

MY COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP WITH I-5 OUR COMPLICATED AMERICAN IDENTITY

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I.

I-5—formally known as Interstate 5—is a crucial corridor that runs north-to-south through Seattle’s core. It serves as a central artery for commuters and couriers, transporting more vehicles than any other road in Washington. Further, as one of the longest freeways in the country, it connects the West Coast from border to border, facilitating interstate travel, commerce and progress.

Like many of us, I personally became acquainted with I-5 for work. A new job called me to Seattle, for which I spent a significant amount of time using major thoroughways to visit local hubs. The learning curve felt immense. Confusing signs and signals caused pause; traffic and construction triggered angst. Daily accidents and abandoned bumpers littering the shoulders were a stark reminder of our collective speed and precarity. But quickly and instinctually, I began to memorize traffic patterns, lanes to avoid, and universally hated exits (see: Mercer Street, Exit 167). I-5 became second nature—a part of me.

As I continue to shuffle from metered on-ramps to join fellow drivers in traffic, I use this time to reflect on our city—the place that I am proud to call home. Between stalled yet steadfast truckers and tech-bros, as we weave to our

destinations of presumed choice, I enjoy my own company. Exhaust plumes around us as we crawl over the bridges into downtown, together. The low rumble of engines is almost meditative. I observe layers of graffiti, encampments nestled between fences, and flurries of seagulls flock above aged evergreens.

I feel kinship with all these beings, and this structure. Our communities are built for and around I-5, connecting yet dividing us all.. We use I-5 to motion through the day, collectively, all the while distinctly separated by metal and monotony.

II.

I-5’s origins are practical, paralleling local industry growth and responding to a growing need for mechanical transport. But its context underscores broader cultural tensions spanning over the last hundred plus years.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the wild west coast had started to settle and boom. The gold rush and land grab of the western frontier captivated new settlers and displaced the last remaining indigenous communities. Railways were built to and from the waterfront, carrying more and more laborers and provisions. Soon,

the region's lucrative lumber industry established Seattle as a major shipping port.

Concerns for urban density sparked decisive infrastructure planning. City systems needed to evolve with new population demands. Brick buildings replaced old wooden structures; pavement reformed treacherous muddy roads. Streetcar systems expanded, though soon occluded by the rise of the all-mighty automobile.

People began to change how they experienced the world. Cars offered unmatched reliability and convenience: maneuvering quickly and easily over new roads, enduring long distances in all weather conditions, allowing travelers to explore new places, visit old friends, and conduct business in ways previously unimaginable. Individual travel became preferable, driving an American pastime.

After World War II, the American economy boomed, leading to national investment in cross-county travel, intra- and inter-state commerce, and emergency preparedness. In 1956, President Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act into law, which earmarked federal funds for a vast interstate freeway system.¹ At its core, this project sought to

¹ In the United States, the terms "highway," "freeway," and "Interstate" are often used interchangeably to describe different types of roads. While there is some overlap, these terms have defining distinctions:

- A **highway** is a general term that is used to describe any public road that is maintained by the government and is open to the public. This can include roads of varying sizes, from small local roads to large multi-lane highways that connect cities and states.
- A **freeway** is a type of highway that is designed for high-speed travel and has limited access points, meaning that there are fewer exits and intersections than on other types of highways. Freeways are typically divided, with multiple lanes in each direction, and are intended for through-traffic only, meaning that drivers are not able to turn off the road at most exits.
- The **Interstate Highway System** is a specific network of highways in the United States that was created under the Federal-Aid Highway Act of

connect the nation. It served as a shining beacon of American ingenuity, industry, and identity. Equally, however, it also came to represent the underbelly of American values.

From early conception to its current iteration, the interstate freeway system exists as a poignant metaphor for American identity. Its overwhelming prioritization of automobiles reflects a deeper cultural prioritization of private industry and personal comfort. Despite increasing public demands for more equitable and environmental transport, its brutalist concrete architecture stands to uphold the American way of life: grand in ambition, aging in upkeep.

