Epilogue

**Landscape Taken for a Ride?**

If latter-day versions of Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov had visited the United States or Germany in the late twentieth century, they would have found much more extensive road systems than the ones they encountered in the 1930s. Rare are the places far from highways and interstates. They also would have found few observers who are enthusiastic about the environmentally redeeming qualities of roads. The optimism and high hopes that some groups and individuals placed in scenic drives and parkways had given way to a practice of mitigating environmental damage from emissions, noise, and habitat fragmentation.¹ The story of scenic roads, however, is not simply one of early embrace and late rejection.

Harmony and serene reconciliation between humans, technology, and the environment were the stated goals of these roads. Instead, planning, construction, and use revealed social and environmental cleavages. They exacerbated them in some cases. Paradoxically, the entangled histories of scenic roads, parkways, and commercial highways in the United States and Germany show how some actors highlighted the environmental dimensions of infrastructures and downplayed them at the same time.

It matters that one of the first significant planning and design features of the rise of cars and roads was a comprehensive (if exclusive) effort to cushion their spatial and environmental dimensions.² Aspirations were high and the claims of redemption were broad and deep. The scenic infrastructures discussed in this book were hardly a quaint interlude in the unfolding of the Motown cluster.

Roadmindedness had several dimensions. For the locals whose livelihoods they affected, very little about these roads was charming. Thousands
of them were displaced in order to create vistas for visitors. These landscapes built for mobile scenery furthered new social and cultural practices of automotive sightseeing. Some of their features became persistent. There can be little doubt that such roads contributed to making landscapes consumable for drivers and passengers en route and, in fact, helped to turn scenery into an automotive consumer item. Ilf and Petrov were onto something: prospects became dispensed in almost the same manner as gasoline in this emerging car-road complex. Associating the car ride with a view, whether bucolic or industrial, has been one of the legacies of the rise of self-propelled movement by automobile. This was hardly a necessary or straightforward development. The concern with automotive vistas has been an undercurrent of this book—whether they were sought after by scenically minded engineers or landscape architects, ignored by other planners, or actively countered by truckers and some planners. The issue was never resolved. The strongest roadminded actors had access to and exercised state-sponsored power. In the process, scenic infrastructures demonstrated the might of central planning carried out by professional elites and backed up by governments. Road schemes received rhetorical and financial resources, while locals bore the brunt of disruption and displacement.

The embrace of scenic highways and the earnest belief in their curative powers was more than simply an overly optimistic embrace of a new technological system. Historians have examined how some observers had high hopes for technologies such as telephones, aviation, or the internet when they first came into broader use. The connections they provided were to supersede barriers of creed or nationality, as proponents of technological optimism averred. In the case of scenic infrastructures, the expectations and plans were optimistic but more relational. In comparison to smoke-belching train engines and geometrically conceived train tracks, cars and landscaped roads were to remake transportation in an environmentally acceptable fashion. When pollution from heavy industry was omnipresent in industrial cities and the railroads were the mobile version of heavy industry, automobiles and their infrastructures could be seen as nimble, smaller, less intrusive, and in fact restorative. The sins of heavy industry were to be expunged by scenic drives in landscapes of redress. In other words, scenic infrastructures were relational technologies with a keen, if socially exclusionary, eye toward their environmental dimensions.

Choosing cars and roads to cure the ills of transportation on rails is, of
course, the exact opposite of today’s environmentalist attitude toward transportation. Current proposals favor public transit and long-distance trains to help to overcome the dependency on cars and decrease pollution. Historically, however, these roles were reversed for some time. Historian Joel Tarr has observed how public health officials and sanitary engineers in large American cities welcomed automobiles in the early twentieth century. Introducing automobiles would reduce the number of urban horses used for deliveries and individual transportation. The millions of pounds of equine manure and the horse cadavers left in the streets were not just unsightly and smelly but provided breeding grounds for flies and other disease vectors. Cars would clean up cities and make them more healthful, or so the hope went. Acting in parallel, landscaped roads were to have salutary effects as well by replacing coal-burning trains and regaining individualistic experiences of scenery.

