Exhibitions

Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York
The Making of the Metropolis
Museum of the City of New York
1 February–28 May 2007

Slum Clearance and the Superblock Solution
Wallach Gallery, New York City
31 January–14 April 2007

The Road to Recreation
Queens Museum of Art, New York City

Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York, a tripartite exhibition curated by Hilary Ballon, seeks to resuscitate the reputation of the master builder whose public works transformed New York City into a far-flung regional metropolis during the forty years that, by means of various overlapping public appointments, he occupied the nexus of power. It is fitting that the exhibition should be presented in three venues scattered across the city, affording visitors the opportunity to grasp the scale and magnitude of Moses’s accomplishments. The Museum of the City of New York is adjacent to Central Park, over whose alterations between 1934 and 1965 Moses presided. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Gallery at Columbia University is near Riverside Park and the Henry Hudson Parkway, two examples of Moses’s vision to combine recreation and transportation. The Queens Museum of Art, built as the New York City Building for the 1939 World’s Fair, is in Flushing Meadow Park, site of that fair and the 1964 World’s Fair fairgrounds, and both are largely the creations of Moses.

Those who were unable to attend the exhibition can find its themes and many of its images in a companion book with the same title. Edited by Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, the publication contains seven scholarly essays that collectively portray Moses’s far-reaching accomplishments as a builder of public works. Marta Gutman focuses on the way Moses overwhelmed the scenic aspects of parks with grand and hugely popular swimming pools that were built to the highest standards in a design idiom that the architectural critic Lewis Mumford dubbed vernacular modernism. Owen D. Gutfreund shows how Moses opportunistically transformed himself from a builder of landscaped parkways with carefully designed stone bridges to a builder of highways with ever-increasing traffic lanes. Ballon’s essay on Moses’s long career as king of slum clearance describes his astute alacrity in procuring 65.8 million dollars of federal funds available through Title I of the United States Housing Act of 1949 to subsidize seventeen projects containing middle-income housing, some with attached cultural and institutional uses. Martha Biondi, Robert Fishman, and the late Joel Schwartz show how Moses’s racist attitude, autocratic style, and opportunistic approach blinded him to civil rights issues and made him contemptuous of both the New York City Planning Commission and critics such as Jane Jacobs who called for neighborhood preservation and community-based planning.

As the title of both the book and the exhibitions suggests, large-scale urban planning as a phenomenon of modernism is the exhibition’s principal theme. Moses operated with the ruthlessness and zeal of Baron Haussmann whose percements incised nineteenth-century Paris, the world’s first modern metropolis, to create grand boulevards linking the center with new train stations on the city’s periphery. In an analogous fashion, the highways and bridges Moses built for motor vehicles pioneered a regional transportation network that enabled New York’s twentieth-century metropolitan growth. Moses was a professed admirer of Haussmann, and like Haussmann, he tore down neighborhoods and displaced inhabitants to achieve his public works, famously declaring, to make an omelet you have to break eggs.

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At the Museum of the City of New York, The Making of the Metropolis examines Moses’s career as a builder of bridges, highways, and monumental civic and institutional projects, notably Lincoln Center and the United Nations. The exhibition consists of plans, perspective drawings, and large architectural models of these important public works.

With their connecting highways, Moses’s bridges form the transportation routes that allowed the city to grow in size and economic power. As one walks around the large-scale presentation models he used to persuade elected officials and the press, one grasps the bold scope of these projects. One can also see a New York that might have been and rejoice that his schemes for great expressways through Midtown and lower Manhattan were thwarted. Though touted by Moses as neighborhood improvements, these highways would have displaced hundreds
of small manufacturers in the garment trade clustered around 30th Street and Seventh Avenue and destroyed numerous small factories and warehouses that subsequently became artists' lofts in Soho. The citizen-led defeat of these plans was no small victory for those who see cities as more than nexuses in a regional automotive transportation network.

Although Moses is rightly cast as the villain in these fights, he operated within the urban planning orthodoxies of the time. Federal policy and funding supplied by the Highway Act of 1956 encouraged road engineers to penetrate central business districts and historic neighborhoods with limited-access arterials in the interest of moving traffic as efficiently as possible. Moses summed up this prevailing urban theory with characteristic bluntness: “Cities are created by and for traffic.”

Less visually compelling than the models but equally important, the brochures, reports, letters, and press clippings on display were part of the public-relations machinery Moses orchestrated with consummate skill. “Slum clearance” is a deeply suspect term today. In Moses’s time, however, no one was especially critical of language characterizing slums as blighted, obsolete, cancerous parts of the urban tissue that needed to be cut away by radical surgery. He could speak of “the scythe of progress” as a reasonable means to a desirable end. Indeed, the word “progress” was particularly associated with the polemics of modernist design theory. People’s lives could be upended by the march of progress in the belief that rich, poor, and middle class alike would subsequently live in a more rational and salubrious city.

