

Houses in place of highways?

The city of Rochester in New York state is tearing down the freeway that cuts through its center, reclaiming the space for homes and businesses. Could Germany do the same?

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The eastern part of Rochester's Inner Loop shortly before it was demolished.

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Driving on the freeway in Rochester can feel like entering a black and white film: gray road, gray bridge pillars, gray potholes — even grey walls to the left and right. The route runs through a concrete channel, essentially a tunnel without a roof.

This article appears as part of our project "Countdown Earth", a series on solutions for the climate crisis and biodiversity loss.

The only splashes of color are green signs that read "Inner Loop." This ring-shaped road runs through the middle of Rochester, a large city on the northern edge of New York state, on the shore of Lake Ontario. Across the lake is Canada.

Rochester is famous as the home of Frederick Douglass, a Black civil rights activist who published an anti-slavery newspaper here starting in 1847. Recently, however, it has made headlines for issues that plague many American cities: [racism](#), [police violence](#), [shrinking industries](#). The photography company Kodak, which has its headquarters here, has been on the verge of bankruptcy several times.

But there's a bright spot. Rochester is also getting attention for [its progressive urban development projects](#) that could serve as a model for other communities. The engine of this progress is, of all things, the concrete gray Inner Loop. Or rather, what can be done with a dilapidated freeway if you remove it and give the space back to the city's residents.

Renaturation of a city

The Inner Loop was built in the 1950s. The two-lane freeway, nearly 5 km long, was intended to transport commuters from the suburbs to the center as quickly as possible—and back home again after work.

Like everywhere else in the country, the freeway boom was accompanied by massive paving over of former green spaces. [Poor air quality](#), climate change and biodiversity loss are all consequences of such car-centric transport policies, problems Germany shares.

In Rochester, living space for people also disappeared, as documents in the city library show: To build the Inner Loop, several hundred homes and businesses were razed to the ground, streets disappeared, and a park lost more than half of its area.

City historian Emily Morry has compiled these losses on her [blog](#). She also describes individual stories such as that of George R. Woods, a woman who lived with her son in the demolition district. She refused to move out and lived for a time without electricity or water. In desperation, she even threatened to let her dog loose on the construction workers. But it was all in vain. In May 1962 she had to leave her house, like thousands of others.



Before: The eastern Inner Loop before demolition.

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After: The new homes on the former freeway site under construction.

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Today, almost 80 years later, it is the Inner Loop itself that has to give way. The city council has decided that the freeway will be gradually dismantled. This is an unusual move, and not only in the U.S. Even in Germany, where transforming and modernizing the transportation system is a much-debated topic, city freeways are almost never questioned. In contrast, new ones are being created, as is currently the case with lengthening of the A100 freeway in Berlin.

Rochester, however, makes it clear how the space gained from freeway demolition can be used. Just before South Union Street, the Inner Loop makes a sharp bend before abruptly ending. Instead of speeding cars, there are now apartment buildings, sidewalks, trees and bike paths — and, of course, a normal road.

South Union Street is the first example of Rochester's larger urban

development plans: The entire Inner Loop will gradually disappear and turn into a livable residential area where cars are still welcome, but are no longer absolutely necessary. At least that's the idea.

Hundreds of apartments in place of the freeway

The demolition of the first section of freeway, which started in 2014, cost \$18 million. The project was financed by an urban development funding program from the Obama administration. The new residential buildings were built by private investors.

So far, the conversion has only transformed just under a kilometer of the former freeway. City planner Erik Frisch, who is responsible for the renovation, is nevertheless satisfied. "We have made a vital neighborhood out of what was previously only asphalt, exhaust fumes and noise," he says as he walks across South Union, coffee in hand.

Frisch talks excitedly about cafés and retail spaces, a hotel, and a museum that used the newly acquired space for an expansion. But most important are the more than 500 new residential units, two-thirds of which are subsidized for lower-income residents. The rent for a one-bedroom apartment is \$700. (The average rent for such an apartment in Rochester is more than \$1500, according to the real estate portal [Apartmenthomeliving](#).)



City planner Eric Frisch thinks the new neighborhood is working fairly well, especially since "we're not Manhattan."

"The apartments were gone very quickly," says Frisch. There is now a waiting list. "People want to be in this place where no one wanted to be. You can ride your bike, grab your cup of coffee or walk your dog." The evidence is apparent from the plentiful dog droppings on the grass verge next to the sidewalk where the city planner strolls.



