

story and photographs by ADAM EISENSTAT

Voyaging through the hollow

The East Busway's singular lens on Pittsburgh

PITTSBURGH'S MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. EAST Busway doesn't exactly rank among the eight manmade Wonders of the World. It may not even rank among the eight wonders of Pittsburgh. But even busways have birthdays, and its 30th is a fine occasion to consider this distinctly local specimen of infrastructure and urban curiosity.

It's basically a two-lane highway deep in a hollow beside the railroad, running 9.1 miles through Swissvale, Wilkinsburg, Homewood, East Liberty, Shadyside, Bloomfield and the Strip District to downtown Pittsburgh. Buses on its three routes make over 680 weekday trips, coming every two minutes at peak hours and averaging 30-35 miles an hour. On a weekday, more than 22,000 riders take some part of the 20-minute trip. As former state Transportation Secretary and Port Authority of Allegheny County Planning Director Allen Biehler said, "When you can provide a service that's quicker than a car, that's like the magic touch."

As the county's first dedicated bus road, the East Busway was a pioneer of what's called Bus Rapid Transit. And it's unique in the U.S. for its "direct service" model, which means (in part) that neighborhood bus lines can use it as a transfer point and other lines that don't actually stop on the busway can use it to bypass congested roads. In other words, it's quite flexible, and that has won it national acclaim, including last spring a national "bronze standard" best practice rating—one of only five in the country.

Considered a vital part of sustainable urban development, Bus Rapid Transit is being promoted as an alternative to rail systems—whose economic and environmental benefits have been clearly established—at a fraction of the cost. One estimate puts the average cost to build a mile of busway at \$13.5 million vs. \$34.8 million for a mile of light rail transit. In many respects, the East Busway functions like a rail system, especially in the far eastern, suburban portion of its route—from Wilkinsburg to Swissvale—where park-and-ride lots and stations like those found along most commuter railways are the norm.

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A photograph of a blue bus in motion, blurred to indicate speed. The bus is on a bridge or elevated roadway. In the foreground, there are green maple leaves and branches. Below the bus, a concrete wall has graffiti that reads "MARTIN LUTHER KING JR". Below the wall are railroad tracks with gravel. The background is a dense wall of green foliage.

MAKING GOOD TIME

During the evening rush hour, an east-bound bus glides along the Martin Luther King Jr. East Busway as viewed from under the Millvale Avenue Bridge in Bloomfield. Pittsburgh's dedicated bus-only highway has been in operation since 1983.

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“Most folks want light rail because they think it’s a panacea,” said Gary Antonella, a former Port Authority transit planner, now with consulting firm Third Sector Development. “But the Port Authority has learned how to compete with the car, which people in the suburbs will never give up. With the park-and-rides, and flexibility with the buses, they’ve found ways to get people to the stations and get them to town.”

The East Busway didn’t always shine with the glow of high regard. At first it was no one’s darling, but something more prosaic: a replacement, or more accurately, a stand-in. It emerged from the wreckage of Skybus, a far more ambitious transit system that represented the large-scale aspirations of Pittsburgh’s civic leaders and captains of industry during the city’s vaunted Renaissance in the ’50s.

At the time, leaders decided the city needed a modern rapid transit system, which they could use as a showcase for local corporations’ transit hardware, and thus make Pittsburgh a center of the transportation industry. It was an ingenious plan both to upgrade the city’s transit infrastructure and revitalize the heavy industry base, which even then was showing signs of incipient decline.

Skybus, an automated, rubber-wheeled vehicle that ran on a concrete track, was initially embraced at the highest levels of government and industry. By 1963, a partnership between the Port Authority and Westinghouse, fueled by federal grants—at a time when the government was eager to help cities upgrade transit systems—led to a mile-long test track in South Park. Essentially, Skybus worked fine, but the project collapsed with the changing of the political guard. A

new, populist mayor, Pete Flaherty (“Nobody’s boy,” as he billed himself), objected to the project as elitist, since it was slated for the predominantly white and affluent South Hills suburbs, thereby neglecting the eastern part of the city and its heavy concentration of African Americans.