The brochures on display, which were designed by Richard C. Guthridge, bear Moses’s indelible graphic and literary stamp. Consistent in their crisp, bold, modern style, they often employ the word progress in their titles and contain numerous before and after images. They make their cases clearly, using data and charts to quantify the dimensions of residential and commercial obsolescence, the current and proposed density of land coverage, and other factors that portray the blight Moses sought to eradicate.

Photographs and architectural renderings, most notably Hugh Ferriss’s beautiful charcoal drawings, give Moses’s projects a heroic, futuristic glamour. It is fascinating to watch Lincoln Center being born in a series of Ferriss’s images, beginning as a circular colonnaded plaza before becoming the open square we know today. Ferriss’s romanticizing of modernism reminds us that Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia put Moses in charge of planning and building the grounds of the memorable 1939 World’s Fair, “The
While Moses’s architectural taste proved less advanced than that of committed modernists, he was nonetheless determined to give New York City a modern urban form, and Title I of the United States Housing Act of 1949 handed him an important tool to achieve this end. Intended as a means of replacing slums with private development, the legislation authorized the use of federal funds to subsidize the cost of land taken by city governments though eminent domain for public use or benefit, in this case middle-income housing. Title I funds could be used to build parks and facilities for public institutions as well. By contrast, housing for the poor was the responsibility of local agencies (such as the New York City Housing Authority), which were eligible for funding under Title III of the act.

At the Wallach Gallery, Slum Clearance and the Superblock Solution examines the Title I projects Moses built. Ballon’s essay “Robert Moses and Urban Renewal” in the accompanying book lays out the financial and governmental structures that Moses employed to fund seventeen urban redevelopment projects. Mostly located in Manhattan, these include the most prominent wholesale demolition and superblock construction project he accomplished as head of the Slum Clearance Committee: 53-acre Lincoln Square comprising Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the Manhattan branch of Fordham University, and Lincoln Towers—eight tall residential buildings that, together with parks, landscaped playgrounds, and walkways, occupy 20 acres of the site. In addition, Moses built the 40-acre Washington Square South, East River Houses at Corlears Hook, Lenox Terrace and Delano Village in Harlem, Morningside Gardens at 33rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue, the now-demolished New York Coliseum at Columbus Circle, Kips Bay Plaza at 33rd Street between First and Second Avenues, and Chatham Green on Park Row near City Hall. In Brooklyn, Title I funds made possible Kingsview in the Fort Greene area and dormitories at Pratt Institute. Along the Shore Front Parkway on the Rockaway peninsula in Queens, 80 acres were acquired to build Surfside Park, Dayton Towers West, Dayton Beach Park, and Dayton Towers East.

The Limited Profit Housing Companies Law of 1955, better known as the Mitchell-Lama Act after its congressional sponsors, was an extension of Title I that provided the borrowing power and tax incentives to stimulate private construction of middle-income housing. In the twilight of Moses’s career, Mitchell-Lama was the mechanism for the construction of Co-op City on 300 acres of East Bronx marshland. Although Moses had no direct involvement in this project, it epitomizes the now widely credited towers-in-the-park design model associated with him.

Appointed commissioner of the New York City Parks Department in 1934 by Mayor LaGuardia, Moses immediately united the five previously independent borough commissions into a single, tightly organized administrative structure. His Progressive Era reform background helped set his agenda. The fear that the shortened workweek would cause an upsurge in socially undesirable behavior combined with a desire to give poor children the opportunity for healthy play oriented his vision for a greatly expanded park system toward family recreation. His acumen in securing New Deal federal funds provided by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA) allowed him to hire talented, out-of-work architects, engineers, landscape architects, and gardeners as well as an army of laborers. Within weeks of his taking office, the Arsenal, the department’s headquarters in Central Park, became a beehive of design and construction professionals working around the clock. Compared to other cities, New York was late to provide the kind of recreational amenities that Moses showered on the city. Soon no other park system in American could compare with New York’s.

The Queens Museum of Art features The Road to Recreation, which looks at the great beaches, swimming pools, and parkways that are surely the most appreciated elements of the vast Moses legacy. The relatively small, monochromatic renderings hung in high-ceiled galleries, a confusing spatial flow, and hard-to-read labels are mitigated by the fascinating subject matter.

For Moses, an ardent swimmer, the construction of swimming pools to replace the antiquated, polluted, floating pools in the East River was a top priority. Two years after taking office, he opened ten pools in a single summer. Scattered across the city’s five boroughs in mostly working class neighborhoods, the pools were large enough to accommodate nearly fifty thousand bathers in a day and boasted state-of-the-art equipment, high maintenance standards, and strict management protocols to ensure public health and safety. Monumental in scale, most were built in existing parks, much to the dismay of those who preferred scenery and repose, but their huge popularity limited protest to a handful of letters to the editor in The New York Times and other newspapers.

