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New York City and the Legend of Robert Moses

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Three astonishing exhibitions documenting the work of the mid-twentieth-century über-public planner/builder Robert Moses stirred the imagination of New Yorkers this year. The shows, revisiting the career of a figure who has been largely demonized since his death in 1981, were curated by the Columbia University architectural historian Hilary Ballon. “Remaking the Metropolis,” at the Museum of the City of New York, examined Moses’s big-picture schemes for restructuring the metropolitan region. “The Road to Recreation,” at the Queens Museum of Art, focused on the prodigious building of beaches, pools, playgrounds and parkways under his direction. And “Slum Clearance and the Superblock Solution,” at Columbia University’s Wallach Art Gallery, examined his impact on federal Title I urban redevelopment spending in the city.¹

With a built legacy of immense scope and reach as the result of thirty-four years in city government, from 1934, when he was appointed New York City Parks Commissioner, until 1968, when he was forced out of the chairmanship of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, an entity he created, Moses was (and remains) a riveting, controversial figure for New Yorkers.² The shows captured this legacy through archival photographs, documents, and majestic contemporary photographs by Andrew Moore. But the comprehensiveness of the exhibitions also caused the red flag of revisionism to be raised, especially with regard to the accepted view of Moses as insensitive, tyrannical, and corrupted by power, best expressed in Robert Caro’s exhaustive 1974 biography *The Power Broker*.³

A plethora of prominent critics have already weighed in on this question. Arguing that the exhibitions

breathed fresh air into a tired subject, the *New York Times* architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff called the shows “required viewing.” Michael Sorkin presented a “brief for the dark side” in *Architectural Record*, emphasizing the cautionary lessons of Moses’s history—a view seconded in the *Wall Street Journal* by Ada Louise Huxtable, who asserted that Moses “is not the man to emulate.” Meanwhile, *Governing* thanked the revisionists for returning “the concept of public authority to the center of the urban policy debate.” In the *New York Times*, Phillip Lopate stressed Moses’s “vision of sustaining New York as a middle-class city,” to which he in part attributes New York’s astonishing revival in recent decades. And *The New Yorker*’s Paul Goldberger took a middle road, concluding (apropos of the stark contrast between the legacies of Moses and Jane Jacobs) that “there is a price to pay for thinking small, just as there is for thinking big.”⁴

Lost in the hoopla over whether the shows repudiate some of Caro’s damning claims of Moses’s racism and contempt for public process, however, are astonishing insights.

- A new appreciation for the scope and grandeur of the public works projects of the 1930s. Among these were ten massive new public pools, built mostly on existing park property, accommodating thousands, which opened to great fanfare—one per week—in the sweltering summer of 1936.
- Diagrammatic maps and a compelling description of Moses’s commitment to mixed-income housing (if not mixed-race) in the implementation of Title I-funded slum clearance in the 1950s.

- A rich narration of the battle over Washington Square Park from 1952 to 1958, which radicalized a “bunch of mothers” and resulted not only in blocking construction of a road through the park but also the birth of a countervailing movement that largely discredited the powerful forces of centralized, large-scale urban redevelopment.
- A reminder of citizens’ horror over the extent of planned demolition in the old industrial districts of Greenwich Village, SoHo, and TriBeCa (complemented by irony, in light of the insanely high property values in these areas today).
- Envy for a time when Moses was able to pull strings to ensure that New York City got far more than its fair share of federal money. In 1935 and 1936 he secured one-seventh of all Works Progress Administration funding dispersed nationwide. And in the 1950s New York received twice the Title I funding allocated to Chicago, its closest competitor.

Clearly, these exhibitions struck a nerve with the general public. Attendance at all three was phenomenal, far exceeding the organizers’ expectations. New Yorkers seemed genuinely moved by the opportunity to evaluate Moses’s controversial legacy on their own terms. In the models and photographs depicting his visions for a modern city, we could discern the origins of much of our individual, contemporary experience of New York: our patterns of daily existence, the routes we use to move from place to place, the recreational facilities our children enjoy. We could reflect on the old neighborhoods and places that



have been preserved, as well as those that were destroyed, and the sweeping Moses-directed projects that took their place—expanded university and cultural institutions, new housing, highways, and parks.

I found myself trying to imagine New York without the pleasant outdoor areas of Morningside Gardens, the Title I-funded cooperative housing near Columbia University, where my son frolics while at preschool. But I cringed at the renderings of Washington Square Park, and

its genteel bocce court, split in two by the four-lane arterial Moses tried to ram through it.

What Can We Learn?

Two issues raised by the exhibitions seem particularly relevant to readers of *Places*. First is the question of what constitutes proper use and control of public space. According to Kenneth Jackson, Moses had “a consistent and powerful commitment to the public realm.... While Moses was in power, the word ‘public’ had not

yet become pejorative.”⁵ Second is the opportunity to revisit the “towers in the park” debate, by examining the relative success of urban redevelopment projects in New York.