“Skybus ran into a political maelstrom, so we ended up with this little subway in the South Hills, and the East End was left hanging,” says Ted Muller, a University of Pittsburgh history professor who has written extensively about Pittsburgh history. “The [population] density to support a rail system never existed in Pittsburgh. I think the busway was a target of cheap opportunity; the infrastructure was already there, with the railroad, so just by moving the tracks and paving it over you have an exclusive right-of-way to get downtown faster... I don’t celebrate the East Busway; it was the second best alternative after this failure.”

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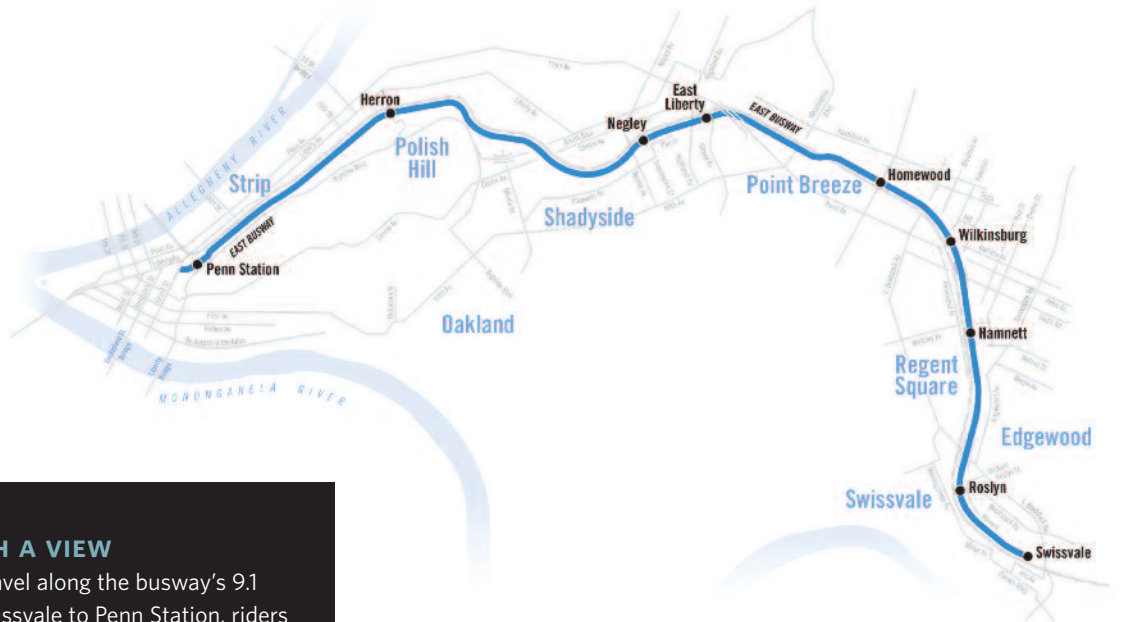


Phase I of the East Busway—downtown to Wilkinsburg (including the Neville ramp to North Oakland)—took about two years to build and cost \$115 million. Phase II—Wilkinsburg to Swissvale—cost \$70 million. Initial construction was fairly straightforward because of the existing right-of-way. It was hardly effortless, though. The tracks had to be moved, which doesn’t sound easy and wasn’t. Shoehorning the road into such a narrow corridor and negotiating with Conrail, which extracted major concessions, were no slam dunks, either.

Passing through multiple neighborhoods, the busway generated public concern. And though the planning process included hundreds of meetings with residents, no amount of “helpful information” or official assurances would ever assuage a particular subset of opponents.

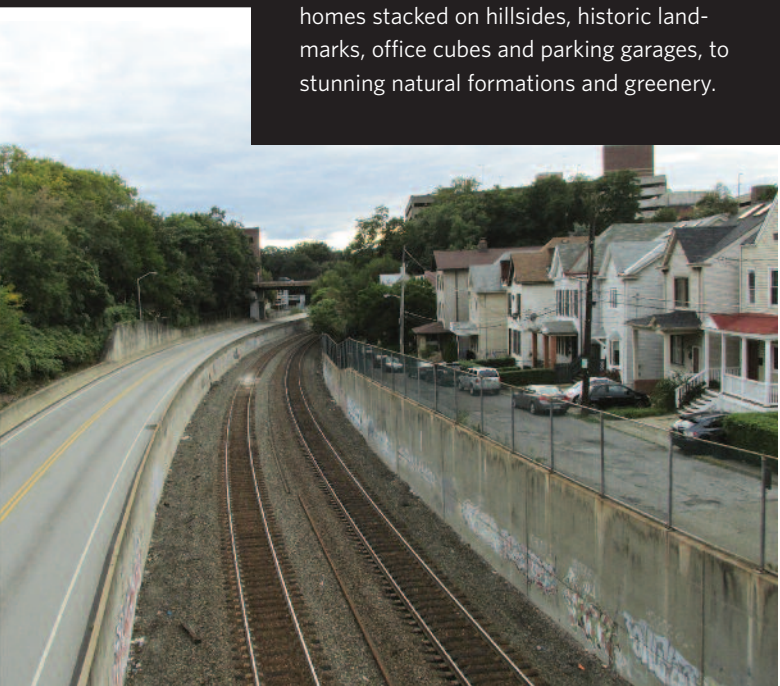
“In the original plan, the East Busway was supposed to go to Swissvale, but due to opposition from communities east and