At its peak, the parkway movement aimed for a perfectly choreographed experience of sightseeing, with drivers and passengers as participants in an individual sensory journey. At the same time, this landscape experience rested on the mass production of automobiles and their reliability. This was yet another tension inherent in roadmindedness. Fordism did not beget scenic roads, but it was one of the preconditions for their expansion. Even more so, the views were prescribed and framed by design professionals, leaving little to chance for the inhabitants of the car (unless they stopped and disembarked from their vehicles). This guidance and instruction, however, was made invisible. With some exaggeration (and unknowingly echoing Ilf and Petrov), wilderness advocate Bob Marshall likened the parkway experience to people moving on a conveyor belt through an art gallery. He was disdainful but correct in pointing to the highly supervised nature of the experience.

In contrast, the rhetoric of the open road and of automotive freedom was pervasive on commercial highways, especially during the Cold War. The freedom to drive, to direct one’s engine to any destination at any time, became ingrained as a measure of individual liberty, especially when compared to the collectivist means of transportation supposedly favored in the Communist world. As any motorist with a speeding ticket can attest, such parlance obscures the degree to which roads have become spaces of control, regulation, and surveillance. In popular culture, however, driving has retained its meaning as an escapist move.
Also hidden to most drivers were the international dimensions of landscaped roads. Civil engineers and landscape architects were engaged in extensive transnational exchanges, but nationally planned and supported roads succeeded in the vernacular. In professional presentations and conversations, design features traveled easily across national borders. But the results on the ground were meant to reinforce allegedly national qualities and represent the sponsorship of the nation-state.

The relational aspects of scenic infrastructures include professional, social, and cultural relationships across national borders. These roads (and protests against them) were the results of international conversations, not national cultures. Reports, scholarly papers, visitations, and the government-sponsored forums of the International Road Congress helped to create a constant flow of ideas, techniques, and relations. It would be both futile and pointless to look for one individual or country as the originator of scenic driving. This book has presented an intertwined history. Countries and builders competed with and emulated each other. Centers of attention shifted. In the late nineteenth and very early twentieth century, Switzerland and other Alpine countries provided reference points and models of scenic infrastructures for aspiring tourist regions elsewhere. For urban and suburban parkways, the United States was the main display in the 1920s and early 1930s. Both Germany and the United States aimed to build extensive scenic highway systems from the mid-1930s onward with the Blue Ridge Parkway and the German Alpine Road as prime examples. At no time were roads or opposition to them merely isolated regional or national incidents. Roadmindedness and its contradictions traveled easily.

The earliest examples of scenic drives served as exhibits, as carefully arranged pictorial showcases of a new automotive access to nature in tune with middle-class, urban aesthetic approaches. Their rhetorical and architectural distinction from railroads and the railroad journey was a social and cultural marker. Railroads with their prescribed views and schedules were for the masses, and newly found autonomy on roads and aesthetic gain were for the happy few who could afford automobiles.

The interwar embrace of consumerism resting on the mass production of cars in the United States appealed to Germans and raised the possibility of an automotive infrastructure for wider swaths of society, based on scenic enjoyment and environmental restoration in both countries. Roadminded-
ness took on new forms and sponsors. In the United States, parkways, a new class of roadways only for automobiles, emerged out of the urban parks movement. They represented an effort to restore property values and degraded landscapes, and out of a desire to clean up society and human dwellings in a form of eugenic environmentalism. The latter goal was particularly strong in New York. Parkways dotted the landscapes in other American cities and suburbs as well. In the eyes of their promoters, the chaotic, disjointed, and crassly commercial landscapes of public transportation and commercial thruways were to give way to orderly and environmentally stable roadscapes in line with middle-class ideas of respectability and social uplift. Cleansing landscapes went hand in hand with cleansing the populace in these cases. A concern for purity undergirded both efforts. While these suburban parkways received lots of attention, most of the roads that were built or upgraded in the 1920s, however, were federally sponsored commercial connectors for cars and trucks.

