboring borough:

While the lifespan of Manhattan’s main lines (the timeframe of construction, operation, and demolition) was certainly lengthy in terms of human perception (roughly ninety years), the case of the first Brooklyn elevated lines is instructive in how the perception of time around the elevateds became compressed and distorted. As mentioned above, Brooklyn suffered from confusing, stop-and-start elevated construction in the 1870s. Early operations were also seemingly *ad hoc*, as significant parts of a new urban landscape appeared and disappeared over a span of five years. Service began on the borough’s first elevated line in 1885, linking Fulton Ferry on the East River with East New York (Cudahy, 108). Unfortunately, this line was “beset with ninety-degree curves,” and did not easily connect with the Brooklyn Bridge (116). After 1885, construction of more elevated routes was rapid, and corrective: “by the end of 1890,” Cudahy writes, “the curve-plagued elements of the Old Main Line [as it had come to be called], and its

### **Figures 7, 8 & 9.**

Anachronistic relics on the Third Avenue El, ca. 1954. Left to Right: Stained glass windows, ornamental platform ironwork, and a pot-bellied stove.



terminal adjacent to Fulton Ferry, had been abandoned” (119). That such significant forms of urban engineering could so quickly become redundant and deemed “Old” (in Capital, no less) is staggering. Although it may be more a testament to the dire need for effective rapid transit and the lengthy trials of early construction efforts, such a quick turnaround in the popular perception of a new technology is interesting. Indeed, there are few such prominent examples in which a massive part of the city environment, initially viewed by many as progressive and modern, so quickly becomes regarded as outdated, obsolete, and “old.”

The re-timing of “age” is a theme that resurfaced in the waning days of Manhattan’s elevated railroads, too. For example, that interior details of Third Avenue Elevated stations (“a pot-bellied stove and stained-glass windows”) remained intact until the line’s 1955 demolition were anachronistic, and riders then “literally [found] an older space” above the street (Stalter, 880). Today, many still recall with vivid sensory details the Third Avenue El stations’ pot-belly stoves, stained-glass windows, and Victorian ornate steelwork (Figures 7, 8 & 9). Nevertheless, by the 1920s artists began to “age” the elevated, and distance it from either the present or the future. In John Sloan (of the Ashcan school’s) 1922 painting, “The City from Greenwich Village,” Tallack argues that the artist “identifies the El with an older city and depicts it twisting around the Village streets rather than racing up or down town” (74). Alternatively, the painting may be trying to recast the elevated as an integral part of the city by focusing on its lesser-known, more form-following routes; regardless, age seems more a compliment than a detraction.

The elevateds were complex relics. Granted, Lowenthal attests that “Relics are also static,” and that the “high visibility of relics, especially of old buildings, leads many to over-estimate -- and over-value -- the stability of the past” (243). But what if a collection of static relics (elevated structure, station building, platform, and details) were united with a collection of dynamic ones (elevated train cars)? This question is not just for Manhattan’s elevateds, for they have perished; but for all remaining elevated structures in New York and other cities. But as untouched and eminently physical structures, Manhattan’s els were thereby “open to public inspection and potentially visible to any passerby,” and “provide[d] unmediated impressions of the past” (245). As relics, elevateds offer an accessible means of *experiencing* the past in the present.

## **Conclusion**

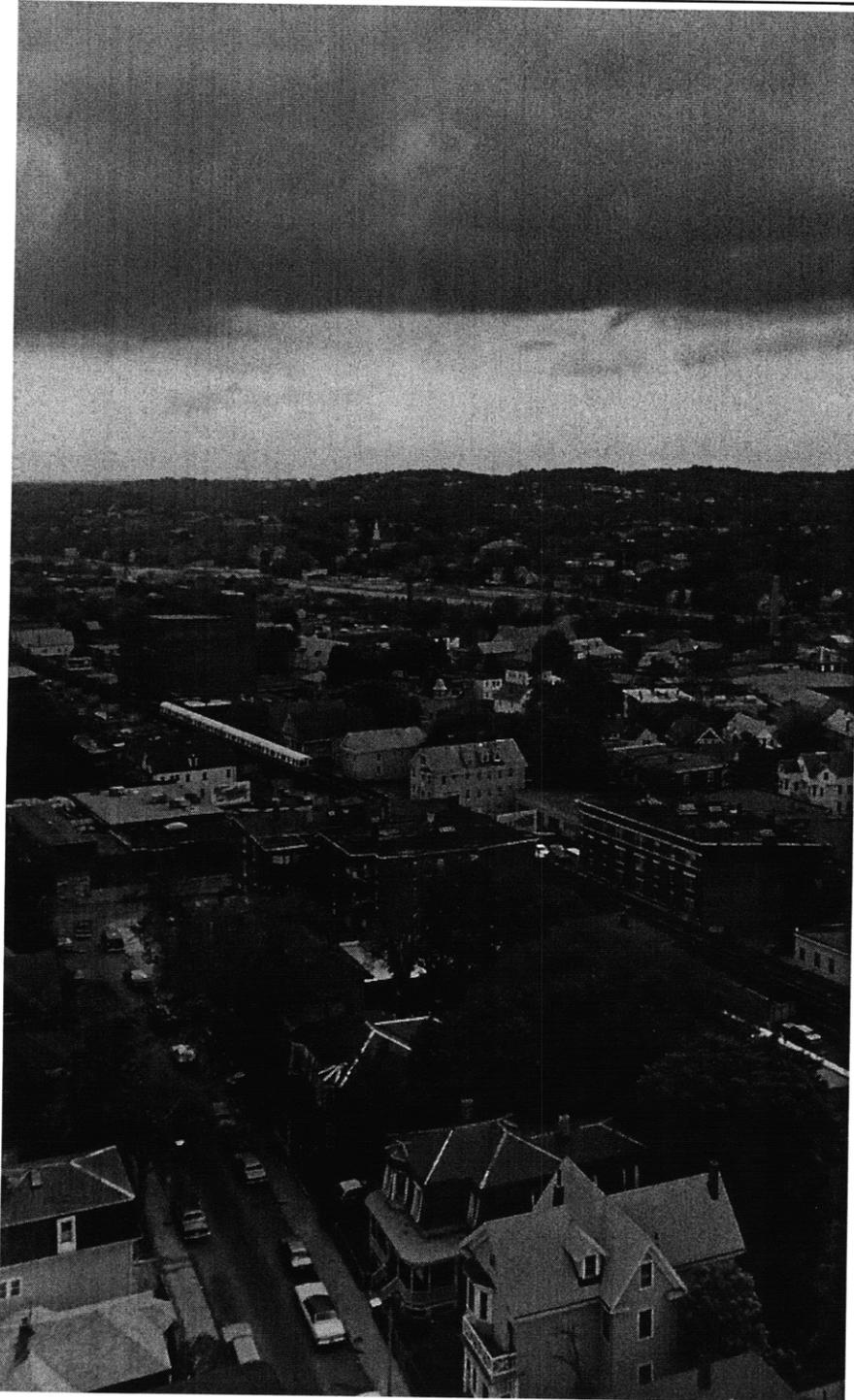
New York is the perfect place to introduce the various roles that elevated railways played in American cities. The themes I explore here will appear in various iterations in Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia; their manifestation in these cities is all the more interesting because they have not yet been explored to the extent of New York City. We begin in Boston, where the city’s history of ethnic tension, political struggle and pleas for national relevance manifests time and again in the story of the Main Line Elevated.

2.

Boston:

Politics, Removal, and the Construction of Memory

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“Elevated lines by definition cause blight, I know, but they remain charming. In Boston, the old El’s day is finally done, so tear it down, but shed a tear.”

Martin F. Nolan,  
The Boston Globe,  
April 26, 1987

**Figure 10.**

The Washington Street  
El in Roxbury, ca.  
1985.

## **Introduction**

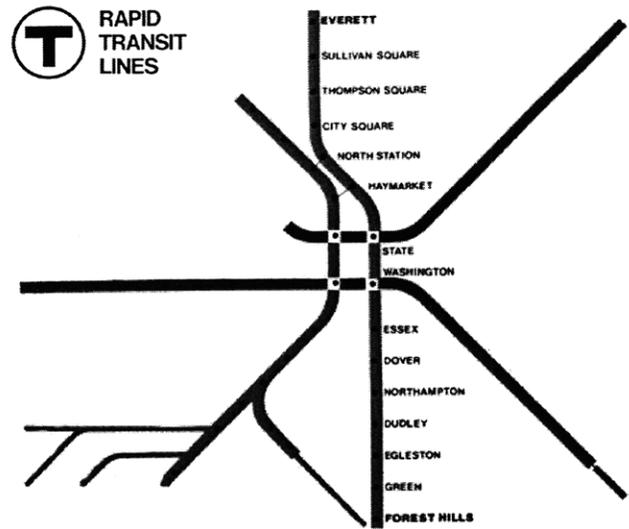
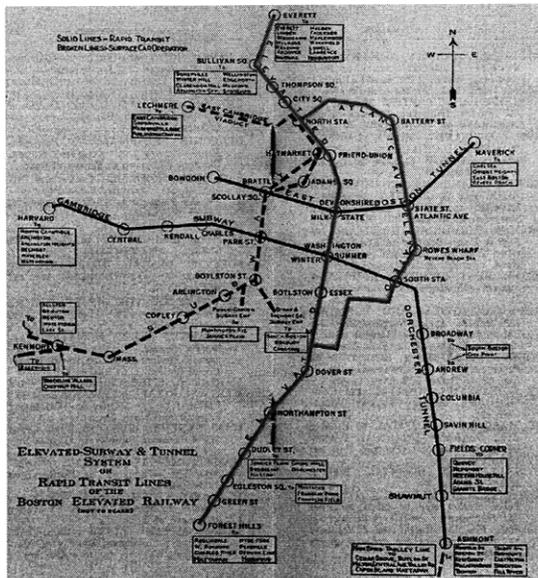
The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief history of the birth, life and death of the elevated railway in Boston, and explore the reasons why it fell out of favor among some constituencies, but retained a meaningful legacy with others. Indeed, Boston is unique among the three case studies in that it has torn down its El -- both Philadelphia and Chicago have, for the most part, retained and rehabilitated their elevated lines. As a consequence, Boston's elevateds live on only in the memories of former riders and resident abutters, and in videos posted to YouTube or disseminated among transit enthusiasts; with the exception of a retained Dudley copper canopy, the El's physical legacy has largely been forgotten.

In Chinatown, any vestige of Atlantic Avenue El is long gone -- the line was torn down in 1942, and its right-of-way has since seen both the construction and the removal of the Central Artery. For that community, the El was a backdrop to the immigrant experience, and now, immortalized in a mural, serves as a reminder of neighborhood solidarity through hardship. At both ends of the line, in Charlestown and in Roxbury, the elevated was replaced with a more modern segment somewhat removed from the original right-of-way. These new lines allowed the line's operator, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) the chance to serve more suburban commuters, and claim credit for neighborhood renewal in the aftermath of highway revolts, respectively. In the former case, residents were happy to see the line go; for them, its disrepair was a symbol of their loss of control over the neighborhood's future. In the latter case, where the Southwest Corridor project moved the (El) rapid transit line a half-mile to the West, the MBTA simply spent more effort garnering community input from those along the new line. The dialogue was polarized: the MBTA and the City of Boston deemed the El a "blight," and the new line a "healing process." For those along the old Washington Street El in the South End, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain, the line was much more than simply a "blight." It was, to some, a reminder of access, a profound symbol of integration, and a reminder of political mobilization.

## **The El in Context**

First, a short history of the development of the city's elevated transit system. By 1920, Boston had an extensive, though not expansive, system of elevated railways. The Boston Elevated Railway Company (BERy) operated trains along the "Main Line Elevated" from Everett and Charlestown to Forest Hills in southern Roxbury, through downtown along the Washington Street Tunnel. A loop route operated along Atlantic Avenue from North to South Station, winding through Chinatown on Beach and Harrison Streets before rejoining the trunk line at Castle Square. Along its journey, the elevated passed through major commercial and residential districts. In Charlestown, Thompson and City Squares were neighborhood business districts, and fairly well-developed. To the south, Dudley Square, and to a smaller extent Egleston Square, were similarly centers of exchange and activity.

Due to low ridership, the Atlantic Avenue elevated was taken out of service in 1938 and scrapped in 1942 to help with the war effort (Cheney and Sammarco, 9). That the lines were not all replaced by this time was not for a lack of effort. In 1935, Trout notes in a history of Boston during the Depression, "[s]ome 50,000 residents of Roxbury and Charlestown had petitioned for the removal of above-ground portions of the El, and the PWA [Public Works Administration]



**Figures 11 & 12.**

At left, the Boston Elevated Railway system map, ca. 1934. The Atlantic Avenue Elevated encircled downtown, while the Main Line ran north-south from Everett to Forest Hills. At right is an MBTA map circa 1967, with the newly-christened Orange Line highlighted.

promised \$10 million to support part of the estimated cost of \$42 million” (243). For reasons unknown, the plans were scrapped; and it was to be another forty and fifty-two years before the Charlestown and Washington Street lines were demolished, respectively. Worthy of note is that prior to 1947 when the public Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the Boston Elevated Railway Company operated not only the elevated but also the subway lines in the City of Boston; thus, according to official parlance, a trip on any of Boston’s rapid transit lines was a trip on the “El.” Confusingly, when contemporary and secondary sources mention the “Boston Elevated,” they may be referring to the operating company rather than the infrastructure alone.

When the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) took over in 1965, the Main Line Elevated (from Everett to Roxbury) was redubbed the Orange Line, assuming the colonial-era name of Washington Street. The “old” Orange Line, as it came to be known, was completely replaced in two steps: Charleston’s portion over Main Street fell after 1975 as the Haymarket-North project moved service to the north and west of the old town center; and the southern portion, the Washington Street elevated, was fully demolished by 1989 as the much-publicized Southwest Corridor was brought into service.

It is no doubt that neighborhoods along the Main Line Elevated suffered to some extent because of its presence. In its assessment of Washington Street in 2008, the American Planning Association blamed the “elevated rail line” for “driv[ing] out families,” thusly affecting the form of the city: the article claims that “rooming houses began to replace apartments.” The APA also notes that, like many other neighborhoods in Boston, “[s]uburbanization also took its toll. From 1950 to 1970, the South End lost two-thirds of its population. Entire blocks were vacant and

prostitution and drugs were commonplace.”<sup>3</sup> It is too easy to blame the deterioration of the area on the elevated alone -- for areas of the neighborhood not immediately adjacent to the El, building stock deteriorated with economic recession and fragmented demographic changes. With regard to development (creative or destructive), the elevated was not only an active agent of noise and disturbance, but also a conduit for change and localized prosperity.

## The El and Urban Design

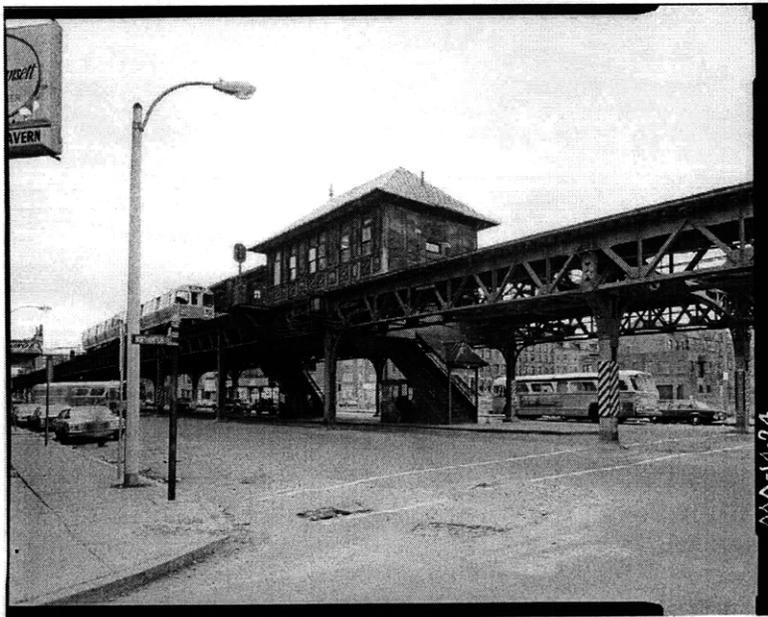
### Architecture

From the beginning, the Boston elevated railway was meant to be an asset to the City, not only as a work of architectural and engineering prowess, but also as a modern, efficient means of rapid transit. The original line was anchored by two massive terminals—to the south, Dudley Square in Roxbury, and at the north edge of Charlestown, Sullivan Square. They were what planners now call “multi-modal,” incorporating cross-platform transfers between the trunk route and more local trolley lines. They were also local monuments: while Sullivan Square resembled a large, Victorian-era railroad station made from brick and glass, Dudley brought a gallery of copper atria to Roxbury.

Ample description of these structures, both as original constructions and as modified over the years, is found in Zaitzevsky’s comprehensive overview of the Washington Street elevated prepared for the MBTA and the National Park Service’s Historic American Engineering Record. According to the author, the five original way-stations along the line between the two terminals (Thompson Square, City Square, North Station, Dover Street, and Northampton Street) “were conceived as parts of a single theme, designed by a single architect, and constructed over a short period of time.” This architect, Alexander Wadsworth Longfellow, Jr., crafted stations of “early French renaissance” design, “combining classical and Gothic features in true Beaux Arts fashion.” All of the way-stations were island style stations (i.e., one platform in the middle of the trackway),

3

<http://www.planning.org/greatplaces/streets/2008/washingtonstreet.htm>



**Figure 13.**

An Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) documentary photograph of Northampton Station, ca. 1975.

with one headhouse anchoring the platform to the street. Although the author does not mention the Atlantic Avenue Elevated, based on copious photography and diagrams of the line we can assume that these stations were of similar design. Zaitzevsky acknowledges that at the time of its 1987 demolition, only Northampton station had retained much of its original architectural detail; indeed, by 1975 (when the Charlestown El came down), both City Square and Dover Street had been expanded to island platforms of different design, and both Dudley and Sullivan Square terminals had been crudely adapted to serve both inbound and outbound traffic. Zaitzevsky reveres Northampton (Figure 13) for its role as anachronistic microcosm: “It reveals perhaps the most enduring merit of the original design: stations of competent but unremarkable design, which were adapted in every sense to their site: the elevated structure. The qualities that are aesthetically noteworthy in the elevated structure – the sense of light and air; the expressive, curvilinear grace of the truss-work; subtle adaptations to the site; rhythmic, elegant arches and carefully crafted details – are also found in the stations” (Zaitzevsky, “Chapter 5”).

Prior to the line’s 1987 closure, noted art and architecture historian Margaret Henderson Floyd spoke to WGBH’s “Ten O’Clock News” about the Washington Street portion of the Orange Line, offering both insightful and familiar comments. “We hear so much about Gropius in the twentieth century and modular architectural components,” she said. “Well, the old Orange Line stations, the “island station” -- was a modular design which was, indeed, repeated over and over again at all the different stations along the Orange Line.” Despite this “modern” pattern of construction, she implied, the elevated stations were anachronistic treasures. “Elements of buildings such as this,” she says in the televised interview as a clip of a train at Dudley is shown, “which could never be produced in another time and in our present time -- the ornate ironwork, for example... -- are something that, once they’re gone, they’re gone forever.” Unfortunately, once the MBTA had firm plans to relocate each end of the Orange Line, that line was left to deteriorate (within the bounds of safe operation). As one young man stated in an on-the-street interview for the same WGBH news story, “all [Dudley] needs is a little renovation, [a] little paint job and everything.”

Indeed, the elevated’s architecture made a profound and lasting effect on the neighborhood, and the city -- for the years the elevated was in operation, the stations served as unique, ornamental symbols of the past. As will be explored below, attempts were made at both ends of the line to salvage and refurbish pieces of the line and stations for future uses. As can be seen today, Dudley Station survives as a reinvigorated piece of period architecture, though the trains are gone. Further south, a new development at Egleston Square (formerly the site of a station at Columbus Avenue & Washington Street), for example, uses the old steel structure as a design motif.

### Urban Form

In all the American cities that possessed a heavy-rail elevated line (or network of lines), the structure was first and foremost a massive new piece of the urban landscape. Though its latticed-steel construction could often appear light, spindly, or ornate, the combined effect on the city -- especially over the street -- was large. One look at a historical aerial photograph of Boston shows a strong, dark line extending from Charlestown to Roxbury over Main and Washington Streets. Its effects were not only aesthetic but physical as well. For their part, the Dudley and Sullivan Square terminals were edifices of form, combining multiple uses within their forms while fitting into the existing built fabric. This is more true in Roxbury, where after years of deterioration and



**Figure 14.**

The Washington Street El/  
Orange Line, between Egleston  
and Dudley Stations,  
ca. 1986.

demolition the Dudley Square elevated station helped a dissolving urban landscape maintain at least a semblance of physical unity. That the stations were multi-modal, allowing cross-platform transfers to trolleys (later buses), further established them as neighborhood hubs. In the architectural narrative, however, these terminal stations were the latest in a trend of large, distinguished railroad terminals that had been built in American and European cities for decades. The way-stations, as will be noted below, were intended to become architectural ‘gems’ in the urban landscape. In a project designed to capture scenes and portraits of the Washington Street elevated prior to its demolition, David Akiba took a number of photographs that illustrate the El’s integration with its surroundings from above, no matter how intrusive it seemed from below. In many of his photographs, train-cars become actors on the Orange Line elevated stage. One photograph in particular, a telephoto capture looking north from Egleston station (Figure 14), shows an Orange Line train as a solitary figure in the midst of trees, buildings, and topography. The only other major presences are the John Hancock Tower and a local apartment building, both pulled forward by the telephoto lens. Such a portrait captures the elevated at its best: symbolically and physically, as much a part of the city as its more modern skyscrapers.

In Charlestown, the elevated railway also changed the form of public spaces, and its presence would also inform neighborhood design for decades to come after demolition. A report on the history of that community’s City Square described the el’s impact on layout and perception: “It effectively cut the Square into two triangular spaces, each bounded by the el and the tall buildings of [the] late 29th century. [The station’s] size and commanding appearance increased the effects

**Figures 15 & 16.**

Unique instances where different eras (and scales) of infrastructure met along the El. Left, Causeway Street; right, City Square.



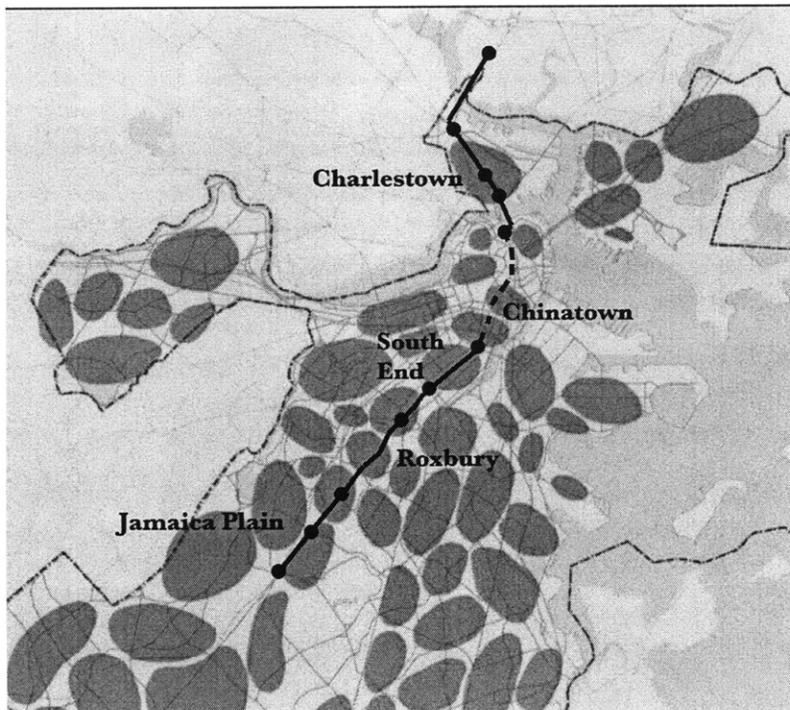
of buildings closing in around the square” (CTP Staff, 25). The elevated was not to be the only major commanding infrastructure in City Square; in the late 1950s, the Massachusetts Highway Department erected ramps through the site connecting the Central Artery to the Tobin Bridge. For two decades, City Square was dominated by two instruments of mobility (Figure 16); moreover, because the highway ramps were designed to clear the elevated transit line, their height was all the more oppressively apparent after the Orange Line was demolished. The elevated’s ghost presence was to be felt in City Square for another decade and a half, as the highway ramps were demolished in the early 1990s.

### **The El in the Neighborhood: Distilling Symbols from Historical Narrative**

This section will explore how some prominent themes -- struggles of power, attempts to regain control, and memory construction -- manifested in a few Boston neighborhoods through which the El passed.

#### Charlestown: Uniting Dissent, Preempting History

In Charlestown, many of the themes that pervaded Boston as a whole manifested on a smaller scale. Indeed, at the time of the Elevated’s construction, residents exhibited positive, if guarded support for the line. As time passed, and the quality of the elevated structure and the building stock adjacent to the line began to deteriorate, residents conflated the El with the loss of control of their neighborhood. Although some saw the legacy of the line as a possible historic asset (and a commodity), the loudest voices in Charlestown were those who unified in shared hardship. Their influence, combined with the MBTA’s desire to better serve suburban communities, led to the line’s



**Figure 17.**

Neighborhood map from the Boston Redevelopment Authority’s General Plan for the City of Boston, 1965. The superimposed line shows the route of the elevated circa 1965, along with some of the communities through which it passed.

demolition.

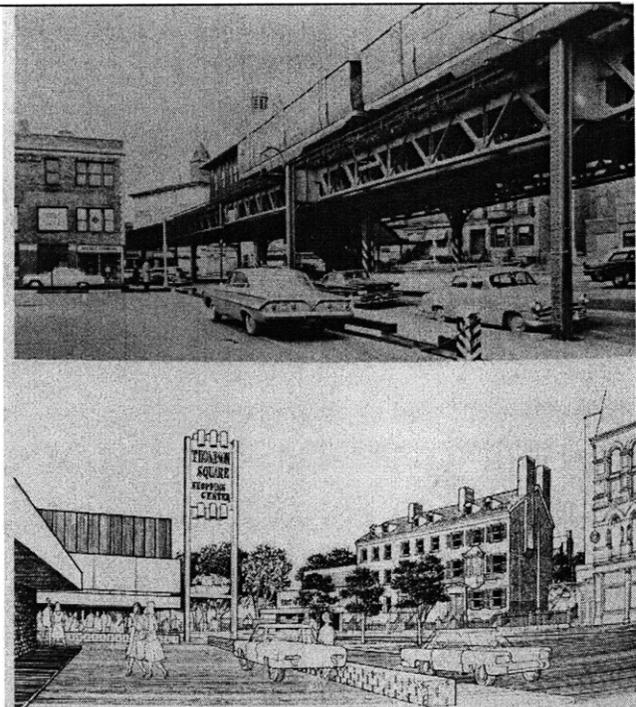
“In September 1947,” write Cheney and Sammarco, “the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) took over the Boston Elevated System, and plans were made to replace both the Washington Street and Charlestown El’s with subways” (9). But by 1964, when the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) took the reins from the MTA, both legs of the Main Line Elevated still stood. Plan after plan of elevated replacement and rapid transit extensions passed and collapsed, and the Charlestown Elevated finally fell on April 4, 1975. Even though they remained in service for much longer than intended, in practice the Charlestown stations were exempt from the MBTA’s station modernization program, and lacked the unifying station signage that ultimately graced the rest of the Orange Line and the other rapid transit routes. Throughout the late 60s and early 70s, the stations became increasingly run-down and deteriorated – it appears as if the MBTA had already counted them as lost causes, especially in their last days. From the beginning of the 1970s, the Elevated was already an Other, even within the subway system as a whole. Perhaps because of this uniqueness, Cheney and Sammarco note, “hundreds of last-trip riders” ignored “a nasty spring snow and sleet storm” to “[jam] aboard the final [Charlestown elevated] train” (9).

Yet for many, the elevated did not play a positive role at all in the community of Charlestown. In fact, it was “initially opposed” (CTP Staff, 17). Still, in its early days it was a “symbol of progress as better access improved the business climate in City Square” (17). But this positive outlook was short-lived. James J. Connolly reports that even in its earlier years, the elevated’s “presence reduced property values, forced some retailers to close down altogether, and fueled a powerful feeling of neglect in the district” (122). In fact, in his observational report on the planning processes surrounding urban renewal in late-sixties Charlestown, Massachusetts, Langley Keyes ascertains that “the town was irreparably damaged [in 1901] when the Boston Elevated [Railway] Company was granted the right to run tracks the length of...Main Street” (99). He notes that petitions calling for

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**Figure 18.**

From the BRA’s General Plan for the City of Boston, 1965: “The relocation of the ‘el’ from Charlestown’s Main Street...will demonstrate to the nation how effectively rapid transit modernization and community renewal can support one another in a proud and historic residential neighborhood.” The removal of the El from Charlestown (seen favorably in this before and after series) was regarded as the ultimate symbol of regaining control over the community’s future.



the elevated's removal first surfaced "within ten years" of its construction. If anything, the elevated served as a shared burden for the residents of Charlestown, "[standing] as a cause and a symbol of all that was wrong" with the neighborhood (107). In Keyes' analysis, removing the elevated "was the rallying point of any renewal plan" put forth by the City, leaving all other "physical changes" to be made in the community to be "of secondary importance" (108). Thus at least in Charlestown, the elevated brought the neighborhood together – not by providing local, shared, and relatively rapid transport; rather, by being a physical embodiment and symbol of collective dissatisfaction.

The Boston 200 Neighborhood History Series volume on Charlestown corroborates the local dislike of the line, cementing this attitude into the contemporary historical narrative of the city as a whole. In response to Charlestown's late-twentieth century history of urban renewal and increased city planning focus, the historical narrative deems the efforts successful. "Through hard experience," the volume reads, "Charlestown has learned to deal with planners, to articulate community needs and to implement plans that will retain the neighborhood's character. Bunker Hill Community College has opened, low income and elderly housing has been built, new businesses have come to town and the despised 'El' is finally only a memory" (5). Later in the volume, local resident Mary Gillen was interviewed about her experiences in Charlestown. Regarding the el, she stated that she "would like to be one of the last" riders on the old elevated, as her mother "was one of its first passengers." Indeed, she postulated, the hitch to redevelopment in Charlestown was the elevated -- "that's really what is holding us up now" (7). And yet Mrs. Gillen recalled another iteration of the elevated, one of civic practicality – though she neglects to note this function. "The [election] rallies in Charlestown were fabulous!" she recalls. "The night before election all the candidates arrived in City Square. They would get out of the elevated and stand on the platform. The square was jammed with people..." Though in its later years the elevated became less of a neighborhood asset and more of a rallying cry for widespread improvement, at least in its early days it could serve, albeit if briefly, as a civic grandstand.

As with the Washington Street portion of the line, around the time of its demolition and replacement the elevated was both celebrated and eulogized by the transit enthusiast community. Rollsign, the near-monthly output of the Boston Street Railway Association, ran numerous news stories about the upcoming demise of the line in the years leading up to 1975. A November, 1973 cover featured a starkly messy black-and-white charcoal drawing of a Longfellow headhouse (possibly Thompson Square station) with the inscription "The End Nears." A full-page feature in this issue celebrated "El Architecture" -- its three photographs are contemporary views of the stations and their associated infrastructure, with romanticized descriptions. A caption describes Thompson Square station as "nearing the end of its useful life as the Haymarket-North extension approaches completion." The caption continues, commenting on the march of progress: "The flaring lines and intricate designs will be replaced by poured concrete" (5). Another photograph shows a "turn of the century toll collector booth," exhibiting many decades worth of system signage. The magazine laments that the "ornamental trim and varnish will also disappear." The October, 1975 issue expressed its opinion much more strongly, in a feature entitled "The El Dies." The one-page piece features eight photographs from Keany Square along Causeway Street in Boston to Sullivan Square in northern Charlestown, showing the El in various stages of demolition. There is hope in these pages, however; one caption reads, "Main Street Charlestown is slowly brightening up. Knowing that the 'El' was to be removed, merchants, home owners, and the Redevelopment Authority have been st[e]adily renovating and improving the area." Yet in the May/June 1976 issue

of Rollsign, six forlorn photographs document the incremental demolition of the Charlestown elevated.

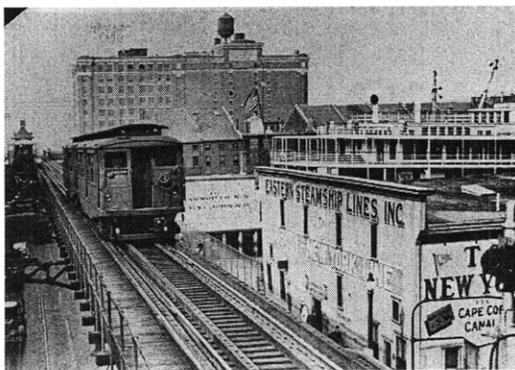
It is worth noting that some in the community rallied to save relics of the old line, if only for aesthetic and commercial reasons. According to the March/April 1976 Rollsign, “the owner of the Warren Tavern” had bought the old Thompson Square headhouse in the hopes of “convert[ing] the station into a small restaurant.” Unfortunately, on April 19, 1976, the salvaged station was ravaged by a fire of unknown origins. If of malicious origins, the fire may have been telling: perhaps residents were happier with no remnants of the line, not even pieces of architecture that had, like it or not, defined the place for decades. Yet the new owner was displeased, and argued that the station was “irreplaceable and priceless – one of the finest examples of Victorian transportation architecture in the United States.” Rollsign added a characteristic rhetorical flourish to the story, explaining that

A few days later the tangled mess of bent, stretched, and melted copper no longer existed and Thompson Sq., now devoid of the beautiful Victorian sculpture, appears to the uninitiated like any other drab intersection on Main Street, U.S.A. (4)

An interesting facet here is that the Warren Tavern was built in 1780, and as such is one of the oldest buildings in Charlestown. That the 1970s owner wanted to preserve the Thompson Square station, and maintain it along with the colonial-era restaurant, is telling in that at least for some, the elevated was a part of the local history worth preserving.

