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From Home to Highway: Gender and the San Francisco Freeway Revolts

A quick drive through rush-hour San Francisco traffic reveals how bad congestion can be when a metropolis has only a few major freeways. While this creates immense strife for the daily commuter, this design was the intended result of mid-century San Franciscan homeowners. From 1951-1967, thousands of San Franciscan residents protested against freeway construction to preserve their homes, their parks, and their space. While many associate this activism with environmentalism or transportation politics, one critical factor is notoriously left out: gender.

My research aims to examine how and why gender influenced the San Francisco Freeway Revolts of the 1950s and 1960s. This includes determining the extent and impact of female participation in these protests, San Francisco freeways' connection to the environment, and how gender roles affected neighborhood activism. While there have been many analyses of these Revolts, rarely have any given more than a cursory glance at gender as a foundational concept within San Francisco. To accomplish this, I scoured local newspaper archives and personal correspondence while conducting interviews with former activists to establish a previously unseen picture of gender's importance in this activism. I then incorporated this information on a conceptual level to gender's relationship with home, space, and the environment.

In 1951, after years of debate over the city's infrastructure needs, the San Francisco Planning Commission called for the construction of nine freeways across the peninsula, many running directly through residential areas and public parks. This plan was designed by individuals in disproportionately male-dominated fields, including state highway engineers, city planners, and business leaders. In fact, in 1960 civil engineers in California were 99% male, the highest of any occupation at the time.¹ To the residential public, these seemingly elitist plans were egregious and warranted retaliation. Three major waves of protest against the Embarcadero, Western, and Panhandle Freeways, respectively, became the longest and most expensive fight against freeway construction in American history, costing the city over \$200 million in federal aid.

Yet this massive infrastructure overhaul would not have been as politically effective as it was without the notable attention of women. Calvin Welch, a former official of the Haight-Ashbury Neighborhood Council, remarked that the people "who kept [the revolt] alive over the years were virtually all women...at the conceptual level, at the organizational level, [and] at the creative level..."² Rather than women in low-income neighborhoods, these women were primarily working or middle-class wives and mothers in majority-white communities. This is because they possessed the social resources and time to be able to organize politically in the first place. This narrative of female involvement is often disguised from academic discourse because, to the public and the media, men appeared to be the face of the movement. For example, real estate developer Chris McKeon was repeatedly interviewed by city newspapers and even became the chairman of Mayor George Christopher's Committee to Study Freeways during the 1959 Western Freeway revolt. Yet McKeon was more of a spokesperson than a community organizer, and the academic focus on spokespeople veils the impact of those who conducted on-the-ground work. In a 1961 neighborhood petition against the Western Freeway by the female-chaired Forest Hills Garden Club, approximately 95% of the 612 signatures were women.³ While this reveals a

formerly unseen image of protest participation, it does not describe why gender is a useful analytical and explanatory tool for this movement.

This picture becomes clearer, however, by examining what these people were fighting against. Freeways strengthened and entrenched male patterns of behavior. At its foundation, males controlled the planning process in both government and industry. The civil engineering field possessed a culture that shirked familial connections for a sense of professionalism and did not allow women in their honor society until 1969.⁴ San Francisco politicians and officials were notoriously male as well. Activist Joan Siewald remarked how whenever she and two other Glen Park women showed up to City Hall, the department heads would race to the men's room.⁵ But the masculinity of the freeways involved more than just the demographics of those responsible for their design. Firstly, large-scale freeway construction would have ensured that the automobile remained the dominant form of urban travel. As Martin Wachs describes, "as the city adjusts over time to the universal mobility provided by the automobile, it is doing so in a social environment which insures the continued existence" of gendered spaces, with the downtown as male and the home as female.⁶ Moreover, freeways act as a tool for social separation. Both literally and figuratively, they separate a driver from their environment, whether that was disrupted parkland in the Panhandle or the ruins of destroyed homes in Glen Park. It was this separation that embodied the underpinnings of female resistance to freeways.

Women campaigned prominently to stop freeway development in order to preserve interpersonal connections within the community. Since freeways would destroy hundreds of houses, they were direct threats to the communal and familial relationships involved in and around one's home. This is uniquely important for women because, as Eugene Rochberg-Halton noted, women have a stronger emotional attachment to the home and to the interpersonal interactions within it.⁷ Freeways were antithetical to this concept. Not only did they raze homes, they literally divided communities and eliminated areas like parks where social relationships could be cultivated. Every individual that I interviewed informed me how freeway



Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

activism was more than just advocacy, it actually began to define the social lives of these women. Additionally, the son of Gina Pennestri, a local leader in the fight against the Panhandle Freeway, mentioned how his mother fought so diligently simply because she wanted to preserve a space for her kids to play.⁸ Nature and parks were crucial in preserving a sense of space that retained significant emotional attachments to a community. In 1964, when Sue Bierman wrapped butcher paper around every tree in the Panhandle that a freeway would have destroyed, she was exerting her sense of ownership over space that fostered all of these interpersonal interactions within her community.⁹ The freeway, both in theory and practice, was a direct attack on an individual's ability to maintain the value of these relationships. In order to protect their home

(including its space and its people), one must protect their neighborhood. By reflecting a desire to preserve interpersonal relationships, women entrenched a sense of family and community that the freeway was primed to destroy.

This is important when looking to future research. I hope to examine the connection between women and the environment through an ecofeminist lens that emphasizes interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, I will aim to quantify my results through a census-based data analysis of gender and space throughout San Francisco neighborhoods. But what this narrative aggregates to is the idea that material objects serve more than just their designed physical purpose. The technology, spaces, and objects that we use every day all establish and entrench a distinct set of social relationships.¹⁰ In this way, San Francisco freeways, or the lack thereof, were defined by gender. While there was no revolution against the automobile itself, women ensured that a gendered form of automobility would fail to root itself within the city's unique character. The actions of women like Sue Bierman and Joan Siewald guaranteed that residential communities within San Francisco would remain just that: communities.

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