A Road to Nowhere: Interstate Highways and Racialized Space in Omaha, Nebraska

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Background on Interstates and Segregation

- Interstate Highway Act 1956-
  - 90:10 federal/state funding scheme
- Already segregated housing –
  - Federal Housing Association, Home Owners Loan Association, G.I. Bill
- Thesis: interstates cemented segregation
- GIS- interstates dictated how people utilized space
Omaha’s Interstates and Freeways

• Mid-sized city
• Moderate minority population
• Already segregated starting during WW I
  • European Immigrant ethnic enclave
  • African American community
• Largest U.S. meat packing industry 1955-1969
Omaha’s Interstates and Freeways

• Two failed opposition movements:
  • European immigrant community
  • African American neighborhood

• One successful opposition movement:
  • White, middle-class suburban Omaha
Use of GIS

• First, I examined historical records
  • examples) newspaper archives; health records; oral histories
  • politicians and residents reaction to Omaha’s interstates.
• GIS answered the questions surrounding space
  • Where did people move?
  • What effect did the route have on minorities?
  • Who moved to suburbia?
  • What pattern did people move in?
Effects on Omaha's Black Community: Federal Yellow Book Plan 1955 vs. Actual Interstate Route 2000
Southeast Omaha Resistance to the Interstate 1958-61

- 1957- Omaha finalized plan
- 1958- Held unpublicized public hearing in January
- 1959- Opposition
- 1960- Right of way purchase
  - Debt
  - Displacement
  - Changed jobs
  - Shut down one of two main elementary schools
- 1961- Started construction
Methods

• Movement of displaced Southeast Omahans
  • 140 names from *Omaha World Herald* articles
  • Looked up names in 1965 directory
    • 20 residents’ addresses did not change
    • 35 residents not listed
    • 88 moved
• geo-coding tools on GIS
Movement of Displaced South Omahans for I-480 Interchange

Legend
- Red: Condemned Residences
- Blue: Homes that Displaced Persons Moved To
Methods

• Effect on neighborhood
  • 1958 *Omaha Phone Directory*
    • Recorded 110 names on three streets that were bisected by interchange
  • 1970 *Omaha Phone Directory*
    • 45 people moved residences
    • 32 did not move
    • 33 people were not re-listed

• geo-coding tools
Migration of South Omahans from 1958 to 1970

Legend

- 1958 South Omahan Residences
- 1970 South Omahans with Same Address
- 1970 Migrated South Omahans

N

0 1.5 3 6 Miles
Sprawl 1961-1971

• Construction of east-west (Interstate-80)
  • Started in 1961
  • Completed in 1972
• Decentralization of people and industry
• Demographics- white and middle class
  • Housing discrimination
  • Employment discrimination
  • Federal policies
• Isolated poverty and minorities
Moran’s Index on GIS

• Increase in value indicates clustering
• Decrease indicates dispersion
• Index of 1 = complete segregation
• Whites’ Moran’s Index
  • fell markedly from 1960 to 1970
  • .58 to .39
• African Americans’ Index
  • increased slightly
  • .6 to .62
North Freeway 1966-1988

• Occurred after July 3-5, 1966 race riot
  • Three national guard squads
  • 120 arrests
• Omaha changed funding scheme in October 1966
  • Decided to fund completely locally
Blacks in Path of West and North Freeway Plans 1970

Legend
- White Park
- Population Density
- Blacks/ Sq. Mile
  - <500
  - 500-1,000
  - 1,000-5,000
  - 5,000-7,000
  - >7,000
North Freeway 1966-1988

• African Americans lacked political voice
  • At-large voting for 18-member city council and mayor
  • First African American senator 1973; city council member 1981

• Opposition at city meetings
  • Less press coverage; no political backing

• White suburbanites halted West Freeway
  • 1970-Introduced
  • 1972- Eliminated
North Freeway 1966-1988

• Continually delayed
• Four displacements occurred
  • 1966 from I-480 to Cuming Street
  • 1968 from Cuming to Hamilton Streets
  • 1970 from Hamilton to Lake Streets
  • 1976-1979 from Lake to Fort Streets
• Interstate- 580 from 1970-1975
Methods

• Looked up streets in freeway path
  • *Omaha Phone Directories*
• Displacement 1968
  • 1965- 25 residents; 1973- relocation
• Displacement 1970
  • 1968- 70 residents; 1973- relocation
• Displacement 1976
  • 1973- 35 residents; 1979- relocation
• Overlaid with African American population density
Long Term Effects

• Northeast and Southeast Omaha in 2000
  • 90% minority population; 12% white population

• 2004-poverty rate in 100 largest cities
  • Omaha third highest African American poverty rate
  • Highest African American child poverty rate

• Largest lead Superfund site in the nation
  • 27 square miles all of which lead contaminates
  • 125,880 residents, including 14,117 children under seven
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Omaha Health Indicators</th>
<th>Omaha Minorities</th>
<th>Omaha Whites</th>
<th>National</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low birth weight (percentage of all births)</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infant mortality (per 1,000 births)</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Death from stroke (per 100,000)</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26.5</td>
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<td>Heart disease (per 100,000 people)</td>
<td>198.4</td>
<td>121.7</td>
<td>139.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lung cancer (per 100,000 people)</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>40.0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions

• Interstates isolated, divided, and oppressed
  • Isolated - minorities and poverty
  • Divided - employment, neighborhoods, schools
  • Oppressed - social and environmental racism

• GIS allowed me to show spatial access to jobs and housing by minorities and whites