

During a career in public service that spanned forty years, Robert Moses transformed greater New York’s twentieth-century infrastructure more than any other person. He served as New York City’s park commissioner from 1934 to 1960 and as chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel authority from 1936 to 1968, in addition to participating in several mayoral committees. He and his team of engineers, architects, and landscape architects built an impressive number of public beaches and pools; parks and parkways; and bridges, tunnels, and highways. Many projects, such as the much-needed parks, pools, and beaches, brought communities together. Others, such as the Cross Bronx Expressway and government-funded Title I slum clearance initiatives, displaced thousands of people and contributed strongly to the destruction of several neighborhoods. Robert Moses and the Modern City illustrated several of these initiatives with contemporary and historic photos, Moses-era promotional materials, plans, renderings, scale models, and videos of film footage. The thematically organized three-venue exhibit reassessed the work of New York’s master planner and builder and demonstrated that his legacy remains controversial and deserving of continued interpretation and discussion.

Curator Hilary Ballon identified two primary objectives: to familiarize a broader audience with Moses and the extent of his influence on New York’s development, and to revisit questions about his contribution to the city. The show offered a timely perspective on the past as greater New York finds itself in the midst of another boom era. It sought to dispel longstanding myths about Moses while acknowledging his tragic flaws, presenting a more balanced view than the “good Moses/bad Moses” polemic. Contrary to popular belief, Moses did not work in a vacuum. Ballon and her collaborators placed Moses in a national context and emphasized that he often implemented the ideas of others. He experienced defeats throughout his career. This became far more apparent toward the end of his tenure. He most notably lost to community activist Shirley Hayes, who led the citizens group that eventually prevented Moses from building a highway through Washington Square Park. Noted activist-authors Charles Abrams, Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford, and William H. Whyte also participated in the initiative. Jacobs, author of the influential critique of modernism The Death and Life of Great
American Cities, became well known for her participation in this effort, and Hayes’s central role is all but forgotten. The show also challenged the long-standing authority on Moses, Robert Caro, author of the exhaustive *The Power Broker* (1974), by delving into Caro’s portrayal of a brilliant visionary corrupted by megalomania and therefore inviting reinterpretation. Well-thumbed copies of *The Power Broker* and the exhibit catalogue, *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, were placed next to each other on a table at the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY). A symposium, public program series, and the catalogue facilitated further public discourse.

Although *Robert Moses and the Modern City* was housed in three institutions, efforts were made to connect the shows. One ticket granted admission to the other two. Wall text at each referred to materials elsewhere that illustrated the information in greater detail. A tabloid-format newspaper, available at all three institutions, contained summaries of each. It made sense that it was located in three places. Moses saw the city regionally, and traveling through it to view his work both at the exhibits and within the fabric of the city itself underscored his perspective. The Queens Museum of Art (QMA), housed in a building dating to the 1939 World’s Fair in Moses’ Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, was a particularly relevant destination. Unfortunately, *Slum Clearance and the Superblock Solution* at Columbia’s Wallach Art Gallery was less accessible to the public than the others due to limited hours and an earlier closing date. This writer was unable to see it before it closed.

A masterful writer and public speaker, Moses proudly stated that he sought to “weave together the loose strands and frayed edges of New York’s arterial and metropolitan tapestry.” Both *Remaking the Metropolis* at MCNY and *The Road to Recreation* at QMA highlighted these connections. *Remaking the Metropolis* emphasized Moses’ efforts to modernize New York by building bridges and roads to link its boroughs to each other and the mainland to its west. He also ensured the construction of Lincoln Center and a permanent United Nations headquarters as efforts to secure the city’s reputation as a vibrant cultural, political, and recreational capital during an era of postwar suburbanization. This show was the most popular of the three. The QMA’s *The Road to Recreation* examined what might be considered Moses’ most positive legacy to greater New York: the dozens of public parks, beaches, and pools that he and his team improved or created and the parkways built to bring people to them. Parks were, Moses emphasized, “the most significant single contribution to intelligent city planning.”

Evoking the abstracted aerial perspective integral to modernism, the design of both exhibits comprised clean lines and clear colors contrasting with bright white. At MCNY, visitors entering the large room where *Remaking the Metropolis* was mounted could not mistake the subject. A larger-than-life color

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photograph of Moses loomed over the room on axis with the entrance. Dressed in a dark suit, rolled plans in hand and arms akimbo, Moses stood on a red steel beam jutting over the East River with the New York skyline shimmering in the background. The room’s sky blue and white walls seemed to emphasize the clarity of Moses’ vision and infinite possibility. Quotations by Moses painted on the walls, such as “The critics build nothing,” also underscored this ethos. The room was divided into sections: Accessible City, Livable City, Monumental City, and Defeats. Pure + Applied Design used images and models to break up the large room. The most successful example of this design strategy showcased a twenty-two-foot-long wooden model of the unrealized Mid-Manhattan Expressway on a ramp surrounded by a low wall in the center of the room. Visitors examined the model by ascending the ramp. This change in elevation also allowed them to see the rest of the exhibit from above, as Moses-era planners and designers saw cities.