The cars are gone but few people are on the streets.

In fact, nature has returned to the once-paved areas, at least to a limited extent. There are small flower beds in front of the house entrances, and newly planted trees line the street. Between the buildings, there is a lawn with tables and chairs.

If there weren't American names on the street signs, South Union Street could also pass for a European neighborhood. The apartment buildings with their box-shaped facades and small balconies would not be out of place in Strasbourg or Cologne.

It's just that the people are missing. "Most people are at work at this time of day," Frisch explains. Or maybe his neighborhood isn't quite as pedestrian-friendly as he'd like. Or people get into their cars in spite of the bike paths and good intentions.

Whose voice was not heard?

Not everyone in Rochester thinks that the ambitious urban development project is an example to follow. "Nobody had anything against the demolition of the dilapidated freeway," says Suzanne Mayer, a retired sustainability consultant who lives nearby. Her criticism: "It just doesn't look nice. They should have listened to the residents instead of simply planning past us."

Mayer, a friendly woman who meets a visitor with a direct gaze and a grandmotherly smile, is a political activist who works with [Hinge Neighbors](#). The association wants to bring together two residential areas that were once separated by the freeway. To this day, the majority of Black residents live in one neighborhood, while the other is predominantly white. If more sections of the Inner Loop disappear in the next few years, the social structure could become more diverse.

"Not many people here are interested in this 'growing together' quite yet," Mayer admits. But better citizen participation could change that. "What will the new homes look like?" she asks. "Where are the homeless people who live near the freeway going to go? Will families still be able to afford to live here if property values increase?"



Along South Union Street there are now apartment houses instead of a freeway.



A bicycle sculpture next to the newly built bike path. The only thing missing is the real bikes.

When Mayer walks along South Union Street, she doesn't see a model district. The new, relatively faceless apartment buildings "look like Eastern Europe," she says. "Where are the people, the shops, the life?" A few hundred meters of bike path is simply not enough, she says. "People don't want to ride in circles."



The supposedly pedestrian-friendly South Union Street has far too few crosswalks.

Another member of Hinge Neighbors, Shawn Dunwoody, agrees. “We can’t do anything with such large-scale buildings,” says the young artist and activist [who painted “Black Lives Matter” on Rochester streets a few years ago](#). What bothers him most about the reclaimed space is that no thought was given to people walking through the neighborhood. “Where are the crosswalks in this supposedly pedestrian-friendly district?”

Stuck halfway

At the next intersection is a toy museum, [The Strong National Museum of Play](#), a brightly painted concrete complex that has expanded in recent years. Thanks to the removal of the freeway, there is now more space for the museum to grow. “But they still don’t have a proper pedestrian entrance,” Dunwoody points out. “Everything is still designed for cars.”



Street artist Shawn Dunwoody (here with one of his projects) favors freeway demolition, but he thinks residents should have been more involved in planning what replaced it.

Walking back along the new blocks, it is even more apparent what he means. Behind the ground floor windows are rows of parked cars. “I don’t know whether to laugh or cry about that,” Mayer says. “The street level space would have been so nice for businesses. But now it’s cars that live here.”

The activists question why parking spaces were not put somewhere else, for example underground. "The Inner Loop was already dug out," Dunwoody says. "Instead of filling it up, they could have built a parking garage."



Cars "live" on the ground floor. Even the city administration admits that this is not ideal.

City planner Frisch says he is aware of the criticism. "One always sees afterwards what could have been done better," he admits, whether it's boring facades, a lack of shopping opportunities or uselessly short bike paths. "Unfortunately, we're not Manhattan," he says. "We have to live with what this market will bear."

And the cars on the ground floor? "I'm not happy about that either," he says. "The garage was actually supposed to be underground, but then the developers ran out of money." In the future, the city will have stricter requirements for investors.

How to learn from mistakes

Malik Evans, the mayor of Rochester, resides in a neo-romantic building that resembles a castle, with its sandstone facade, pointed turrets, and archway in front of the entrance.

Visitors have to pass through a gate with security officers and metal detectors. Upstairs, in front of the mayor's office, there is another security guard. "It's unfortunately necessary these days," the mayor's assistant explains.



Mayor Malik Evans promises more citizen participation in the demolition of the next section of freeway.