#### Under the El in Chinatown: Solidarity from Hardship

The Atlantic Avenue Elevated existed for roughly forty years, and yet there is little information (beyond technical plans and analysis) available about the line. This is true for a number of reasons, but most likely the associated plans were simply discarded after a certain amount of time. Thankfully, bits and pieces about the general neighborhood conception of the line can be gleaned from photographs and varied sources; regardless, my area of focus is on the southern portion of



**Figures 19 & 20.**

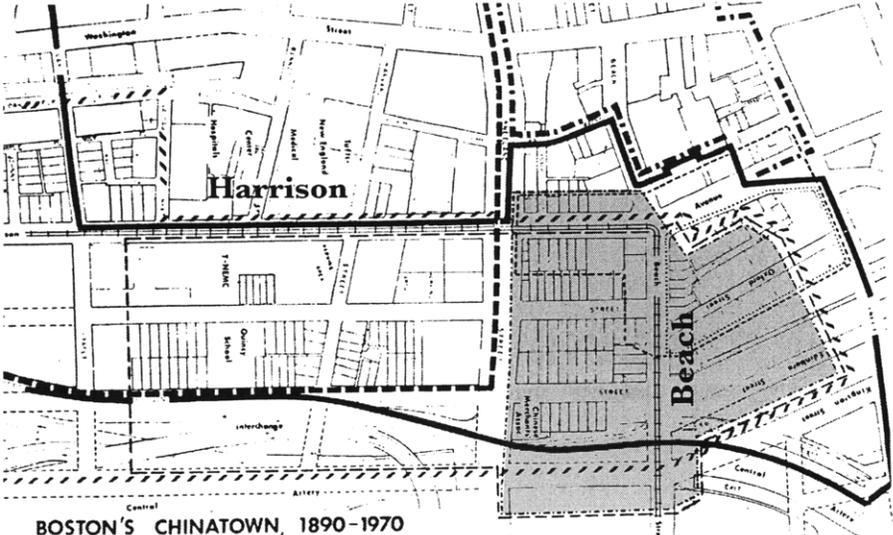
At left, the Atlantic Avenue Elevated at the waterfront. At right, the El at Beach Street station in the heart of Chinatown.

the line, along Harrison and Beach Streets, in the area known as Chinatown.

So much has changed along Boston’s waterfront in the last century, that with the last fifty years’ construction and demolition of an elevated highway, the rerouting of streets and reallocating of public space, it almost seems reasonable that the previous fifty years would have seen urban design changes of increasing scale as well. The Atlantic Avenue line is interesting in that it passed through mainly commercial and industrial neighborhoods – after all, it passed above the old freight line that linked North Station and South Station. But the line skirted the North End (and has so far been the only rapid transit line to serve this area of the city), and plowed through the heart of Chinatown on its way to the docks. So this elevated line’s story is, like all others, certainly not singular in nature.

Cheney and Sammarco write primarily of the line’s proximity to the sea (Figure 19), explaining variously that “riders had an excellent view of Boston Harbor and its busy shipping activity” (59), and that “among the interesting activities that could be viewed from the Atlantic Avenue El was the arrival of the sleek white ships of the United Fruit Company, with their cargoes of bananas and other fruit” (63). They summarize that the Depression caused a decline in the seaport and ridership that led to the line’s downfall. “Although the line was colorful,” the authors note, “in many ways – with its excellent views of Boston’s waterfront and its transport of the U.S. Mail on nine trips per day, with pickup at South Station, State Street, and North Station – economics caused it to close on September 30, 1938” (9). As in New York City, the elevated took on a new role in wartime as physical fodder for more productive uses – the line was to be scrapped, in the words of a 1942 poster attached to the line, to “lick the Jap” (58). Like other places in Boston, notably Dudley Square, the Atlantic Avenue Elevated had the visual effect of a vise, tightening, isolating, and emphasizing the downtown area. In a way, the loss of the elevated in the late 30s predicted a general downtown downturn, especially one that would result in decentralization and widespread renewal.

In Chinatown, the elevated was an accepted backdrop (and, to some extent, backbone) of community life. As will be seen in Philadelphia, the structure acted as an orientating landmark in the urban environment, as well as an active symbol of connection to other parts of the city. In Chinatown, the elevated hovered over the two major commercial strips – Beach Street and Harrison



**Figure 21.**

“Boston’s Chinatown, 1890-1970.” The shaded portion indicates the extent of the settlement in 1935. Until 1938, the elevated line ran north along Harrison and curved east along Beach, serving as a backbone to the neighborhood.

Avenue. Beach Street station (Figure 20) was located at the intersection of these two thoroughfares, where the line took a hard curve to the east. This location was renowned for a fatal 1928 wreck that damaged the station (Clarke, 33) and led to partial closure of the line south of South Station. A map of fluctuating neighborhood boundaries published in a 1970 community development report confirms that the elevated railway was literally at the heart of the neighborhood, at least from the time of its construction to the nineteen-thirties (Figure 21).

According to Wing-kai To's Chinese in Boston, 1870-1965, the elevated line was just one of a long list of negative factors affecting the Chinese population in Boston. After a few decades of developing a settlement in Boston's South Cove, by that late 1800s the Chinese community began to face both physical and mental hardships. After "the widening of Harrison Avenue in 1893 almost destroyed the city's Chinese business core," To explains, "an immigration raid...in 1903...reduced the population of Chinese residents in the neighborhood by nearly half" (7). Remaining residents had then to face "deplorable" conditions -- especially the "unbearable noise and pollution" caused by the elevated railway (7). Furthermore, it can be assumed that the elevated was constructed through the heart of the Chinese district primarily because that path would yield the least public resistance.

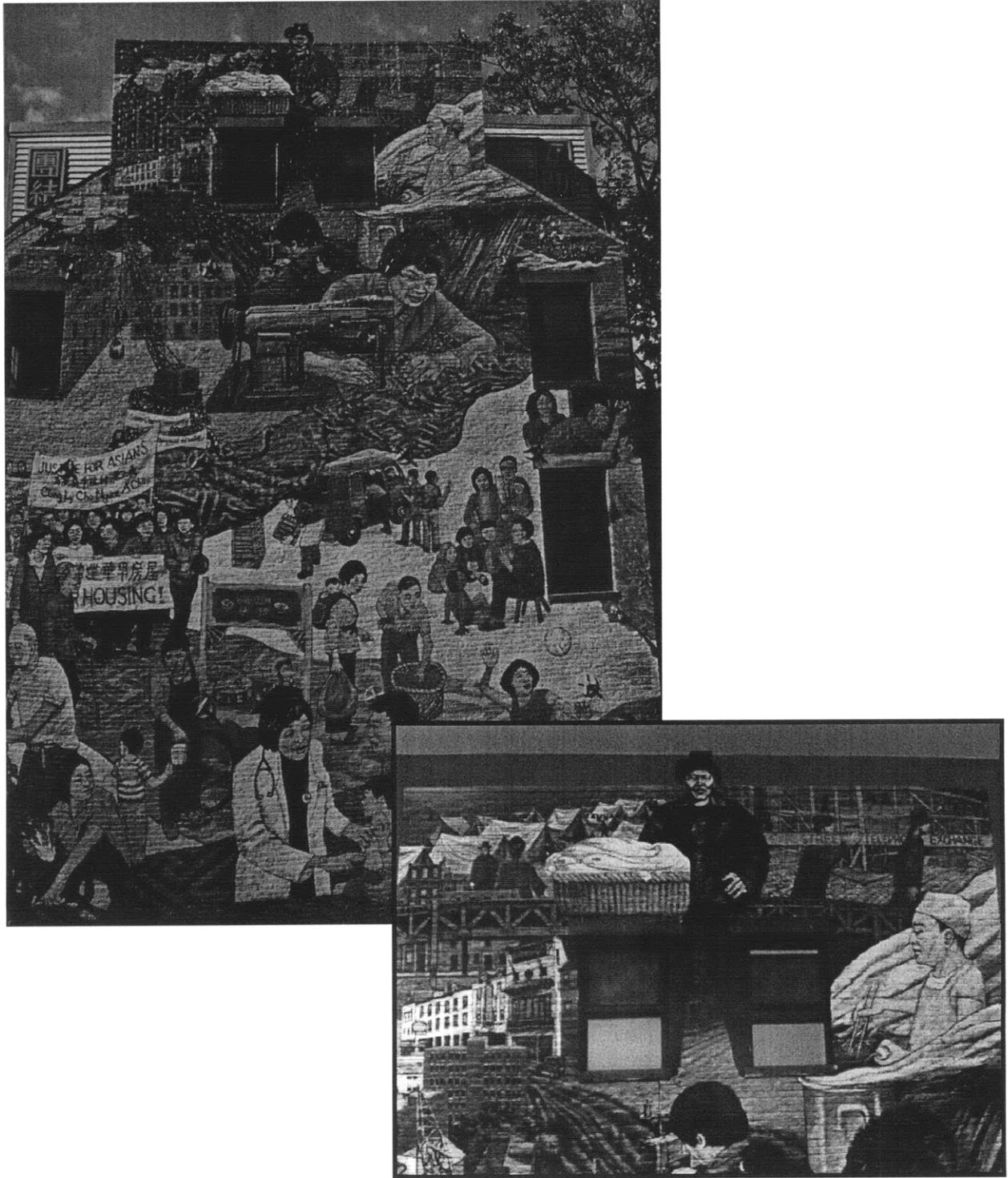
Again, as in Roxbury as well as Philadelphia, the elevated line's influence on the neighborhood's historical narrative can be found in local public art, especially murals. The Chinatown Unity Community Mural (Figure 22) was located on the wall of a building at 38 Oak Street, and faced Harrison Avenue. It existed for sixteen years before being destroyed for the 23-story mixed-use project, the Metropolitan. According to the Chinatown Blog's two-part "History of the Chinatown Community Mural,"<sup>4</sup> the artwork was initiated in 1986 by the Quincy School Community Council, currently known as Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, and "designed and painted by Cambridge artist Wen-ti Tsen and David Fichter with assistance from Annie Chin, Arlene Chung, Valerie Jayne and members of the community."

Because of its three-story stature, the Community Mural was able to display numerous decades of community history, with each period of time depicted by synecdoche – an action or a landmark standing for a way of life, or a series of experiences.<sup>5</sup> Down from the top, the mural thus contains (to select a few images) a launderer, a seamstress, buildings being demolished for the expressway, and public/civic marches. The Chinatown Blog explains that "The mural included images that were meant to represent the journey of the Chinese American experience. The theme is woven together into a cloth by the seamstress in middle with the sewing machine. The seamstress is weaving the history of the Chinatown community." Of particular interest to this paper, the mural also contains the darkened girders of the old Atlantic Avenue Elevated at the top, running behind the launderer. Despite its negative impacts on the community, as experienced in the North End and elsewhere, the el was nevertheless a part of the neighborhood's collective memory. The mural is important because it is one of the few visible indications that the community acknowledges an association with the elevated. Although it is a painted representation of the El, the mural offers a unique relic of the forgotten line, immortalizing it as a backdrop for community hardship. As a contemporary backdrop to Chinatown's local heritage, the mural remembers the el as prompting solidarity through shared hardship.

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4 <http://bostonchinatowngateway.com/archives/380>

5 <http://davidfichter.net/muralPortfolio/#Unity-Community,%20Chinatown%20Mural%20Project>



**Figure 22.**

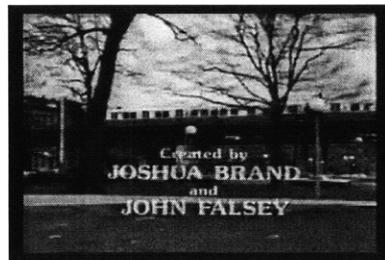
Chinatown Unity Community Mural. At top is a Chinese launderer with the steel girders of the Elevated in the faint background. The inclusion of the El in the mural is an acknowledgement of its importance in the local narrative. The inset enlarges the upper section so that the painted El can be seen more clearly.

For national television audiences, the Washington Street Orange Line was a very present symbol of urban decay. The line is featured for a few seconds in the opening credits of *St. Elsewhere*, a television show that appeared on NBC from 1982 to 1987 (Figure 23). In a review of the pilot episode, *The New York Times* explained that “St. Elsewhere is supposed to be St. Eligius, a bustling Boston hospital that is a bit rundown around the architectural edges and that cannot compete with the city’s bigger and fancier hospitals. When patients can’t get into them, they simply go ‘elsewhere.’ Still part of its surrounding neighborhood, St. Elsewhere gets an unusual variety of patients, from junkie children infected by dirty syringes to bag people and other such types living on society’s fringes.” screenshot. The appearance of the El, itself regarded by some as a blight, solidified “St. Eligius” image as a struggling institution in a struggling neighborhood. The media’s aim was not to actively denigrate the line or the neighborhood, but rather to provide a two-second-long, immediate context for the fictional hospital. To real life residents, the Orange Line symbolized various neighborhood themes of identity. Indeed, in contrast to the media perception, the Orange Line was much more than just a passing image of abandonment and marginalization.

Local television stations gave a fuller context of the line. In his introduction to a three-minute WGBH “Ten O’Clock News” story broadcast on April 30, 1987, reporter Christopher Lydon explained that the elevated “Orange Line as a structure is a main groove in the landscape and the psyche of the South End and Roxbury. After tonight, Dover, Northampton, Dudley and Egleston will not be where anyone gets off or on a train. They will be structures without a function. Defaced and neglected now, these stations were once the architectural pride of a city just discovering mass transportation.”

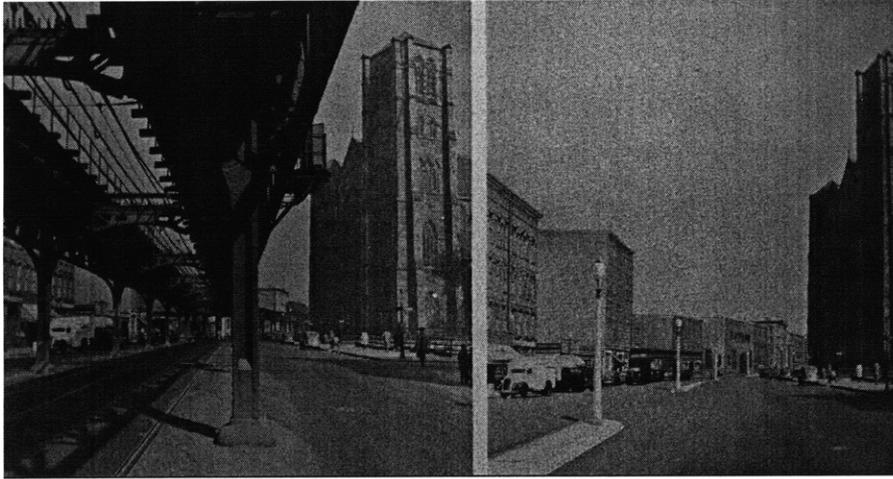
Washington Street was, in many respects, both dominated and invigorated by the Orange Line elevated. Despite its ‘blighting’ effects -- the line’s noise, drip, and shadow was undoubtedly linked to a decline in rent and upkeep immediately adjacent to the line -- the elevated was first and foremost the trunk route of the Orange Line, and represented the neighborhood’s connection to downtown Boston and other points. It was this strong transit service that, perhaps paradoxically, kept the neighborhood alive. When the line was relocated to the Southwest Corridor and the Washington Street line dismantled in 1987, the MBTA did not have a suitable replacement. A 1997 Boston Redevelopment Authority report on future Washington Street development summarized ten years of unreliable transport: under a headline reading “Challenges,” the report noted that

Although the dismantling of the elevated Orange Line transit structure in 1987 opened up unique urban design and development opportunities, this entire area has been poorly served by public transportation since that time. The delay in the installation of the Transit Replacement Service and street reconstruction has had



**Figure 23.**

Stills from the opening of *St. Elsewhere*, showing the Orange Line outside of the fictional St. Eligius Hospital on Washington Street.



**Figure 24.**

An ideal Washington Street, so envisioned in 1948. It took forty years for the elevated to come down.

a chilling effect on reinvestment activity by property owners and prospective developers. Washington Street has suffered from years of public and private disinvestment and is in extreme disrepair. Several historic buildings remain vacant and deteriorated. (7)

Only after that report and its associated Task Force, the successful implementation of several key streetscape improvements, real estate developments, and the oft-maligned Silver Line bus route, did Washington Street finally turn around. In 2008, Washington Street was named one of the American Planning Association's "Great Streets in America."<sup>6</sup>

By the late 1970s, most of surrounding Boston, and some of those living and working along the Washington Street corridor adjacent to the elevated, agreed that the line needed to go. It, like elsewhere, was noisy and dark, and was a smudge on the city's national image. It also passed by – or marred, in the sentiment of its detractors -- the picturesque Cathedral of the Holy Cross. In fact, as in Chicago there had been calls for the line's removal soon after it was built; a 1948 textbook entitled *Surging Cities* showed an ideal development for the city – a Washington Street at the Cathedral, free of the ugly elevated (Figure 24).

It would be forty years before the textbook's dream would finally come true. In fact, due to the highway revolt in the early 1970s, the MBTA would be able to accomplish this among many other goals, all at once. The keystone in the state and the transit agency's effort to rekindle local community support and garner national recognition was the Southwest Corridor project (1978-1987). This pioneering project was to make the most of land already cleared for the canceled-Interstate 95, relocating the Orange Line, Commuter Rail, and intercity rail lines into a trench that at some places would be decked with parkland and recreational uses. The scheme was also noteworthy in that it was the first to reallocate highway funds to public transit projects. Here, the MBTA actively sought and encouraged community participation -- enough to garner a 1989 Silver Medal in the Rudy Bruner Awards for Urban Excellence. The irony is that for all of the solid participatory work the transit agency did in neighborhoods adjacent to the new transit line, residents along the old Orange Line -- the Washington Street El -- were left grasping at straws.

The contemporary *Dudley in 2001* visioning report stated that early in the process, "Although there was nearly unanimous support for the new Orange Line amongst community

6 <http://www.planning.org/greatplaces/streets/2008/washingtonstreet.htm>

groups with whom [project planning] staff consulted – primarily those groups active in the Stop I-95 Coalition and located along the proposed I-95 corridor – even at this early point, strong reservations were expressed by groups in the Roxbury and North Dorchester areas who worried that they would not be well served by the relocated Orange Line because it would be much further away from the heart of the black community.” (19). The MBTA did, of course, conduct significant public outreach in Roxbury and the South End concerning replacement transit planning (see the South End section), and even partnered with a local art group to document the last days of the El (described further in the “Eulogy” section). Nevertheless, what was missing from the transit agency’s efforts was the promise of adequate follow-through -- and even positive political rhetoric. While those along the new Southwest Corridor saw the results of, as Mayor Ray Flynn declared at the ribbon-cutting of the new line, “a 15-year healing process... that rejoins neighborhoods that were torn apart for more than two decades,” Flynn flatly decried the old El as an “ugly orange wall dividing Boston’s neighborhoods” (Boston Globe, 5/3/1987).<sup>7</sup> Of course, political rhetoric has never been an art form that acknowledges the nuance of everyday life. Still, Flynn’s characterization of the old Orange Line versus the new was overly dramatic; and by ignoring the diverse symbolism of the El, the Mayor reinforced the city’s history of neighborhood and political polarity.

In the years leading up to the old Orange Line’s demolition, there was a heightened sense of urgency among all the actors that lived adjacent to the El. Community leaders and private citizens were concerned about the demographic and economic changes that demolition would bring about, others wondered about what sort of transportation would replace the El, and others weighed the historical importance of the line in the face of the MBTA’s steadfast determination to raze it. In the sections that follow, I will examine how the symbolism of the El changed in three major neighborhoods through which the line passed. In the first two -- the South End and Roxbury -- the historical narrative focuses primarily on the years leading up to demolition, and how growing concern over the future of those neighborhoods distilled sentiment of the Orange Line. The order in which these sections appear is geographical: the final section covers how the El was a symbol of political mobilization in Jamaica Plain, the southernmost neighborhood along Washington Street before the Orange Line terminal. The historical narrative there is largely dated at the turn of the twentieth century.

### *The South End -- The El as Symbol of Access*

The South End -- bordered roughly by Tremont Street to the northwest, Interstate 93 to the east, and Melnea Cass Boulevard to the south, and anchored at the center by Washington Street -- was for many years both defined and enlivened by the elevated. However, the rail line was not the first evidence of the street’s importance. As seen in Figure 25, years before the construction of the elevated, Washington Street had already been a major access point for the downtown as well as the South End: before decades of physical infill landlocked the street, it was the one “ribbon of land” that “linked the Boston peninsula with mainland towns such as Roxbury” (5). In fact, the South End Historical Society summarized that “transportation has always helped define Washington Street,” and, by proxy, the surrounding neighborhood as well (5). In explaining the history of the elevated in the South End, the Historical Society noted that early on, “many people saw the

<sup>7</sup> Hereafter, for eyes’ sake, I will use “BG” interchangeably with “Boston Globe.”



**Figure 25.**

Route of Washington Street El superimposed on 1775 “Boston and Environs” map. Contemporary Washington Street (and the old El) followed the historic route over the isthmus and south to the mainland. Atlantic Avenue El & non-Roxbury branch stations omitted.

impending train as progress that would bring new worshippers to the district’s churches, more shoppers to the stores, and new residents into the neighborhood” (16). Over time, as residents learned to endure the negative effects of the line, it became primarily a physical reminder of the importance of Washington Street (and the South End) to Boston as a whole.

Right up to its demise there was still popular support for the elevated; however, much of it was borne out of the MBTA’s lack of adequate replacement transit strategies. The South End Historical Society rightly noted that the El had served as a “lifeline” for “the district’s working-class residents” (16). Today’s “Silver Line” is the messy product of years of replacement transit planning for the old Orange Line route. Meetings began well before demolition, as early as the late 1970s, as part of the greater Southwest Corridor/El replacement project. At the outset, both light rail as well as bus alternatives were considered; however, by the late-1980s, all rail alternatives had been dropped. After eighty years of reliable rapid transit, local community groups were understandably concerned about the future. For the South End in particular, the prospect of losing this connection was troubling for reasons of access as well as neighborhood identity.

Written responses to an MBTA replacement transit scoping meeting in late 1980, for example, primarily focused on the lack of adequate alternatives to the elevated. Alison Barnet, then Managing Editor of the *South End News*, echoed many of the community’s sentiments by deeming it “most distressing” that “the MBTA [is] considering so few options for Orange Line replacement....” She continues, explaining her personal predicament:

For over 15 years I have depended on the elevated Orange Line for transportation downtown and to Jamaica Plain. The Orange Line, in my opinion, is the best MBTA line, far more reliable than the Red,

the Green or the Blue. Although the elevated makes a lot of noise (and, since the South End News office is on Washington Street underneath it, I know just how much noise it makes), I would much prefer to see the elevated remain intact and in use than see buses attempt to replace it. In no way do I foresee the new Orange Line as fitting my normal transportation needs – it is simply too far away.

Ms. Barnet goes on to explain that the trip to the nearest station (presumably Massachusetts Ave.) is “five or six blocks of potential trouble and entirely out of the question after dark.” She further decries the lack of adequate community involvement in the study, labeling it “disturbing.” Her next paragraph is particularly telling about the difference of opinions between those in favor of demolition, and those opposed: sometimes, it seems, the gratifying image of a Washington Street free of the elevated was more valuable than the services the line offered. “It has been my experience,” Ms. Barnet wrote,

that many of my neighbors in the South End have the following idea about Orange Line replacement: the el is coming down in 1982, they say, and then Washington Street is going to automatically bloom. Property values will go up, ...[and] adequate public transportation will magically come our way....Why should we assume that Washington Street will become commercially (or residentially) attractive? (It didn't happen in Charlestown.) Why should we assume that our area of the city will get the public transportation it needs? Why should we assume that “experts,” whether from Washington or Boston, know more than we do about what is needed and what should be done? And, why should [we] assume that the elevated is coming down, that it has to come down?

Ms. Barnet concludes that the MBTA should only tear down the elevated when a “better system” (her emphasis) was in place. Her argument, as implied above, was driven by safety and reliability concerns. And although the northern part of the South End -- closer to Back Bay and Copley Square -- had already begun to gentrify by the mid-1980s, that influence had yet to bleed towards Washington Street. There were no upper-middle-class populations to celebrate the El, and there were no guarantees that they would ever come. In another response to the MBTA's scoping meeting, Sr. Patricia Keaveny, principal of the Holy Cross Cathedral High School, highlights another important role of the elevated Orange Line. “Each day from September through June,” she wrote, “several hundred Cathedral students use the current Orange Line...Students from Dorchester come both by way of Dudley Station as well as the Red Line transferring at Washington [now Downtown Crossing] Station.” Sr. Keaveny was responsible for a large number of children, and her concerns carried much weight. “Since Cathedral is a Catholic school,” she continued, “our students must take public transit. They have no alternative. Therefore, adequate and frequent replacement service along the current Orange Line route is absolutely essential. This replacement service must be fully functioning before service on the current Orange Line ceases.” Sadly, this was not to be. Not even calls for a stay of demolition were heard. Cheney and Sammarco summarize that

as the new Southwest Corridor...neared completion in the fall of 1986, residents along the Dudley Street-Washington Street section of the elevated requested that the T retain the elevated from downtown as far south as Dudley Station – a plan discussed with local residents in 1971 and 1972 – at least until the new

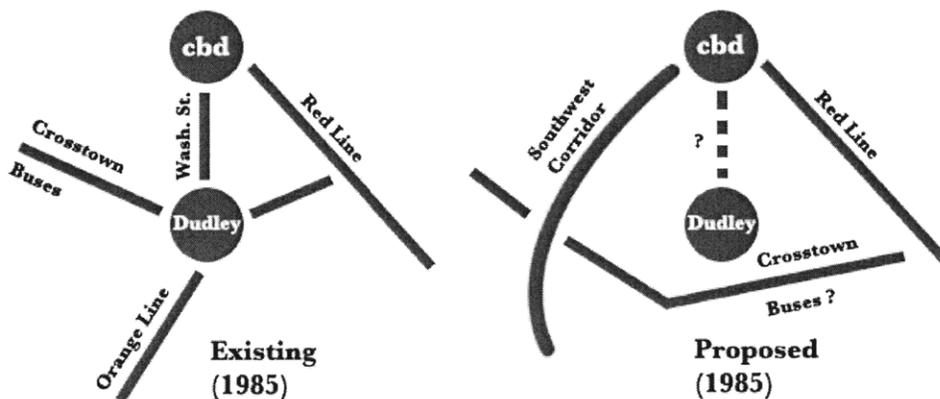
light-rail line, promised as a permanent replacement, could be completed. Claiming that there were not enough cars on hand to operate both the new Southwest Corridor and a shortened elevated line to Dudley Street, the T quickly had 70 spare cars stored at the Wellington Shops scrapped...before the South End civic groups became aware of their existence. (9)

In executing this demonstration of power, the MBTA must have calculated that the public image boost (both locally and nationwide) of demolishing a symbol of blight far outweighed the duty of providing transportation to needy communities. Their inability to comprehensively understand the symbolic implications of the line led to a delay in providing adequate replacement transit, and undermined their role as true public servants.

*Roxbury -- The El as Unifying Agent*

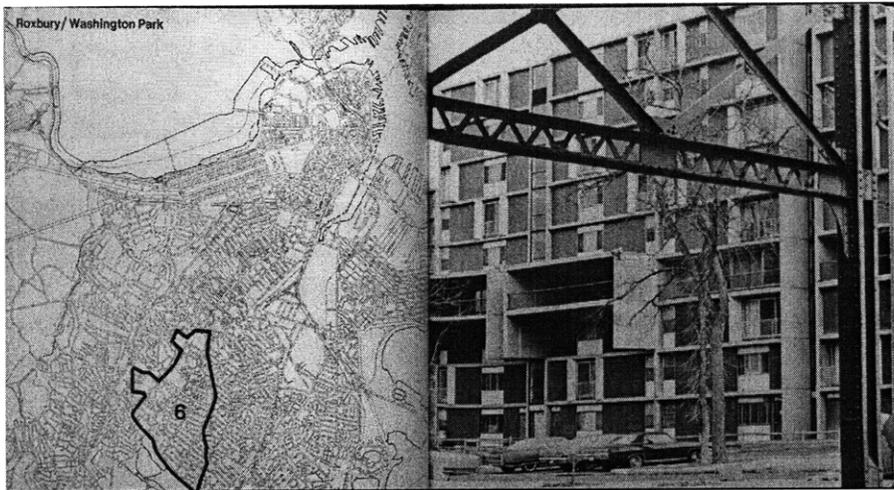
Of course, not only local activists, but community organizations and the City were also concerned about the future economic development of the area after the el's demolition. A January, 1985 report prepared for the Roxbury Action Program by faculty and students at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, entitled Dudley in 2001: After the El...Center for whom? attempted to "make a statement about...who should control a revitalized Dudley area." The report explains that Dudley Square is an important place, as it was "for two centuries the major 'town center' for Roxbury, since World War II, the major center for Boston's Black Community, and, until recently the second densest commercial district in the city (surpassed only by the downtown)" (1-2). Even as residential neighborhoods and commercial centers abutting the Orange Line deteriorated over the years, the elevated line still served as a major catalyst for local businesses. After all, this was *the* route of the Orange Line; and the replacement, by virtue of a farther location from Washington Street, favored a different set of users and clientele. As seen in Figure 26 below, community activists wondered how future public transit patterns would affect access to Dudley Square and Roxbury. Still, the report remains hopeful, acknowledging that

Surrounding Dudley Station is one of the poorest areas in the city and an area where the rate of building abandonment, demolition and arson has been particularly high. Despite this, the area has some thriving small businesses and, given certain development and investment decisions, has undeniable commercial,



**Figure 26.**

1985: Confusion over future access to Dudley Square, in light of slow replacement transit discussions.



**Figure 27.**

The face of Roxbury for some, ca. 1976: steel elevated struts and modern low-cost housing.

social, cultural and architectural potential. (2)

The land use and urban fabric analysis component of the study is useful because it provides a context for the elevated line. “Washington Street serves as a unifying spine for the Dudley area,” the report ascertains, and “the noise and vibration of the El probably account for the mainly vacant residential spaces above the commercial spaces on the ground floor” of abutting structures (11). Despite its effect on immediately adjacent properties, the elevated was heavily used; in 1985, “Dudley Station serve[d] as a major transfer point between buses and rapid transit.” The report also comments on the surrounding communities’ reliance on transit -- “Roxbury and North Dorchester have the lowest ratio of automobile ownership to population in the city..” (11). Concisely, both residents and community groups were afraid that the line’s removal would not only hurt those who depended on it for fast and efficient transportation (and potential customers); but also would cause rents along Washington Street and adjacent neighborhoods to rise, forcing out the current, relatively immobile, population.

Still, there was a thread of knowledge that the line was, despite its detriments and annoyances, a piece of history. In Roxbury in particular, the line was both a symbol of current community solidarity, and a record of the city’s diverse historic legacy. After all, it was the last remaining portion of Boston’s old Main Line Elevated, and as such, one of the longest continually operating piece of infrastructure in the city. Even as the MBTA demolished the northern portion of the elevated in Charlestown, Cheney and Sammarco note, in 1975 the Washington Street elevated “was rehabilitated and repainted in an attractive blue-and-orange color scheme” (9). When news of this project reached the Museum of Afro-American History of Roxbury, Rollsign reported in March/April of 1976, “the director...contacted the MBTA...to find out if citizens who use the line and who seek pride in the community could be involved.” The result was that Dudley Station received “a free artistic touch-up by some young Boston artists” with the theme, “What is this Station?” Although only some parts of the station were targeted, the MBTA admitted “enthusiasm” about the project’s “uninhibited, bold design, and vivid color schemes” (4).

One dissenting voice was to rise above the others, offering ideas for rethinking the future of elevated lines present and future. This was Byron Rushing, at the time of the replacement study meeting the President of the Museum of Afro American History, and currently a Massachusetts

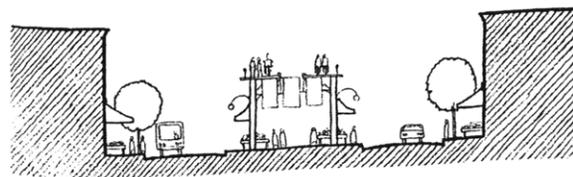
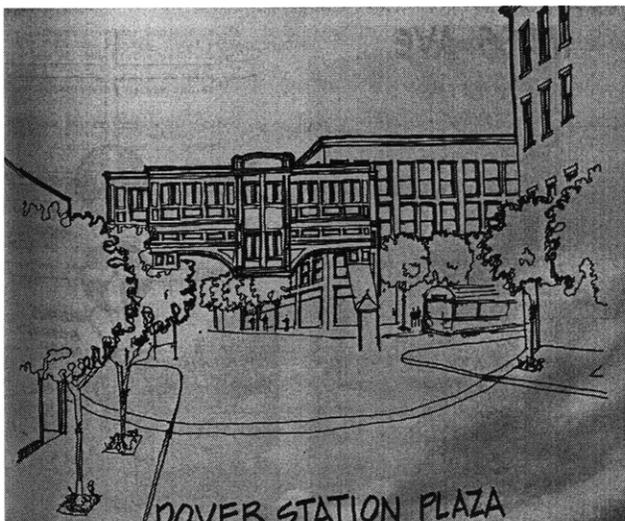
State Representative from Roxbury. In his response to the December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1980, presentation, Mr. Rushing questioned the assumptions that drove the Replacement/Transit Improvement study. Mr. Rushing proposed that the second phase of the study carry “an assumption that the Washington Street elevated structure is an historic structure.” He continued, explaining that

Originally, most concerned residents and planners assumed that the “el” should be demolished. In the past few years that opinion has been modified by many. The major pollution caused by the “el” is noise pollution. When the Orange Line vehicles are relocated the noise will be gone. Need the structure go too?

