

8. A (Very Brief) Tale of Two Freeways: February 28

A week earlier I had driven from the Fort Lauderdale Airport to my motel in Pompano Beach after darkness had fallen, so it was the drive back to Airport just before sunset to catch there my flight there back to Halifax which was a true revelation about the aesthetic deformation the U.S and Canada as well inflict on their freeways. The congested traffic was a separate issue: after all, it was rush hour. Much of Atlantic Avenue accessing Interstate 95, which would take us to the Airport, was already bumper-to-bumper traffic, and on the Interstate it also was stop and go, so that a trip of 25 kilometres lasted for an hour. The delays along the latter would have been compensated for by agreeable vistas on both sides of the highway. Instead, monotonous successions of nondescript, even grungy-looking smallish buildings (factories? warehouses?), no green except for the odd palm tree holding out in this suburban wilderness; at times, glimpses of rows of trees on the horizon perhaps adorning more attractive but invisible conurbations; the whole dreary ambiance of it all even more disfigured by the omnipresent clutter of utility poles, wires, and cables—a sight still far too common in the built-up areas of North America. What a far remove from the Florida of the alluring Atlantic and Gulf coasts, the myriad waterways, the awesome expanses of swamp land, and last but not least in my opinion, the eye-catching architecture whether ultra-modern or elegantly traditional! Freeways in Canada, I admit, generally do not offer much more agreeable sights to the eye, but Interstate 95 along the stretch I rode a few weeks ago represents, in my opinion, a nadir of modern urban (or suburban) blight. Like nearly all the American Interstates, this one must have been built or at least started in the '50's or '60's—part of the greatest and costliest transportation infrastructure projects after the Second World War. How vastly, but at such little cost, would the aesthetics of some of their urban and suburban stretches have been improved by nothing more than carefully laid out and maintained flanking strips of trees and grass!

I first saw the Don Valley Parkway in Toronto in the summer of 1967 when I was on my way by bus to Montreal and the World Expo there, and I was truly awed by it. Nature has been allowed to play the decisive role here. Stretching for many kilometres, the broad ravine of the Don River (the river itself is now minuscule and for a long time was badly polluted) provides the freeway with a luxuriant stretches of grass and woods, especially on the west side. Drivers and riders take it all in as the multi-lane highway winds its way up and down through the valley, grand aqueducts spanning the ravine—the Bloor Street aqueduct constructed a century ago the most awesome of them all—and almost skyscraper-high apartment buildings towering on the hilltops. I have not seen its like anywhere else. Even though the Don Valley Parkway is often overtaxed with traffic nowadays, I cannot think of a happier coming together of nature and human engineering.