Moses also created beaches in the city and on Long Island. Speaking of the design of the bathhouses, outdoor cafes, tennis courts, and other recreational facilities that made these public beaches as attractive as any exclusive beach club, Moses maintained, “Nothing is too good for the people of the Empire State.” His masterpiece, Jones Beach, which was built between 1926 and 1929 soon after he had begun his long tenure as commissioner of Long Island State Parks, became the prototype for the beaches he built later within the city. Here the bathhouses and concession buildings are clad in the same brick he had seen on the Barbizon Hotel on Madison Avenue and had
admired for its light rose, soft buff, and pale grey hues that harmonize with Long Island beach sand. The buildings are low slung to follow the long horizontal sweep of the beach, but a tall tower designed like a Venetian campanile dramatically terminates the causeway carrying visitors over the bay to the barrier island.

Nowhere in the beaches Moses built was there any hint of the honky-tonk character of the old seaside amusement parks epitomized by Coney Island. In 1941, in an attempt to make Coney Island accord with his standards of propriety, Moses enlarged the boardwalk and lined it with sports facilities. He also relocated the old aquarium—long a popular destination in Battery Park—to this distant edge of the city. As much as New Yorkers appreciated the Moses beaches and new opportunities for recreation, they still loved the vulgar delights of Coney Island’s amusement parks. Nostalgia for Steeplechase and Dreamland—with their tunnels of love, rollercoaster rides, and hand-carved carousels—lingers to the present day, and three of the most famous rides—the Wonder Wheel, the Cyclone, and the Parachute Jump—are now designated New York City landmarks.

Significant design and engineering was required at all of the beaches Moses built, and if none quite equaled his achievement at Jones Beach, they were just as carefully planned, well managed, and family friendly. Most have basketball and tennis courts alongside their boardwalks and outdoor cafés as extensions of their bathhouses. In 1938 Moses opened Jacob Riis Park on the Atlantic Ocean in Queens, followed by Orchard Beach in Pelham Bay Park in 1939 and South Beach on Staten Island in 1955.

The effort expended to create beaches where none existed before was staggering. The Pelham Bay shore is the last bit of the rocky coastline that extends through New England to New York from Maine, so Moses had to dredge and import sand on barges to create Orchard Beach. He hired talented professionals to design the ancillary facilities. The outdoor restaurant and bathhouse, curved like the beach, are by Aymar Embury II, chief consulting architect for the Department of Parks. It is a neoclassical version of modernist architecture, authoritarian in its grandeur like the contemporary work of fascist architects in Germany and Italy. Moses’s longtime consulting landscape architect, Gilmore Clarke, designed the landscaped spur road connecting this imposing structure to the older Pelham Parkway in a complementary axially symmetrical style.

Overall, it is the subject of these three related, ephemera-heavy exhibitions, not their design presentation, that holds our attention. Though not particularly distinguished, Andrew Moore’s large present-day color photographs add some sparks of visual appeal. One wishes that more of the images from the Parks Department’s extraordinary Moses archive had been enlarged and placed alongside Moore’s for comparison and for their human interest. While the pools and beaches Moses built are still immensely popular, these period photographs show the delighted faces of their first visitors. In addition, photographs from the American Memory Archive in the Library of Congress by Samuel H. Gottscho, who documented New York City architecture, interiors, bridges, and landscapes during the Moses years, would have enriched the exhibition while also providing greater familiarity with one of New York’s most outstanding photographers.1

For all the far-reaching grandeur of Moses’s ambitions and achievements as a master builder, he did not pursue a comprehensive planner’s vision but was rather a pragmatic enabler of public works. He was simply and powerfully what he boasted to be: a man who got things done. Without his focus and uncanny ability to follow the money and his preparedness with an arsenal of well-developed plans, the transformation of New York, for better and for worse, into the modern city we know today would not have occurred. Yet, all the elements of that transformation—parks, housing, bridges, roads—for all their impressive scope, scale, and reach, are only pieces within a richly complex city whose glory also derives in no small measure from things that Robert Moses’s vision did not encompass or that he willfully ignored, such as its mass transit system, world-class museums, and soaring commercial skyscrapers. Comprehensive planning is, in any case, a quixotic ideal, for the best-laid plans are always subject to global economic forces, political change, and unpredictable shifts in societal values.

Still, the intentions of every age are inscribed on the urban palimpsest. One of the best places to contemplate the Moses legacy is from the ramp overlooking the newly refurbished and beautifully relit Panorama of the City of New York housed at the Queens Museum of Art. Made by Moses for the 1964–65 World’s Fair, the model, measuring some 10,000 square feet and depicting all of the city’s 895,000 structures, is a permanent attraction of the museum. Here you can marvel at the complex whole of a dynamic metropolis and recognize all the places where Moses left his stamp.

Elizabeth Barlow Rogers
Foundation for Landscape Studies

Related Publication

Notes
1. Cited in exhibition wall panel.
2. Hilary Ballon, “Lincoln Square Title I,” in Ballon and Jackson, Robert Moses and the Modern City, 279.
3. Lincoln Towers is soon to be sold and turned into market-rate condominiums.

Editor’s Note
Hilary Ballon, JSAH editor, was not involved in commissioning, editing, or publishing this review.