With regard to the first question, Marta Gutman’s scholarship in the exhibition’s companion volume on the pools program in the 1930s is particularly fascinating. She writes

Above: Morningside Gardens, view north, 2005. Photo by Andrew Moore.



that the placement of WPA-funded public facilities in existing parks “enforced the reform landscape put in place in New York starting in the late nineteenth century and emphasized the value of a specific kind of recreation: civic, not commercial; uplifting, not honky-tonk; public, not private.”⁶ This civic-minded approach resulted in an expansive network of free public spaces, unsullied by commercial amusements.

One can hardly help contrasting this program with current emphasis

on public-private partnerships, commercialization of activities within public parks, and expansion of eminent domain to assist essentially private commercial and entertainment development projects. It is generally recognized today that some privatization is necessary for the maintenance and improvement of public assets like city parks. But this system has not been able to deliver the same level of equity in the distribution of public investment as that enjoyed under Moses. Simply stated, the New York

City parks with the best facilities and programs today—i.e., those funded through private, not-for-profit organizations, such as the Central Park Conservancy and the Battery Park Conservancy—are located in the wealthiest districts.

Regarding the “towers in the park” controversy, the exhibitions provided good examples of New York projects that contradict accepted wisdom about this now-disgraced modernist formula. As Hilary Ballon points out in her essay, Moses’s genius in

working with Title I was to counter its failings elsewhere.

In some cases he did this by making agreements with private developers before proceeding with land clearance. He thus avoided situations in which land, once cleared by a public agency, remained empty for years for lack of private redevelopment initiative.

In other cases he paired Title I sites with New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing to promote establishment of mixed-income neighborhoods. Under his direction, twelve of seventeen Title I projects in the city (comprising new, privately built middle-income housing and other noncommercial uses) were paired—with great coordination difficulty—with adjacent public-housing projects.

One lesson from the exhibitions might be that success in mass housing has as much to do with the location, size, and programming of a site as it does with formal organization.

Thinking Big

The exhibitions also raised the subject of scale by highlighting conflicts presented by regional versus neighborhood-level planning. Although it was at the neighborhood level that the public facilities Moses championed were often valued most, his own favored view was a regional one. Sometimes it can seem to make sense, from a bird's-eye perspective, to sacrifice a neighborhood for the good of the region. But the “worms” on the ground will be none too pleased. After all, it does not make sense at the neighborhood level to decide on self-annihilation.⁷ But without leadership and authority at the regional scale, useful and necessary projects requiring coordination among neighborhoods will rarely be built.

This retrospective of Moses's

built projects inspires big thinking about the future. The real question is whether it is possible to renew emphasis on the region without losing sight of the local.

The idea of the abstract “public” has already been reintroduced to planning discourse through sustainability agendas that promote awareness of local decisions as not just regional, but global in their ramifications. Are there other big opportunities to improve the prospects of our metropolitan regions?

I see three. First is to think regionally in retrofitting existing inner-ring suburbs that have suffered from disinvestment in recent decades. This rejuvenation can be accomplished by adding the missing public realm, by densifying, improving public services for diverse populations, rebuilding infrastructure, and introducing increased housing choice. Second is to devise, promote, and implement comprehensive urban sustainability agendas. Multiple sources of funding are already on the horizon; we must be prepared with plans to use them, as Moses always was. Third is to invent new ways to finance and build a substantial quantity of much-needed affordable housing, both low- and middle-income, in locations served by mass transit.

While not as self-consciously modern as the view of Robert Moses, such initiatives offer a vision of a city at least as bold as the one he embraced.

Notes

1. I will refrain from attempting to describe the breadth and depth of the exhibitions. For this, readers should consult the amazing book of scholarly essays and project descriptions published concurrently: Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds., *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

It contains contributions from Marta Gutman, Owen Gutfreund, Martha Biondi, Robert Fishman, and Joel Schwartz, portions of which are quoted here.

2. Along the way Moses served mayors from Fiorello LaGuardia to John Lindsey on the City Planning Commission, as the City's Construction Coordinator, as chairman of the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance, as Coordinator of Arterial Projects, and as president of the 1964 New York World's Fair Corporation. He also served in numerous capacities in New York State government.
3. Robert Caro, *The Power Broker* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1974).
4. Nicolai Ouroussoff, “Complex, Contradictory Robert Moses,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2007, p. E1. Michael Sorkin, “Can Robert Moses be Rehabilitated for a New Era of Building?” *Architectural Record*, Vol. 195, No. 3 (March 2007), p. 55. Ada Louise Huxtable, “Shows Try to Renovate Moses' Reputation,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2007, p. D10. Alan Ehrenhalt, “The Power Broker Reconsidered,” *Governing* (April 2007), p. 9. Phillip Lopate, “A Town Revived, a Villain Redeemed,” *New York Times*, February 11, 2007, p. 14. Paul Goldberger, “Eminent Dominion; Rethinking the Legacy of Robert Moses,” *The New Yorker*, February 5, 2007, p. 83.
5. *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, p. 70.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
7. However, such neighborhood-scale decision-making is not totally unprecedented—if the price is right. Entire residential subdivisions have been known to sell themselves out to a developer seeking to assemble a large parcel for retrofitting. On the other hand, movements are afoot for suburbs to coalesce into regional governance networks in order to recognize and support their interdependence and shared needs.

Above: Sunset Pool, entry pavilion on the pool side, 2005. Photo by Andrew Moore.