

Prof. Richard J. Williams submission of 30 May 2022

PE1906/B - Investigate options for removing and reducing the impact of the central Glasgow section of the M8

Background and expertise

I am an art historian with expertise in the architecture and urbanism of the modern period. I have particular interests in car-oriented design, and over the years I have investigated a number of areas relevant to the petition in question, including Cumbernauld and Milton Keynes in the UK, the Los Angeles freeway system, and most recently in Brazil, São Paulo's car-oriented reconstruction of the 1960s.

I would like to comment on the petition in relation to my recent work in São Paulo, done between February and April 2022, supported by the Leverhulme Trust and the University of São Paulo. The work focused on the reuse of the Elevado João Goulart, popularly known as the Minhocão ('Big Worm'), a 3.5km elevated highway in the in the centre of São Paulo which has been the focus of intense public debate since its completion in 1971.

The Minhocão, São Paulo, case study

The Minhocão has been closed progressively to traffic since 1976. It remains open to cars during weekdays, but since 2018 it has been entirely closed at weekends and public holidays, as well as at night. At these times it becomes a well-used public park, in some ways the nearest thing the city has to a beach. Since at least 2013 plans have been put forward by architects and politicians to close the Minhocão permanently to traffic, creating a park along the lines of the High Line in New York, a converted disused rail that receives upwards of 8 million visitors per annum. Those proposals however remain the subject of debate. In the meantime, the municipality of São Paulo has funded temporary access structures, temporary wooden furniture for use at weekends, and over 40 large scale public artworks on adjacent buildings. The Minhocão is now often promoted (and used) as an outdoor art museum.

I would make the following points about the Minhocão and its future

- There is limited, if any, appetite now for its demolition
- The Minhocão is now understood to be a 'place' by all parties, if a complex and imperfect one.
- Different communities 'own' the Minhocão at different times (eg. runners and cyclists at weekends, drivers during the day).
- The popularity of the weekend park has encouraged a significant amount of new real estate development along the Minhocão, particularly residential towers.
- The Associação Parque Minhocão (Minhocão Park Association) has had some political success in advancing the idea of a permanent park. But the Association is also widely believed to be a front for developers.
- There is a significant part of the local population that is hostile to a permanent park because they understand it to be a real estate-led gentrification project For more, see <http://bit.ly/minhocacontragentrificacao>)
- The weekend and evening closure of the Minhocão depends on a high level of security. Access is controlled by chicanes formed by steel barriers at all entry points, along with private security staff (usually 20-25 in total, patrolling the length of the Minhocão) and sometimes military police.
- There is a significant homeless population (up to 200, including some families) living underneath the Minhocão who are excluded from any park arrangements, either temporary or permanent. The structure provides a significant amount of shelter from the weather, and is 'home'.

Lessons from São Paulo for the M8 petition:

- Temporary closures or urban motorways can produce well used new public space. Little investment is required in the first instance.
- The central section of the M8 may be understood locally as a 'place' – any investigation of a change of use should recognise this possibility, however counter-intuitive.
- The investigation should be open to gradual and contingent changes of use of the M8. Using the carriageway as a temporary park may be popular. There does not need to be a total solution.
- It is possible to balance apparently contradictory uses; different constituencies can 'own' the space at different times.

- Proposals to replace the M8 with parks and boulevards are likely to be widely understood as gentrification, unless carefully managed.

Recommendation

I would support the petition for a feasibility study to investigate options for removing and reducing the impact of the central Glasgow section of the M8.

Further reading:

A. Hochuli, 'The Minhocão Highway of São Paulo: Living with the Big Worm', *Domus*, 1044 (12 March 2020)

N. Millington, 'Public Space and Terrain Vague on São Paulo's Minhocão' in C. Lindner and B. Rosa (eds.) *Deconstructing the High Line* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2017), pp. 201-18.

View of the Minhocão on a Saturday looking west, February 2022. Photo by Richard J. Williams

