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## How MacArthur Boulevard Takes You Through the Heart of Oakland

A journey through the city's past, present and future

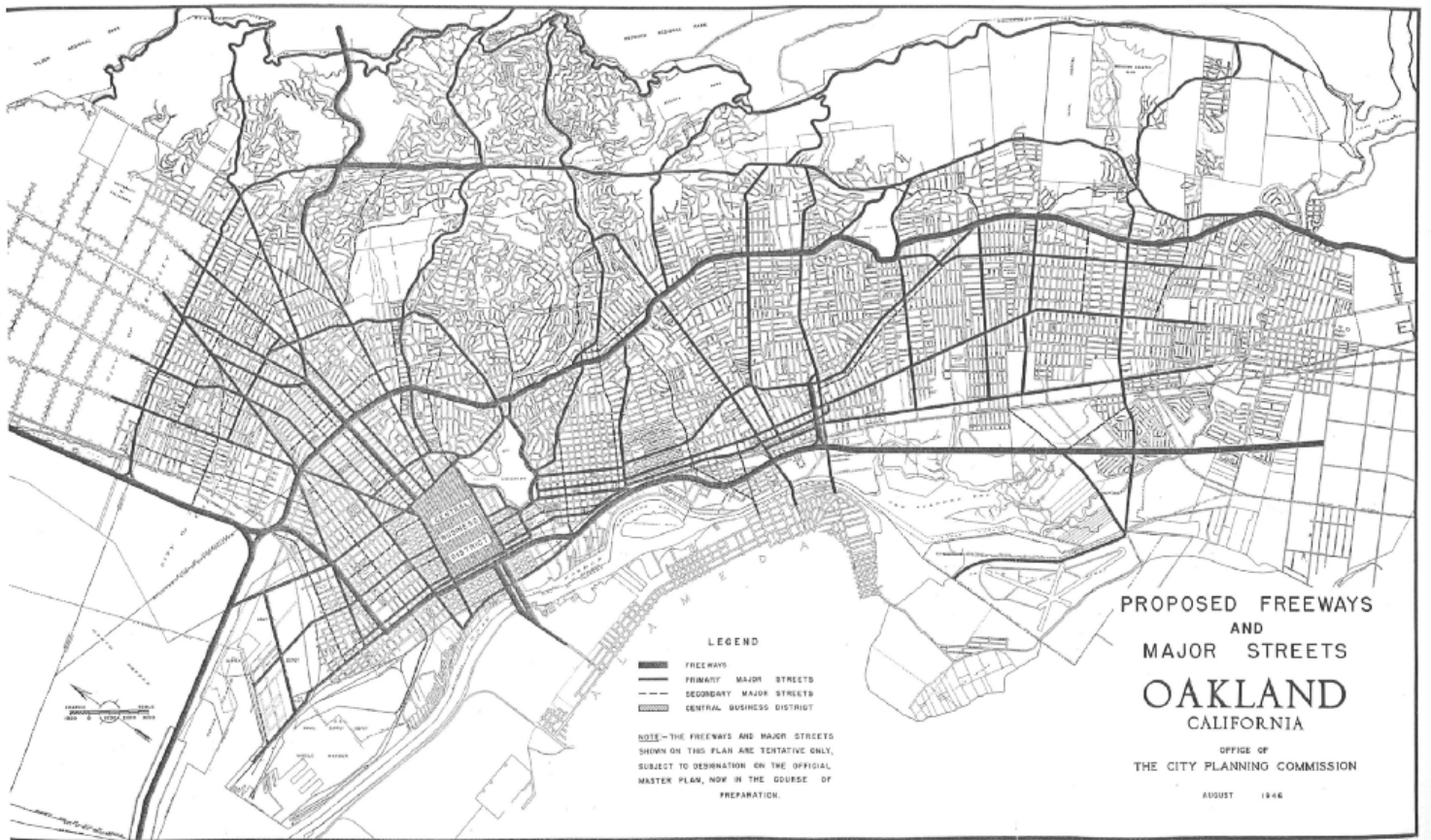


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One evening after work, I was driving home on Interstate 580 East and got stuck in traffic. I was near Lake Merritt, and outside it was still light. On a whim, I decided to abandon the freeway and take city streets. I jetted off the exit and landed on MacArthur Boulevard. Little did I know that I was embarking on what would become a favorite drive.

MacArthur Boulevard is a nondescript artery that runs the length of Oakland and traverses disparate neighborhoods. Along the way there are glimpses of iconic landmarks and hidden parks. Following MacArthur Boulevard from beginning to end takes you through the past, present and possible future of the city of Oakland. It took several journeys along the iconic route for me to learn to slow down and open my eyes.