The New Deal in the United States and the Nazi regime’s counterpart of public works fever created the political conditions for a wider embrace of the parkway idea. The Great Depression and political responses to it provided the juncture for not just expanding but reshaping roadmindedness. Central governments in Berlin and Washington, DC, employed metropolitan planners to bring forth national scenic roads in relatively remote settings with the Blue Ridge Parkway and the German Alpine Road. These roads were much longer and their implications were broader than previous examples. Fordist ideas of consumption and car ownership conjoined with extensive government intervention. Planners imposed their scenic visions of Appalachia and the Alps on local populations by using the powers of central planning. Locals were shunted aside. In the more open political system of the United States, the rise of these national scenic roads provoked a quest for roadless areas with wilderness as a shorthand for preserving areas from industrial civilization and its embodiment, the automobile and roads. Germany’s dictatorship of roads allowed some grumbling on the sidelines, but no fundamental criticism. In the end, civil engineers and landscape architects with a view toward the moving image of mountain scenery dominated the design process in its fundamentals. Locals were excluded by design and practice.

Design features of scenic highways were remarkably similar, regardless of location. Curvilinear alignment, the cloaking and revealing of beauty spots by way of shrubs and trees, rest areas at prominent places, relatively low
speeds, and sylvan or shoreline preferences had become part of an interna-
tional design vocabulary by the 1930s. Both for the Blue Ridge Parkway and
for the German Alpine Road, the rural and more extensive character of these
highways resulted in roads being designed for the longer view from higher
elevations. As national showpieces, they used altitude for visual and politi-
cal effect.

The remarkable similarities in approach, vision, and execution of scenic
infrastructures in Nazi Germany and the United States during the New
Deal, however, do not mean that differences in political systems ceased to
matter. Comparing, after all, is not equating. Fordism and widely distributed
cars were a reality in the United States by the late 1920s. For Nazi Germany,
they remained an aspiration, as the regime attempted to create a racialized
version of consumption. Planning processes differed; relative American
transparency and debates contrasted with government by fiat in Germany.
The simplicity of dictatorial planning, personified in Hitler and his road czar
Todt, brooked no resistance for high-profile projects such as the Alpine Road.
The roads were exclusionary as Germans defined as Jewish were legally
banned from operating an automobile anywhere. While some hikers and pres-
servationists were permitted to grumble in the remaining niches of publicity,
there was no questioning the general undertaking. The status of state-backed
experts, especially civil engineers, was not fundamentally challenged.

In contrast, the planning of the Blue Ridge Parkway rested on the polit-
ical nature of expertise. The decision on whether to place the road in Ten-
nessee or North Carolina in its southern part involved public hearings as
well as public and backchannel lobbying by these two states. Scenic produc-
tion rested on a political process involving state and federal actors. However,
local residents were left with little access to these wrangles and often saw
the road as an imposition on the land for the benefit of urban tourists rather
than themselves, a “rich man’s road.” For African Americans, the barriers
for using national parks such as the Blue Ridge Parkway in the segregated
South were formidable. Spatial segregation by race continued after the end
of legal, administrative exclusion; automotive recreation was not accessible
to all. The extent of parkways and their wide footprint, both geographically
and culturally, provoked a historically potent response in the form of the
wilderness movement. For these critics, roadlessness rather than roadmind-
edness was the goal.

But the differences between the two countries go even deeper. The Nazi
Concern for the environment in general and scenic infrastructures in particular is best described as spasmodic. Given Hitler’s and Todt’s highly personal management style and, more importantly, the regime’s ultimate priorities of war and genocide, it would be naive to look for a deliberate, sustained development of scenic policies or environmentalism during the Nazi period. By contrast, parkways played a specific role in the complex process of American environmental politics, as the rise of the organized wilderness movement shows.