Mr. Rushing’s dedication to the line as an historic structure extended to contemplations of its future. Indeed, he wrote, “the elevated structure may have useful reuses...-- anything from a bikeway to the structure for a mall to a brightly painted whimsical four-mile sculpture...” He echoed these sentiments in the 1987 WGBH news report on the imminent demolition of the line. In it, State Representative Rushing declared the line to be not only a symbol of neighborhood character (“funkiness”), but also “a fantastic piece of sculpture,” not unlike “the Eiffel Tower on its side.” He summarized his feelings about the line’s significance with a hypothetical scenario:

If you didn’t have it, go to an artist and say, “We would like to figure out a way to connect three or four neighborhoods in Boston. We want an artistic statement that would sort of just hold these neighborhoods together, that in itself is neutral, that doesn’t really speak to the Chinese or black people or rich people or poor people, but will hold everybody together.” Now, someone’s going to come along and do that, you know, ten years from now, and they’re going to sit around, they’re going to draw it up and it’s going to look like the El.

Interestingly, a contemporary report compiled by the Urban Planning and Design Committee of the American Institute of Architects did include visionary future uses of the elevated structure, though not to the same degree as Mr. Rushing (e.g., a line-long bikeway). The “Urban Design Assistance Teams” report for the South End and Lower Roxbury encouraged using the more architecturally distinct components of the line for gateways and cultural activities (Figures 28



**THE BIG TOP**  
**Figures 28 & 29.**

The Urban Design Assistance Teams’ suggestions for possible future uses of the El, 1980.

& 29). “We propose that the Dover Station be retained after the Orange Line ceases to operate,” they suggested. “This dual-level station...could provide two levels of small shops, possibly offering crafts and other goods for visitors” (39). The idea at Dover was to preserve a natural “gateway” structure, as well as use its universality as a local landmark to “preserve and foster appreciation for the unique multinational heritage of the South End” (40). The design teams also proposed an innovative reuse of the trackway near Dover Street and Massachusetts Avenue -- a linear asset called “The Big Top.” Echoing Byron Rushing, the report writers acknowledge that “[m]any persons advocate the total removal of the elevated structure when the Orange Line is eliminated [sic],” but propose “that the community take a closer look,” for “[t]here are several reasons for considering leaving all or parts of the structure intact” (61). “The Big Top” would have created a linear “street market” under the trackway, in a newly constructed median. The report suggests that “the top of the structure might even be used as a commuter bikeway or jogging track” (61). The report turned out, in practice, to be nothing more than a charette; but it shows that architects and urban designers realized the potential of adapting the elevated to more friendly and diverse uses.

The MBTA, too, at the outset of its demolition of the elevated, had planned to salvage both Dover and Dudley stations. On June 26th, 1987, the Boston Globe’s “Ask the Globe” feature responded to a question about the scrapping of the line. “The inbound platform of Dudley station and the entire Dover station have been given National Landmark status,” the response read. “Thus they will be preserved, says MBTA spokesman Vincente Carbona. They will be dismantled but later reassembled and put to new use. The Dudley facility, for example, may become part of a bus turnaround area, a light-rail facility or a trackless trolley station. The Dover station will be preserved pretty much as it is. There is also a copper-covered signal bungalow outside Dudley station that will be preserved and relocated.” Eventually, the Dudley inbound platform roof and the “bungalow,” Tower C, were renovated and reused as part of the Dudley bus transfer station.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The Dudley renovation project, begun in 1989, posed its own problems and neighborhood concerns were high during its planning. The *Globe* reported on August 15th of that year that “Dudley merchants are mainly worried that...its construction, scheduled to take 21 months...would play havoc with business by worsening the parking situation and discouraging shoppers from the area.” The MBTA’s motivations were

### Figures 30 & 31.

Rehabilitation of Dudley Station. As a rapid transit station ca. 1975 at left & as a bus hub ca. 2001, at right.



Seen in Figure 31, it now serves as the Silver Line's southern terminal. Dover station appears to have been wholly demolished.

### *Jamaica Plain -- Political Legacy Tied to the El*

In Jamaica Plain, through which Washington Street and the Orange Line passed on their way to Egleston Square and Forest Hills, the elevated line was a constant reminder of the successes and failures of local political mobilization. At the turn of the twentieth century, the line was primarily a symbol of oppression and, to a turn-of-the-century local reform group,<sup>9</sup> “a greedy monopoly, unconcerned with the common good” (Connolly, 52). The Boston 200 historical pamphlet on Jamaica Plain notes the efforts of another local progressive group, the Jamaica Plain Citizens Association (JPCA). “Hardly anyone who lived in Jamaica Plain wanted an overhead train,” the history reads, “and some residents...proposed to put it underground, like Stony Brook” (15-16). The pamphlet offers a quotation from the JPCA's Mr. Joseph J. Leonard in 1903:

“For the people along Washington Street to advocate an elevated would be suicidal to their own welfare. It is true, some may say, that ample compensation will be made in money damages, but money damages cannot remedy the wound inflicted on an entire community. You may insert the knife and apply a little anesthetic in the way of money damages but the wound remains.” (15-16)

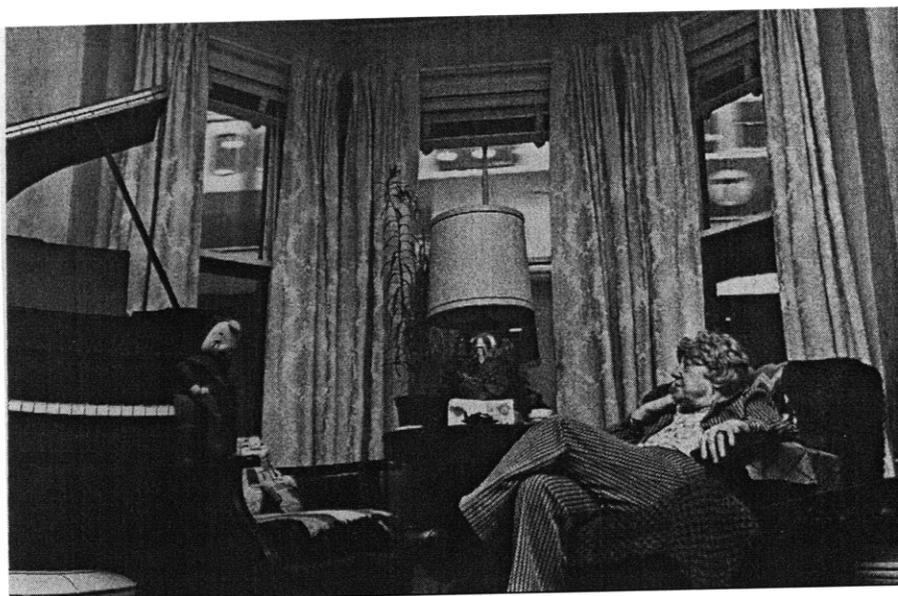
As in Charlestown, Jamaica Plain's early opposition to the elevated brought together people of many different backgrounds, professions, and ideologies. Both Democrats and Republicans, as well as “those who were directly economically interested, such as real estate agents and property owners, and those who were not property owners” worked to stave off the line's construction (von Hoffman 198). The JPCA attempted to use these united sentiments to stop the extension of the elevated.

James Connolly, in his book about Boston's “Ethnic Progressivism” in the early twentieth century, writes that the JPCA set itself up in the early 1900s and became “the voice” of Jamaica Plain” (52), despite comprising primarily middle-class members (to the neighborhood's largely working-class base). Still, the elevated railroad would affect not only Washington Street, but the perception of the neighborhood as a whole, and so the Boston Elevated Railway Company became the JPCA's first major target. Connolly explains that the El (Company) “had been implicated in several highly publicized bribery scandals, and its cofounder, Henry Whitney, had a notorious reputation as an inside operation at the Massachusetts State House. His ties to financier J.P. Morgan and to state and local Democratic Party officials strengthened the public image of the El as a politically powerful economic interest” (52). Thus, coupled with the JPCA's narrative of tackling “the far reaching influence of the big corporations” (53), the elevated rail structure at question came to represent the looming overreach of the State, the City, and vested commercial

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valiant, of course; spokesman Peter A. Diamond held that the renovation would help to reverse the “negative image of the neighborhood.” Even after the demolition of the rest of the line, local business owner Charles Calvey said that the area in 1989 was a “skeleton of what it once was.” It is interesting to note that even renovating the final vestige of the elevated line inspired a heated debate, and further concerns over the economic and perceived health of the neighborhood.

9 The Public Franchise League



**Figure 32.**

Mrs. M, a Jamaica Plain abutter of the Orange Line, circa 1981.

interests. The City Aldermen on the committee overseeing the elevated expansion ultimately voted in favor of the line, all but confirming the elevated's new significance. Summarizing the meeting, von Hoffman writes,

Admitting that the elevated railway's presence was undoubtedly 'a serious detriment,' the aldermen decided that 'the interests of the few much be sacrificed for the general good.' The extension would benefit the large population south of Forest Hills and 'would open up for development a large territory for residential and other purposes which has been neglected in the past.'

While the JPCA failed to halt the Forest Hills extension of the elevated railway, Connolly notes, they did secure the construction of a station for Jamaica Plain (Green Street); omitting a Jamaica Plain station -- part of the original plan -- would effectively have "deny[ed] local residents the benefit of the new line while inflicting on them the noise, dirt, and disruption of the elevated tracks" (52).

Later, the elevated continued to present blight upon Jamaica Plain, and took on shades of political incompetence in addition to oppression. Local resident R.M. (name withheld) was interviewed in the early 1980s for a compilation on the experience of living in Jamaica Plain, A Sense of Place. A large photograph facing her interview notes shows Mrs. M. sitting comfortably in her living room, looking resigned as an Orange Line train travels in a blur outside her bay window (Figure 32). Up to the date of the interview, she'd lived under the elevated for thirty-three years, and was uncertain about the future of the neighborhood. "I think I'm too old to pick up now," she said. "If they're going to tear down the elevated structure that we put up with for years I hope we reap the benefit of it now, when the elevated does come down. For a joke we always said we live in the shadow of the El, which is true." She, like others in Roxbury to the north, was concerned about future City influence -- "I suppose [my] house will be taken out," she said, presumably in favor of more profitable development. Still, in 1981, "They [had] promised us thirty-three years ago they were going to take the elevated structure down and now it's another five years before they

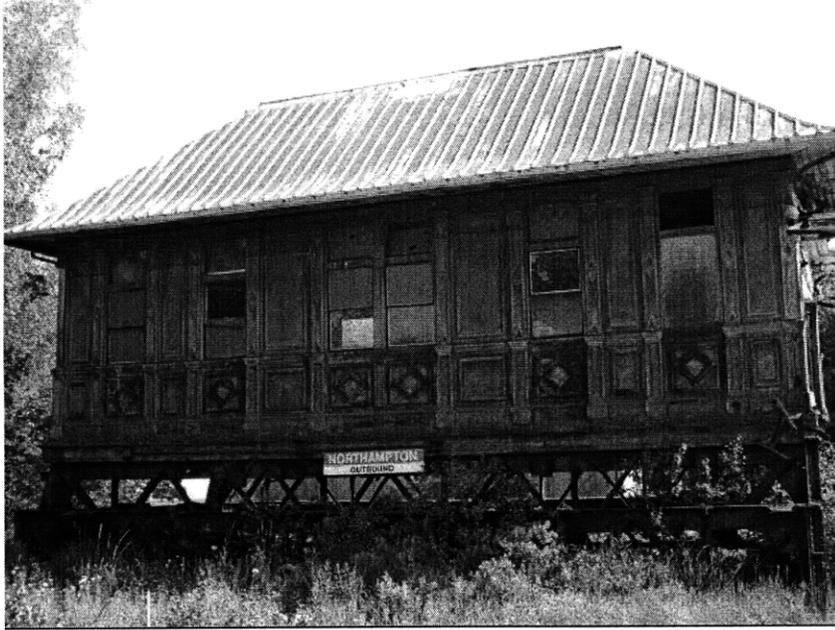
start it. And that will be thirty-eight years. So who knows?" (18). Thankfully, by 1981 work had indeed begun on the line's replacement to the west. But the line, in addition to being noisy and deteriorated, was also a symbol of broken promises.

The Boston 200 report notes more contemporary intrusions into the urban fabric of Jamaica Plain, most notably the demolition in preparation for the Southwest Corridor (and Interstate 95). Whereas opponents to the expressway had support from "experts," "in the fight against the Washington Street elevated there was no outside help, and Jamaica Plain saw the monstrous girders and tracks go up one of its most important streets" (16-17). If the neighborhood groups had failed to keep Washington Street open to the air, then they had learned their lesson: the Interstate 95 project, thankfully, was halted by an unprecedented uproar of community political will.

### **The Last Days: Eulogy and the Commodification of History**

The last days of the Washington Street El, and the first days of it as an abandoned steel structure, were marked by *ad hoc* attempts to codify and preserve the memory of the line. Even Egleston station, deemed unworthy of historic preservation or National Landmark status, attracted local attention -- in a fashion similar to efforts at Thompson Square in Charlestown -- in the months following the line's closure. According to an article in the August 10th, 1987 Boston Business Journal, Asterios Politis, an area developer and owner of an adjacent restaurant, "convinced the MBTA to spare a 120-foot span of the track at Egleston Square long enough for him to promote the idea of planting a restaurant on top of the old El." Politis, with perhaps a tinge of idealism, echoed Byron Rushing in his aims. The restaurant would have "serve[d] up a variety of foods to satisfy the tastes of the ethnically diverse populations of the area and the adjacent neighborhoods of Jamaica Plain and Roxbury," and, were his more grand plans given the green-light, to complement a larger development including "low-income housing, a park and retail space." Ultimately, it is clear that his plans never got off the ground, so to speak; but his fervor and desire to, in his words, provide the neighborhood with "something historic that will never be forgotten," were bold. Again, to some developers the line deserved to be immortalized, albeit with some kind of themed activity beyond simple transportation.

The one station that was preserved was Northampton; and its future was also hotly debated between three prospective owners, each representing a community that looked to canonize the elevated as part of their historical narrative. Once again, the Boston Globe captured the late 1988 controversy. Then, "in spite of its broken windows, missing ornaments and 87 years of grime on its once-burnished copper exterior, the old Northampton station [was] again in demand." The sight was striking -- with its north and south connecting tracks, wooden platform, and canopy all gone, the headhouse was "an orphan balanced in midair over Washington Street between Massachusetts Avenue and Northampton Street." The three organizations vying for the station building were the Seashore Trolley Museum, in Kennebunkport, Maine (representing the interests of the regional transit enthusiast community); the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management (representing the Roxbury historical interest); and the Boston Center for the Arts (or BCA, representing the South End historical interest). The Department of Environmental Management planned to use the headhouse in the planned Roxbury Heritage Park -- the park's chief planner, Thelma Watson, explained that "our overall presentation has to do with the history of Roxbury, and the Elevated certainly played an important part in that history..." The South End Landmark



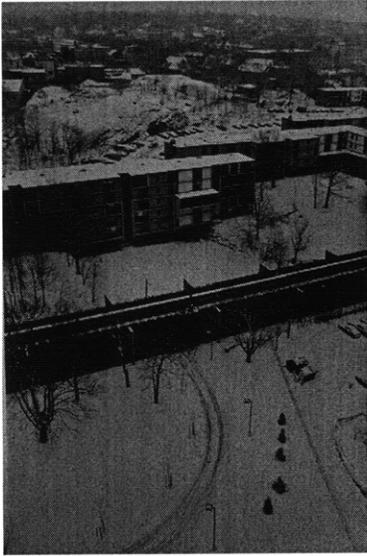
**Figure 33.**

Northampton today, at the Seashore Trolley Museum in Kennebunkport, Maine.

District Commission commented on the BCA's bid: according to the Globe, they "contend[ed] that the station is in the South End and should 'stay as close as possible' to its community." In the end, the Seashore Trolley Museum won the battle; unfortunately, to this day the station headhouse sits ashambles amid a gravel parking lot and the brush of lower Maine (Figure 33).

The battle for Northampton station serves as a suitable introduction to attempts to catalogue, and then *remember* the line, for better or for worse, whether in official stead or unofficially among the local populace. In the line's final years, the MBTA partnered with local nonprofit UrbanArts to create a project called "The Artist's Lens: A Focus on Relocation," which according to its unpublished book "paired professional artist/photographers with young photography students from the Humphrey Occupational Resource Center in Roxbury in an effort to document the final days of Boston's elevated Orange Line..." Many photographers were enlisted to the project, and each had their own interpretation of the assignment. David Akiba, for example, focused mainly on the elevated structures and stations themselves and how they fit into the greater urban fabric, occasionally capturing riders and patrons waiting on the platforms, high above the city. Melissa Shook, alternatively, turned her attention to the Cathedral Housing Project, located in the South End on Washington Street, and its inhabitants living in view of the elevated. In general, the effect was striking: all photographers captured everyday moments of Roxbury culture -- some solemn, like a mother holding a child in her arms with another to her right looking forlorn under the el; some joyous, like two women erupting in praise at a church; and some universally familiar, like a group of five children sitting on a stoop, three transit workers at Egleston station, or a dapper businessman at Dudley station.

In a late 1986 Globe article, reporter Joanne Ball followed photographer John Leuders-Booth and student Stacey Woodberry on one of their days photographing around Dudley Square. For these two, impromptu interviews were part of the process. The article notes that though the "areas [through which the elevated passed] are bleak, the people of the Orange Line -- those who ride it and those, like Joe Cohen [(one interviewee)], who operate in its shadows -- appear rich in



**Figures 34 & 35.**

Two of local photographer David Akiba's additions to the MBTA/UrbanArts Orange Line Project. At left, a winter scene of the line between Egleston and Dudley, ca. 1986; at right, "Dudley Station 86," 1986.

individuality and spirit." Ball interviewed fellow photographer and project director Linda Swartz, who summarized "The Artist's Lens" as an attempt to capture the daily life around and on the elevated. "I was very interested in having a comprehensive record of this particular place at this particular time," Swartz stated. "Thirty years from now people are going to want to know how all this looked." At the time of writing, the project archives sit in the Boston Public Library's deep stacks. There is a hope that the photographs can be redisplayed in 2012, in time for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Orange Line's demolition and relocation. Although the project accomplished its goals -- the photographs are stunning not only from an aesthetic perspective, but also for their frank portrayal of life under, on, and in the neighborhoods abutting the elevated -- the planning and execution nevertheless exhibits a growing rift in the public comprehension and memory of the line. At the time of the project, both Swartz and Leuders-Booth were outsiders: Swartz was from Cambridge, and her personal interest in the line stemmed from its intrinsic artistic and aesthetic beauty: "I loved the way it looked -- the way the sun filtered through the tracks on Washington Street..." Similarly, Leuders-Booth, despite having a family connection to the line's construction, admitted that "the architecture in the stations is beautiful. I even love the sound of it, but I don't have to live with it. I'm not trying to sleep under it when it goes by at 2 a.m." Roxbury resident and apprentice photographer Woodberry provided a counterpoint, if youthful, perspective on Dudley Station, musing that it "sure will look a lot different without that train running through there. A lot quieter, too. And not so many people hanging out."

In the years following the Orange Line's relocation -- indeed, even in the weeks right before its closure -- members of social networks that were *distant* from the intrinsically negative effects of the elevated began to wax nostalgic about the line's place in (personal and neighborhood) history. This is not a negative trend by any means; in fact, it is natural -- the disappearance of such a profound piece of the established urban fabric is bound to inspire feelings of loss, whether or not

perceived as such. Yet, at least in newspaper stories contemporary with the relocation of the line, a physical distance trend is noticeable:

- “‘Yeah, I’ll miss it. I’ll miss riding on the El,’ said Ronnie Harris, 31, of Hyde Park...I remember when I was 7, riding in town with my mother, just riding and seeing everything you can see.”  
(Boston Globe, May 2, 1987)

- “‘This is kind of like a funeral, like saying goodbye to something you loved,’ said Stephen O’Brien, who grew up in Roslindale. ‘There are so many memories here.’” (Associated Press, May 1, 1987)

With elevated railways, distance is not always lateral; often, it is vertical. Simply put, the view from above is much more enjoyable than the one from below. For locals, it was generally this top-side view that inspired positive memories of the line. The Globe offered a handy summary of this phenomenon:

The elevated was noisy, it was ugly, it made Washington Street a dark and bleak place, riders admitted. But from way up high, you could see the city pass by. North of Dudley, over Melnea Cass Boulevard, the elevated line offered a quick glimpse of Boston Harbor on a clear day. (May 2, 1987)

Even the sounds of the elevated -- the screeches and yelps of the metal wheels on tight curves -- became proprietary memories, even ones to be cherished. Again, the Globe, May 2, 1987: “‘My favorite memory of the Orange Line? Riding into Dudley Station -- the ‘birdhouse,’ the squeal when you come into Dudley,’ said Laverne Jenkins, 35, of Roxbury. As it banked the sharp curve, the train leaned over so far that, if you pressed your face up the window, you couldn’t see any tracks, just Warren Street and the cars below.” Her friend, 22-year-old and Roxbury resident Greg Cameron, had second thoughts about life without the signature sound. “It’s a bad sound to hear, but now that you know you’re not going to hear it, well...It’ll be like moving to the country, getting used to that quietness...” (BG, 5/2/87) Of course, for ardent supporters of the line’s demolition, the “silence” was a “gift” (BG, 5/4/87). Those at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, for example, savored the quiet. Then-Cardinal Bernard F. Law, according to the Globe,

did not have to face his loudest competitor: the elevated Orange Line that used to rumble and roar as it tore by on Washington Street. Perhaps no one is more pleased than Cardinal Law, who was forced to pause -- often -- in mid-homily, waiting for the clack-and-clatter to subside.

The passing of the El also, whether seriously or not, forced some residents to invest in alarm clocks. Others had simply learned to tune the noise out. Overall, the article assured the general public that the noise was now gone (that is, of course, until demolition), and most residents and business owners adjacent to the line were pleased by this development.

At the time of the Washington Street elevated’s closure, newspaper articles and documentary news pieces compressed the line’s history down into pithy paragraphs, single statements, and contemporary interviews. It was nearly impossible, especially on the final revenue trip (12.24 am, May 2, 1987, documented in BG “Last Riders Save Tokens of El”), to avoid the weight of the past.



**Figure 36.**

Egleston Center, ca. 2008. The new community shopping complex echoes the old elevated structure in a steel strut-supported atrium.

That night, train cars were packed with “cameras, videocassette recorders or just a dose of urban nostalgia,” the *Globe* lyrically noted.

In the recent past, real estate development at various points along the old Washington Street elevated route have made a conscious effort, decades on, to resuscitate the architectural heritage of the line. At Egleston, Manuel Martinez Hernandez explains, a new neighborhood shopping center called Egleston Center

grew out of a community planning process that had established a vision and related design guidelines for the MBTA site. Urban Edge’s building design responded to the planning vision and to the character of the area. The building combined concrete, glass, and a steel atrium that resembled the former train station” (91).

Although Washington Street is free to light and air, and development interest surged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Egleston Center still reaches out to a troubled time, reclaiming the elevated’s architecture as a new symbol of neighborhood unity and progress (Figure 36).

In reviewing the attempts of the community and the MBTA to remember the line, it becomes clear that there was no official step early in the planning process that attempted to document the symbolic importance of the elevated. Official art projects and historical preservation attempts arose in the last few years, and the last few days, respectively, of the old Orange Line. As a result, protracted legal battles like the one over Northampton Station resulted in only moderate victories for those who thought the line had historic value. The UrbanArts/MBTA “Focus on Relocation” project photographs now sit in the archival stacks of the Boston Public Library, awaiting a possible 2012 (25th Anniversary) showing and an uncertain future. Thankfully, the Silver Line’s decorative kiosks sited along Washington Street manage to remember the line (and adjacent neighborhood) history through historic photographs pressed onto the enamel surfaces. Ultimately, Boston lacked a running dialogue that could have catalogued and codified differing opinions of the line’s collective and individual meanings. Attempts at historic preservation--as well as replacement transit strategies--were untimely and ad hoc, and lacked a cohesive and collaborative narrative. However, technology has reignited the fire.

## History Online: The El is Dead! Long Live the El!

Contemporary memory of the Boston elevated lines (or more nostalgic rewritings of memory) can be found in online message board postings and YouTube video comments. Granted, some of these discussions occur on transit enthusiast websites, where there appears to be tremendous support for rail rapid transit in particular -- and, in Boston, for the old El. Although this demographic is small and relatively homogenous, analyzing the way online communities have come to think of the Orange Line is a step towards understanding how we perceive cities: in fact, as the El held multiple levels of meaning for residents along the line -- e.g., oppressor, business provider, connector -- our perception of the city as a whole is also based on a history of combined experience and image. For the online community at least, the Old Orange Line's history is always changing, especially as technology allows us to see it once again.

The availability of videos once difficult to share on a large scale not only opens up the Old Orange Line to worldwide "riding," but also allows for a diversity of opinions that continue to twist and reconsider the line's place in history. Accompanying a film on YouTube entitled "Outbound Boston Orange Line on the El"<sup>10</sup> is a myriad of user-added comments ranging from personal memories to alternate histories and downright ire. User edisonoside remarks that "It sure was a scenic ride...The newer line is boring with NOTHING to see but cemented walls." Echoing many others, user fletchneck writes that the video "brings back memories of my youth." Many of the comments follow user Wehategod's suggestion that "Boston should have kept the EL," but not solely because "it looked aw[e]some." Indeed, accompanying similar videos are thinly-veiled comments about the lack of adequate service to Dudley Square and other areas the elevated served. In response to Wehategod, user DarkChildDiva writes that the MBTA "could have still had [the Orange Line] run on the southwest corridor and on Washington Street. It would have been bet[t]er that way bec[au]se the trains are real crowded now." Another commenter, Cocoabrothaa, "remember[s] taking the train from Dudley Station," whence "the EL would get to downtown Boston in NO time."

The comments also accentuate the effects of distance in shaping peoples' opinions of the line. (Of course, online forums themselves are unique in that distance is no longer a hindrance to dialogue.) Regarding recently posted videos of the El, temporal distance (i.e., the passage of time) has already compounded physical distance; thus, most of the comments offer either positive memories of riding the line, or suggestions of alternate scenarios that ignore any associated negative consequences. Although there are relatively few total comments, it is worthy of note that none of the users who post positive memories of the line openly admit to having lived adjacent to it. Still, a few users provide dissenting opinions, reminding others what the El was like at street level. 62volvo1800 perceptively notes that "Nostalgia is certainly tempting when screening these videos, but I remember this eyesore. The El was noisy, dirty, unreliable, and from what many motormen told me at the time, unsafe. Drivers used to complain about rivets, bolts, and other pieces of metal falling onto their cars. And those of use who remember the Charlestown El might recall just how ugly that was." PKingman, who posted the video "Last Revenue Train Inbound on Boston's Elevated Orange Line,"<sup>11</sup> adds that "the elevated structure did become a blight upon the neighborhoods that it ran thru. It blocked out the sun for everything below." "Things are prettier

10 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXoK2weC-g>

11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10fEHWH4HV0>

[now],” he writes.

Because many of the YouTube commenters are old enough to remember the El, the videos are not introductions to the Old Orange Line, but reminders and reintroductions. Although the Old Orange Line’s context -- the Washington Street corridor -- has changed drastically since 1987, the videos immortalize the past. They have also reawakened dormant memories and diverse opinions. For many, the line has returned as a time-delayed relic, and the films primarily serve as canvases and catalysts for growing nostalgia. Transit enthusiast films of Boston’s subway lines, now widely available on DVD, encapsulate this point to a garish degree: in one such compilation, clips of Boston’s then-gritty elevated lines shot in the 1960s and 1970s are accompanied by whimsical, 1950s-style elevator music.<sup>12</sup>

Memory is malleable. The YouTube videos of the Old Orange Line and their associated comment sections, as well as online message boards devoted to amateur MBTA historians and enthusiasts<sup>13</sup>, enable new community reaction to the elevated, far distanced from the shadow and noise. The videos in particular act as virtual “historic sites” where, as Lowenthal explains, the nostalgic go “to share recall of the familiar,” their “communal recollection enhancing persona reminiscence” (8). In these communities, as in memories, the elevated can be forever personal. Here, beyond the technical details that enrapt many transit enthusiasts, the el is a shape-shifting symbol of fraternity.

### **Conclusion: The El as Neighborhood Symbol**

Out of the three case studies covered in this report, Boston is unique in that it has demolished all of its elevated lines. They now exist on paper, computer and television screens, or solely in memory. Vestiges remain, but as disparate shadows: copper-sheathed Dudley Station is now bus-only, for example, and the Northampton station head-house sits idle amid gravel and weeds in downstate Maine. Memory is what ties Boston’s elevated legacy together, whether for better or for worse. As transit enthusiast put it, “Boston lost part of its identity when [the elevated] went.... now only Chicago, New York and Philly are EL towns.... we have dropped off the map” (aline1969, 3/13/07).<sup>14</sup>

In Boston’s historically diverse and political neighborhoods, perceptions of the El were fueled by distrust and dissatisfaction: in Charlestown, residents fearful of Urban Renewal blamed much of the community’s problems on the elevated, which could be demolished and replaced without much impact on the ‘town’s existing urban fabric. In Roxbury, efforts to salvage the Washington Street Elevated were heightened by uncertainty over adequate replacement transit. In Chinatown, however, the El was a nuisance but a backbone of the community and an integral part of that neighborhood’s history. The history and development of the line’s collective memory is an interesting part of the puzzle: for some, the legacy was stronger without the physical reminder of the line; whereas for others, the El’s remains became commodities of architectural merit. Finally, although the Main Line Elevated has been gone for nearly twenty-five years, new communities that have sprung up online interpret the line as a symbol of a lost Boston, and of collective identity. In Boston, the elevated railway was so many things to so many people; it is uncertain whether its

12 Frank Miklos, *Boston Memories*, 2007, at 41:00

13 Archboston.org/community; Railroad.net “MBTA Rail Operations” Forum.

14 “Eulogy for the North Station EL, p. 2. “MBTA Rail Operations” Forum.

replacement, the Southwest Corridor, will come to embody such a unique and diverse set of ideas, hopes, and memories.

In Boston, the negative environmental effects of the elevated ultimately condemned the line to history. Early, but guarded, support for the line quickly became city-wide disdain. Along the Waterfront, failing industry prompted a loss of ridership, and its abandonment was merely a product of obsolescence. In Charlestown, citizens angered by a loss of control over the direction of their neighborhood banded together in opposition to the line -- for them, it was a symbol of decline. As the MBTA geared up to provide increased service to newer growing communities to the north and west of the fading Charlestown, the el was demolished. Along Washington Street, the stakes were higher: in each major neighborhood along the line, from the South End to Roxbury and Jamaica Plain, the El had been something unique. Though the negative effects were the same -- noise, shadow and falling land values, in these three neighborhoods, the Orange Line was respectively a symbol of access, a backbone of community identity, and a reminder of popular political mobilization. Finally, the MBTA pressed ahead with its Southwest Corridor relocation project with little acknowledgement of the el's neighborhood importance. In the process, it marginalized the needs and proposals of the old Orange Line commuters and adjacent community groups, while garnering and cultivating tremendous community collaboration from communities along the new line. Furthermore, its polarized project narrative -- that the elevated was simply an "ugly orange wall dividing" Boston's neighborhoods -- did little to assure the South End, Roxbury and Jamaica Plain of adequate future service. In the end, Boston's elevated lines live on in collective memory; due to the generally negative contemporary political narrative and *ad hoc* El improvements and efforts to memorialize the line, unaddressed questions still linger of what could -- or should -- have been.