III.

By 1962, when federal funding flowed in, Seattle had already begun surveying for a new north-south route to alleviate automotive congestion. Seattle's distinct "hourglass" landscape – pinched by two large bodies of water – combined with its San Francisco-esque hills, limited I-5's placement options. Much of the area had already been commercially developed and required a significant amount of "right-of-way" land purchases and demolition of existing structures.² While many other urban terrain allowed for construction outside of developed land, I-5 seemed destined to part the city in two.

Like most American decisions, construction of the Interstate system disproportionately affected areas with little to no political power: namely, the

¹⁹⁵⁶. These roads are designed for long-distance travel and connect cities and states across the country. The Interstates are marked by distinctive red, white, and blue shields, and are typically freeways, with limited access and multiple lanes in each direction.

Source: [U.S. Department of Transportation](#)

² Federal and State governments have the authority to acquire land for various highway-related purposes when it deems the acquisition to be in the best interest of the general public.

Source: [Washington State Legislature](#)

more impoverished and less white. The final route approval for I-5 necessitated the severing of entire neighborhoods, foot passageways, and community centers, fundamentally altering population patterns to this day. Construction most affected what is today referred to as the International District, dividing an already eviscerated Japantown at its center.³

Much of I-5 today is still the original structure finished in the 1962. “The highway’s busiest stretch—just north of Mercer Street—carries about 274,000 vehicles per day,” David Guttman of *The Seattle Times* reported in 2017.⁴ “In 1976, the earliest year for which WSDOT has comparable data, it carried about 187,000 vehicles. That’s a lot more cars. The road hasn’t gotten wider.” Its obstruction issues also stem from its original construction, which purposely undershot congestion projections to avoid buying more developed land.

As Seattle’s population continues to grow, the maintenance and expansion of I-5 has become increasingly critical. Traffic and construction efforts feel ubiquitous. New issues and values feel at odds. I-5, like other major freeways, categorically contributes to air pollution, traffic fatalities, and overall pedestrian inaccessibility. But I-5 remains staunchly vital to many, and essential to almost everyone. Its history and centrality to our landscape reflects the best and worst of us, its fate tied to our own. It is defining in the most literal sense. I-5 defines the city and our relationship to it, whether we like it or not.

IV.

Locals might not initially think of I-5 as part of Seattle’s identity. In the same way we might list our own best qualities first, Seattleites might pick something more iconic, or distinctly unique, to encapsulate Seattle, like the elegant Space Needle or vibrant Pike Place Market. But locals and tourists alike all-but-certainly know of—and depend on—I-5. Almost everyone who moves in and out of Seattle must traverse the infamous concrete mire in some way. A necessary evil, most will say. Our very own “concrete scar,” David Guttman of *The Seattle Times*’ traffic declares.

Sometimes, when the sun is out and the sky is clear, when sharp clouds frame the city skyline, I feel grateful to sit in traffic on I-5. South of downtown, Seattle’s industry is on full view: the sharp lines of the shipping port, stacks of matte-colored shipping containers, and crosshatch of railroads remind us of what Seattle once was – and still is – at its core. Seattle’s distinct landscape limited I-5’s placement but today results in a view. I watch the large “R” of the old Rainier Brewery pass through the window as I bounce out of the downtown corridor, only to see more traffic ahead.

Traffic will make anyone question their morals. The oppressive design of freeway structures, complete with bottlenecks, will too. The way freeways look, feel, and cut throughout a city define life for the commuter, tourist, transporter and citizen. The story of I-5 is a historical and cultural one: it reflects the larger narrative of Seattle’s developing identity. Though complicated, I-5 stands as a prominent physical reckoning for us; for our relationship to our city and our collective identities.

³ Source: *The Seattle Times* (2016)

⁴ Source: *The Seattle Times* (2017)