In both countries, roadmindedness provoked professional rivalries. Civil engineers were the most obvious beneficiaries of the push to upgrade existing roads and build new ones during the automotive age. When it came to scenic roads, however, landscape architects aimed to assert their expertise as well. Their goal was to be involved in the initial design process rather than decorating a highway that others had planned. During the planning and construction of some American suburban parkways and of the National Park Service roads, they were able to achieve their goal. When interstate highways appeared on the drawing board, however, engineers tended to be in control. By contrast, Nazi Germany’s chaotic system of governance and the power exercised by individuals such as Todt translated into uneven professional relationships. Civil engineers had the upper hand in the end. They managed to continue this status during the Federal Republic. While the Blue Ridge Parkway took several decades to build, the German Alpine Road itself was not completed as planned, not least because it bore the imprint of the dictatorship so visibly.

Institutions mattered, especially in the longer term. Both Nazi Germany and its partial successor, the democratic Federal Republic, did not have a counterpart to the National Park Service. More than any other historical actor, this agency has engendered scenic driving on roads designed for this purpose and translated it into governmental policy. Almost defensively, the Park Service’s assistant director described it as “not being a construction agency, primarily” in 1944, when roadbuilding had been one of its most visible activities for some two decades. The Park Service under Mather promoted car-based scenic tourism with bureaucratic fortitude and longevity. Roads such as the Blue Ridge Parkway and scenic automotive tourism as a common practice are the infrastructural and experiential practices of such institutional vigor. The cultural, political, and financial resources of this fed-
eral agency, even as it was one of many clamoring for support and money, promoted automotive scenic tourism for decades. When the bulk of traffic had migrated to infrastructures meant to facilitate volume and safety, the Park Service continued to hold on to its scenic roads out of institutional momentum and cultural preference. As a result, scenic roads and utilitarian roads sometimes run parallel in American spaces. No German equivalent of this spatial generosity exist.

The institutions and practices of the federal government also produced and contained within itself the wilderness movement. One of the most eloquent wilderness voices and parkway critics, Bob Marshall, was in the employ of the federal government while he provided an important intellectual and political impetus for the movement to set aside wilderness areas where roads were absent. Scenic roads and parkways did not beget the wilderness movement, but their proliferation provoked contestations over their design and location, which contributed to a legislative response in the form of the Wilderness Act. Wilderness, of course, has deeper cultural and intellectual roots. During the historical moment of enthusiastic roadbuilding, however, a political movement emerged.

As a cultural concept, wilderness did not resonate in domestic German affairs, given its general embrace of man-made landscapes within its borders. Hikers and preservationists, however, were successful in stopping roads in sensitive spots such as Alpine summits after the end of the Nazi dictatorship. The reason for protecting these areas was not their supposedly untouched quality, but the fact that zones without infrastructural access had become rare. With growing postwar affluence, tourism expanded greatly, as did the desire to set aside areas that were only accessible on foot, if at all.

Both countries shared some similarities. After the war, during the greatest period of expansion for roads, parkways and the idea of the scenic drive did not wither, but they were overshadowed by more utilitarian highways. Driving habits fostered earlier, with their more immersive experience of landscapes, often made way for the faster reality of traversing mere territory and reaching one’s destination quickly. Still, unlike the railroad journey with its unintended consequence of panoramic traveling, the twentieth-century driving experience continued to contain an element of slowing down for sights. The complex history of scenic infrastructures does not fall neatly into a narrative of rise and fall. Scenic highways were not displaced by utilitarian free-
Consuming Landscapes

ways, just as cars and trucks have not replaced railroads. Rather, all of these artifacts and systems were built on top of each other. They formed interconnected layers, not distinct areas.  

Automotive Scenery Today

The role performed by scenery has changed. Today, parents often debate whether showing movies to children while driving is beneficial for their offspring and for traffic safety. Citing the “mind-numbing boredom of being strapped in a car seat for hours on end, with nothing to do but admire ‘the scenery’” or “staring at mile after mile of Jersey walls,” as one journalist put it, Disney appears to win over the landscape, especially on long-distance trips on busy interstates on the Eastern seaboard of the United States.  