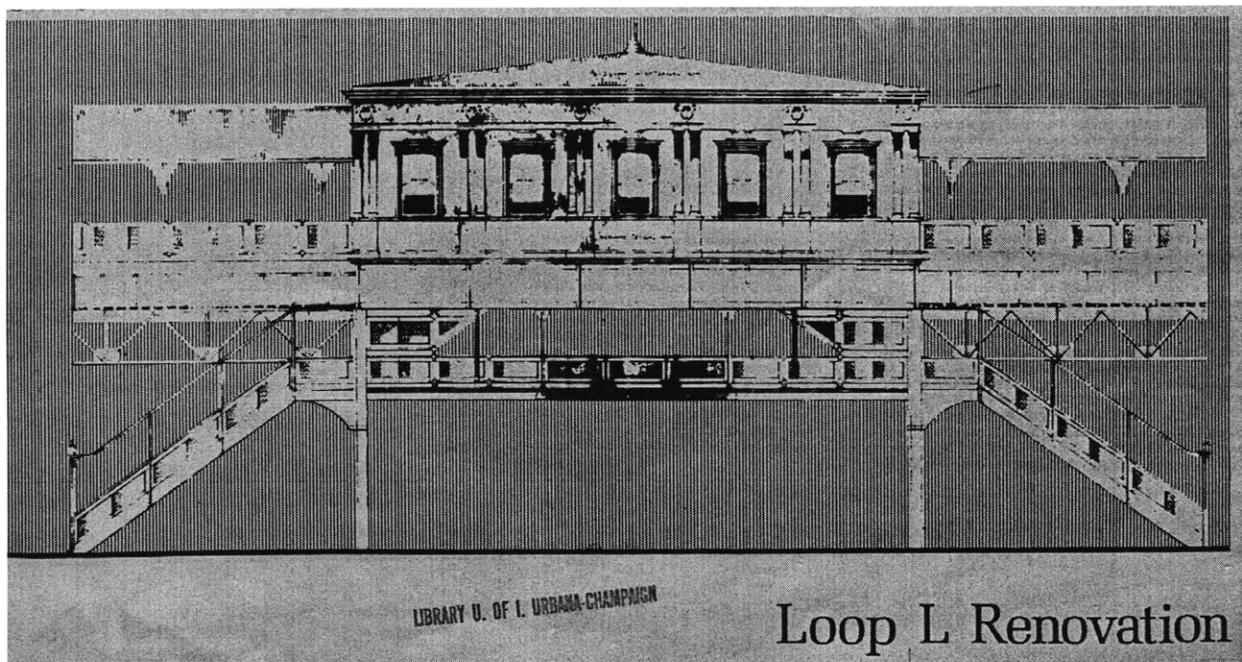
3.

Chicago:  
Reclaiming An Image

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“The L is such a unique feature of Chicago. Other cities have elevated systems, but we’re the one known for it.”

Brian Goeken,  
Deputy Commissioner  
of the Commission on  
Chicago Landmarks, in  
The Baltimore Sun,  
April 18, 2001.



**Figure 37.**

Weese & Associates' Loop Renovation Plan, 1979.

## Introduction

As one of the largest and youngest major cities in the United States, Chicago's reputation has been built by industry and technology. For years it was a railroad town, the center for agriculture trading and cattle-raising, and the site of the ornate bellwether for City Beautiful planning schemes, the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Over the course of its history, Chicago has had to juggle its outside image as a cohesive symbol with its local identity as collection of fragmented neighborhoods, ethnic groups, and political parties. One of its best-known landmarks is its mostly-elevated transportation system, the Chicago 'L.' From its promising beginnings in the original South Side Alley-L that linked the downtown (Loop) with Jackson Park and the Columbian Exposition, the L now stretches far to the South, West, and North of the Loop. Although the lines are now color-coded and managed by a semi-governmental agency, the Chicago Transit Authority, they all began as separate neighborhood routes, constructed by private companies. No matter which neighborhoods they served, the elevateds were often influencers of economic development and shifts in land use; but, as in Philadelphia and Boston, over time they gained different meanings in different communities. In the years since consolidation of the various routes, the Loop L has withstood many calls for its removal, and has become a landmark. Recently, reconstruction of some of the lines has led to calls for reinvestment in distressed abutting communities by constructing transit-oriented-developments along the lines. In Chicago, we shall see how the L has come to be both a local and a city-wide asset, as well as a national beacon of the city's history, diversity, and collective identity.

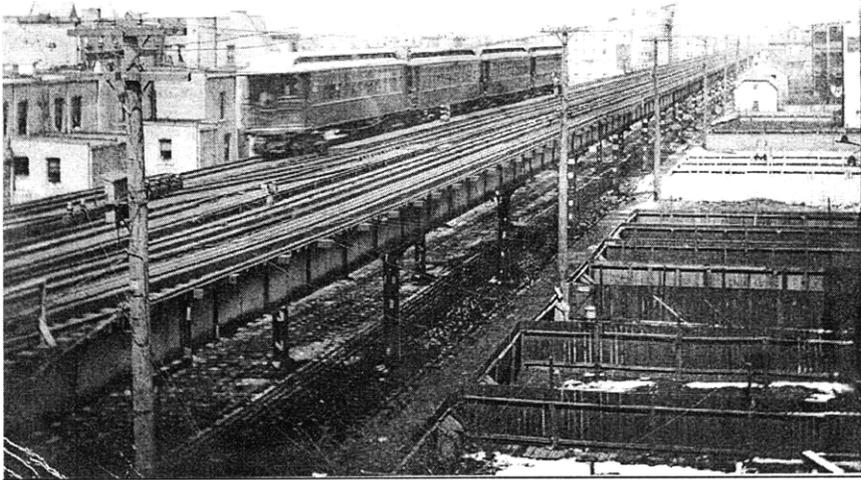
This chapter is placed as my second case study because Chicago, like Boston, has a richly diverse -- and tense -- historical transportation legacy. Unlike Boston, however, Chicago's L has withstood line and station closings; and in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, when Boston abandoned and demolished its Els, Chicago decided to reclaim their history as part of the City's pioneering legacy. In this chapter, after laying down a general historical, architectural, and contemporary context, I shall focus on two lines in particular to evaluate location-specific development history and the evolution of local symbolism. These will be the Green Line (Lake Street to Jackson Park/Englewood) and the Brown Line (Loop to Ravenswood). It is worthy to note that my historical and architectural overview of Chicago's extensive L system will not be comprehensive. Nor will it resemble perfectly the Boston and Philadelphia chapters. The discussion of the Loop will illuminate why Chicago is an interesting case study: how from complex beginnings and recent threats an elevated railway becomes emblematic of the city it serves.<sup>15</sup>

## The L in Context

Like in any major American city, the history of transportation in the Chicago area is storied and complex. Chicagoans first used omnibuses, horsecars, and then streetcars to travel among neighborhood destinations, and increasingly between the city's outskirts and the downtown. Faster and more technologically-advanced transportation came with a cost: dominant ownership, corrupt business practices, and public disdain. Charles Tyson Yerkes, now infamous in the planning and transportation spheres for his 'straphangers pay the dividends' comment (and in the literary

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<sup>15</sup> Special credit is due to Graham Garfield for his website, Chicago-L.org -- its encyclopedic history of Chicago's elevated transportation is unparalleled among local transit resources. References to his website will appear as (Garfield).



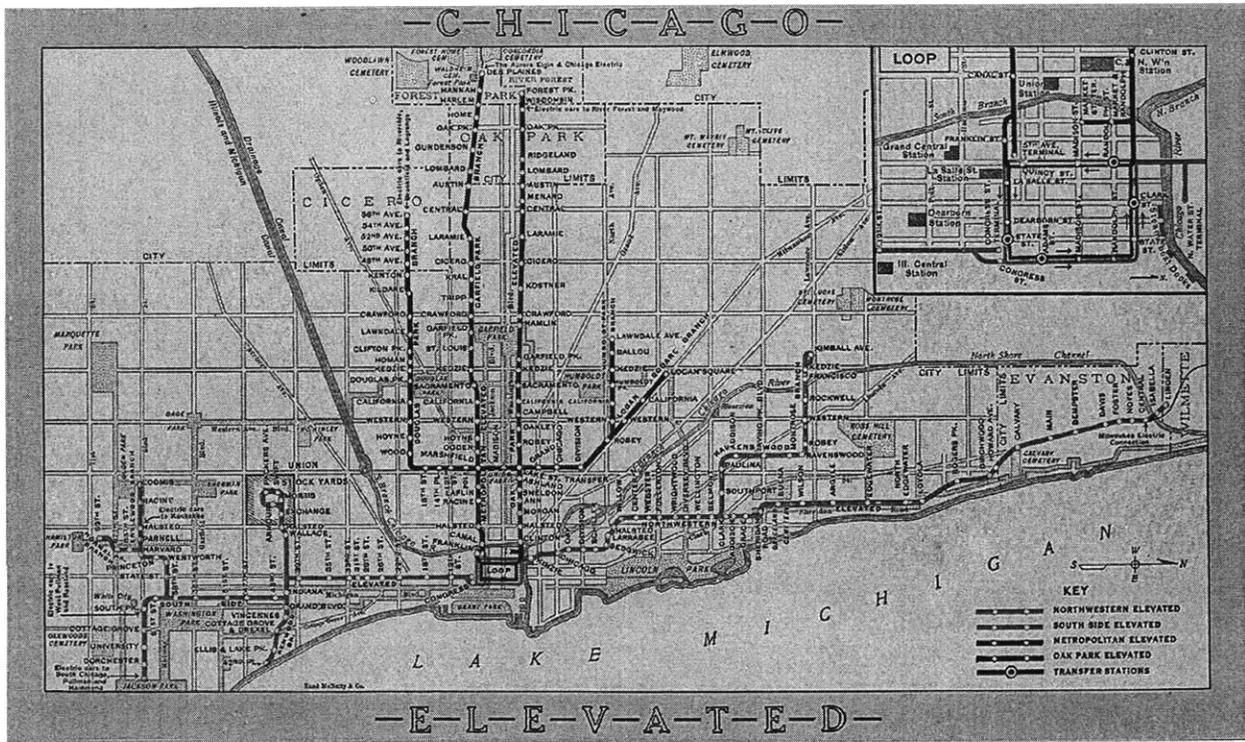
**Figure 39.**

The “Alley L” on the South Side, at 43rd Street. Note that the L faced backyards, not front façades.

world, for his fictional counterpart Frank Cowperwood in Theodore Dreiser’s *The Titan*), came to Chicago in the early 1880s bent on making a fortune in the mass transport business (Miller 268-9). Despite his “crooked stock dealings and political thievery,” Miller argues, Yerkes “fashioned the world’s greatest urban transportation system” (268). The so-called Titan worked quickly to modernize Chicago’s aging horse- and street-car systems, introducing electricity to streetcar lines and “replacing horsecars with cable cars in the North and West Divisions, bringing them into the downtown area” through refurbished tunnels (269). While the cable cars relied on steam power and were accepted as part of Chicago’s technological advance, the electric cars drew concern from many Chicagoans -- chiefly, a good deal of Yerkes’ “enemies in the press.” Thus Yerkes had trouble finagling rights for downtown streetcars, but his cable cars went straight to the heart of the city. Holt and the Chicago Historical Society determined that it was this mode of transport that gave Chicago’s downtown its distinctive name. “What is not widely known,” Holt wrote in 1979, “is that the Loop owes its name to the earlier cable car system rather than to the ring of Chicago’s elevateds which ran on Wabash, Lake, Wells, and Van Buren [Streets]. Actually, the term ‘Loop’ crept into the Chicago vernacular a decade before most of the elevateds were built” (17).

Before Yerkes built his Union Loop Elevated in 1897, however, other steam-powered elevated rail lines leapt into Chicago’s neighborhoods to the South and West. The fragmented nature of their development was heightened by the fact that each served a unique set of neighborhoods. The city’s first was built by the Chicago & South Side Rapid Transit Railroad Company, whose line first ran from a downtown terminal at Congress Street to 39th Street in 1892 (Cudahy, 10-11). This line’s construction scheme was different from all elevated railways that preceded it: due to restrictive Illinois and City of Chicago statutes<sup>16</sup>, the South Side elevated was forced into a route

<sup>16</sup> Cudahy outlines this point well. The Illinois statute, the 1883 “Adams Law,” “stipulated that any proposed elevated line that would be built over a public thoroughfare must obtain approval signatures from a majority of property owners along every mile of the route.” Similarly, “Chicago’s 1872 city charter required *any* transit operator, streetcar or elevated, to secure approval signatures from a majority of property owners along any route on, or over, a public thoroughfare” (19). In the construction of his Union Loop Elevated, Yerkes found clever (and most likely illegal) methods of circumventing these restrictions, either through sheer volume of money proffered to would-be signatories, or by acquiring the required majority from property owners along a section of street “where he would never build an L” (21).



**Figure 38.**

The Chicago L in 1913.

that skirted the backyards of buildings (Figure 39), paralleling City alleyways rather than existing streets. As a result, “the designation ‘Alley L’ was long used as a popular name for the South Side route and, without the capital A, became a general synonym for any Chicago L so constructed” (11). By late 1893, the South Side ‘L’ had been extended to a temporary terminal located in Jackson Park, so as to serve the World’s Columbian Exposition. On its way to the Park, the L gave up its alley route and ran down 63rd Street, presumably because the area was sparsely developed. In subsequent years, the South Side line was extended to neighborhoods and industries both near and far from the original line, including Englewood, Normal Park, Kenwood, and the Stock Yards.

The next elevated line to serve multiple neighborhoods opened over Lake Street -- a major conduit to the West -- in November, 1893. Built and owned by an incredibly corrupt businessman named “King Mile” -- Michael C. McDonald, the Lake Street L was constructed not as a means of providing fast transport to Chicagoans, but as a means to an end. Cudahy argues that “McDonald’s aim...was to use his franchise to issue stock, then more stock, then still more stock, and to divert the proceeds of such sales to his own purposes” (15). Nevertheless, the line did offer faster transport than any existing surface route. But, like the South Side L, the elevated stopped just short of the Loop, dead-ending at a terminal at Madison and Market streets (16). Yerkes ultimately bought the line a few years after its construction, putting himself in a better position to construct his lucrative Loop elevated.

Contrary to Cudahy’s assertion, Chicago’s “Second L” was not the Lake Street line, but in fact the Columbian Exposition’s proprietary “Intramural Railway.” In April, 1893, seven months

before the Lake Street L opened, the Exposition's 3.1-mile, looped elevated railroad was declared open (Bullard 7). Perhaps the most revelatory aspect of the Columbian Railway was its innovative technology, well in keeping with the Exposition's overall focus on industry and efficiency. Indeed, the line was the first sustained electrified rapid transit railway in the United States<sup>17</sup>. The Intramural Railway did its job diligently, carrying thousands of Exposition passengers a day. But while the line's technology was to be a bellwether of Chicago's (and Boston, New York, and Philadelphia's) transit future, it was in fact ephemeral, like the palatial monuments to Cities Beautiful, modern industries, and exotic cultures that it served: the Exposition railway was torn down by 1894.

While the South Side and Lake Street L lines were driven by steam-powered locomotives, the third major line to open was no doubt influenced by the successful Columbian Railway experiment; in 1895, the Metropolitan West Side Elevated began operation as Chicago's first electric L.<sup>18</sup> Soon after construction, the Metropolitan Elevated would extend beyond its own downtown stub-end terminal and into Yerkes' new Loop. Nevertheless, beyond downtown these lines served Chicago's northwesterly neighborhoods, and by 1915 extended to numerous destinations including Logan Square, Humboldt Park, and other points West (but to the south of Lake Street). Because of its cleaner reputation, electric technology spread to the Lake Street L in 1896 and the South Side line in 1898 (Cudahy, 24 & 25).

Yerkes' Northwestern Elevated opened to the north between the Loop and Wilson Avenue (at the city limits) in 1900, and an extension to Ravenswood and north-northwest neighborhoods followed in 1908. Further extensions pushed rapid transit service to the cities of Evanston and Wilmette, but these were constructed either on embankments or at-grade, rather than on alleyway elevated structures.

By the 1950s, however, the Chicago transit picture had changed rapidly. In 1943, somewhat late for a major American city, Chicago built its first rapid transit subway, but only to alleviate the crowded Loop elevated; drawn along State Street, it served new destinations in the heart of downtown while connecting at both ends to the Northwestern and South Side L lines. Likewise, in 1951, the former Metropolitan Logan Square line was rerouted into the downtown Dearborn Street subway (5-6). In 1947, the public Chicago Transit Authority had taken over from the private Chicago Rapid Transit amalgamation, and many elevated branch lines were either truncated or abandoned in entirety; while some of the ground-level extensions on the far West Side had been abandoned, the South Side saw the brunt of the closings: the Normal Park, Kenwood, and Stock Yards branches all were taken out of commission and demolished by the end of the decade. On other lines, these cuts manifested in multiple station closings, especially on the former Metropolitan L branches where stations were often merely two or three blocks apart.

In the last two decades, Chicago has, like Philadelphia, ensured the long-term viability of its L. Between 1994 and 1996, the Lake Street and South Side routes (now unified as the Green Line) were completely rebuilt. Likewise, in the early 2000s, the severely-deteriorated Douglas Park L (the 54/Cermak branch of the Blue Line, and now the Pink Line) was completely replaced, from tracks to understructure and stations, and now exists essentially as a new transit line within an historic

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17 Bullard notes that electric train test runs occurred in New York in the late 1880s, but were not regarded then as permanent solutions. The waterfront Overhead Railway in Liverpool, England, was the "world's first...revenue, third-rail service" upon opening in March of 1893 (5).

18 Cudahy corroborates: The Columbian Railway "was an important pilot project, and it helped insure the Metropolitan's later success" (24).

right-of-way. Still underway is a “capacity improvement” project on the Ravenswood route, the Brown Line, that will render all stations handicapped accessible, while ensuring improved service to the route’s growing ridership. The physical definition of “elevated” has also changed in recent years, due to downtown and neighborhood L reconstruction. In a published report on possible Red Line (Howard-Dan Ryan) line extensions, the graphic symbol for “elevated” trackways is that of a one-column, t-shaped concrete support -- a far cry from the latticed steel supports that initially held the original L lines.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from the L’s history is that Chicago is indeed a city of fragments. The development of the elevated system occurred in fits and starts; over time, some sections of steel structure have been merely temporary fixtures in the urban environment. Others have been replaced, their destinations expanded or redefined in the mind of the Chicagoan. Yet others have been rehabilitated in new steel and concrete, adding another layered texture to the urban environment.

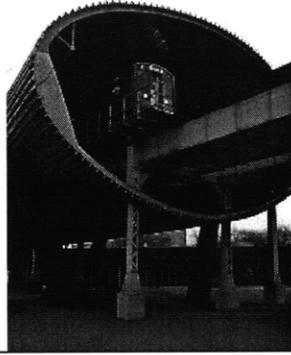
## **The L and Urban Design**

### Architecture & Urban Form

As in Boston and Philadelphia, Chicago’s Loop L constituted a major new urban form. The suburban neighborhood lines were less intrusive for the most part, as their unique “alley” routing placed them at the backs of buildings, and not over a major commercial or residential street (The Lake Street L is the major exception). Station architecture was generally the same despite the fact that each line was constructed by a different company: regardless, the utilitarian schemes retained significant details, including decorative lighting, latticework, and railings. On the West Side, the Metropolitan Elevated stations employed “romanesque” architecture “with Queen Anne style”; and on the South Side, original street-level station buildings were designed in the craftsman/arts-and-crafts style that had been popular in the late 1800s (Garfield).

Over the years, stations have been renovated without any core rehabilitation plan; this, as will be explained below in a section about the Loop, was to come later. Some stations were stripped of their distinctive details; others were rebuilt outright. In the renovation projects of the past decade, architectural treatment has differed: on the Douglas Park route (the Pink Line), stations were completely rebuilt in a contemporary style; on the Ravenswood route (the Brown Line), elevated stations were replaced and surface ones were restored -- complete with brand-new wood-planking.

The Chicago L’s physical infrastructure also attempted, in small design flourishes, to be responsive to community needs. Though this is not a widespread trend, two examples help to illustrate how both current and future aerial structures can better integrate with the urban environment. Recent studies have also proposed rethinking formerly underused spaces beneath the L structure. During the construction of the South and West Side Lines, the L companies were forced by the City’s Park Commission (who were in the process of planning city-wide open spaces and connecting boulevards) to acknowledge these parks in design. As a result, a few stretches of the West Side L’s Douglas Park branch and the South Side L main line -- where they cross city boulevards -- have more aesthetically-pleasing and decorative steelwork. When the Douglas Park line was renovated by the Chicago Transit Authority in the early 2000s, small decorative elements



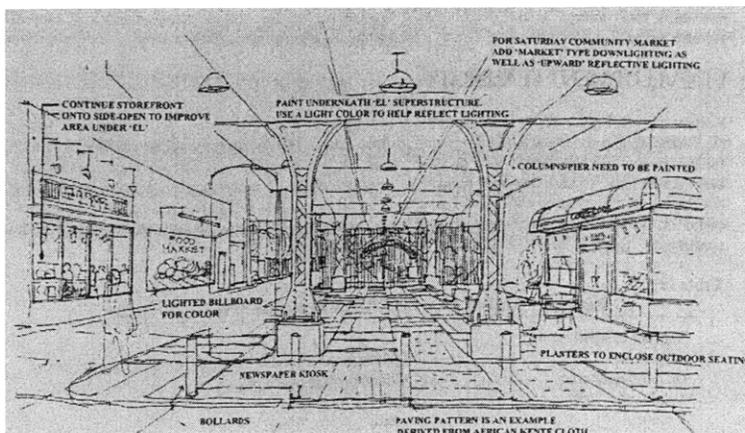
**Figures 40 & 41.**

Architecture & Urban Form: Dressing and addressing the L. At left, the L's decorative boulevard ironwork was retained when the Cermak line was renovated in the early 2000s; at right, Koolhaas' IIT Student Center engages the L.

were retained at Marshall Boulevard, though in somewhat awkward fashion (Figure 40). More recently, architects have engaged the L in building and campus design. At the Illinois Institute of Technology, Rem Koolhaas' McCormick Tribune Campus Center includes, as its "most remarkable feature, a 530-foot oval tube made of concrete and steel" that "encloses and muffles the el as it passes over the student center."<sup>19</sup> The effect is useful in curbing the negative effects of the L, but it is also symbolic: the L is now a part of the construction, integrated into the campus (Figure 41).

Others, including the City of Chicago planning department and a MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning alumnus, have proposed new uses for spaces under the L structure itself. Because much of Chicago's network is built on private right-of-way, the possibilities are endless -- all it takes, it seems, is a hopeful outlook and creative ideas for reuse. A Transit Oriented Development study from 1998 used the South Side station at 47th and Prairie as a case study. Diagrams for understructure improvement (Figure 42) included repainting the L with colors that would effectively reflect light, introducing lighted billboards for needed "color," and encouraging adjacent businesses to "continue [their] storefront onto [the] side...to improve [the] area under [the] 'El' (90). For this particular station, located in a densely African-American neighborhood, the study also proposed a special "paving pattern...derived from African Kente cloth." DUSP and Architecture student Jing Su proposed a myriad of Brown Line L treatments in a 2005 thesis. From creating new, local streets under the structure, to providing space for sculpture gardens, backyard amenities, and local informational areas, Su effectively opened the door for a new paradigm of

19 <http://www.galinsky.com/buildings/mccormick/index.htm>



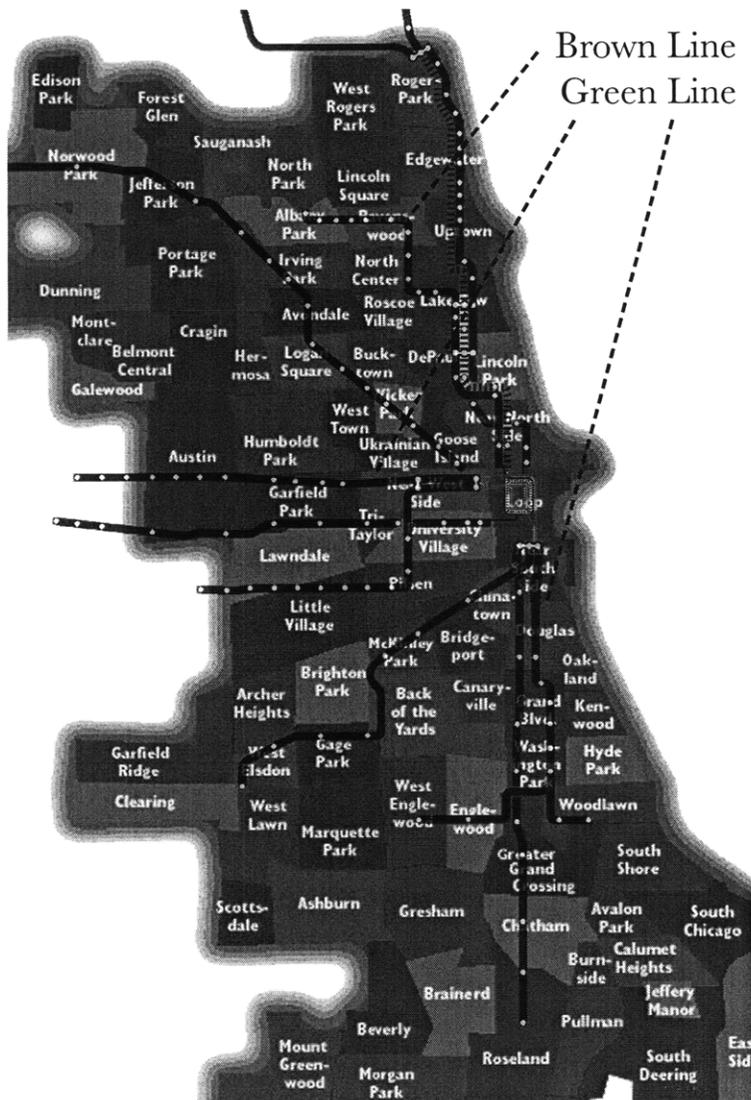
**Figure 42.**

"Sketch C - Proposed Improvements Under Elevated Tracks at 47th Street." Proposals such as this one reflect a desire to work with the existing infrastructure, and integrate it as much as possible into the on-the-ground urban fabric.

L-related improvements. The thesis' ample graphics and imaginative solutions melded academic fervor with real community needs. It is a beacon for historical preservation and neighborhood re-integration of Chicago's L system, and indicates that there are others who seek to unite the past, present, and future of aerial rapid transit infrastructure through design and planning.

### The L in the Neighborhood: Distilling Symbols from Historical Narrative

The following two studies will identify the themes and questions raised by elevated lines on Chicago's distinct and diverse South and North Sides. The hope of this section is to emphasize that each of Chicago's L routes has its own unique story to tell, and that its symbolism has changed over the past one hundred years, dependent on neighborhood renewal and outside investment. From these portraits -- one of the Green Line (the South Side L) and the other of the Brown Line (the Ravenswood line) -- we shall press on to discuss how the Loop has come to unify the disparate network of elevated lines, and how their image has come to represent the city on local, neighborhood, city-wide, and national scales.



**Figure 43.**

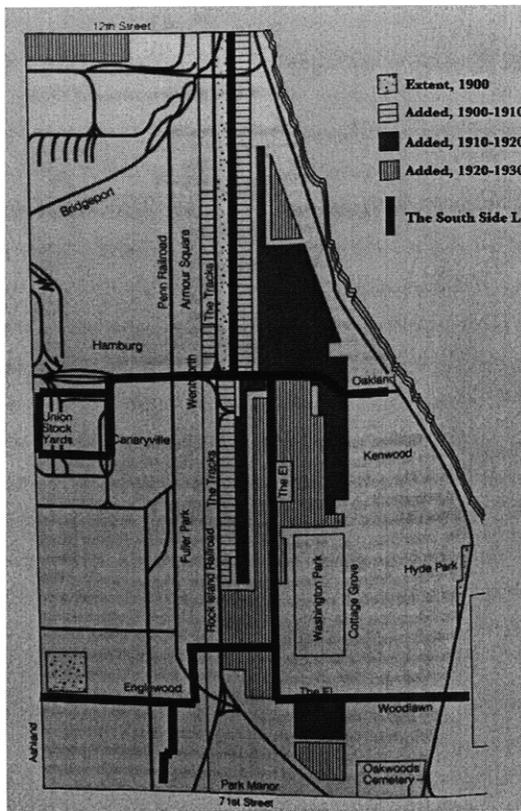
Today's Chicago Transit Authority L lines and the neighborhoods through which they pass.

## The Green Line/South Side L: From Ethnic Barrier to Economic Gateway

On Chicago's South Side, the L played many roles in the lives and livelihoods of those abutting the line. For some, it was an opportunity: whereas in less-developed areas such as Woodlawn and Englewood, it brought about rapid new construction, in already built-up neighborhoods like Washington Park, it encouraged denser development. And, certainly, it created dense commercial nodes centered around its stations. This latter identity, of commercial catalyst, was repeated throughout greater Chicago. To certain residents, however, the L was a powerful symbol of racial segregation, and later, after service cuts and station closings, an equally powerful symbol of disinvestment and abandonment. To be sure, ridership and maintenance fluctuated over the line's century-plus of service; in the years following the L's complete closure and reconstruction, the new Green Line was viewed as a conduit for reinvestment and an opportunity for re-centralizing neighborhood identity.

In the South Side L's formative years, its patterned effect on neighborhood form and ethnic makeup was unmistakable: the promise of rapid transit densified existing communities, encouraging construction of apartment buildings, and farther south built new communities on former prairies. In Oakland, a largely single-family neighborhood to the north of Kenwood, the L encouraged land uses that were unfamiliar and undesirable to established residents. The Kenwood branch opened in 1907 as part of a cross-town connection to the Stock Yards that opened fully one year later (Garfield). "Before 1910 apartments had been created by conversion," Holt writes of Oakland. "During the next decade apartment houses began to replace single-family dwellings... At first the new apartment units housed people who took some interest in the community, but between 1918 and 1925, long-term residents became aware that the apartments were attracting persons who were 'mobile, with very few connections within the community.' Together, the construction of the elevated and the apartment house boom led to a dramatic downturn in the quality of the neighborhood" (63). This, despite the fact that the Lline was largely built on an elevated embankment rather than on steel supports. In next-door Kenwood, the elevated similarly encouraged building owners to convert their houses into apartment dwellings. Increased development of this sort led to an rise in "population density and overcrowding," as the old neighborhood fabric was tried by "the Loop workers who commuted via the new transportation connection." Holt concludes that "what had been an exclusive suburban enclave in 1880 had become an urban neighborhood with a population of 21, 068 by 1920" (68). Later, Holt explains, the area became more and more a black neighborhood; and in the 60s, was a target for urban renewal.

To the southwest of Kenwood and Oakland, the Grand Boulevard and Washington Park neighborhoods each were affected differently by the coming of the L because of their different prior development histories. "Because of its proximity to the center of the city," Pacyga writes, "Grand Boulevard [initially] developed at a faster rate than the Washington Park district" (337). The former neighborhood, like Kenwood and Oakland, had developed as a fashionable community with rows of fancy apartments and smaller homes. The 'building boom' of 1890-1910 brought "important social service agencies and schools" (341). In Washington Park, much more land was open for widespread development. Indeed, even after the construction of the South Side L, "large tracts... remained prairie" (341). Here, the L was apparently not looked upon as a blighting influence -- the economic possibilities far outweighed the negative aesthetic connotations. The 1907 extension of



**Figure 44.**

“South Side Black Belt and Satellites,” modified from Philpott. At first a symbol of segregation as one of the boundaries of the “Black Belt,” the South Side L became an conduit of black population expansion in the early twentieth century.

the elevated to Englewood (west of Washington Park), Pacyga argues, “far from diminish[ed] the desirability of Washington Park as a residential district,” as the line “made the area even more accessible to downtown Chicago” (345). The neighborhood was changing, all right, and not just in urban form: not only did “the entertainment district that emerged along the ‘L’ tracks further” this trend, but also the line “brought an entirely new ethnic group to Washington Park, the Irish” (385). The L, in its early years, allowed Washington Park to “[take] on an upper-middle-class character.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet this same L line, some twenty blocks to the north, was as much an emblem of a ghettoized, severely impoverished and marginalized Chicago. Quite simply, for a majority of the “Black Belt,” the South Side L may have been a physical nuisance; but as a symbol, it was one of the biggest barriers that community could ever face. That infamous black urban ghetto was closed off on both long-sides by rails: “The broad embankment of the Rock Island Railroad sealed it from the working-class immigrant communities to the west, and the South Side Elevated Railroad

20 Regarding income segregation, Barrett notes that “The elevated lines themselves had their own class connotations. They had been built specifically to tap developing sections that were often really suburbs within the city limits, and elevated lines with the trackage to do so concentrated their efforts on express trains between major outlying centers like Uptown or Englewood and the Loop. Without such express service, the ‘nice class of people’ (as a company spokesman described them) would have to stand and then might complain to the press and the city council. Of course, more express trains meant fewer locals. Laborers from factories in the industrial belt around the city’s heart could not squeeze aboard the trains which did stop near where they worked. By 1906 it appears that factory workers did ride mass transit when they could, but the el was difficult--even dangerous--to use in the inner city factory districts.” *The Automobile and Urban Transit* (25-6)

walled it off from ‘the white belt of aristocracy and wealth’ to the east” (Philpott, 147). This was not an isolated trend in Chicago of the turn of the century. “On the West Side,” Philpott writes, “an[other] enclave was growing up in the gap between the Northwestern Railroad’s freight lines and the new, noisy Lake Street El, and there was a sizable colony in Englewood, two and a half miles southwest of the Black Belt” (147). Up in the North Side, a “Little Black Belt” formed along the Northwestern L railroad along Franklin between Chicago Avenue and, appropriately-named, Division Street (264). The railroads, including the L’s, were “simply [convenient places] to draw the line,” and did not actively work to sustain these symbols: they “were racial barricades, but only because there were white people on the other side to man them” (148). Its connotation was so strong in one particular housing settlement, Douglass Center, that “few blacks went beyond the el tracks except to go to work in white people’s homes” (320). When the black community expanded into more of the South Side between 1910 and 1930, the L once again served as a dividing line (Figure 44). “East of State Street and the ‘alley el’ were large districts of town houses and apartment buildings occupied by middle-class whites,” Philpott explains. “These people did not want to give up any territory to blacks, but they seemed to accept the gradual expansion of the Black Belt as an unfortunate but unpreventable process. As their buildings aged, they moved...[now,] just south of 39th the tall steel stilts of the Kenwood El stood like so many sentinels along the new boundary” (153).