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MacArthur Boulevard begins inauspiciously—right behind the Home Depot in the East Bay Bridge shopping center on the Emeryville border. It starts at a massive homeless encampment, one of about 100 such “sprawling” sites in the city, according to the *Chronicle*. While it’s not the most promising sign, when I was there recently, it was heartening to see the Berkeley Free Clinic truck serving the residents.

It won’t surprise many that the boulevard is named after General Douglas MacArthur. However, it’s generally not known that it started not as a single road but rather was created from many streets. The MacArthur we know today, including West MacArthur, was the result of multiple streets being “linked together,” according to the *Oakland Tribune*. In fact, some Oakland officials expressed hope that other municipalities would follow their lead and extend the new thoroughfare south to the Mexico border. This origin explains the quirks of the road, which can disappear without notice. In such cases, MacArthur suddenly becomes one-way or is sliced by the freeway or an intersection. The tenacious driver is left to pick up the scent.

Departing from this juncture of Emeryville and Oakland, you’ll find yourself in the Longfellow neighborhood. Those familiar with the area will see reminders of changing North and West Oakland. From Longfellow, it’s a short hop to Temescal, which was a poster boy of gentrification in the aughts—even becoming the subject of a *New York Times* profile.

Maybe because it’s middle class, one neighborhood that has been able to retain its flavor is Piedmont Avenue. Restaurants and shops line the

street, which is a simple left turn from MacArthur. Another nourishing experience is off the main drag, exploring the side streets. One gem I often visit is Richmond Boulevard, a loop that encircles little Oak Glen Park, a small park with a creek. This hidden area feels like a working-class Hobbiton, a mix of green and grit. The 580 freeway looms overhead, and ordinary apartment buildings line the street, but the park itself is secluded and lush.

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Southeast of Piedmont Avenue, the stretch of MacArthur that passes Lake Merritt might be considered the heart of Oakland. Here the road nears the eastern tip of the lake and the pergola. Many Oaklanders will argue that there are few places as exquisite on a warm afternoon. Indeed, the crowds and music and assortment of other activities contribute to a festive scene—an escape from daily burdens.

However, it is the stretch of MacArthur after Lake Merritt that will probably be the most eye-opening for many visitors. From here, MacArthur winds through neighborhoods that are mostly unknown beyond the borders of Oakland. These include Glenview, the Dimond District and Laurel. All three distinct communities lie above 580 but below the Warren Freeway and the affluent Oakland Hills. They are still culturally diverse and economically mixed.

Glenview has a small commercial center on Park Boulevard, which is the farthest from MacArthur but still only a couple of minutes drive. The Key System streetcars used to run along park in the early 1900s. MacArthur will land you in the epicenter of Dimond's bustling corridor on Fruitvale Avenue. One revelation sits just a few blocks away: Dimond Park and Sausal Creek. Once a Boy Scout camp, this large park is public, and you can disappear into a trail.

The Laurel district claims MacArthur itself as its center. Longstanding neighborhood market Farmer Joe's sits under the "Laurel" welcome sign. These communities straddle a space (economic, ethnic and

geographic) between the two categories that many locals refer to: the hills and the flatlands.

After departing Laurel, you'll dip under 580 to follow MacArthur. I've heard many people express surprise at the sight of Mills College, which resembles a quaint New England campus plunked into an urban environment. Every resident has their own understanding of the geography of a city. For me, this area beyond Laurel signals the transition to deep East Oakland. Mills abuts Seminary Avenue where it crosses MacArthur. From here, MacArthur stretches nearly 50 blocks to the San Leandro city line.

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Much ink has been spilled on the complex subjects of poverty, racial inequities and gentrification. Along this three-mile stretch of MacArthur, however, this threat of exile seems distant. Possibly more than anywhere else in the Bay Area, the neighborhoods that comprise this portion of East Oakland are home to a thriving African American population.

To the white privileged eye, it's easy to comment on the visible poverty and police activity. Commuting from Bart over the years, I encountered a distressing number of memorials lining MacArthur to victims of homicide. To the repeat visitor, though, what becomes most evident are the layers—past and present—of African American history. At MacArthur and 64th, for example, Evergreen Cemetery is the burial place for Black Panthers founder Huey P. Newton. (The cemetery also houses a memorial to the victims of the Jonestown massacre.) The merchants here reflect their customer base. As different ethnic groups get pushed out of San Francisco, East Oakland can be seen as a place to treasure—a unique spot in the Bay Area.

MacArthur Boulevard in Oakland ends as unceremoniously as it began. San Leandro begins at Durant Avenue, and the road takes you into the pretty Estudillo neighborhood. It does not continue further south and leaves the original hopes for a longer road unfulfilled. However, there is a notable eatery close to the end—Main Street Bagels, which has a deck overlooking San Leandro Creek. It's a great place for lunch and to mark the end of an adventure. Or maybe it's another beginning? The return trip beckons.

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