What, then, is the legacy of these scenic roads and parkways? Did they slow down traffic? Speed it up inadvertently? At first glance, such deliberately slower movements—less expeditious than fast trains and cars on

“In Quiet Contemplation of the Scenery (In stiller Beschauung der Gegend)”. With a degree of irony, the caption to this snapshot from a private photo album speaks of the “quiet contemplation of scenery.” Automotive touring and sightseeing had become quotidian for many. Private photo album, not dated (1950s or 1960s), Stadtarchiv Munich
interstates—appear as precursors of the twenty-first-century slow movement in the realms of food and travel, with its middle-class emphasis on the local and the unaccelerated. As some observers have pointed out, this slow movement is born out of privilege. Pointedly, the geographer Tim Cresswell asks, “How bourgeois can you get? Who has the time and space to be slow by choice?” On their face, parkways would provide the underpinnings for such choices. Yet, they were also part of an accelerated world that brought metropolitan traffic to the farthest recesses of the nation-state with the help of new or extended infrastructures. Like the railroads that preceded them, they were part and parcel of a circulative system and of industrial modernity. They sought to provide a different version of modernity, not an escape from it.15

Telling the history of transportation and mobility in the twentieth century has often meant presenting a story about moving toward faster and faster means of transportation. Cultural historians have noticed and discussed a contemporaneous sense of acceleration of life and the resulting responses, ranging from enthusiasm to fatigue and exhaustion. Yet, the historical moment of parkways raises questions about speed and its roles. With trains going ever faster and airplanes promising to break the boundaries between heaven and earth, slower, scenic roads were much more than a retarding episode in the continuous march toward greater speeds. These highways show the interconnection of transport infrastructures: the purposefully slow movement on scenic roads was a counterbalance to the railroads, a response as much as an effort to find a more grounded movement. It was both deeply romantic and forward-looking as it sought to embrace a new technology and to mold it to reclaim what had been lost. Transport infrastructures are layered and connected, not distinct from each other, as this example shows.16 Roadmindedness was an uneven and contested process related to other technologies, not a victory lap toward ever greater speed.

Slowing down was as modern as was acceleration. Attending to specific landscapes rather than an indistinct, blurred space to be traversed, showed environmental sensibility as much as it showed a selective embrace of scenic features derived from architectural and touristic conventions. The story of transportation and speed is incomplete without paying attention to deceleration. The nineteenth-century trope of shrinking time and space as the result of new transportation technologies has had a long shelf life.17 Parkways, indeed, contributed to a shrinking of space, namely the perception that
available space was shrinking and was getting more crowded with roads, rails, and other infrastructures. By the late twentieth century, the dominant perception was that available space had become less extensive, less malleable, and therefore more precious. The discussions over never-built parkways or the extensions of existing ones, the rejection of high-altitude roads in the 1960s and the 1970s, and the freeway revolt had been about the precarity and preciousness of spaces. In this new perception, space was now too valuable to use it for more roads. Space had shrunk, but not in the way that the designers of roads, in particular parkways, had imagined. Quite the opposite: instead of bringing drivers and passengers closer to nature, the extent of parkways and, especially, highways and interstates, had made more and more drivers, voters, and constituents feel that infrastructures estranged them from nature.

Finally, the interrelated, complex, and sometimes contradictory history of the automotive view from the road showcases how one generation’s solutions to environmental questions can end up as the next generation’s problem. The beautified, professionally supervised world of landscaped roads was intended to supplant the polluting railroad with its imposing infrastructures. By encouraging more driving and driving for the sake of driving, such ideas, plans, and their embodiments have helped to bring about a world of vastly increased gasoline-driven movement and one where non-motorized mobility has taken on new meanings. The view from the road has become a central aspect of our lives.