In Englewood, the South Side elevated branch helped to create what was first regarded as Chicago’s “second busiest intersection,” and later the neighborhood that “[was] a microcosm of a racial problem that has plagued Chicago for years” (495, 499). Today, the intersection of 63rd and Halsted Streets is now virtually unrecognizable from its heyday self, but there is hope in its future as a community, rather than commercial, center. Pacyga argues that while the intersection was quietly budding as a potential centralized commercial hub, the area truly took off with the “converg[ing]” of several transit modes at the intersection, including the Englewood L. “By the end of the 1920s,” Pacyga writes, “63rd and Halsted...was the regional shopping center for the entire South and Southwest Sides. In many ways it was the forerunner of today’s suburban shopping malls. The major difference was that its prosperity was based on the streetcar, elevated, and interurban transit lines that moved people across the city. 63rd and Halsted was an easy place to get to” (495-6). In time, economic, social, and mobility trends led to the intersection (and Englewood)’s decline into “slum”-like conditions (498). Those white, middle-class residents who had moved in with the L and post-L building boom moved out as blacks moved in. In fact, from the beginning blacks had been living in segregated conditions. Philpott asserts that the “Englewood enclave” was formed as “blacks [had] got there ahead of the developers, who, instead of dislodging them, built white Englewood around them” (150). That the neighborhood was “easy to get to” by public transport suddenly became a negative quality, among populations for whom the automobile was paramount -- a notion that was exacerbated by deferred L maintenance. Having nothing to do but continually run trains and age, the Englewood L weathered poorly an age where rapid transit struggled to remain relevant. Pacyga summarizes that “the auto subsequently allowed shoppers to travel easily to the suburban malls. When given the choice between an increasingly black, integrated Englewood or white neighborhoods with amenities like shopping malls, the white middle-class moved on” (499).

That summary was written in 1979, a decade after a failed attempt to rekindle the shopping district through an ill-conceived demolish-and-pedestrianize scheme (repeated throughout the

country). While there may then have been little hope for Englewood -- and, after mass urban renewal elsewhere along the line, much of South Side Chicago -- community and city groups have taken advantage of the CTA's recent renovation of the Green Line to restore a cohesive identity, centered at elevated transit stops.

Before we explore the slow rebirth of these areas in recent years, it is worthwhile to illustrate the factors leading to the line's decline. The South Side L's popularity in the 1950s--it was the only major form of rapid transport for those neighborhoods--led the Chicago Transit Authority to plan for another transit link in the area, writes Allen. Encouraged by the success of the rerouting of a West Side L line into the median of the Congress Expressway, CTA officials pressed for an extension within the new Dan Ryan expressway that was to parallel the South Side railroad tracks (the same ones that had hemmed in the Black Belt years earlier). Allen explains that transit planners "anticipated that [the new line] would meet the need for longer-distance express travel on the South Side, and the old Alley 'L' would mainly provide local service in a busy, long-established market" (11). Soon after its opening in 1969, however, the new line "attracted many longer-haul riders -- many of whom switched from the South Side 'L'. The latter line now entered a long period of ridership decline, as it only served older, more troubled neighborhoods" (11). The urban fabric declined along with ridership. Closer to the Loop, about parallel with Chinatown, massive urban renewal projects replaced the Black Belt slums with large residential towers, many of which have now been demolished as well. In Washington Park, Woodlawn and Englewood, a checkered pattern of vacant lots and houses can be seen abutting the old L. Along East 63rd Street, over which the L used to run all the way to Jackson Park and the World's Columbian Exposition, lies a swath of vacant land on both sides of the street. Also, the rebuilding of the Green Line in the mid-1990s brought about numerous station demolitions, as well as the razing of ten blocks of rebuilt L structure to 63rd and Dorchester (Allen 12, Garfield). Recent aerial photographs show that this section, even though its street is open to the air, has little to no street wall left. The L itself was in dire need of repair: stations were falling apart, and commute times grew steadily as deferred maintenance forced slower train speeds.

Unlike Philadelphia's step-by-step renovation and rebuilding projects, the Green Line scheme was unique in its blunt approach: a complete shutdown. While placing a burden on daily riders, this approach allowed planners ample opportunity to propose neighborhood development along the line. Allen notes that although it took nearly a decade for the line to regain its pre-renovation ridership statistics, planners saw a renewed Green Line as a conduit of opportunity, not only for faster and more reliable transit service but also for community development, reinvestment, and "empowerment" as well. And the two-year closing developed a meaningful narrative, too. As a 1995 Urban Land Institute (ULI) report read, "both events--the closing of the old Green Line and the opening of the new Green Line--are symbols...The reconstruction of the New Green Line symbolizes a decision to reverse the pattern of disinvestment, and reinvest in these historic city neighborhoods" (13).

Nevertheless, it was partly due to community initiative and dedication to the L that the Chicago Transit Authority even embarked on the reconstruction project. In response to the Authority's doubts about the line's viability in the face of falling ridership, the Lake Street El Coalition was formed in the early 1990s to "show the CTA that the line should be viewed as valuable infrastructure, could serve as an engine for economic revitalization, and with increased ridership could play a role in helping the region meet federal Clean Air Act mandates" (Center

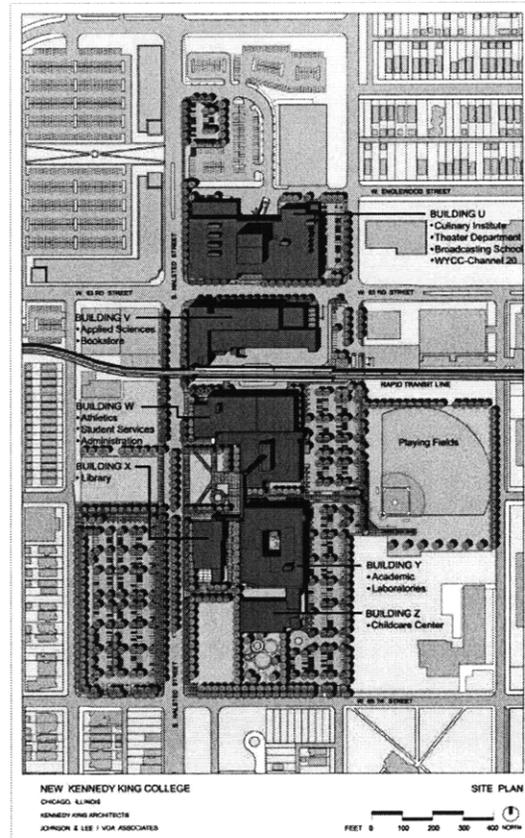
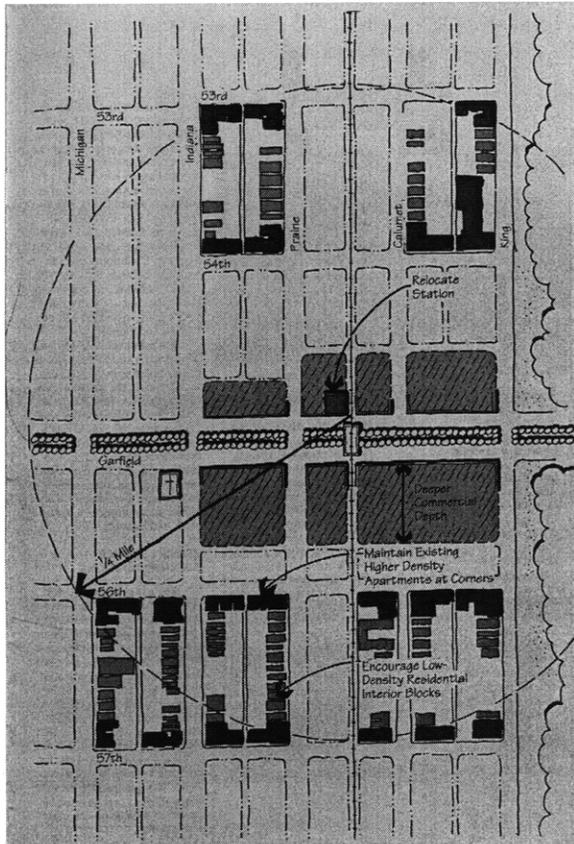
for Neighborhood Technology 4). The Coalition's document was contemporary with the Urban Land Institute's report; and both the community and the national planning community sought to "[reposition the L] as the focal point for community reinvestment" (4).

Both the ULI and the City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development saw the reconstruction as a perfect way to weave newer planning ideas--Transit Oriented Developments--into the distressed urban fabric. The ULI was, in fact, employed by the City of Chicago and the Chicago Transit Authority to "help them examine the relationship between transit investment and urban redevelopment," using the Green Line as a case study (8). Like West Philadelphia's communities, these inner-city neighborhoods needed a strong physical symbol of renewed commitment to their vitality, and the L was a perfect jumping off point to merge strong planning theory with practical need and ample opportunity. Both the ULI and Chicago's City Planning staff proposed specific interventions at station stops on the Lake Street line and the South Side branches; for our purposes, I will primarily focus on ULI's proposals. The Urban Land Institute's document is a testament to innovative ways of thinking about the L, whether in abstract neighborhood meaning, physical interventions, or the frequent intersection of both.

At Garfield (55th Street) Station, the Urban Land Institute study proposed new developments and land uses that would use both the L's and the surrounding neighborhood's history to unify the landscape (Figure 45). Garfield is noteworthy in that its station house is the oldest remaining piece of the South Side L in its original form -- and, according to (Graham) Garfield, is the "oldest [station building] on the system and possibly in the US." In addition to providing necessary accessibility improvements, the ULI team's renovated station plan included a replacement station building that would hearken back to the line's hundred-year plus architectural history (replicating in design the historic station entrance across the street), while initiating "a strong urban development sequence" (39). Indeed, the new station "would help keep the tracks from being an interruption to the flow of development along the north side of Garfield," helping advance this goal by incorporating retail space into the structure itself (19, 37). As the new L station would serve as a bright center to a denser neighborhood, its support structure could be re-imagined as well. The ULI suggested using the L street overpass as an active connection to the past: "The panel thinks it is important to visually connect the new station...to the existing historical station house on the south side of Garfield. This could be accomplished by an arcade-like ceiling element with lights on the underside of the bridge over the boulevard, mid-block pedestrian traffic lights, and a paved concourse across the boulevard's median" (39). Of course, the ULI team offered general recommendations for further development beyond the transit station -- in order to "main the neighborhood's historic residential character," for example, the report suggested that "higher density multifamily housing should generally be located at corners, with mid-block lots infilled with single-family and townhouse units" (35). So while strong street-walls were important, the center of the neighborhood would not be a certain intersection; rather, it was to be an historic L station.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the ULI's proposed improvements

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21 In the nearly fifteen years since the ULI report was published, not much new development has occurred. The CTA did, however, replace the Garfield station in the early 2000s. Graham Garfield describes the current state of things: "The CTA® has not identified a new use for the historic 1892 station house facility. Work also included the removal existing platforms, canopies, stairs, fare control equipment, and kiosk. The platforms are the last of their kind on the system and while not original to the station, do date from the early years of this century. They were finally demolished in late September 2001. When the platforms were removed, so was an irreplaceable part of "L" history... With no new use identified for the historic



**Figures 45 & 46.**

Left: The Urban Land Institute’s plan for centralizing density around the Garfield Boulevard station on the South Side main line; at right is the Kennedy King College campus plan, located at Halsted/63rd station on the Englewood branch. The L is the thick line moving from left to right at center.

at Garfield directed both physical and symbolic focus to the L; here, it could become an emblem of neighborhood uniqueness. Overall, the report challenged the Chicago Transit Authority to reconsider its plans for the New Green Line, in order for the L to “become a community asset” (42).

Because the CTA had already planned to completely rebuild the Lake Street L’s California Station, the ULI took this opportunity to propose infusing the L with local meaning and architectural heritage. Indeed, “the panel urge[d] the city to make the new California/Lake station a centerpiece and celebration of its neighborhood. A nearby Frank Lloyd Wright building provides a suitable architectural motif that could be incorporated into the station design” (18). To the immediate south of the new station, the ULI argued, should be a wide plaza with encircling buildings (21). Presumably this plan would work best with a more widespread, dense development surrounding the plaza; in any case, from an urban design standpoint, it would orient the L to the neighborhoods to the south of Lake Street, and likewise offer a “centerpiece” to the revitalized community, and a “focal point and an end view to California Street” (32). The L station would also

station house -- and none seemingly forthcoming from CTA® of the City -- it seems destined to sit empty and unused for the foreseeable future, until someone steps forward with a feasible and desirable use for the ornate, historic structure.”

“celebrate the neighborhood. Perhaps,” the report suggested, “it should honor Joseph Sylvester, a neighborhood pastor after whom California Street is honorarily designated...” (32). Though the ULI’s architectural plans are a bit grandiose, the group’s ideas are admirable in their willingness to include the L as a centerpiece of neighborhood identity. Indeed, on the West Side as well as the South Side, the Urban Land Institute saw a multitude of opportunities to reinvest in struggling communities, using the L as a foundation as well as a canvas.

Although many of these recommendations have yet to be adequately planned, funded, and implemented, some community groups are extending the legacy and the fervor of the Lake Street El Coalition (and the ULI) beyond commercial development. Indeed, the City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development’s proposed redevelopment of the intersection of 63 and Halsted Streets back into a transit-oriented, new urbanist regional center never came to fruition. Yet with the help of local community groups and institutions, the area around the Halsted/63rd L station has seen immense change in the past ten years. Disused and dilapidated commercial buildings have largely disappeared from the area -- and a local facility of higher learning, Kennedy-King College, has built a brand-new campus in their place. The L station has been integrated into the campus plan, providing a unifying space between the Athletics/Student Services/Administration building and the Applied Sciences Center.

A local community organization, Teamwork Englewood, has designated the reinvented intersection “Englewood Center,” once again implicitly tying the L to the neighborhood’s identity. The transformation of 63rd and Halsted is remarkable, as Teamwork Englewood has followed through with L-centric transit-oriented development schemes that first took root in the 1990s. At the Englewood L’s terminus, Ashland and 63rd, Teamwork maps illustrate mixed-use developments that would ideally fill the gaps of vacant land abutting the L, adding a semblance of permanence and coherence to the landscape. At present, the bellwether is Kennedy-King College, where the L has successfully been physically incorporated into a reconstructed urban fabric (Figure 46). Although the time may not be right for construction, community groups like Teamwork Englewood offer strong, sustainable ideals for the future of the South Side and its L.

### The Brown Line/Ravenswood L: Anachronism as an Asset

The story of Chicago’s Brown Line -- the Ravenswood L -- appears radically different than that of the South Side L lines. Though the route suffered ridership declines, too, its one-hundred-year existence has largely been devoid of the racial tensions, economic depression and physical deterioration that plagued neighborhoods to the south of the Loop. Indeed, while the ethnic makeup of communities adjacent to the line has changed over time, the quality of building stock and the continuity of the urban fabric has remained relatively stable. After suffering declining ridership and threatened closure, the Brown Line has gained a steady following over the past twenty years as its neighborhoods have gentrified; and what could have led to a swift downfall in any other context -- its anachronistic ricketiness -- actually has transformed the line into a unique community asset. The sharp increase in ridership led the Chicago Transit Authority to embark on a “Capacity Expansion Project” (which is scheduled to conclude later this year) that is designed to expand all Brown Line stations to full accessibility standards, as well as provide for many more years of sustained use.

In 1907, the Ravenswood L opened as a branch line off of the Northwestern Elevated

Railway, and immediately provided residents of the West Lake View neighborhood with reliable rapid transit (Garfield; Pacyga 92). Though specific information is not readily available, it can be assumed that the Ravenswood L had a effect on urban form and development similar to other Chicago neighborhoods served by elevated railway lines: undoubtedly, it encouraged localized commercial districts to spring up around stations, and, as on the South Side, facilitated construction of apartment houses in addition to single-family homes. It is clear, according to Ehrenhalt, that “1920s bungalows” exist “at the end of the line, near Kedzie and Lawrence and Kimball” (45). With the exception of numerous station renovations over the past fifty years, and the recent Capacity Expansion Project, the Brown Line’s right-of-way has also remained intact--unlike some South Side branches, the line has not been truncated in any way.

By the 1970s, the Ravenswood L was hit hard by the CTA’s poor fiscal situation, but not because of any major dip in the line’s importance; rather, gradually declining ridership led to often disproportionate cuts. Although operating hours were being cut right and left, with some stations closing down (albeit temporarily) even due to “moderate ridership” statistics (Garfield), the line still received a fair share of infrastructure upgrades. In fact, Garfield notes that the line saw its terminal, Kimball, reconstructed in a more modern style, and signal upgrades during that decade. Still, the situation was to get worse before it got any better. “In the early 1980s,” Ehrenhalt writes, “with the number of its rides declining and the entire Chicago Transit Authority in dire straits, there was constant talk of closing Ravenswood down altogether” (44). In the late 1980s, however, “something odd happened. Contrary to all expectations, ridership started going up again. Between 1987 and 1998, as overall rail traffic on the Chicago transit system continued to plummet, traffic on the Ravenswood increased by nearly 30 percent... Last July [2000], the transit system gave the Ravenswood revival a formal gesture of respect; weekend service was reinstated along the line, 48 years after it had been discontinued for a lack of patronage” (44). The reasons for the population resurgence in this area may have something to do with the changing demographic makeup of adjacent communities.

The population migrations and distribution of wealth along the Brown Line are also worthy of note, as they speak to the evolving symbolism of the North Side L routes -- and the role that rapid transit can play in income segregation. “At the last few stops along the line,” Ehrenhalt observes, “we are clearly in immigrant territory. We leave the train at Kedzie...and are within a few steps of the Holy Land grocery, Buraketrachakul Video, and the Lindo Michoacan Tacqueria. Middle Eastern men sit in storefront cafés playing cards and drinking strong coffee” (47). Around Kimball, the end of the line, “signs and billboards that were printed in Yiddish in the 1930s and 1940s are now printed in Korean,” and “Lawrence Avenue...has been given the nickname Seoul Drive” (48). These neighborhoods have undoubtedly added to the contemporary eclecticism of the Brown Line, and by virtue of their semi-marginalization, will most likely (continue to) attract the younger gentrifiers.

Ehrenhalt notes with disdain that areas along the Main Line of the Northwestern Elevated -- the four-track section of L where the Brown, Purple and Red Lines all share a right-of-way -- have already seen enormous land value jumps and rampant gentrification. At Fullerton Station, near DePaul University, the author reported in 2001 that “simple one- and two-story wood cottages built for clerks and tradesmen a century ago are being sold for close to half a million dollars, to lawyers who festoon them with Victorian gingerbread that wasn’t part of this neighborhood in the beginning. These affluent newcomers don’t all take the train to their offices--you can see some



**Figure 47.**

Unique anachronism on the North Side Main Line (from which the Brown Line branches): “In the 1890s, the Northwestern Elevated was unable to purchase the property from [a German-American] parish, so the line was forced to detour around the building, creating what is today called Church Curve.” (Graham Garfield)

of them from the Fullerton platform at rush hour, hailing cabs to go to work--but they all want to live where the train goes. The combination of the university and the El has created a bustling pedestrian enclave that has become a magnet for youth, energy, and money” (46). Thus at the beginning of this decade, the L’s prognosis was rosy, both for the affluent, as well as for the less-affluent immigrant populations.

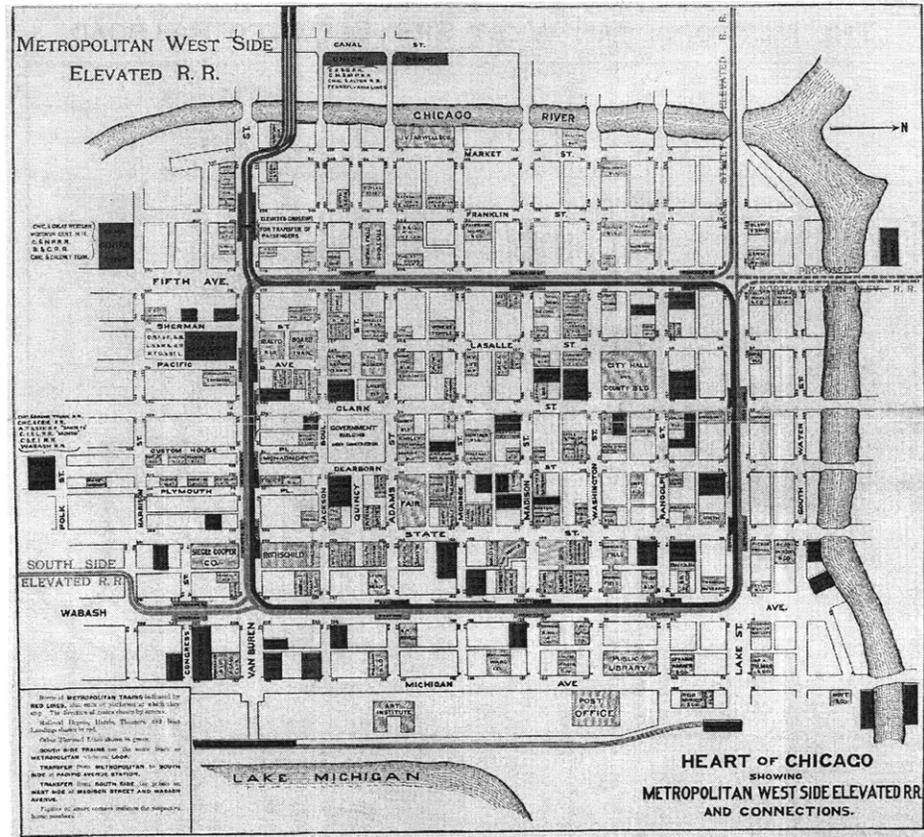
While personally enthralled by the L’s anachronistic charm, Ehrenhalt is cautious about the long-term symbolic implications of the line. He wonders whether “Chicago may eventually evolve into the modern equivalent of 19th-century Paris or Vienna, with the professional elite in the inner ring, and the working class on the periphery” (48). The Brown Line could be, for him, a case study in a growing trend -- its linearity symbolizes not so much a dividing line than a gradient. Still, avoiding the larger question of income inequality and gentrified homogenization, Ehrenhalt’s Brown Line is most of all a complex, unexplainable success in neighborhood revitalization. He prescribes a sweet pill to aspiring “urbanists from all over the country”: “come to Chicago and ride it...: ride back and forth, look out the window, peep inside the apartments, and ponder. How, they might ask, can we make some of the virtues of this 1907 wonder available to different kinds of cities in a very different time?” (49). As the author notes, the Brown Line is just one piece of the transit system, a contemporary catalyst among historic and future inspirers of reinvestment and rebirth. To be sure, each L has its own local narrative -- but certain themes pervade all the lines. Though not fraught with a history of racial tension and social abandonment, the Brown Line has at least one major thing in common with the South Side L: they meet at the Loop.

### Chicago United: The Loop & Chicago’s Public Image

The evolution of Charles Yerkes’ Union Loop Elevated, from its utilitarian beginnings to its role as an important public symbol of Chicago, is a story worth telling; and this story, of affect, exaggeration, and acceptance, may well be the story of the city as a whole. Around the turn of the century, Miller explains, “Chicago was divided into three parts--the North Side, the West Side, and the South Side--whose inhabitants rarely mingled. The Loop was Chicago’s ‘neutral land, however,

**Figure 48.**

The Union Loop in 1898, before Yerkes' Northwestern Elevated opened and well before free transfers were allowed. Still, the physical presence of such connective infrastructure would forever alter Chicago's future successes, as well as build on the city's nationwide reputation.



where [Chicagoans] transact business by day and enjoy themselves by night,' wrote Hobart C. Chatfield-Taylor" (266). In other words, it was where the fragments coalesced. As a result of these transactions, the Loop became a business powerhouse.

The full transit loop was fully complete in 1897, and, with the completion of the Northwestern Elevated in 1900, carried the traffic of all four L companies in that year (Cudahy). Like the Lake Street line, the Union Loop was constructed over city streets rather than alleyways (Yerkes deemed too high the price of acquiring downtown property for a private right-of-way). Although this physical unification preceded the procedural unification of the elevated railways into the Chicago Rapid Transit organization by twenty-four years (6), the effect was strong. The business district thrived with the centralized rapid transit, as "major office buildings, department stores, public agencies and railroad terminals were built in--or immediately adjacent to--the rectangle formed by Lake, Wabash, Van Buren, and Fifth/Wells. As a result," Cudahy argues, "the City of Chicago has since had one of the most concentrated downtown business districts of any American city" (38). In 1913, "through-routing" was introduced to the Loop, allowing trains originating in the South Side to travel along two sides of the downtown elevated railway and terminate in the North Side. But the greatest accomplishment of this scheme was not a new efficiency; rather, it "was the privilege of transferring freely from one line to another on the Loop" (50). Symbolically, the physical unification of the disparate L lines extended to the individual rider, as such transfers allowed for increased freedom of choice. Conceivably, platforms were now places for diverse exchanges, whether by person-to-person contact or destination choice.

Whereas riders enjoyed increasing freedoms on the Union Loop, those down below found

their ways of life increasingly restricted. Indeed, as Holt explained in a caption accompanying a photograph of the L on a downtown street, “until the construction of the elevated, Wabash [Street] merchants hoped to replace their State Street rivals as the city’s preeminent retailers. The dirt and noise introduced by the ‘L’ put an end to these hopes” (17). Mayer relates the experience of a French artist to the Loop at Wabash: “The sky is of iron, and perpetually growls a rolling thunder” (214). Not surprisingly, as early as 1902 some Chicagoans were clamoring for a replacement of the Loop Elevated, if not substantial structural changes (Young 31); and City Beautiful maestro Daniel Burnham “repeated the recommendation in his 1908 master plan for the city” (34).

In 1908, a lengthy report composed by Charles K. Mohler and submitted to the Loop Protective Association offered “remedies” for, as the title proclaimed, the elevated’s “Causes of Congestion [,] Noise in Operation [,] Unsightly Appearance [, and] Obstruction to Light.” For our purposes, Mohler’s introductory summary will suffice: first, the engineer rightly proposed through-routing to alleviate congestion; second, likely taking cues from Philadelphia’s Market Street Elevated, to ameliorate noise issues he proposed “reconstructing the roadbed in order to interpose stone ballast or some other inelastic medium between the structure and rail supports”; finally, to “[remedy] the unsightly appearance and obstruction to light,” he argued that “a large factor in the accomplishment of of that result would be the reconstruction of stations, so as to dispense with the buildings above the platforms” (7). Despite Mohler’s optimistic outlook, much of his solution was ignored, and the L remained largely unaltered until the 1970s.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequent subway construction (as noted above, the 1943 State Street, and the 1951 Dearborn Street lines) served to alleviate growing pressure on the Loop elevated, and did not pose a significant threat to the downtown structure. In fact, the two systems were not physically connected in the downtown area. In the 1960s, however, “pressures mounted to replace the Loop El with a centralized subway system,” for “in an age of hundred-story glass towers and sanitary design” the old structure “was branded as a blight, a shelter for undesirables, an obstruction to progress, [and] a dinosaur” (Huth 3). Though the future of the Loop may have been underground, cost overruns and political delays took their toll: by the late 1970s, the downtown subway replacement was 1.5 billion dollars costlier, and several sections shorter. The severely bloated -- and physically curtailed -- subway replacement project began to draw the ire of historic preservationists in particular, mainly because it “would destroy a vital element of Chicago heritage and yet provide no expanded service whatsoever” (3). If anything, the Franklin Street project, a 4.5-mile subway that would allow just two legs of the Loop to be demolished, had become more an appeasement of “the real-estate community and Chicago’s influential labor unions” than a useful transit link (Progressive Architecture 23). Worse, the major objections to the elevated, the ones that had plagued it since the very beginning -- noise, dirt, and shadows -- were exacerbated by the conflict over the new subway. In 1979, “the Chicago Transit Authority...admitted to a program of ‘deferred maintenance’ because of the city’s plans for demolition” (23). Debates over the Loop Elevated’s future became heated in the Franklin project’s final years, as all Chicagoans in one form or fashion were forced to consider the historical importance and meaning of the L.

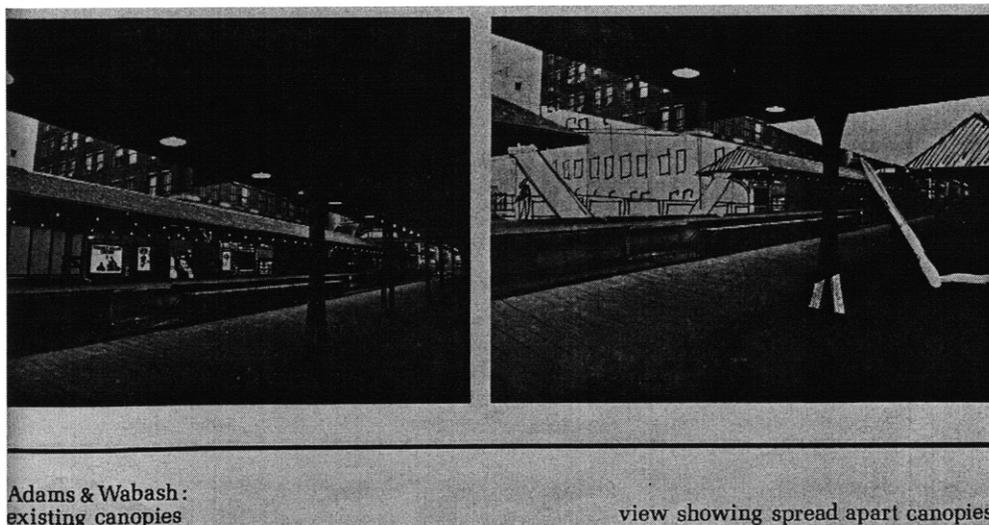
Many citizens, historians and non-historians alike, agreed that the L was an integral part of the city’s image -- however, not many knew why or how this was so. The leaders of the preservationist front that mobilized in support of the Loop Elevated in the late 1970s argued for

<sup>22</sup> Still, Young notes that in subsequent years, voters twice turned down comprehensive Loop subway plans -- once in 1918, and again in 1925 (34).

the line's salvage because of its intrinsic beauty and cost savings. Washington Metro architectural consultant and Chicago AIA (American Institute of Architects) member Harry Weese was an outspoken proponent of the L, chiefly for its architectural contribution to the urban environment, its cost-effectiveness in the face of a ballooning subway project, and, relatedly, its role as a reliable reminder of the past. In an attempt to protect the L, Weese "worked to have the Loop El placed in the National Register of Historic Places" (Huth 5), claiming that it "rank[ed] with the original Ferris Wheel and the Eiffel Tower in its rivets tracery, canopied stairs, railings, girders and laced columns" (5). While these efforts fell short, so did the Franklin subway project's time eventually run out. Indeed, "the election of Jane Byrne as mayor in the spring of 1979 and mounting inflation" once again allowed the Loop L to simply "outlast its critics" (5, 2). Huth notes that Byrne "in the process of reviewing Chicago's long-range transportation needs, appointed an architectural advisory committee whose most energetic member was...Harry Weese" (6).

The architect's 1979 plan for the Loop L Renovation identifies responsible programs for the rehabilitation and amelioration of the L, and sheds light on why Chicagoans were unable to coherently explain why the Loop L was so important to the city. As with the Mohler study, Weese's introductory summary serves our purposes well. Weese's plan provided a mix of renovation and reconstruction that, taken as a whole, was meant to ensure a permanent future of the line. Echoing Mohler, Weese proposed "removing the blockage of stations from cross streets" to "open up scenic easements, on Adams, for example, to the Art Institute, and on Clark Street to the north [Figure 49]. A careful paring down of the platform canopy on a few select stations will offer clear vistas with minimal obstruction..." In general, Weese proposed major alterations to all downtown L stations except Quincy/Wells, which would undergo a comprehensive restoration (Figures 50 & 51). The architect told Huth and Historic Preservation that he hoped his reconstruction plans wouldn't "run afoul of the purists" (9). Yet Weese argued that the primary cause of downtown blight was the years of ad hoc station improvements that "actually degraded the architecture of the stations," so much so that even from his preservationist standpoint, they were too far gone to save.