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map courtesy of Port Authority of Allegheny County

ZOOM WITH A VIEW
 As they travel along the busway's 9.1 miles from Swissvale to Penn Station, riders catch glimpses of "classic" Pittsburgh, from homes stacked on hillsides, historic landmarks, office cubes and parking garages, to stunning natural formations and greenery.





<< south of Wilksburg, it was built only as far as Wilksburg,” said Port Authority spokesman Jim Ritchie. (One of the communities to which he refers is Edgewood, which also declined to be part of Phase II.) “Also, a station was planned for South Aiken Avenue in Shadyside, but community opposition quashed that too.”

Still, there were few, if any, dramatic upheavals or displacements—nothing like those associated with Robert Moses, the “Stalin of concrete,” who shaped so much of New York City’s infrastructure. This, along with the project’s other relatively benign challenges, can be attributed to its location: in the hollow, next to the tracks.

A road is defined less by asphalt and hardware than by its surroundings. A road is what it passes; a road is where it is. And if

you’re one of the busway’s daily commuters, the trip goes fast (according to schedule), and too fast to notice much.

To venture down to the hollow on foot, though—a pedestrian in transit land—and walk the tracks beside the busway, you see the busway in a different light.

The busway lacks even a hint of industrial aesthetics, *à la* Modernist architecture or design-conscious plumbing fixtures. As one case study mentioning the busway said, “The stations, the buses, and the pedestrian approaches are purely utilitarian... with no sense of brand or style.” Somehow this dullness adds to the

BUSWAY BEAUTIFUL?

Headed east, a lone bus glides far below the monolithic arc of the Bloomfield Bridge—avoiding traffic and delivering passengers in record time.

periphery's appeal, acting as a perfect frame.

But some areas along the footprint, especially the stretch between Shadyside and the Strip, have an alluringly post-apocalyptic ambience, cluttered with that familiar mix of household and industrial detritus and draped in entropy, especially during the warmest months, when it's bursting with an Amazonian volume of plant life.

"Pittsburgh [offers] environmental and architectural experiences unlike any other place," says Martin Aurand in his book, "The Spectator and the Topographical City." "Landforms shape topographical space and the city occupies that space with tenacity and verve."

Walking through the hollow, flanked by steep, green-swaddled hillsides, provides a rare opportunity to relish the city's distinctive topography and appreciate this singular space, where industry and nature dramatically converge. Look up, look left, look right to see Classic Pittsburgh on display: houses layered in the hills, among churches and derelict factories, office cubes and parking garages. Beautiful old streets and four historic landmarks (including Roslyn Place and Colonial Place) are separated from the busway by an array of porous barriers.

The busway's route embodies the city's character and illustrates the essential ingredients of its continuing revitalization: the meshing of industrial and residential elements ("mixed use" in urban planning parlance), and adaptation—that capacity that has served Pittsburgh so well. That adaptation is essential to every aspect of the busway, its genesis, construction and ongoing relationship to its surroundings.

The Hoover Dam, Erie Canal, Brooklyn Bridge, East Busway—maybe not. One thing you can say about it for certain is "only in Pittsburgh." The busway is of the city, winding through its core, reflecting its history and its physical charms (and blights) as legibly as a giant signature scrawled upon the hollows and hills. Not only that, if you need to get downtown really fast, or to Rankin for that matter, it's a bargain at \$2.50. P Q

Adam Eisenstat is a professional writer and an avid photographer.



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