

Outreach

Disaster struck San Francisco in 1989 when an earthquake hit the city. It killed 16 and shattered arterial road links. **Andrew Nash**, former director of the city's transport authority, tells how the city rose from the rubble



In the wake of the quake: demolishing freeways improved the damaged economy

Tearing down the freeway

AS YOU WALK along San Francisco's Embarcadero with its palm trees waving in the ocean breeze, watching historic streetcars rumble by, admiring views of the Bay, it's hard to imagine that just 10 years ago you would have been walking in an ugly, dark, smelly street under two levels of freeway. That freeway was damaged by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and torn down to make way for today's spectacular boulevard.

Demolishing this freeway was quite controversial since it led directly to Chinatown and Fisherman's Wharf. Merchants complained that visitors could not reach their restaurants and shops without it. However, a large group of sealions settled in a nearby marina at Pier 39 following the earthquake. The sealions pushed Pier 39 attendance to record levels despite the closed freeway. This proved lack of freeway access would not have to bring visitor declines.

Demolition of San Francisco's Central Freeway, also damaged in the earthquake, was even more controversial, since it provided access for a large part of the city. Some of the freeway had been demolished immediately after the quake and Hayes Valley, a once marginal neighbourhood, blossomed with new shops, restaurants, and activity. Residents realised that demolishing the remaining

freeway could have similar benefits and began fighting reconstruction plans. Between 1996 and 1999, San Franciscans voted four times on whether to rebuild the Central Freeway, ultimately deciding to replace it with a boulevard.

The Embarcadero is now complete and Octavia Boulevard is under construction. Early results are nothing short of extraordinary – both areas have redeveloped into vital, attractive and exciting neighbourhoods. The Embarcadero is a major regional shopping and entertainment district; real estate values have rocketed, and billions of dollars have been invested in the area. Hayes Valley has been transformed into one of the city's most hip and arty neighbourhoods. An area once filled with drugs, prostitution and parking lots, now boasts restaurants, galleries and new apartments.

In San Francisco, demolishing the freeways provided two fundamental ingredients for urban revitalisation: land and an improved environment. The freeways themselves took up a huge amount of space and their environmental impact (noise, air pollution and visual intrusion) destroyed any possibility of economic vitality. Before these areas were urban wastelands. Now they are the city's most highly sought after property.

Urban revitalisation started when the freeways were torn down and was, especially in the case of Hayes Valley, a spontaneous community-driven effort.

Tearing down the freeways cost more than building them. Surplus land sales made up the cost difference from disaster funding. The city will eventually benefit from increased property tax values – imagine the difference in value of a hotel located next to a double deck freeway, and a hotel overlooking a park with views of San Francisco Bay.

But with California's convoluted tax system it will be many years before the city collects these taxes – and this will be a fraction of the private sector benefit. From a funding agency's perspective it would be nice to share in the windfall profits property owners accrue after construction (or deconstruction) of major transport projects. A system for this would go a long way to funding the rebuilding of our decaying urban infrastructure.

Looking back it's hard to believe tearing down the two freeways was controversial, however, without change, cities become stagnant and die. The earthquake helped push San Francisco into the future. We hope other cities can get there – without a natural disaster.