That trend -- the Chicago Transit Authority's ad hoc improvements -- was part of why Chicagoans could not fully grasp the Loop L's meaningfulness. For years, the L did not really have a cohesive symbolic image because, in the eyes of its governing authorities, it did not have



Adams & Wabash:  
existing canopies

view showing spread apart canopies

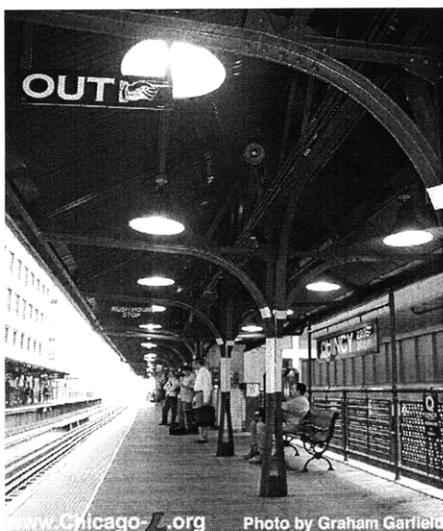
**Figure 49.**

Harry Weese's plan: modify those stations like Adams & Wabash that had lost their luster, and restore Quincy, which had remained intact.

a future. Worse, the negative effects of the line were constant, and stations often became uglier and uglier as time went by. Furthermore, expressways were seen as the solution: in the late 1950s, the Van Buren Street L was replaced with the Congress Line, built in the median of a highway of the same name, and connected to the system by the Dearborn Street subway. In the midst of replacement project delays, the Loop gained symbolic status as a landmark simply because that it was there, always running, forming the backdrop to memories of activities downtown. “It so identified Chicago,” resident Jim O’Connor told Bronsky and Samors, “that if you removed it... we would have lost a major element of what made Chicago different from any other major city” (137). In essence, due to a lack of sustained government investment, the Loop L typified Chicago because it was Chicago’s unique downtown characteristic. To those living next to it, however, its diversity was the city’s diversity. In 1979, Weese called for city leaders to seize an opportunity “to provide an absolutely new image for the El--[and] finally recognize it as an artifact that we must live with for an indefinite period of time.” Transit officials finally caught on, and Weese’s hopes for a renovation of Quincy/Wells became reality in the late 1980s, when the station was restored to its “original 1897 appearance” (Garfield). The investment solidified the historical importance of the L, and marked a new era of responsible acceptance -- by the 1990s, the city had acknowledged that the L was there to stay, and subsequent station construction (e.g., the new Library/State-Van Buren stop, seen in Figure 52) highlighted this newfound historical legacy. In Chicago, the Loop L has become a complex and revered mix of the past and the present.

**Conclusion: The L as Stratified Symbol**

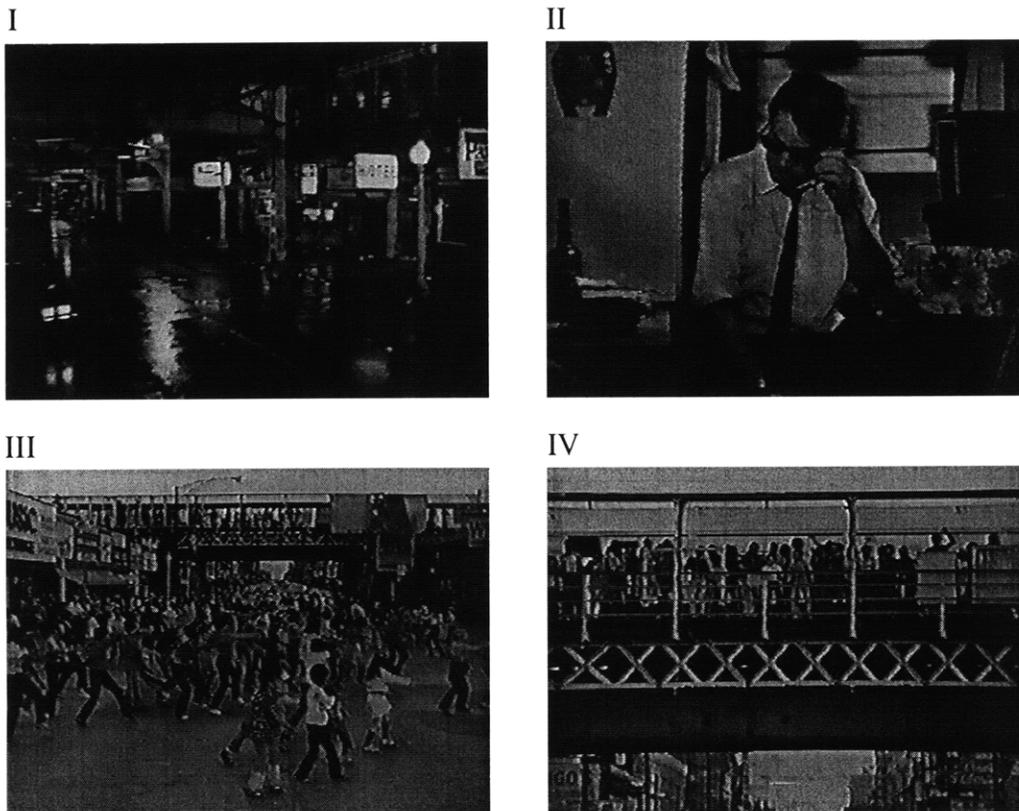
Since the 1970s, the L has been the film industry’s go-to symbol of Chicago. In 1980, Huth noted that “whenever Hollywood wants to characterize the Windy City, it heads, not for the Sears or Hancock towers, not for the luxury strip along North Michigan Avenue, but for the doughty old elevated. As the cable car represents San Francisco, as the double-decker bus speaks for London, so the El gives shape and distinction to this place called Chicago” (7). Perhaps this is because the L is perfect for that profession: at once, it offers a distinct and immediate sense of place, and by virtue of its visible structure and train movement, can be an actor as well as a stage. According



**Figures 50, 51 & 52.**

Left & center: Quincy station, restored to a near-perfect 1897 appearance, complete with Victorian advertisements; Right, Library/State-Van Buren station echoes the Harold Washington Library Center next door, and resembles a classic trainshed.

to Graham Garfield, the L appears in a multitude of movies and television shows, including The Sting, The Blues Brothers, Risky Business, and Planes, Trains and Automobiles. (He neglects to identify that a few short clips of the L are showing in John Hughes' 1985 classic tribute to Chicago, Ferris Bueller's Day Off.) Out of all films that feature the L, perhaps The Blues Brothers uses it best, variously employing it as a comic actor, a stage for a musical scene, and a setting for a ridiculous police-car pileup. In that 1980 film, director John Landis also uses the L symbolically: its encouragement of citywide connectivity and fraternity can be seen to mirror the relationship of the two protagonists (brothers Jake and Elwood Blues, played by John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd, respectively). In scenes featuring Elwood's downtown dive apartment, the L offers comic relief as an impossibly-constant reminder of the dense urban center that is the Loop. Garfield notes that "every time we see the window in Elwood's apartment an 'L' train goes past"-- because this happens several times in one scene, the rush of noise and wind that fills the tiny apartment every few seconds is ridiculous (Fig. 53, I, II). In another scene, a South Side L station allows an outdoor musical scene with Ray Charles to fill the street and a backdrop above it with dancing people (Fig. 53, III, IV). The result is hypnotic, and depicts the L as much more than a symbol of noisy downtown life; in fact, this Chicago L was fully integrated with the neighborhood.



**Figure 53.**

Stills from John Landis' *The Blues Brothers* (1980). In the film, the L is both a stage and an actor; overall, it offers instant recognition of the movie's setting in a quintessential and beloved urban environment -- Chicago.

In real life, however, Chicago's relationship with its L lines is much more complex, and less rosy than the scene at "Ray's Music Exchange" suggests. The early history of disparate elevated railway construction and management, associated real estate development, and ethnic migration was indeed a bit of a dance -- though more often a quickstep than a waltz. On the South Side, the L fell into disrepair and rose again with the neighborhoods it served: while for many blacks in the early twentieth century it was an emblem of racial segregation and tension, in the years following the Green Line's renovation the L became a conduit of hope. Planners and community groups alike saw the L as a gateway to better development strategies as well as a patched urban fabric. On the North Side, recent resurgence in the popularity of the Ravenswood L -- the Brown Line -- has led the Chicago Transit Authority to expand station capacity to handle ever-increasing ridership. Ehrenhart indicated that the line's uniqueness became an asset, but not to entirely positive ends: perhaps the Brown Line, despite its modern renovations, would end up like the early twentieth century South Side L -- a symbol of increasing inner-city income segregation and middle-class homogeneity.

Yet the lines covered in depth are but two out of Chicago's (once-larger) system of L's and feeder subways. Like the neighborhoods they served in the greater Chicago metropolitan context, the lines are fragmented spokes that coalesce into the Loop Elevated. Our investigation of the Loop's symbolism found that over the years, Chicagoans came to regard the Loop L as a landmark and a synecdoche for the city as a whole, but often knew not why. A late-1970s fracas over possibly demolishing the line revealed one of the culprits to be the Chicago Transit Authority, who did not have a long-term strategy for the downtown elevated. In the end, preservationists won out, and the L's historical legacy -- and its role as a technological pioneer -- became its one of its defining narratives, one that the City could be proud of. Finally, we saw that film and television media use the L as a stand-in for Chicago, cementing that extensive elevated rapid transit system in the national and international identity of the city.

4.

Philadelphia:  
Renewing the “Backbone”

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“You can’t get to heaven on  
the Frankford El/ ‘cause  
the Frankford El goes  
straight to...Frankford.”

“Frankford El,” by  
The American  
Dream, 1968



**Figure 54.**

Light streams through decorative steel slats at a reconstructed station on West Market Street.

## Introduction

The Philadelphia story is one that can be understood, at the fore, as a product of costs. As we will see, the city's elevated lines were built thusly because of cost considerations, and they were recently reconstructed and rehabilitated *in situ* because to their operator, SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority), as well as the neighboring communities, the lines were simply too costly to relocate. In this final case study, I shall provide a historical and neighborhood context for what SEPTA deems the "backbone" of their transit system, the Market-Frankford Subway-Elevated, and investigate the public response to recent reconstruction efforts. Because Boston has demolished all of its elevated system, and Chicago has only recently acknowledged its L's importance in the city-wide context, Philadelphia's El offers a set of symbols that, it is significant to note, continue to grow and change in everyday life. SEPTA's reconstruction of the Market Street Elevated is particularly important, not only for its installation of a new physical form on the landscape, but also for the transit operator's efforts to engage the community in projecting local history and culture onto the line.

As we dig deeper into the Market-Frankford Line's history, we find that neighborhoods along the line, as in Boston, found symbolism in their respective segments; for some, the line brought a richer sense of community identity, and for others, the elevated was an element of survival. The more recent narrative of the line's reconstruction is enriched by the City's renewed, perhaps emboldened, push to regenerate the parcels immediately adjacent to the line in both West Philadelphia (along West Market Street) and the northeast neighborhood of Frankford (along Frankford Avenue) through a comprehensive series of Transit Oriented Development (TOD) projects. Though a similar scheme will be seen in Chicago, Philadelphia's example is unique in that the Market-Frankford El is the accepted "backbone" of SEPTA (running above streets, not alleyways), and thus serves as an interesting study of how neighborhoods have come to live with the line now and into the future.

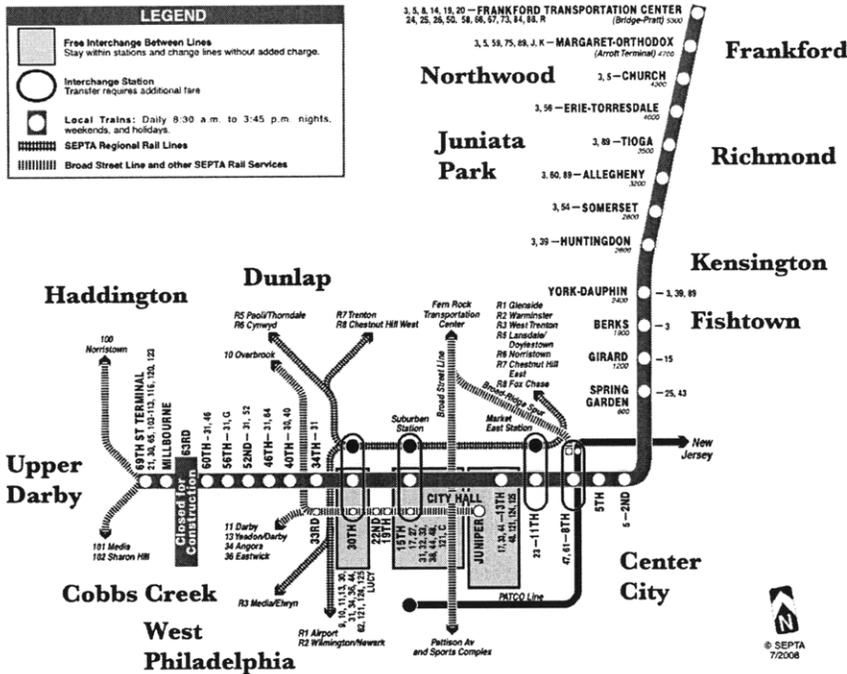
## The El in Context

Today, the Market-Frankford Subway-Elevated (MFSE) stretches from 69th Street in West Philadelphia, near the village center of Upper Darby, through Center City Philadelphia, and northeast to Frankford through a variety of neighborhoods such as Fishtown and Kensington. In studies from the 1970s to the present, SEPTA has described the elevated line (or, locally, the "el") as the "backbone" of the system, offering variable ridership statistics that, more or less, continually hover around 100,000 passengers a day. In 2007, the year of the Market Street elevated's centennial, SEPTA estimated yearly ridership on the line to be 47 million, with 25.8 million riding the Market Street segment alone (The Philadelphia Inquirer, 3/1/07)<sup>23</sup>. In the last twenty years, the line's elevated portions (including stations, signals, and trackwork) have been completely rehabilitated and/or replaced: the Frankford El, from the Girard street station to the Bridge/Pratt streets terminus, was rehabilitated with a new concrete trackway between 1987 and 1996; and the Market Street portion, from the 46th street portal to the 69th street terminus, has been replaced in stages between 2000 and 2009.

The early history of Philadelphia's foray into rapid transit is complex, and involves a great

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<sup>23</sup> For sake of ease and variety, I will use "PI" interchangeably with "The Philadelphia Inquirer."



**Figure 55.** The current SEPTA Market-Frankford Subway-Elevated line. While this map omits details such as handicapped accessible stations (all but three are currently inaccessible) and the A/B skip-stop service explained in the Chicago section, it is apparent that the route truly forms the “backbone” of Philadelphia’s transit system. To establish context for the discussions that follow, a sampling of adjacent neighborhoods is also shown.

deal of private competition and public haranguing. By the late 1800s, the downtown grid was choked with traffic. Streetcars had dominated the scene for many years, and congestion only grew as the city expanded, especially into West Philadelphia. After many proposals for city-wide systems of elevated lines failed, by 1903 only one remained: the Market Street Line. Ultimately, it was rushed to construction because by then congestion had become unbearable.

Philadelphia’s elevated lines, linked by the Center City -- Market Street subway, were constructed as such because elevated lines were the most cost-effective and, pardon the pun, the easiest to get off the ground. The downtown Market Street subway was, however cost-prohibitive, a necessity for the West Philadelphia elevated line. Contextually, as Fogelson notes in his seminal history, *Downtown*, by the early twentieth century subways became more and more desirable in American cities; indeed, the author writes, “[Americans] were also convinced that underground railroads were far superior to elevated ones. It had long been evident that subways were technologically feasible...[and] it now seemed clear that they were economically feasible as well” (61-2). Despite the “complex subsurface utilities on Market Street, most of which were unmarked on maps” (Cox 3), the Philadelphia City Council, motivated by earlier unmovable opposition to an elevated line in the business district, “authorized construction [in April 1903], provided that the portion east of the Schuylkill River was to be placed underground” (5). Cox argues that it was Market Street’s “saturation with streetcars” that pushed the Philadelphia Rapid Transit company (PRT) to quit “quibbl[ing] over the relative virtues and expenses of elevated and subway lines” and begin construction (5). By 1908, the city’s first subway-elevated stretched from Upper Darby (69th Street) to the edge of downtown, fell into subway thereafter, and rose again to the waterfront ferries with a tail elevated line down Delaware Avenue. The project also helped to alleviate the streetcar traffic with a linked downtown streetcar tunnel ending at City Hall.

Sam Bass Warner explains that, in essence, the Market Street Subway-Elevated was intended

“to link the downtown with the fast-growing commuter suburbs of West Philadelphia,” and that it, as built and operated by a private entity, “was clearly designed to profit from and maintain the specialized character of the downtown” (192). The line was also designed and trumpeted as the pinnacle of rapid transit in the United States. A 1908 PRT report celebrating the completion of the Market Street Subway-Elevated compared its city with New York, Boston, and Chicago: given the “scattering of the population” in the “City of Homes,” “Philadelphia was therefore the last of the great cities to attain elevated and subway transportation. But while she was the last to get it, she was the first in which the subways were built by private capital, and she has profited by the experience and mistakes of other cities, and today presents the finest specimen of elevated and subway construction in the world.”

The elevated portion of the line especially “differs from the elevated railways in other American cities, in the solid floor provided to prevent dripping into the street, and in the precautions taken to reduce the noise as much as possible... The reduction of noise is quite satisfactory.” Renovations of the line were successful in further reducing noise; during my visit in March, the Frankford El was no louder than a passing bus or garbage collection truck. The perception is different, no doubt, for those living with thousands of passing trains a year.

The PRT undertook several other major transportation projects in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, including commencing construction of a subway along Broad Street, and opening the final segment of the Subway-Elevated -- the line to Frankford, along Front Street, Kensington and Frankford Avenues, was completed in 1922. The Delaware Avenue line, which offered views similar to Boston’s Atlantic Avenue El and, similarly, declined in ridership with the decline of waterfront activity (most notably ferries to New Jersey, which were superseded by the Ben Franklin Bridge), was abandoned in 1953 (Cox, 24). By the 1950s, an elevated section of the Market Street line from the Schuylkill River bridge to 46th street was put underground, allowing cleaner and brighter development around the Universities and beyond. After the SEPTA takeover, transit management decided to color-code the city’s rapid transit services; in the 1980s, the Market-Frankford line became the “Blue Line.” All station placards would henceforth bear this color. Regardless, the Market-Frankford Subway-Elevated remained structurally intact until the complete overhauls of the last twenty years, with only minor necessary renovations completed before then. After nearly one hundred (Market Street) and eighty (Frankford) years of service, the



**Figure 56.**

The Delaware Street elevated, for years the easterly end of the Market Street Subway-Elevated. Like Boston’s Atlantic Avenue El, it served the city’s waterfront.

structure was in dire need of attention.

## The El and Urban Design

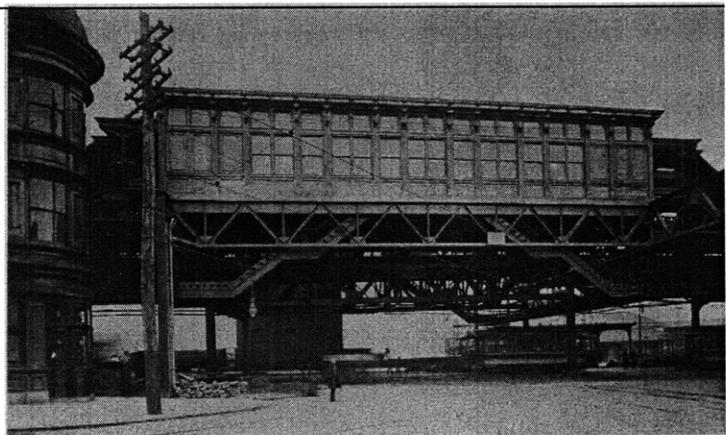
### Architecture

The architecture of the original Market Street Elevated stations was utilitarian yet advanced. The 1908 Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company report on the new line stressed the technological prowess accompanying the station buildings: “In each [station’s] waiting room a toilet room has been provided with tiled floors and tiled wainscoting, and the best modern sanitary plumbing. The waiting rooms and ticket booths are heated by electric heaters....The exterior of the buildings is covered with copper, and all roofs received felt, pitch and slag covering, except the steep shelters over the stairways, where the roofs are of tin.” From contemporary photographs in Cox’s history, one observes that the station facades housed many operable, identical windows topped by a decorative cornice (Figure 57). The station platforms featured little ornamentation besides the safety railing: a band of diamond-shaped steel cut-outs sat below a simple steel grill. It seems that in the rush to construct the elevated, the PRT sacrificed ornament for utility; nevertheless, the stations were passable as complements to the West Philadelphia urban fabric -- in fact, they were even featured in postcards (described below).

Along the Frankford Elevated, more care was given to the design of stations, especially their anchoring buildings. Here, the Philadelphia Department of City Transit (by this time, the City was to lease its structures to PRT) decided that stations with stairwells extending to “narrow and crowded sidewalks” were “unsightly buildings.” The company’s solution was to construct individual station buildings for each stop, containing fare collection areas, toilets, and stairways. As station-houses of “pleasing architectural design” (25), the El’s stops were in effect gateways to the neighborhood, and more tangible anchors of the elevated’s rapid transverse movement. In renovations, a few of these station houses received graphics celebrating the cross street names in large type, further adding a more localized touch to the line’s uniformity. Additionally, local residents asserted that one of the stations along the route, Margaret-Orthodox, originally “had brick portals and was painted blue and white with signs to match. There were also floral mosaics...” (PI, 2/11/08). Yet ad-hoc renovations and minor modernization projects, coupled with years of neglect and deterioration,

**Figure 57.**

32nd Street station on the Market Street line. Now demolished, the structure was representative of Philadelphia’s early elevated stations: functional yet attractive.



led an author of a textbook on mass transit marketing to step slightly out of character. In 1965, Schneider reported that “the stations along the Market-Frankford route, in the author’s opinion, were among the dreariest and most unattractive in the United States” (126).

Features the original stations most certainly lacked were alternate means of access, including escalators and elevators. Of course, at the time of construction (1900s and nineteen-teens), these features were either not technologically available, or simply not considered. But by the late 1980s their installation became essential -- for one, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 required public transportation facilities to provide handicapped access; also, the lines were losing riders who were not able to climb the stairs anymore. The renovation and replacement projects of the last twenty years have addressed these problems: by late 2009, all but two of the Market and Frankford Elevated stations will be fully handicapped accessible. Philadelphia, unlike Boston, undertook massive reconstruction and rehabilitation of its elevated structure and stations, and the results were mixed:

Initial station redesigns failed to engage the community; and at Margaret-Orthodox the redesign even distilled residents’ growing ire with the project. At a transportation panel discussion accompanying that station’s opening, tensions ran high. Elderly residents complained about accessibility gaffes, such as placing a set of stairs before an escalator. Representatives of the Frankford United Neighbors historic preservation committee complained that “SEPTA never answered their letter asking that the signs and mosaics from the old station be donated to the Frankford Historical Society” (PI, 2/11/88). One woman stated that the new station was radically out of place in the community, looking more like “a gas station in the 1950s” than a context- or historically-appropriate rail station (Figure 58). Although SEPTA representatives acknowledged that there was no money to retool station designs, the operator promised “to donate to the historical society any mosaics or artifacts that are removed from El stations in the future;” SEPTA’s marketing director also “suggested that his department might be able to provide graphics of old Frankford to hang in the new station.” Too little, too late, it seems, for the way stations. On my visit in March, the Frankford El stations did not appear to have many historical artwork on the station platforms or in the station buildings. Moreover, the construction quality of the reconstructed stations is in doubt,



**Figure 58.**

A sore thumb: Margaret-Orthodox station (left) neither tries nor succeeds to integrate with the existing neighborhood fabric of lower Frankford (right).

and in the early 1990s, spotty maintenance compounded the problem. In 1995, only a few years after its rebuilding, residents noticed “that the metal panels on the Margaret-Orthodox station were already covered in soot stains” (PI, 8/1/03).

Yet, during the same trip to Philadelphia, I noted that the way-stations have more than a few significant, if modernized, architectural details. Stations like Somerset and York-Dauphin retain the historic steel diamond-cutout decoration. Nearly all of the way-stations also have large SEPTA logos on either the platform structures or station buildings, with an equally large identifying-sign. At Girard, the station name is located directly over the namesake street. Symbolically, the mere presence of this graphic helps to ground the structure to that particular place. That is, despite the line’s role as a city-wide connector, it displays a local awareness. Furthermore, some way-stations do indeed feature artwork by local artists, and incorporate different color schemes to render each station unique.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike the other stations, however, Frankford Terminal (Figure 59) attempts in its architectural details to pay homage to the history of rail transport and the form of the surrounding community. After the station’s opening in 2003, *Philadelphia Inquirer* architectural critic Inga Saffron wrote a glowing celebration of the El reconstruction’s crowning achievement. This time, she wrote, “the main architectural challenge was to make the large building sit comfortably amid a neighborhood of 16-foot-wide rowhouses. The [architectural] firm accomplished this goal by dividing the front facade into five sections, each marked by a thick brick column. The columns are meant to mimic the party walls that separate Philadelphia rowhouses. These are topped with chimneylike forms that conveniently hide the ventilation equipment on the roof.” These innovations and homages were mixed with real community needs, and space was provided on the lower level of the station for retail. The station is a real asset to the community, on par with the grand old railroad stations of the past, Saffron notes. As an El station, I would argue, Frankford Transportation Center is a beacon of hope for future elevated rapid transit renovations. Sometimes it is essential to inject some (responsible -- see Margaret-Orthodox) pomp into a transit station, if only to appease the nostalgia-

24 <http://www.stationreporter.net/market.htm>, accessed 4/8/09



**Figure 59.**

The new Frankford Transportation Center, 2004.

**Figure 60.**

SEPTA learns a lesson from Frankford: Stations along the reconstructed Market Street El. On-structure buildings celebrate an ornate, if streamlined, past. (46th St Station)



prone as well as rally the local community.

On Market Street, SEPTA's stations are more responsive to community needs. With the opening of 63rd Street Station this June (2009), all Market Street Elevated stations will be fully handicapped accessible. New station buildings, two of which are meant to house automatic train operation equipment, are fitting anchors to the neighborhood. The stations themselves, while identical and spartan, reintroduce a historic sensibility to the modern aerial guideway. Unlike the way-stations along the Frankford El, these stations have curved, pressed steel platform barriers with half-circle cutouts (seen in Figure 54 at the beginning of the chapter). It's a subtle difference, but one worth mentioning, as they add necessary design variety to the Market-Frankford line as a whole. The Market Street stations also have identical headhouses that look over a neighborhood street (Figure 60). The view emphasizes the station's connection to the specific neighborhood below, and in turn offers a pleasant, if nostalgically Victorian, sight to those below. These ornamental "houses" contain no amenities, but feature respectable mock-chandeliers that do not mimic the past so much as amplify a streamlined version of it -- much like the line itself.

### **The El in the Neighborhood: Distilling Symbols from Historical Narrative**

In this section, I will address the physical and symbolic impact of the Market-Frankford Subway-Elevated on the major neighborhoods through which the line passes and serves. The order of neighborhoods -- first, Frankford and Kensington, to the northeast of downtown; and West Philadelphia, along Market Street -- is determined by the order in which they were reconstructed. Because SEPTA improved its handling of community input and collaboration between the Frankford and Market Street projects, the neighborhood-centric narrative is best served to conclude



**Figure 61.**

Frankford anticipates the El, ca. 1922. Note the existing two-story buildings -- the area was already reasonably built-up prior to the arrival of rapid transit.

on a high note.

### Development, Symbolism & Renovation in Frankford and Kensington

Whereas West Philadelphia (at least south of Market Street) was largely undeveloped prior to the coming of the elevated, neighborhoods “up to Bridge Street” -- along the path of the Frankford El -- “had already been developed by 1910” (Miller 230). The author posits that these neighborhoods were “probably affected by the noise and dirt of the El.” Farther north of the Frankford terminal at Bridge and Pratt Streets, however, the elevated brought similar development schemes as in West Philadelphia. Indeed, a contemporary photograph (Figure 61) depicts a sign in this vicinity reading, “Now is the time to buy before the coming of the elevated railroad advances values” (231). Likewise, a souvenir booklet compiled to celebrate the coming of the Frankford El contains advertisements for housing projects in that neighborhood. One ad purchased by the Frankford Real Estate Co. reads, “The 92 homes on the FRANKFORD ‘L’ are the first in the series for the development of Northeast.”

The celebration of the opening of the line, held in early November of 1922, was monumental in of itself, and telling as to the contemporary local significance of the rapid transit link. “All along Frankford Avenue,” the Philadelphia Inquirer reported, “the roadway was lined with American flags and a mass of cheering humanity extending for more than two miles.” Even the stations -- of which just two were opened for the occasion -- were packed with people, the paper noted. The Mayor of Philadelphia at the time, J. Hampton Moore, in company of Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company, T.E. Mitten, rode a ceremonial train from Frankford to 69th Street in West Philadelphia, a trip of thirteen miles. Moore addressed the community at one point, announcing that “Frankford’s gain is a gain for all of Philadelphia. Suddenly the northeast section of Philadelphia has changed as a provincial community, and it will take its rightful place in this great metropolitan city.” Clearly, the coming of the elevated still, in 1922, represented a step towards modernity and civic duty. An advertisement posted by Geo. Royle & Co, Manufacturers of Frankford in the souvenir booklet did justice to the event as well as the overall community sentiment: “Progress for Frankford,” its

headline read. “George Royle & Co. gladly add their humble voice to the general shout of joy at the opening of the Frankford L -- an event which will result in not only speedier transportation but in increased prosperity for every manufacturer, every retailer, every individual in our progressive community.” As another bellwether of industrial support for the line, “the first train had been sent over the elevated...to the accompaniment of blasts from the whistles of every factory in that great manufacturing headquarters” (PI, 11/5/22). Further south in Kensington, the El provided not only quicker service to the textile and shipbuilding industries in the area, but also led to the development of Kensington Avenue as a commercial district (Hartmann).

In the years following the line’s opening, the decline of the once-great manufacturing industries -- due to nationwide economic factors --profoundly affected the neighborhoods along the El . Indeed, widespread building abandonment, rising crime rates, and great population change occurred. Despite all of these troubles, the community consensus on the El was generally positive, though not for aesthetic reasons. Frank Healy, a longtime resident of Frankford, told the Inquirer in 1989 that “the El is very important” to his community. Unfortunately, according to him, the paper wrote, “the Frankford El was in its heyday in the 1950s, [when] the trains were graffiti-free, the stations were clean and Healy was not worried about being out by himself after dark” (PI, 7/30/89). To business owners along the Frankford El, the line was a vital catalyst. In the same article, 45-year Frankford Avenue veteran Gerace Jewelers owner Frances Gerace told the Inquirer, “Every once in a while, we have people stop in who live at 69th Street. You do pick up customers from the El. I don’t know what Frankford Avenue would look like if we didn’t have the El.” Interestingly, Gerace’s comment avoids any consideration of the aesthetics of the line; for him, presumably, it would be too costly to allow sunlight back onto the street. (A more thorough discussion of business impacts during the renovation -- a bellwether of any possible relocation -- of the line follows below.)

To others in the neighborhood, the El served not only as a backbone of business, but also as an anchor for memories. Seen in Figure 62, Meyers and Nathans’ The Jewish Community Under the Frankford El is an Images of America history-photography book that could easily have been titled The Jewish Community in Frankford. Rather, in the authors’ (admittedly nostalgic) eyes, the established community known as “Jewtown,” or “Little Jerusalem,” in northeast Philadelphia thrived anew with the elevated line’s coming. Indeed, it allowed “Jewish life [to flourish] for a second and third generation into the 1960s” (7). The community largely disappeared with the loss of manufacturing jobs and the desire to provide a suitable and positive environment for their children. Now, the authors write, “the vacant buildings and residences hold tales of a bygone era when little voices could echo and be heard for some distance under the superstructure where the sun rarely shined into business owners’ display windows.”

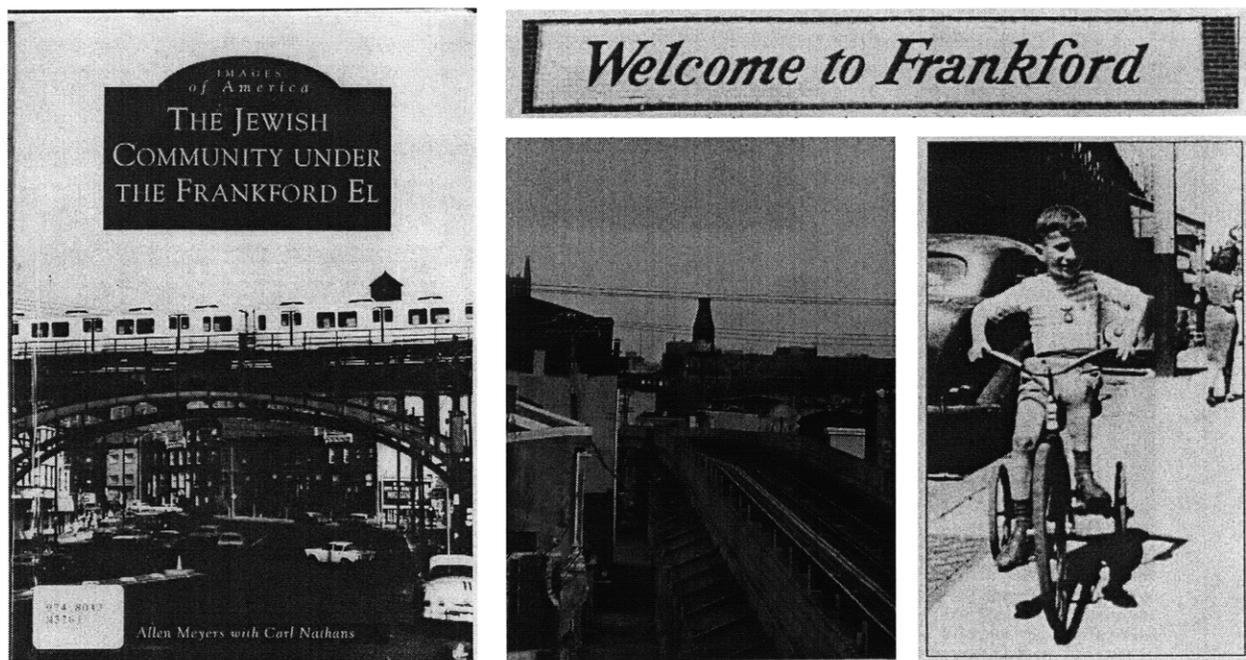
Meyers and Nathans identify several ways in which the Frankford El served as a physical conduit, and abstract symbol, of community prosperity and identity. Local landmarks targeted at elevated riders “help [them] know what part of the city they are in” (13), the authors posit. Conceptually, a sight such as the Harbison Dairy plant’s large model milk bottle (13), which lies on a direct line of sight with the el as it turns from Front Street onto Kensington Avenue, serves as a unique reminder of the neighborhood and its history (Figure 65). Similarly, the more clear “Welcome to Frankford” sign seen in Figure 63, with black italic type on a white background, greets El riders at “the start of Frankford’s business district, where the Frankford el makes a sharp left turn [off of Kensington Avenue] high above the roofline” (103). Also, as the Inquirer wrote more recently, the El enables a view of Frankford’s architectural heritage unavailable to the “uninitiated”

-- simply by being thirty feet in the air, adjacent to buildings' ornament. (PI, 3/20/88)

While riders on the line were able to orient themselves high above the avenues using special cues, those on the ground found similar grounding (orientation, reminders of place) in the everyday experience below the elevated. Meyers reminisces about how Center City-bound El trains, rounding the bend from Kensington Avenue to Front Street, “would make a loud, shrill sound, which could be heard throughout the neighborhood” (57). In the context of the preceding paragraph, which highlights the positive aspects of the El, the author seems to reclaim the structure’s negative effect as a sign of community unity; those indebted to the El for success may, no matter how lucrative it may have been, have seen the line as a shared hardship, and bonded in its affronts. Partially corroborating this claim, Meyers and Nathans tell of local business owner Sam Bobman, whose family (perhaps apocryphally) “loved the fresh air and the sound of the Frankford El as it brought more customers from all over the city to the clothing stores in Kensington and Frankford” (79). To some, then, like the boy in Figure 64, the El was a canvas, a background and backbone of memories; to others, it was a rattling and crashing symbol of prosperity.