The design of The Road to Recreation complemented Remaking the Metropolis. The Queens Museum of Art mounts its own exhibits, and chief curator Valerie Smith devised a simple yet effective way to create a sense of cohesiveness within the several-room exhibit. Bright bands of color painted on the walls indicated each of the themes: yellow for Beaches, blue for Pools, green for Parks and Playgrounds, and dark brown for Roads. Visitors were better able to orient themselves as a result.

In both venues, video did not overwhelm or distract, as is the case in many contemporary installations. At MCNY, footage of Moses speaking at the groundbreaking for the Lincoln Center was the only video with sound. His infamous assertion that one cannot “make an omelet without breaking a few eggs,” in reference to the thousands of families displaced by the project, sounded far more chilling when heard from Moses himself. In Queens, silent black-and-white footage of Moses’ enormously popular beaches projected onto a wall provided an effective contrast with the sunny yellow band of color that denoted that room’s subject matter.

Condensing and explicating the vast amount of material associated with the subject was no small undertaking, and much of the wall text was concise and clear. Some basic additions would have helped visitors comprehend the material. Maps of project locations would have been useful. Brief definitions of terms such as the “Progressive Era” would have enhanced the experience of those unfamiliar with that time. Connections between engineers, designers, and their projects could have been made more consistently apparent. Moses’ obsession with pools and beaches was part of a larger modernistic movement in Europe and the U.S. to improve physical and social well-being by providing opportunities to exercise in sunlight and air. Explaining this would have increased the understanding of why these pools and beaches were deemed so important and why they looked the way they did.

Similarly, the exhibit’s goal of challenging Moses’ myths was sometimes inconsistent. The Road to Recreation successfully demonstrated with photos that
not all Moses-era pools were segregated. Less clearly, it refuted Caro’s oft-quoted claim that Moses demanded the bridges on the parkways leading to Long Island beaches be built low enough to exclude buses, and presumably, minorities and others too poor to own cars. Although Kenneth Jackson rejects this mischaracterization in his introductory essay in the catalogue, those who saw the exhibit only might have easily reached a different conclusion. At the beginning of *The Road to Recreation*, wall text stated, “The new parkways leading to the beach were restricted to passenger cars, and buses were required to take other roads.” And later in the exhibit: “The low-slung overpasses on the parkways to Jones Beach prohibited buses. The city projects welcomed public buses.” It was not until the Roads section that text briefly made the distinction that parkways were built for cars while highways were built for commercial traffic.

Much of *Robert Moses and the Modern City* presented a balanced interpretation of such topics. In a few cases, however, the show perpetuated stereotypes. In “Remaking the Metropolis,” park and parkway designer Frederick Law Olmsted (his partner, architect Calvert Vaux, was not mentioned) was depicted as an elitist whose primary motive was for people to experience park scenery passively. Moses, in contrast, was said to care only about athletics. Olmsted and Vaux were a product of their time as much as Moses was of his, and they created parks for public health and recreational purposes as Moses did. Moses, like Olmsted and Vaux, was invested in the appearance of parks. He claimed that part of the reason for adding playgrounds around the perimeter of Central Park was to “intercept the little destroyers” who damaged the landscape.

As Ballon, Jackson, and other collaborators emphasized, it is time to reassess Moses and to better apply historical knowledge to contemporary projects. Unfortunately, much of the related press coverage and public discourse contains the polemic that the show sought to dispel. This reflexiveness may partially be the result of the subject matter, which involved places where people viewing the exhibition live or lived. Public officials and planners would benefit by gaining a deeper understanding of the rhetoric of Moses and his contemporaries rather than merely mimicking it with the planning of ambitious projects that may never successfully reach fruition. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s recently unveiled PlaNYC, for example, calls for, among other things, building more parks and recreational facilities with the goal that no New Yorker will live more than ten minutes from a park. While this assertion is made with good intent, it would be more advantageous in the long run to care for existing parks. Moses functioned in an era of abundant public funding; when those monies dried, his parks fell into disrepair. A synthesis of the Moses polemic would contribute to the future of the city in ways that merely thinking big and adding to the inventory cannot.

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