The mayor himself is relaxed. He introduces an employee who speaks German and organizes an exchange with Rochester's sister city Würzburg. Has he ever asked whether a freeway there will also disappear? The employee replies with a curt "No," before shutting his door.

Evans says that he can of course only speak for Rochester, but “other cities should think twice before trying to extend highways through neighborhoods.” They will regret it later, he predicts. He knows the arguments that the auto lobby uses against demolishing freeways. “They claim that the remaining streets would not be able to cope with the additional traffic. But, surprise! Here the predicted traffic jams didn’t happen.”

And what about Rochester’s mistakes on South Union Street? “We have learned our lesson,” says the Democratic politician. His administration is already planning phase two, the demolition of the northern ring. He promises more citizen participation, more livability, and more trees.

Evans can’t be blamed for the mistakes of his predecessors. He wasn’t elected until 2022, by which time the eastern part of the Inner Loop had long since been filled in. But the demolition of the rest of the freeway is very much in his hands.

Can Rochester be an example?

While the political majority in Rochester supports the remaining demolition, there is still another challenge: Who will pay for such projects? After all, not every city in America can hope for a federal grant worth millions of dollars.

The demolition of the next 2.4 km stretch of freeway is expected to cost \$100 million. Most of the money will come from the infrastructure package launched by the Biden administration.

The infrastructure package is also supposed to help overcome a relic of racial segregation in the U.S. Many inner-city freeways were built through neighborhoods in which the majority of residents were Black. Particularly well-known is Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans, which President Biden [explicitly mentioned in a speech](#) about the package. Once a shopping street lined with oak trees and single-family homes, today it is a multi-lane freeway on stilts.



In the 1960s, several hundred homes in Rochester were demolished to make room for the freeway. Its removal could allow the neighborhood to grow together again.



A few brave pedestrians suggest there's still hope for the new district.

In addition to the environmental aspect, demolishing such freeways also has a social component. Historical urban districts that were torn apart should grow together again. There are ideas for this all over the country. The organization ["Freeway Fighters"](#) is campaigning for the demolition of old routes in numerous cities.

However, such a large-scale project has never actually been implemented before — except in Rochester.

Whether this example sets a precedent will also depend on the coming elections. The infrastructure package was passed across party lines in Congress. But many Republicans have strong reservations about anything that could be seen as anti-car. The governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, calls freeway dismantling projects "woke," for him a smear for left-wing ideas.

Motorway expansion in Berlin

In Germany, many expressways and motorway bridges also date from the 1960s and 1970s and are therefore due for expensive repairs and renovations. "We hardly have any urban freeways, in a stricter sense, that really divide a city," says Weert Canzler, mobility researcher at the Berlin Science Center for Social Research (WZB). "It's usually smaller highways that run through city centers." And at the moment there is no move to demolish these outdated roads.

But at least two examples do come to mind, Canzler says. The A40 in Essen, with its lowered trough shape, has a certain similarity to the Inner Loop in Rochester. And the A100 in Berlin already cuts through several neighborhoods in the city's western districts. Controversial plans to expand it by cutting through neighborhoods on the city's east side are proceeding with support from both the city and federal governments.

If you ask the mobility researcher about positive examples, he primarily mentions other countries: "In Utrecht, a motorway was moved underground," says Canzler, as also happened in Seoul, South Korea. "It's impressive what sort of urbanity is possible if you

want it!" he says. A similar project is currently underway in Hamburg. Roughly 900 meters of the A7 are being capped, creating room for green spaces, allotment gardens and playgrounds on top of the motorway.

Canzler, like Rochester mayor Evans, is convinced that the elimination of expressways will not lead to traffic chaos. It is quite possible that traffic will initially shift to side streets. But there are ways to counter that trend. The less attractive a district becomes for cars, the more likely people are to switch to public transport.

This can be seen in London, for example. In low-traffic neighborhoods, there are data that prove the success of such a policy. "The traffic there literally disappeared into thin air," says Canzler. There's even a technical term for this: traffic evaporation.

Canzler thinks it's possible that Germany could be catching on to the trend. Taking Berlin as an example again, the city is planning to demolish an outdated freeway bridge at Breitenbachplatz. It's not a whole motorway, but it's at least a start.

Perhaps there's a little bit of Rochester in Germany after all.

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