As the Market Street Elevated has been converted from a double-girder, rusty steel structure into a more modern, t-shaped concrete and steel aerial guideway, the areas under the Frankford El, which retains its historic understructure, attracts attention for its unique and historic environment. This has been the case in past years as well. Unlike Market Street’s old elevated, the Frankford line straddles Front Street and Kensington Avenue from sidewalk to sidewalk.

“Down under the El,” the *Inquirer* wrote in 1985 before renovations, “it is among the most



**Figures 62, 63, 64 & 65.**

Lives and livelihoods were tied to the El. Clockwise from far left: Meyers & Nathans’ ode to the Frankford line; a sign geared at El riders to orient them to the neighborhood below; an example of the El as constant background element in the Frankford Jewish Community (especially its youth); and the Harbison Dairy bottle seen from Girard Station in Fishtown, acting as advertisement as well as community beacon.

intensely urban environments in the big city. [In Frankford,] Trains rattle into the stations every three minutes at rush hour; cars clog the streets, and shoppers hurry among stores, restaurants and fruit markets” (PI, 8/11/85). Here, the elevated serves as a distiller of urban activity. The infrastructure encloses and amplifies movement, and at rush hours, sensory experiences. The line at former terminal Bridge/Pratt “created its own biosphere for the people underneath it,” the Inquirer reported in 2003, “When it rained, [local salesclerk Eutikey] Hallaway said, the runoff from the tracks made it seem as if was raining harder for the folks below” (PI, 7/30/03).

As early as 1956, contemporary with the extension of subway service (and demolition of the El) from the Center City to 46th Street, the City of Philadelphia was drawing up plans to renovate the Market-Frankford Subway-Elevated. The City’s Urban Traffic and Transportation Board suggested, plainly, that the line “must be modernized.” Speed was a major issue, and the Board’s recommendation of skip-stop service<sup>25</sup> was ultimately adopted. Two major recommendations were not implemented, however; the Board recommended that one, “stations...be refurbished to make them more attractive,” and two, that “the elevated line should be replaced eventually by open-cut or expressway center-mall locations.”

Subsequent studies deemed the latter recommendation to be cost-prohibitive. The former direction, as seen by the state of the line in the mid-1980s, was also not followed through. Apparently, according to Cassidy Hartmann of the Philadelphia Weekly, a subway was proposed for the Frankford El in the 1970s, “but business owners protested the idea, saying they couldn’t survive the time required to tear down and rebuild.” Another 1970s study completed for the U.S. Department of Transportation by Villanova University identified four “design packages” for the Frankford line. Of them -- a Pneumatic Tired Facility (akin to Montreal) with an express bypass route; a higher elevated structure (possibly 60 feet high); a “piggybacking” facility, wherein a feeder bus drives directly onto an elevated flatbed railcar; and a rehabilitation of the existing facility -- the last example was chosen. Undoubtedly, it was again the most cost-effective and least disruptive solution.

Yet it still was disruptive in both Frankford and West Philadelphia, and the associated stresses made apparent the integral role the El still played in the city. The Frankford El reconstruction occurred first, in sporadic bursts between 1987 and 2003. Engineers decided that “the reuse of the existing foundations and slender columns that support the guideway was one of the main factors to make [the] project economically viable and constructable while maintaining service” (Woods and Nuxoll 7). Thus the understructure, comprised of the steel “bents” stretching from sidewalk to sidewalk to the south, and rising from the middle of Frankford Avenue, is original. The project replaced the trackway with new rails, safety means, and signals, and refurbished stations as well as the historic support structures.

The need for such a project was apparent by 1988. Then, the Inquirer noted that “calcium dripping from the concrete that holds up the tracks...is forming stalactites,” and “thick industrial paint is peeling in brittle flakes from El stations and from diagonal trusses of the El’s supports. Its lattice of steel has assumed the rust and gray colors of age, neglect and decay” (3/21/1988).

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25 Designating certain trains to stop at certain stations in order to improve acceleration speed. A similar system was implemented in Chicago in the 1950s, where some stations would be “A” stops, others “B” stops, and other “AB” (full service) stations. Trains marked “A” would stop only at “A” and “AB” stations, and vice versa. In Philadelphia, most stations were “AB” -- only a few more local stops were designated as skip-stops.

At this point, the community under the El was undoubtedly tarnished by not only the train noise and the structure shadows, but also by the apparent lack of effective management, maintenance or care paid to the line. Residents and line users had much with which to be annoyed. Not only were neighborhoods distrusting of SEPTA -- one Kensington merchant complained in 1985 that "there's no confidence on the avenue" -- oversight groups had their doubts as well (PI, 1/27/85). The Urban Mass Transit Administration (UMTA), who had given grant money to the project in its infancy, complained that "because of poor management in general, the project will cost more than SEPTA estimated...SEPTA is going to have to work its way out of this one on its own" (PI, 3/21/88). Others disagreed, arguing that SEPTA was stretched thin due to many other city-wide commitments. Nevertheless, as the project progressed, SEPTA was to open its ears to community input.

The line was to be methodologically rebuilt in stages, but hit many snags along the way. The bulk of the trackway renovation formally finished in late 1996. Some stations -- specifically Margaret-Orthodox -- were completely renovated by 1988, and others followed sporadically over the next decade. The Frankford Transportation Center (replacing Bridge/Pratt station, named for its span over two cross streets) was opened in 2003, marking the official end of the 650 million-dollar project.

One of the reasons this latter station became so popular was not because of its responsive design (as detailed above), but because it realigned the transit line ever so slightly away from Frankford's central commercial district. After all, much of the celebration about the terminal is rooted in utter disgust over what it replaced. The old Bridge-Pratt station was situated on what the Inquirer called the "Green Monster," a section of structure that represented "perhaps the ugliest two blocks of corroding elevated track in the entire city." Even more, the paper posited, the green color spoke "of illness, nausea and decay" (7/30/03). Yet, even to SEPTA, the rest of the El had more than just negative connotations.

To their credit, throughout the reconstruction process the transit operator made clear that it had a vested interest in the revitalization of the El and its surrounding community. In sporadic bursts, a newsletter chronicling construction progress and local involvement was circulated in Frankford and Kensington entitled "Makin' Tracks." In one edition, SEPTA reminded the communities that "one of the engineers who spent many weekends on-site is Tom Shiels, now PTC [Philadelphia Transit Consultants, the team responsible for the project's design, engineering and construction] Resident Engineer for Stations. Shiels is a native of Mount Airy whose mother and grandmother were raised in Kensington. He has fond memories of riding the El to visit his grandmother. Shiels observes, '...The bottom line is that we have put our hearts and souls into this project. We want it to work'" (Makin' Tracks, Winter 1995). An earlier edition also attempted to quell community distrust of SEPTA by emphasizing the operator's commitment to transparency. The Winter 1994 issue read,

"To help prepare the community for a weekend of major demolition, the [Community Information Center] staff issues, and personally distributes, weekly construction updates to those businesses and residents most directly affected by upcoming work. The description of the work is not always pleasant. As [coordinator Marge] Scherneck put it, '...We quickly learned that painting an honest picture, no matter how bleak, brought no surprises. This face-to-face communication has worked well and has resulted in better cooperation and understanding within the community.'"

Before and after the renovation, the El has acted as a symbol of the less desirable and



**Figure 66.**

The El as unique asset, or simply part of a medley of attractive qualities in up-and-coming neighborhoods? Old stone pavers, the rehabilitated El & a horse-drawn carriage near Fishtown at Girard Avenue.

seemingly denigrating populations of northeast Philadelphia. “Thirty years ago,” Hartmann wrote for the *Philadelphia Weekly* in 2007, “a journalist described the Kensington section of the El as ‘an open-air coffin for the many stores it covers.’” Yet as in northern Chicago, the grittiness has been rebranded as uniqueness by opportunistic real estate actors and younger renting generations. At Girard Street station in Fishtown, I noticed creative posters for music gigs that one might see in up-and-coming “hip” neighborhoods across the country. A horse-drawn carriage was also parked outside the station entrance, down the way from some exposed sidewalk paving-stones (Figure 66). The appeal of this neighborhood to young artists and thinkers -- fast transit access, interesting juxtapositions of layers of history -- is obvious. Accordingly, Hartmann notes, “property values in [the Kensington] area have been steadily rising since 2002.”

Recently, a local artist (noted by several journalists to be of the young, creative class) has drawn attention to the locals underneath the El in Kensington, in an attempt to reclaim the structure and the people who live under it from the city’s negative gaze. The artist, David Kessler, cobbles together roughly three-minute-long “video stories from people [he’s] encountered on walks beneath and around the Kensington El” (Hartmann, 10/10/07). The videos, posted at Kessler’s blog,<sup>26</sup> are part of a greater project called “Shadow World.” Here the El is the stage as well as an actor; whether “a growl of thunder,” a knife “cut[ting] up North Front Street and...Kensington Avenue,” or a timepiece, the Frankford El intensifies the dynamism of the place. Of course, the city’s negative image of the area is not unfounded; “The el gives the neighborhood a vibe where things are in the shadow,” Kessler admits. “It’s shrouded by this dark presence, and I think that has something to do with the crime and some of the attitudes here.” Although Kessler’s videos are more character studies than interpretations of the El, it is clear that for some, the line itself encourages an altered form of time and human interaction. At the time of Hartmann’s article, Kessler hoped that a future showing of his work would include “speakers, so when you’re in the gallery space the same kind of phenomenon happens that happens when you’re under the El. You

26 <http://dskessler.com/shadowworld/> (formerly [undertheel.blogspot.com](http://undertheel.blogspot.com))

can talk for three minutes and then the train rumbles by, and you either have to stop talking or raise your voice.”

In the years since the line opened, the line has garnered enthusiastic, and then familiar, acceptance; and though the negative physical effects remain -- and, in Kensington, the line now serves as a symbol of the shadowy fringes of society -- the line is here to stay. Some, like Kessler, are more optimistic than others about its future.

### Development, Symbolism & Renovation on West Market Street

At the time of their construction, both sections of the elevated symbolized connectivity and progress despite their ever-present negative effects. Indeed, in both West Philadelphia and Frankford, the el encouraged faster and more varied development even in areas that had already become fairly built-up. On West Market Street, where more open land could be found to the south of the street, the El encouraged the construction of entirely new communities. In existing neighborhoods to the north and west of Market Street, new development also encouraged a shift in the ethnic makeup of the community population.

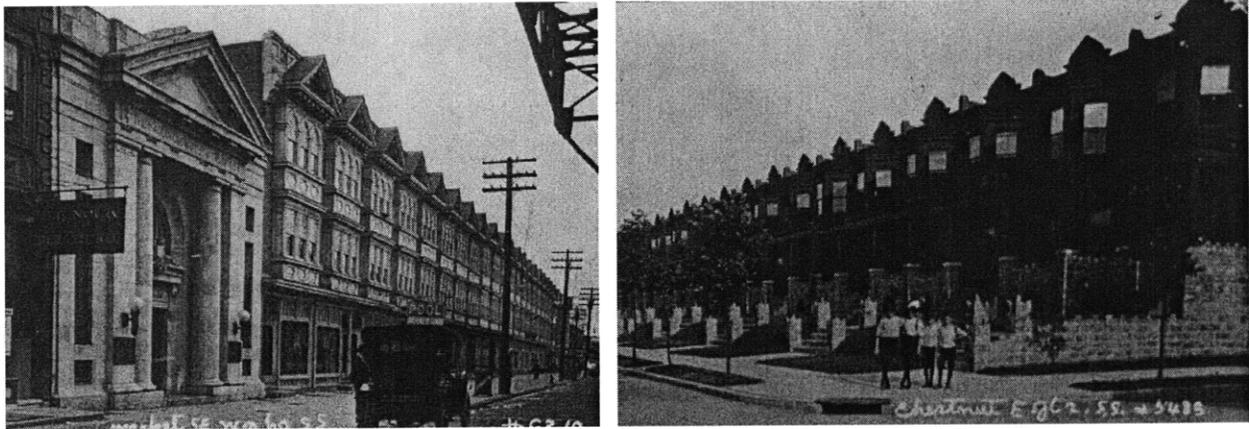
Margaret Marsh suggests that at root, the El “function[ed] as a tangible link between central Philadelphia and the communities of the outer city,” and thus “facilitated a shift of residents’ attention from their neighborhoods to downtown.” Clearly, she proposes, the double-edged sword of elevated rapid transit service surfaced in West Philadelphia: “if the El succeeded as a symbol of physical unification, it served to promote fragmentation and divisiveness as well” (169). Although Marsh’s focus is on Northern West Philadelphia, she acknowledges that Southern West Philadelphia “was virtually undeveloped until the El opened it to mass settlement in 1907” (174). The author omits the other neighborhood units of Southwest and Eastern West Philadelphia because the former was “too far away to be affected,” and the latter because by 1907 it “had become almost fully urbanized” (174). Indeed, Marsh posits that her area of focus is most interesting because there, “the El’s impact...was most profound, for it disrupted established communities in the process of further development.” The El was a large physical disruption, for sure, but it was the intangible aspects of the communities -- sense of identity, camaraderie, civic responsibility -- that were to be most affected.

For one, the El changed the routes and usage patterns of streetcar lines, which prior to the rapid transit construction had facilitated fast inter-neighborhood travel. Not so by 1912, Marsh explains, when the trolley lines “were...relegated principally to the role of feeder lines to the El.” She describes a scenario where it had become faster to travel five miles from the outer neighborhoods to the city center, than to negotiate the 1.5 miles within these neighborhoods. (180). This infrastructural refocusing on downtown, reflected most prominently in the massive steel elevated constructed on a bee-line to the Center City, Marsh notes, had a significant impact on the deterioration of community identity and connectedness. Changes in the form of urban development spurred by the prospect of prosperity contained in the El also led to changes in neighborhood demographics.

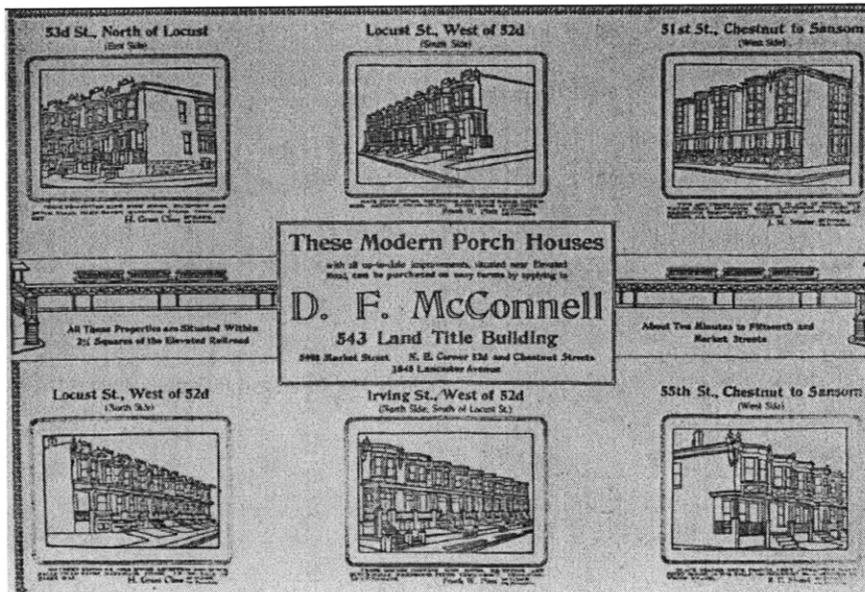
In the years of the Market Street elevated’s construction, according to the Inquirer’s Paul Nussbaum, Philadelphia “was growing by 2,000 people a month,” with West Philadelphia doubling in population within the El’s first twenty years of operation (PI, 3/1/07). In anticipation of the elevated, developers constructed residential units that, while structurally sound, resulted “in

**Figures 67 & 68.**

Blocks of “generic” row-businesses (left) and row-houses (right) proliferated in West Philadelphia following the construction of the El.



architectural repetitiveness and visual boredom” (Marsh, 181). The sense of community was so irreparably damaged by this “aesthetically unappealing” urban form, Marsh suggests, that West Philadelphia’s more mobile, middle-class residents chose suburbia’s “relatively more open space” when it became available (181). However, to the south of Market Street, farmland transformed into similarly “generic” row houses of “not great architecture” (Figure 68, above) offered residents of newly-formed communities “a home in a clean, healthy neighborhood at a time when the average New Yorker lived in a tenement apartment” (Skaler, 94). A contemporary (1909) advertisement for “modern porch houses” -- row houses with porches, essentially -- even used an illustration of the El as a horizontal graphical element, complete with drawings of ornate stairwell entrances anchored at the placard’s edge (Figure 69).

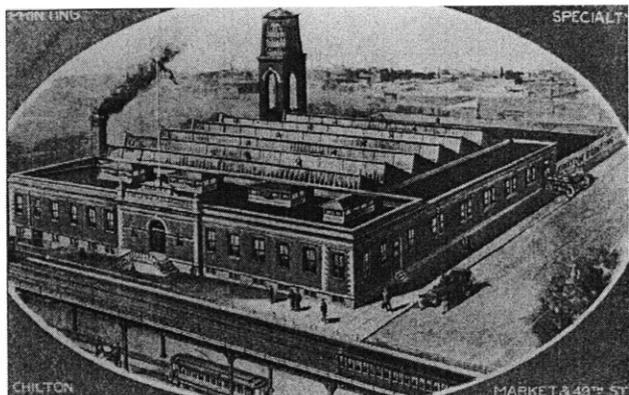


**Figure 69.**

The El as a West Philadelphia housing advertising design motif, vividly conflating rapid and regular access with aesthetic marketing.

## Figures 70 & 71.

Postcards produced around the time of the El's construction touted its modernity, efficiency, and rapidity as status symbols for private businesses and factories (left), as well as the city as a whole (right).



In terms of the changing ethnic makeup of the area, Marsh is ultimately uncertain about the exact role the El and its associated developments played. Nevertheless, she concludes that “the decisions which accompanied the El’s construction--the introduction of rental housing, the siting of commercial areas...--created the conditions for the transformation of northern West Philadelphia from a group of middle-class, native-white suburbs into more urban but still residential communities for somewhat less affluent but nevertheless upwardly mobile black and white, ethnic Americans” (190). Established communities to the north of Market Street may have fractured, but the El undoubtedly enabled scores of new developments for all uses.

Like New York’s early elevateds, to the business and industrial communities budding in West Philadelphia, the Market Street line was a symbol of futuristic goals -- access, efficiency, and technology. Indeed, Nussbaum notes, “the rattle of trains on the elevated was the sound of progress for West Philadelphia... Employers like Bond Bread Co., with its bakery at 57th and Market, and Chilton Publishers, at 56th and Chestnut, depended on the El to bring workers to the job, and the El stations became magnets for businesses.” Others, including “General Electric, the ACF Brill Company, Breyers Ice Cream, [and] the Prudential Insurance Company” also set up shop in the area (Skaler, 90). A 1910 postcard printed (Figure 70) by the Chilton Company “invite[d] one to inspect [the] modern ‘daylight’ plant, lighted by a roof full of skylights. In keeping with the modern theme, the postcard also features the new Market Street Elevated, an electric trolley car, an automobile, and a delivery truck” (90). Another contemporary postcard (Figure 71, 1909) shows the elevated station at 40th and Market streets, annotating the pictured steel support beams and solid stead in the urban fabric with the message, “Greetings from Philadelphia” (90). These images are telling: at the time of its opening, the Market Street Elevated was a positive, if not defining, element of the city.

New businesses also changed the physical form of West Philadelphia. As Skaler illustrates (Figure 67), the architecture of commerce was, like the bulk of the area’s new residential construction, repetitive. But it offered more of a concrete street wall: one “row of stores” along South 52nd street, a block from Market street, “was designed in the latest Colonial Revival style with Palladian windows” (91). Farther west, at 60th and Market streets, row-stores were “endless,”

but were only part of a greater development theme; as evidenced in this photograph, “large, imposing, classical-style banks were also built at every elevated stop” (91). The intangible effect of these particular structures was that commercial areas built around elevated stops appeared to be solid and permanent. Indeed, though the strong, often ‘classical,’ street wall along Market Street has given way to abandonment, disrepair, and demolition the El has remained a constant fixture for over one hundred years.

In the past ten years, SEPTA has completely rebuilt West Philadelphia’s Market Street Elevated Line from the ground up. And though the line celebrated its 100th year of continual service in 2007, by then only the route was the same. Indeed, \$710 million dollars has brought about a significant change in the form of West Philadelphia neighborhoods. What was once an image of a better future painted on the wall of a solitary rowhouse along Market Street (Figure 72) is now a partial reality; opposite the pastel mural depicting an El train rushing along a thin-columned, modern aerial guideway, the hoped-for diverse activity and copious sunlight flooding the streets has yet to arrive. The project, too, was a slog, and many businesses did not survive its restrictive timetable. There was light at the end of the tunnel, however. By expanding its public information campaign to utilize the multi-media power of the internet, SEPTA took important steps toward building a stronger relationship between the El and the local community.

Initiated in 1998, the reconstruction project encompassed “replacing 11,000 feet of El support structure, rebuilding six stations, constructing two new train control buildings, and other related improvements” (Fisher, 11/17/08). If this description sounds abstract, consider the prospects such improvements had for the surrounding community. For one, the elevated had not significantly changed since its opening in 1907. That meant that the support structures, which were not as wide or accessibly narrow as along the Frankford line, were still in place. The original El was located *within* the street, which, at one time, allowed streetcars to run underneath the structure while



**Figure 72.**

Market Street, ca. 2005. In the shadow of the old steel elevated line, West Philadelphia hopes for a better, sunnier form of rapid transit.

automobiles and other private forms of transportation could operate in lanes adjacent to the line. Not so by the late twentieth century, according to the *Inquirer*. Prior to reconstruction, “auto and pedestrian traffic” were forced to “weave around twin rows of ancient steel posts,” often leading to spectacular crashes. The reconstruction project solved this problem in an innovative way: build the line much like a modern aerial rapid transit system, perching the guideway on “T-shaped concrete [support] structures.” Longtime resident Abdullah Muhammad told the paper that “that will be an improvement. There’s always someone hitting those [old] girders after trying to maneuver around those things, especially at night. Not too long ago, I saw two sisters standing in the street crying, just looking at their car wrapped around one of those things. And I tell you, if your car hits a girder, it’s totally demolished” (PI, 5/10/1998). In addition to allowing a reconstruction of the street, the new piers would also open the street and surrounding buildings to more sunlight, SEPTA asserted.

Despite these positive developments, the community sensed the power and permanence of the line -- not only as a perennial demolisher of cars -- and feared for diminished business. As in Frankford, SEPTA promised minimal workday delays, but ensured weekend construction shutdowns. Business owners balked at the plan. “Saturday is the best day for retail,” 30-year local business veteran Chuck O’Connor told the *Inquirer*. His son, John, echoed the worry. “If the streets are blocked off because of construction, there’s not going to be any parking. So customers won’t be able to take the El to get to our store, and they really won’t be able to drive over either,” he told the paper (5/10/1998). As the project dragged on longer than its original schedule and accusations of political haranguing muddied the process, some businesses did falter. By early 2004, “at least a dozen owners have either closed or are in the process of selling their businesses because they are not pulling in revenue and are drowning in debt” (PI, 2/3/04). The owner of one such failing business became antagonized by the project (and perhaps the El itself), coming to see it as a symbol of apathy and destruction. “They did me in. I’m down to making \$100 a day. That doesn’t even pay my gas bill. But they don’t care,” Donna Sterling told the *Inquirer* (2/3/04). Despite SEPTA’s outreach efforts (detailed below) and a 500,000-thousand-dollar grant organized by a local councilwoman to ‘mom and pop’ stores along the line, by the end of guideway construction in 2007, “shuttered stores line[d] the work zone” (PI, 8/20/07). At the outset, the transit organization believed in the ‘trickle-down’ effect: “Anytime you invest \$370 million [sic] in the community,” SEPTA general manager John K. Leary, Jr. told the *Inquirer*, “there’s going to be a ripple effect that’s going to have a positive effect on the neighborhood” (5/10/1998). Even if their reasoning was murky, there was some consolation in SEPTA’s aims: at least in the future, the shiny new structure would better embody its importance as the “backbone” of the transit system as well as the neighborhood.

Though new stations would be fully accessible, the reconstruction project as a whole had dire consequences on the community’s mobility. For weeks at a time, portions of Market Street were shut to through traffic. Pedestrians were forced to find new routes to their homes, and, of course, businesses suffered. As seen in Figure 73 below, Google’s StreetView van recorded West Philadelphia during the reconstruction, and to this day parts of Market Street still look like a series of back alleys, one-way streets, and closed-off intersections. It is understandable that given this set of barriers, the sense of community may have fractured. After all, their historical lifeline seemed both clamped and severed.

In spite of all the on-the-ground hardships, SEPTA’s efforts to engage the community were more streamlined than in Frankford, in that the internet encouraged multiple simultaneous forms



**Figure 73.**

Google’s view down Market Street, during SEPTA’s 2000s reconstruction of the elevated. At top is the El as it existed for over one hundred years, as a dangerous impediment to increasing automobile traffic. At bottom is the t-shaped guideway that replaced it, bringing a decidedly different feel to the neighborhood. Still, the photographs indicate to what extent the reconstruction curtailed travel on Market Street.

of media outreach. Starting in 2005, the Authority began publishing weekly one-page “Progress Reports.” The editions ranged from construction updates and plans to an issue called “El Talk,” featuring responses from three residents answering “why I think it is important to support local businesses.” Other issues highlighted SEPTA’s efforts to clean up litter and debris from the reconstruction route, and statements from West Philadelphia City Council representatives. Most contained sidebars identifying the dates of upcoming community meetings, El shutdowns, and related stories. Echoing the Frankford project, one issue even identified a “Hometown Engineer Help[ing] to Rebuild SEPTA’s El.” The project website also has links to community meeting presentations, a brief history of the line, and a child safety program. Despite business owners’ protests during the reconstruction process, SEPTA also helped to initiate a series of “Shopping Campaigns” to help businesses along the El. The organization reached out to a local radio station to further the cause. “Every Friday around 9:50am...and 4:50pm..., SEPTA ‘Opens a Window on The El Shopping Zone’ on that station, the website explains.<sup>27</sup> “The show features The El Shopping Zone participating businesses around SEPTA’s Market Street El in West Philadelphia and eastern Delaware County. Each 5-minute segment is heard by thousands of listeners in the greater Philadelphia area. This presents an opportunity for business owners to promote their products and services on the air.” Further, the website has an archive of many of these five-minute spots on the website.

Learning its lessons from Frankford, SEPTA actively engaged with artists to add local character to its stations and infrastructure, encouraging West Philadelphia communities to officially reclaim the El as a community canvas. As part of a program entitled “Arts-in-Transit,”<sup>28</sup> SEPTA issued a “Call for Artists” (CFA) for each station along the line. The 60th Street Station CFA solidifies SEPTA’s hope that “each station [would] have its own unique personality expressed in the

27 <http://www.theelseptaatwork.com/RadioShow.html> (4/8/09)

28 <http://www.theelseptaatwork.com/ArtInTransit.html>

Figure 74.

SEPTA's El Progress Report, 3/20/09. The missive celebrates the ongoing column mural project.



**The EL PROGRESS REPORT**

## SEPTA Beautifies West Philly El Corridor

**City Year and Local School Students Help**

SEPTA is giving West Philadelphia a colorful facelift as construction on the new El moves to a close. Neighbors will enjoy a unique "gallery" of murals and designs from 46th Street to Cobbs Creek Parkway that add pleasing art and discourage graffiti. The project will start with the large square columns around every SEPTA station and then progress to the El support pedestals in between.

You may have noticed young people in red jackets busily painting El support pedestals around 52nd Street Station recently. They're out there because of SEPTA's arrangement with City Year for a variety of services. Originally SEPTA had them perform regular cleanups of the Market Street Elevated corridor. Now they are doing cleanups *and* murals.

Best of all, SEPTA made sure that the mural design reflects the neighborhood's personality. Take a look at the artwork now underway at 52nd Street. You'll see that SEPTA listened when local residents said the large clock on the El reminded them that they were in the heart of West Philadelphia. That's why the clock's bright colors and stars are featured in the murals.

SEPTA and City Year are also working with students at Alain Locke School to design artwork for the pedestals around 46th Street Station, which will be painted later this spring.

City Year unites young people of all backgrounds for a year of full-time service, giving them skills and opportunities to change the world as tutors, mentors and role models. SEPTA is a longstanding City Year supporter and partner.

Any questions, please contact:  
**THE EL SEPTA @ WORK**  
Community Information Center  
215-580-6484 • Mon. - Wed.  
215-243-4141 • Thurs. - Sat.  
[www.theelseptatwork.com](http://www.theelseptatwork.com)



**REMINDERS**

### El Shutdown this Weekend

**8PM Friday until  
5AM Monday  
March 20th - 23rd.**

### CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES

Call the Community Information Center if you want to know how these may affect you.

- **PECO Pole Relocations Delayed until Late March**  
4600-5600 Blocks Market Street
- **Market Street Sidewalk/Curb Restoration**  
from 6100 to 4500 Blocks until Complete
- **Cobbs Creek Sidewalk/Curb Restoration through April**  
63rd & Market Street Area
- **No Parking in Affected Blocks**  
While Work Takes Place Weekdays 6AM - 6PM
- **WARNING - No More Parking Under the El.**  
Cars will be ticketed and/or towed.

The El Shopping Zone.  
Neighborhood businesses open during construction.

Thank you for your patience as SEPTA moves closer to completion of a brand new El.



Volunteers paint murals on pillar supports at 52nd St. Station

artwork, and, in turn, the characteristics that contribute to the personality of each piece [would] be a reflection of the community." The project website provides links to artist biographies and samples of future installations, and espouses worthy goals and frameworks for a rethinking of the El:

Using art as a focal point, SEPTA is seeking to establish a partnership with the people we serve, to strengthen our identity as a public transit service provider, and to foster neighborhood pride and ownership at each location. Community members participated in the program process by attending community meetings where they suggested themes, ideas and concepts for the artwork. This information was shared with the artists to inspire them...

In 2008, a national newswire article detailed a larger manifestation of SEPTA's newfound community spirit. "Over the next two years," it read, "SEPTA and City Year [a multi-city nonprofit; and local students] will partner on painting murals on a total of 175 columns that support the rebuilt elevated line." The beginnings of this program are outlined in a recent SEPTA Progress

Report, Figure 74 above. The newswire report succinctly distills the transit operator's impressive community outreach, which this time found a balance between nurturing experiences above and below the line : "The beautification project is intended to enhance the overall riding experience for passengers and create a sense of ownership within each community where the murals are to be painted."

### **Conclusion: The El as Neighborhood Symbol**

In the early days of Philadelphia's era of rapid transit, the El altered the form and travel patterns of existing communities, and helped to create new neighborhoods. For many in the newly-linked parts of the city, the El offered cause to celebrate: commercial and industrial establishments below the stations found the structure and its associated clientele a boon to business. Over time, the El's symbolism gradually shifted from an image of modernity and efficiency to one of assured prosperity and access, its practical importance never waned. In Frankford, the line formed the backbone for memories of a prosperous Jewish community. However, even after rebuilding, this end of line still carries mixed connotations; in Kensington in particular, outsiders often conflate the negative physical effects of the structure with the quality of the people who live nearby. Some, like artist David Kessler, are attempting to reclaim the people (and the El) from these generalizations.

On Market Street, the Market-Frankford line originally stood as an emblem of neighborhood change. As Margaret Marsh describes, by 1915 Northern West Philadelphia had seen the influx of industry, new business districts, and rows of identical houses spring up along the El. Then, the line was a harbinger of change. In recent years, SEPTA's outreach programs during the reconstruction of the line were incredibly important in uniting neighborhoods in support of the line's potential as a shared, community asset. After decades of dealing with an intrusive structure that claimed many vehicles, West Philadelphians saw a reconstructed El as a symbol of a brighter future. In its construction mitigation process, SEPTA made great strides along Market Street. In addition to providing advertising for businesses struggling to keep afloat during construction, its attempts to engage the local youth and art communities reflected a profound understanding of the El in the community, and sought to extend the line's symbolic "ownership" to the neighborhood.

### Analysis: Transit-Oriented Development for the Future Market-Frankford El

It is 2009. SEPTA is just now putting the finishing touches on its new Market Street El, and the Kensington and Frankford communities are still in limbo. The economy is at a very low point. And yet, artists in Kensington and West Philadelphia are mobilizing, whether independently or with strong positive encouragement, to reclaim the Elevated. They believe that what may now be physical distress and abandonment could also be a wealth of opportunity along the El. Indeed, the theme these artists are espousing is what Philadelphia city planners believed three years ago, when they prepared two reports on Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) schemes for West Philadelphia and Frankford.

The existing Philadelphia urban fabric and high density residential development surrounding the El transit corridor would presumably act as a de facto TOD," the Philadelphia City Planning Commission posited in the West Market Street Corridor Study. However, with the exception of the

Center City stations and the 69th Street Terminal, most of the stations along Frankford Avenue and the West Market Street Corridor do not currently operate as transit oriented developments. Despite the two commercial corridors on West Market Street and a neighborhood “Main Street” on Frankford Avenue, the connections between existing development and the stations are disrupted by heavy automobile traffic, vacant and underutilized properties and a poorly designed and often unsafe pedestrian environment (1-5).

In West Philadelphia in particular, they note, SEPTA’s reconstruction project set the stage for future large-scale improvements. With more reliable and attractive transit service, coupled with local households’ low rate of car ownership, West Market Street holds a “competitive advantage over other areas of Philadelphia” (2-7). The center-column El also allows for a better variety of transportation options; the planning report contains renderings from the City’s Streets department showing a Market Street with only one lane each way, generous curb bump-outs for easier bus transfers, and bi-directional bike lanes (2-14). In Northeast Philadelphia, Frankford Avenue suffers from the same vacancies and neglect that befalls West Market Street. Alas, the Avenue is too narrow to rethink parking and traffic patterns; the planners recommended that further study be conducted to introduce alternate forms of mobility, like bicycles (Frankford 2-13).

Both studies conduct thorough analyses of each project area’s demographics, land use, and possible public-private land swaps to bank developable land. The proposed developments for both corridors are unique in that, while acknowledging the positive aspects of immediately adjacent rapid transit, some projects must for attractiveness’ sake forswear abutting the street. In both studies, the number one Planning and Design Principle is to

Encourage ideas and design strategies that address shade, noise and vibration problems for buildings along the corridor and adjacent to [the] El, and for narrow parcels facing the West Market Street Corridor. Parcels along the corridor are constrained by the presence of the El structure and associated shade, noise and vibration impacts. The newly designed concrete sub-structure of the El is expected to reduce these impacts. However, it will remain a concern. The purpose of this principle is to encourage new design ideas and strategies that can mitigate the impacts created by the El structure and the narrow frontage lots facing the Market Street Corridor. (5-1)

The analysis that follows is of design guidelines for developments along Frankford Avenue. While both reports include several detailed site-specific proposals, these general building and open space siting guidelines could have applications beyond Philadelphia, in future transit-oriented developments along elevated lines:

### **Mid-Block Open Spaces**

Small neighborhood pocket parks should be encouraged within mixed use developments in the mid-block areas along the corridor between station areas. Creation of open space in these areas will provide visual relief for tenants of the buildings close to the El structure and help reduce related noise impacts. (6-3)

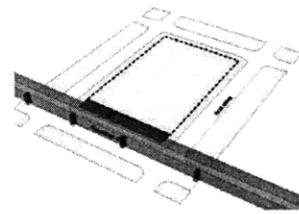
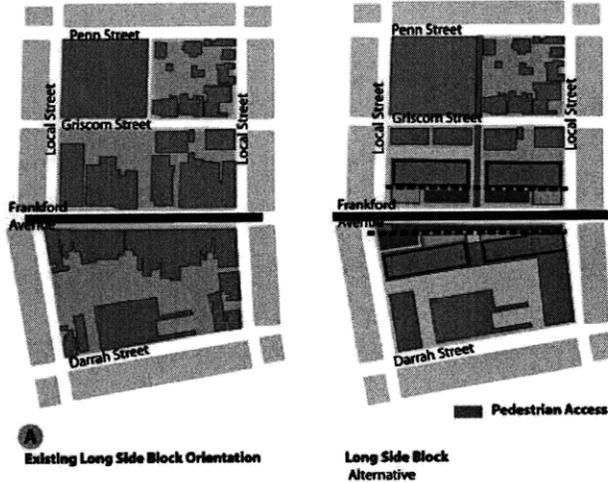
### **Building Typology:**

Buildings should follow the street wall except in the case of Frankford Avenue, where open space is encouraged to be incorporated as an organizing “place making” element fronting the El structure and located at or close to the sidewalk. (6-4)

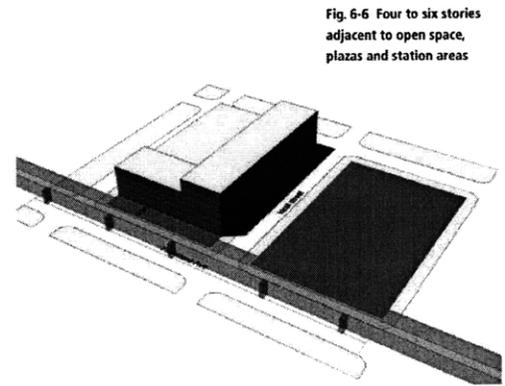
**Figures 75 & 76.**

From the Frankford TOD Report, 2005. At left, elevated-facing schematic block types. At right, proposed building typologies that mitigate the El's noise and vibration.

**Fig. 6-3 Existing and proposed Long Side Block Orientation**

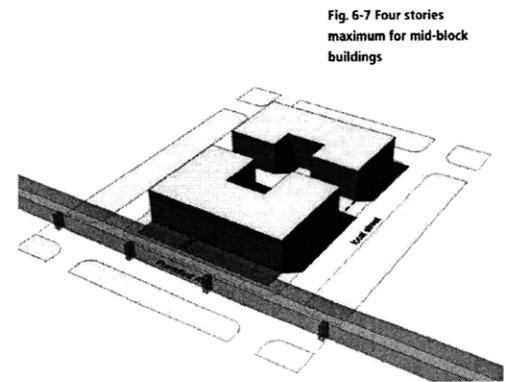
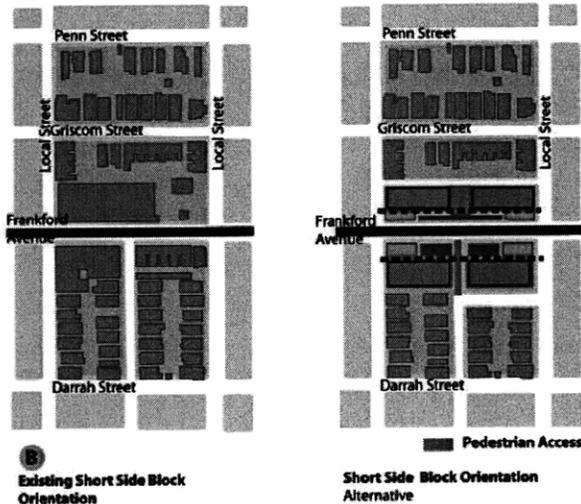


**Fig. 6-5 Build-to-lines ensure continuous street frontage**



**Fig. 6-6 Four to six stories adjacent to open space, plazas and station areas**

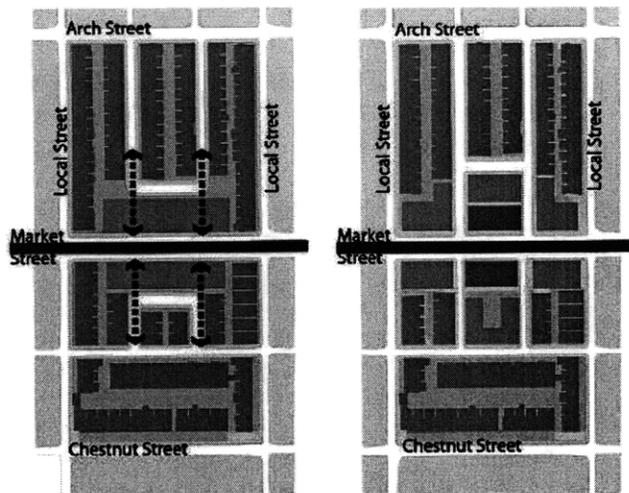
**Fig. 6-4 Existing and proposed Short Side Block Orientation**



**Fig. 6-7 Four stories maximum for mid-block buildings**

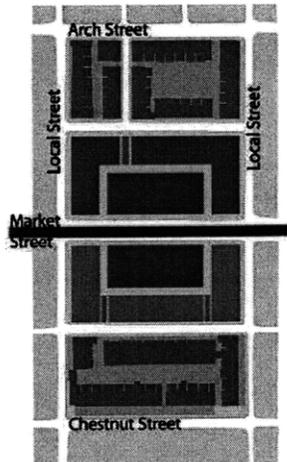
**Short Side along Frankford Avenue:** Medium density mixed use development surrounding central pocket parks should be encouraged at these mid-block locations. Larger developments, if provided without open space, should emphasize pedestrian connectivity to Frankford Avenue. These developments should also include a noise barrier wall on higher floors facing the El structure. (6-4) 82/184

**Long Side along Frankford Avenue:** Medium density mixed use developments should be encouraged at these mid-block locations. The long side block orientation along Frankford Avenue provides opportunities to develop structures with large building footprints and large open spaces facing the El. (6-5)

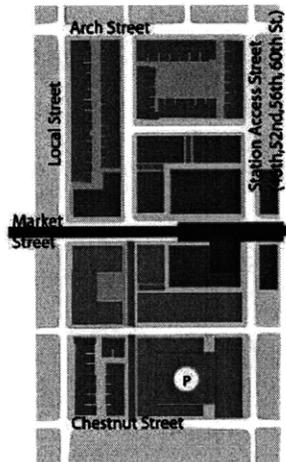


**Short Side Block Orientation Alternative**

**Short Side Block Orientation Open Space Alternative**



**B Long Side Block Orientation Alternative**



**C Station Adjacent Blocks Public Plaza - High Density Alternative**  
 Pedestrian Access  
 (====)  
 (====)

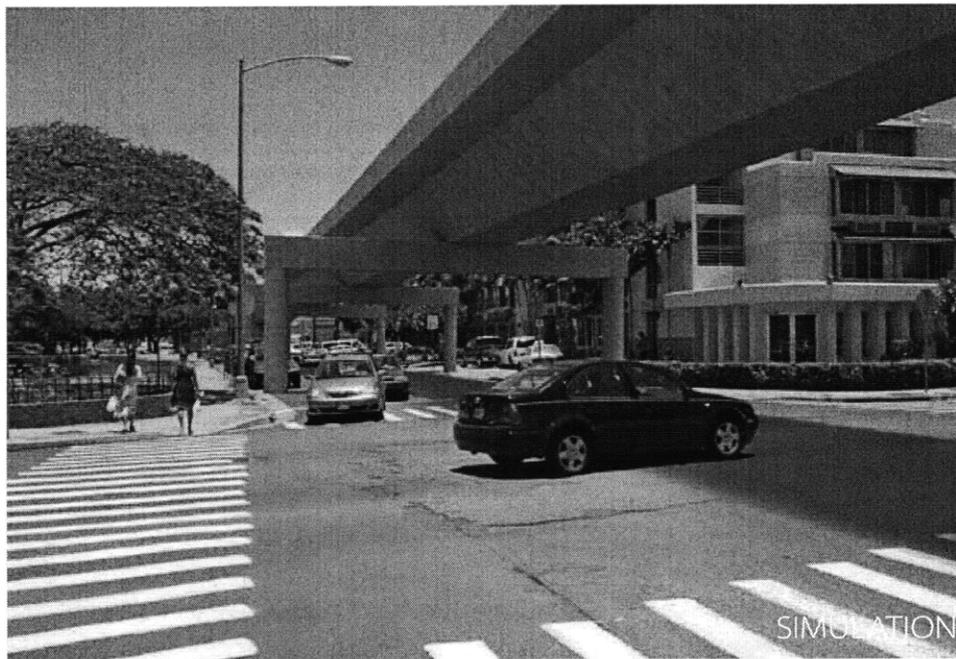
**Figure 77.**

Variations on a theme: Proposals for open space and building massing along Market Street in West Philadelphia. The guidelines that inform these schematics are nearly identical to those for Frankford.

As seen in the diagrams of Frankford Avenue and Market Street above, these guidelines inform responsible urban development along the El. This responsibility is marked by an attempt to balance theory with practice along a heretofore unfavorable stretch of street and its adjoining blocks: while planners mitigate the noise and visual impacts of the elevated through setbacks along Frankford Avenue, they ensure that new buildings along all other streets will “follow the street wall.” Still, the setbacks facing the El are not to be wasted: by developing them as significant public space “places,” a semblance of continuous activity along the corridor will be maintained, even if a traditional street wall is not. Furthermore, this scheme increases the amount of public open space in the neighborhood, not only providing new developments distance from the El but also serving existing communities beyond the TOD.

# 5.

## The Legacy of the El: Applying the Past to Current Planning, Urban Design and Transit Projects



**Figure 78.**

Honolulu's proposed rapid transit would run on an elevated concrete structure downtown.

## Elevated Lines Today

Today, elevated rapid transit lines continue to be built around the world. In current parlance, they are usually referred to as “aerial” guideways or structures. Newer American transit systems, especially those built in the 1970s, used them extensively: they appear in San Francisco and Oakland’s suburbs, as part of Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART)’s system, in the outskirts of Atlanta, as part of Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA)’s heavy rail network, and in Washington, D.C. In Western American cities such as Seattle, San Jose, and Los Angeles, new light rail networks also feature aerial sections. In other places like Honolulu, heavy-rail elevated transit lines are also proposed. The reality is that elevated lines continue to be cost-effective, especially when constructed alongside existing highway and railroad infrastructure, and in areas such as industrial and office parks where such lines tend to have minimal adverse community impact.

Regardless, the technology to reduce noise and shadows has only marginally improved since the early twentieth century. For the time being, trains will continue to make noise as they pass over aerial structures. A 1979 report on BART’s operational impact noted that “the most important environmental effect of BART’s trackways is the noise of BART trains. Information from residents and real-estate agents suggests that trackways might induce some people to move away, and that they discourage the building of new houses on adjacent undeveloped land” (13). To be sure, transit agencies now conduct public outreach in advance of aerial structure construction. “Indeed, MARTA’s second round of planning included considerable design attention directed at minimizing adverse effects,” Nelson and McCleskey wrote. “Sensitivity to the impact of elevated stations on established neighborhoods was ensured because of citizen participation in the planning and design process. Ignoring citizen concerns delayed MARTA construction until those concerns were reasonably satisfied” (180). One of the major differences between elevated construction today versus the past is that most rapid transit systems are planned and designed by public agencies. Unlike the private companies that built Chicago’s L’s for profit, these agencies have a mandate to consider community and neighborhood impacts.

Although proposed elevated transportation systems are carefully analyzed for visual and noise impacts, there often remains a stigma against them. To be sure, technologic advances have minimized the sonic impact of rapid transit infrastructure: for example, welded rails offer not only a smoother ride, but also eliminate the click-clack sound of traditional joined rails. Most elevated transit projects also currently evaluate many modal options prior to moving forward with design. The 1977 Villanova Frankford El replacement study, for one, considered replacing the steel-wheel rail infrastructure with the rubber-tired model made famous in Montreal. Other options, including magnetic-levitation (mag-lev) and monorails, also emit much less noise than traditional rail lines. The one unifying element of all of these options is the visual impact: large-scale infrastructure demands large-scale guideways and support structures. Though supporters argue that monorails are minimally intrusive, stations along built and proposed systems (Las Vegas and Seattle, respectively) are massive. A comprehensive example of the debate over modern elevated transit projects comes from Honolulu, Hawaii, where the City intends to build a 20-mile line.

In a summary explaining why Honolulu had decided that traditional steel-wheel rail technology would be the best elevated guideway solution, Ron Tober of the City’s Technology Selection Panel emphasized “minimizing the risks involved in building and operating a rapid transit system.” In addition to being an established mode, he wrote, “modern rail technology is a far cry

from the elevated rail lines in New York City, Chicago and elsewhere.”<sup>29</sup> The case of this new elevated transit system follows the basic historical model found in the three case studies: while the line is planned to catalyze development in more rural sections of the city and provide much-needed congestion relief downtown, its proposed physical imposition on the city has drawn ire and debate in abutting neighborhoods. For much of its journey across the city, the line will follow larger arterial streets in less densely developed areas; in the downtown area, however, space restrictions force the line onto a concrete structure straddling streets in the vein of New York, Boston and Philadelphia’s elevateds. The visual impact of the line is monumental in these latter areas (Figure 78).

In recent years, improving the image of aerial structures involves more creative uses for their right-of-ways. Echoing Jing Su’s thesis, which sought to find innovative ways to treat the underutilized spaces under Chicago’s Brown Line, in the San Francisco Bay Area, Urban Ecology has put together a plan for the “East Bay Greenway,” a proposed mixed-use path under the “roughly twelve miles of elevated BART tracks that run from 18th Avenue in Oakland south to Hayward.” The areas along the guideway, like those in the three cities I have covered, are “some of the poorest and most densely populated areas of San Francisco’s East Bay.” Urban Ecology predicts that a sustained reinvestment effort, anchored by the amelioration of the currently unstable and unsafe terrain beneath the structure, will lead to profound results. “The East Bay Greenway,” rendered in Figure 79, “will be a well-lighted, beautifully landscaped pedestrian and bicycle path connecting five BART stations. With play areas and other community amenities, the currently neglected space will be transformed into a community place that brings people together in healthier, safer, and stronger communities.”

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29 <http://www.honolulutransit.org>



**Figure 79.**

Urban Ecology’s proposed East Bay Greenway: reclaiming BART’s aerial right of way.

## Towards a Recommendation

As we hop from city to city, diving deeper into the details of each, one lesson stands paramount: our histories will never be complete, and our analysis of meaning will always be changing and never-ending. Still, in all four cities we have covered, elevated railways remain, in physical form and collective memory. The reason for their existence, and the base technology they all initially employed, was similar: to solve ground-level congestion, *elevate* the railroad onto steel latticework. In Boston, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia, this deceptively simple solution forever changed the city's urban fabric, carrying the city's influence far outside of downtown while buttressing its dominance in the urban consciousness. Downtowns densified, existing suburban neighborhoods urbanized, and new communities sprang up like weeds.

The lines, whether financed with public or private funds, were not initially constructed with public collaboration. They were to provide either public or for-profit transport to those who needed it. They allowed cities, neighborhoods, and adjacent businesses to grow and prosper. Upon completion, the Els were celebrated as symbols of modernity, efficiency, and the ability of technology to conquer common urban problems. Over time, however, the el's immediate negative qualities -- ones that had been accurately predicted prior to construction -- took their toll. Abutting residents complained of noise, shadows, and adverse health effects. In most locations, these negative side effects reduced the value of land and buildings along the line, and in some eyes, the Els were instruments and symbols of "blight." During post-war suburbanization, the upwardly mobile were able to retreat from the inner-city, and already-poor urban areas served by elevateds often fared the worst. Boston's Roxbury, Chicago's South Side, and West Philadelphia all experienced significant physical deterioration in neighborhoods alongside the elevated.

It is here where we must dispense with the argument that the Els were altogether similar throughout their histories. Each of the three cities' elevated railways was preceded by a unique set of circumstances: Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia each possessed a different political, business, race and class demographic and geographical context and narrative into which the elevated railway was placed. We must stop the unified discussion at deterioration because each city responded differently to the crisis: Boston initiated several courses of *removal*; Chicago, after years of uncertainty, decided to reclaim the image of its L as a local, city-wide and national symbol of its pioneering spirit; and because of its essential importance to neighborhoods and SEPTA, Philadelphia chose complete *renewal* of the Market-Frankford line.

One of the major themes that pervades the three case study cities is that of historic preservation. Recognition of elevated stations and structures on the National Register of Historic Places has been spotty. I noted that in Boston, Dover and Dudley stations had at one time been listed on the National Register; however, while Dover was eventually demolished, Dudley has been rehabilitated -- an entry in the Register database exists for the associated "Dudley Station Historic District." In Chicago, many station buildings, according to Graham Garfield, are considered "eligible" for inclusion on the National Register; in the early 1980s, the Loop Elevated infrastructure was considered as well. To date, it seems as if Wilson station on the old Northwestern L (today's Red Line) is the only Chicago station on the listing, albeit as a part of the Uptown Square Historic District.<sup>30</sup> Neither Philadelphia's El structure nor its stations appear to have National Register status; their eligibility is also unknown.

30 <http://www.chicago-l.org/stations/wilson.html>

A related discipline that has sought to document the history of elevated railways, among other structures and systems, is *industrial archeology*, described by Cudahy as “a new field of study, extending the ‘national monument’ concept to industry: the discovery, investigation, recording, surveying, and sometimes the preservation of historically significant industrial sites and structures” (128). Summarizing a newfound interest in the potential of the Chicago L, Cudahy quoted Theodore Anton Sande, the “founding father” of the Society for Industrial Archeology: “For the industrial archeologist,” Sande wrote in Industrial Archeology: A New Look at the American Heritage, “the Chicago Loop provides an ideal case study of an entire transit system of reasonably manageable size that still serves its original purpose” (Cudahy 127).

Relatedly, the Els in Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia have been recorded for all time -- in photographs, research summaries, and diagrams -- as part of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER). According to its website, this Record “was established in 1969 by the National Park Service, the American Society of Civil Engineers and the Library of Congress to document historic sites and structures related to engineering and industry.”<sup>31</sup> Boston’s Washington Street El is included in this record, as is Chicago’s Loop and Philadelphia’s Frankford and Market Street routes. Unlike, say, the MBTA/UrbanArts “Along the El” project, however, these photographs emphasize purely structural elements: any associated cultural meaning or social presence is strictly background fodder. Indeed, if the historic preservation and documentation of the Els offers a unique cultural resource, it is at the national rather than local level: true to the National Register and the HAER’s purposes, the surveys group each city’s aesthetic and industrial prowess into a country-wide pool. In Chicago, the renovation and restoration of the Loop was partly borne out of a need to preserve a national asset; however, over time, the hard work of a few dedicated devotees (Harry Weese et al) paid off on a local level, as the Chicago Transit Authority and local residents reclaimed the L as a city-wide (and neighborhood) cultural anchor. In Boston, the Washington Street El was, in a word, expendable, as a new line was being prepared to the west. Northampton and Dudley stations survived, but not without controversy. The cultural heritage of the line was simply not recognized, especially amid polarizing rhetoric from city and state politicians. Tunney Lee put it well: in proposing to keep the line for its unique architecture, well-established neighborhood connectivity, and cultural histories, Representative Byron Rushing was “ahead of his time.” Perhaps it was only a matter of time for cities like Boston and Philadelphia, who lacked a vital, centralized elevated infrastructure (like Chicago’s integral downtown elevated loop): only now has Philadelphia harnessed the opportunity for cultural and artistic integration into their rebuilt structures.

The major challenge today and in the future is to responsibly negotiate national and neighborhood desires for preservation and ensure the continued use of elevated structures. It will be necessary to distill a cohesive local and city-wide narrative from a large pool of memories and opinions. To set a foundation for my recommendations for future elevated rapid transit renovation projects, there are a few key lessons that I would like to highlight from each city’s chapter.

### Lessons from Boston

Because Boston’s El system has been demolished in entirety, the the twenty-five years since the Washington Street El fell has allowed for a more complete history of the lines to emerge. The

31 <http://www.nps.gov/history/hdp/haer/index.htm>

following lessons have applicability beyond Boston, and should be considered in future elevated transit line planning and design.

**Architecture:** *The architecture of future elevated transit lines should be carefully considered, as stations have the potential to become both neighborhood and citywide assets.* The original design of Boston's elevated stations was determined by architectural competition, indicating that contemporary transit and city leaders deemed the aesthetics of highly-visible El structures to be of great importance. The stations that remained relatively intact by the time of demolition were either adapted for a new use (Dudley), sold as a historical commodity (Northampton), or salvaged and then destroyed under suspicious circumstances (Thompson Square). Overall, throughout their history, the stations were a unique part of Boston, and came to be symbols of their respective neighborhoods.

**Community Interaction: Art & Mitigation:** *Future elevated transit replacement projects should balance the needs of new clientele as well as old, both in replacement transit talks and in ensuring the physical legacy of associated art projects and collective memory.* The MBTA's partnership with UrbanArts allowed local artists and students to celebrate the old Orange Line El as well as the new Southwest Corridor, through installations and exhibitions. Unfortunately, only the Southwest Corridor artwork was to remain permanently installed in stations; the El project, "The Artist's Lens: A Focus on Relocation," now sits at the Boston Public Library, largely forgotten. Indeed, during the Southwest Corridor project, the MBTA's collaborative interaction with residents and community groups abutting the *new* line was commendable, and worthy of a Silver Medal at the Rudy Bruner Awards (a competition that stresses community engagement and responsive design). On the other hand, the interaction with Washington Street abutters was less successful. Transit replacement talks languished over time, as the MBTA's primary focus remained on the new corridor.

**Politics: Dialogue & Rhetoric:** *Future elevated transport renovation projects should encourage non-polarized discussions of the line's legacy and symbolism in the neighborhood.* In Charlestown, there came to be an unspoken gulf between the communities that lived alongside the El, and transit enthusiasts (and commercial owners) that saw lasting historical value in the structure. The MBTA sided with the unhappy Charlestown residents, and demolished the El as part of a relocation project that would serve more suburban commuters. In the case of the Washington Street El, the Southwest Corridor relocation project was described in more polarizing terms. Regardless of the different opinions of the elevated line, the MBTA and City's position was that it was a "blight" on the neighborhood -- conversely, the new line would "heal" the divisions cut by Interstate 95 demolition. The negative rhetoric catalyzed disdain for the El, effectively silencing leaders like Byron Rushing, who sought to retain the line as a unifying neighborhood element. Boston lacked a public dialogue about the El, where both negative and positive opinions and symbols could be discussed openly among a variety of actors and interested parties.

### Lessons from Chicago

Because of its richly diverse neighborhoods and an impressive transport legacy, Chicago offers lessons that can serve a wide variety of cities, both now and for the future.

**Architecture:** *Future elevated transit construction as well as renovation projects should be responsive in design to community needs, and be open to transit oriented development that physically interacts with the elevated structure.* In its original design, the L was responsive to city boulevards by providing detailed accents and

decorative steel bents at those locations; and in recent years, architects like Rem Koolhaas have engaged with the L to create innovative ways of integrating the structure into the neighborhood while shielding its negative effects.

**Changing Symbols:** *Transit and city planners should be aware that elevated transit structures can hold multiple symbols over time, as economic and social contexts change. One line could first be seen as a barrier to a neighborhood, and reinforce division rather than connectivity; later, the opposite could be true. Elsewhere, Els can be marketed as unique neighborhood assets; unfortunately, this trend can, depending on social and economic conditions, lead to income stratification.* On the South Side, the L stood as a symbol of African-American containment, where it formed one side of the “Black Belt.” Now, it is being reclaimed by some African-American communities as a neighborhood anchor and a symbol of connectivity. The Brown Line, on the North Side, has transformed from a local transit link to a uniquely marketable anachronism that has attracted a new wave of gentrifiers. The line has adapted from being a conduit of ethnic diversity to one gradually solidifying income homogeneity.

**Media Image:** *Planners should acknowledge that in some cities, rapid transit systems -- elevated lines in particular -- carry a uniqueness to them that typifies the city as a whole. The media can increase elevated transport visibility to a national scale, and transit officials should anticipate any possible exposure through careful station design and sustained maintenance.* Chicago’s L has become a symbol of the city. Films and television shows use the elevated transit system to immediately establish a sense of place.

### Lessons from Philadelphia

Philadelphia’s Market-Frankford El continues to be important to neighborhood businesses, and allows rapid cross-town access and transportation. Because SEPTA has recently reconstructed its El lines, the lessons below are more contemporary in nature and do not, in contrast to Boston, incorporate as much the themes of historical legacy and memory.

**Business & Commerce:** *Regardless of the negative environmental effects, elevated rapid transit lines offer fast access across cities. For neighborhoods that have grown up alongside these lines, their continued service is essential.* In Philadelphia, the elevated was and is essential to the neighborhood businesses that abut the line. The transit service offered a conduit for potential clientele, and some Kensington and Frankford businesses served cross-town customers.

**Community Interaction: Art & Mitigation:** *Planners and designers should take SEPTA’s multi-faceted outreach as an example, and in the future similarly extend a hand to local businesses, cultural groups, artists, and the youth community, all in an effort to renew not only the physical structure but also the neighborhood image of the elevated.* Unlike in Boston, the Market-Frankford line had no readily available, cost-effective relocation scheme, and SEPTA ultimately decided that years of deferred maintenance would lead to on-site rehabilitation. Each step of reconstruction in both Frankford and along Market Street was a hardship for businesses that depended on the line for customers, but SEPTA tried its best to offer honest and timely updates on the project’s progress. This more recent program (Market Street) serves as an important model for future elevated transit renovation and/or rebuilding projects.

**Transit-Oriented Development:** *If Transit-Oriented Development is to be coupled with elevated transit renovation projects, noise and shadow impacts should be mitigated in the design of adjacent buildings and public spaces.* The Frankford Avenue and Market Street TOD plans are fine first steps in that they begin to negotiate the desire for a strong street wall and neighborhood character with the very real physical effects of the elevated.

## Applying the Lessons

Innovative physical rehabilitation of elevated rail lines can be achieved, but not without strong community support. Recall that in Chicago, the community-led Lake Street El Coalition helped to save the Green Line L, and promote its future as an “engine of economic revitalization.” New York City’s High Line is the best contemporary example of how an outpouring of neighborhood sentiment can drastically alter the future of physical infrastructure. While not a former rapid transit line, this abandoned freight rail access structure has been preserved as a public elevated right-of-way. The story of its downfall and rebirth demands its own thesis; still, the persistence of the non-profit Friends of the High Line organization to challenge legal restrictions and demolition threats over the past ten years is inspirational to those seeking to reclaim elevated rapid transit structures as neighborhood assets. Even in its new history as a public open space, the elevated High Line continues to influence surrounding land uses: like the Els in Chicago and Philadelphia, in its rebirth it has become a corridor of change and reinvestment (Figure 80).

The diversity of reactions to elevateds in Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia is a resource for future transit renovation projects, especially those involving aerial guideways. It is inevitable that cities with elevated rail lines -- whether of aging steel construction, such as in Chicago and New York’s boroughs, or of more modern concrete style in the newer systems outlined above -- will in the future find it necessary to rehabilitate, reconstruct, or relocate these lines. *The most basic lesson from these three cities is that the symbolism or meaning of rapid transit infrastructure should not be taken lightly.* Boston, for example, paid a dear price for its failure to act on innovative community suggestions: its decisions leading up to Washington Street’s replacement transit, the Silver Line, have been widely scrutinized and criticized in recent years, and online communities are abuzz with what could have been rather than what should be done. A better example is Philadelphia’s Market Street Elevated reconstruction, where SEPTA has done an exemplary job in recruiting local youths and artists to instill a real sense of community ownership in the new line, at once celebrating the past and looking forward to a better future.

It is easy to forget that the present is the future’s history. One day, perhaps, when the rebar on Seattle’s new light rail line begins to pop through the concrete, all aerial guideways will be relegated to history, replaced with the next new technological advance. Again, studies of community impact are of utmost importance. *I propose an extra step in rapid transit renovation planning and design: before, not after the fact, agencies should conduct surveys of community and neighborhood conceptions of the line. Because concepts -- symbols, meaning -- are fluid and qualitative, such a survey would take the form of a dialogue, rather than a checklist or a spreadsheet.* This is to be an ongoing learning process: planning officials would



**Figure 80.**

Successful and innovative rehabilitation of an elevated structure: New York’s High Line.

regularly meet with constituents of community groups, local institutions, and private individuals, to discuss the meaning of the line and to what extent local history, culture and artwork could manifest in station/structure design. If, as in Philadelphia, Transit Oriented Developments are to accompany the renovation or rebuilding project, this ongoing engagement with community groups could extend into discussions of adjacent land uses, station siting, and building design.

Kevin Lynch wrote that “the arguments of planning all come down to the management of change” (1). Rapid transit infrastructure is important in that it attempts to be permanent in the midst of an ever-changing city. As lessons from Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia illustrate, while not all elevated railways remain (either at all or in their original condition), during their time on earth they have withstood monumental changes in the form and function of the city they serve(d). They have also weathered shifting populations, and shifting opinions. Planners of elevated transit line renovations would be best to understand the importance of the El’s image in addition to its actuality. The complexity of reactions to elevated railways confirms one of the reasons I chose this topic: more often than not, Els have been pushed to the edges of academic and planning discourse, and their unique histories neglected. As has been seen, there are often profound stories in overlooked realms. As many have noted, there can even be beauty in the everyday.

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