

**ROBERT MOSES  
AND THE  
MODERN CITY  
THE  
TRANSFORMATION  
OF  
NEW YORK**

**EDITED BY  
HILARY BALLON AND  
KENNETH T. JACKSON**



**W. W. NORTON & COMPANY  
NEW YORK • LONDON**

# INTRODUCTION

HILARY BALLON AND KENNETH T. JACKSON

**R**obert Moses (1888–1981) had a greater impact on the physical character of New York City than any other individual, and given how the process of city building has changed since his time, it is unlikely anyone in the future will match him. Moses fits with New York's distinguished history of daring, large-scale public works: the Commissioner's plan of 1811 that devised Manhattan's grid, the Croton water supply system, the Brooklyn Bridge, the parks of Frederick Law Olmsted, the subway, and now a new water tunnel. They demonstrate the city's capacity to organize private and public actors in the face of collective dangers and to develop an infrastructure of shared resources to keep the city strong. Yet even in the context of this heroic city-building tradition, Moses is in a league of his own.

Moses's reign as building maestro in New York City extended from 1934, when Mayor Fiorello La Guardia appointed him the first city-wide commissioner of parks, to 1968, when the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority merged with the MTA and Moses was ousted as chairman. During that thirty-four-year period, Moses's output was remarkable by every measure: the number of public works completed; the speed of their execution; their geographical scope across five boroughs; their exceptional quality; and, most especially, their range, including beaches, swimming pools, playgrounds, parks, and golf courses; bridges, parkways, and expressways; garages and a convention center. He also conceived and set into motion one of the largest slum clearance–urban renewal programs in the United States.

Moses's public works, now fifty or more years old, are so indispensable it is impossible to imagine New York without them: the Triborough, Whitestone, and Verrazano bridges; the Henry Hudson Parkway, Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, Cross-Bronx Expressway, to name a few. Other structures, less widely known, have welcomed successive waves of ethnic groups;

the pools, parks, and playgrounds are thriving points of entry into the civic realm. Indeed, few New Yorkers recognize the extent to which their city was shaped by Robert Moses. This book and the related three-part exhibition *Robert Moses and the Modern City*—at the Museum of the City of New York, the Queens Museum of Art, and the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University—recover this important chapter in city building. The book consists of seven essays by scholars with different types of expertise—urban history, architectural history, African-American history—and an extensive catalog of Moses's public works, built and unbuilt. It amplifies the exhibitions but does not mirror their organization or contents.

All this comes at a time when Moses's reputation is on an upswing. In the 1930s, the press and public admired Moses for turning federal aid into a magnificent public works program and renewing the city's shabby nineteenth-century recreational and road system. The positive view prevailed during the 1940s, when he organized the city for an enormous postwar building effort. But in the 1950s, Moses's standing sank as the city experienced the physical destruction and social displacement caused by three major postwar building programs: Interstate highways, urban renewal, and public housing. Moses's reputation reached a nadir with that of New York City in the 1970s, when Robert Caro's influential biography *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* was published. As the title indicates, the book links Moses to the city's decline.

Since the 1980s, Moses's reputation has been rising, propelled by a fear that New York can no longer execute ambitious projects because of a multi-layered process of citizen and governmental review. A turning point was the defeat in 1985, after fourteen years of debate and litigation, of Westway, a federally funded project to replace the West Side Highway with an under-

ground road and waterfront park development. In the twenty-first century, after a long period when the city's infrastructure has been ignored, the desire for governmental actors that can tame the bureaucracy and overcome the opposition is projected onto Moses, who, we imagine, would have capitalized on the opportunity to rebuild lower Manhattan after 9/11. He has become a symbolic figure in discourse about the future of the city, its capacity to think and build big.

This book brings to bear a new body of scholarly research in another round of historical revisionism. Although the contributors have divergent views of Moses, certain underlying themes and concerns emerge in these pages. They align Moses with national and municipal policies and demonstrate that he was symptomatic of his age. The intention is not to disavow his remarkable qualities, flatten his achievements, or diminish his failings, yet Moses looks different in a national context than he does in isolation. His building programs reflected federal priorities and required federal funds. By setting the Moses record against the opportunities and constraints of his time, it becomes possible to better calibrate his personal achievements.

Kenneth T. Jackson's opening essay puts Moses in a national context and argues that the net effect of his programs was to equip New York to function in the modern age. The impact of national policy is taken up in Owen Gutfreund's essay on road building. Gutfreund, an authority on the history of highways, contrasts Moses's landscaped parkways in the 1930s with the bleak expressways of the 1950s and relates the change in engineering standards, design qualities, and funding constraints to federal mandates. Hilary Ballon's essay on urban renewal likewise insists on the federal context of Moses's slum clearance efforts and describes his controversial revision of the federal procedures to make an ill-considered program work in New York's high-priced real estate market. Mapping Moses's public works onto national policies also clarifies the widely perceived divide in his career: the good Moses of the 1930s is associated with a faith in government's ability to act on the public behalf, and the bad Moses of the 1950s mirrors a loss of faith in government to act wisely, particularly in urban affairs where governmental programs, however well intended, had destructive consequences.

A thrust of the research presented here is to shift attention from Moses's unbridled power to his effectiveness within a system of constraints. As Robert Fishman indicates in his essay on citizen planning, Moses fashioned his image of superpower. He skillfully publicized his projects with press releases, stylish brochures, and a distribution list for memos sometimes half a page long. He pulled the levers of public opinion to create the impression of indefatigable energy, a perception reinforced by his pugnacious and arrogant personality. But as powerful as he was, Moses was not omnipotent. He fought other bureaucratic stakeholders inside government and alternatively threatened, manipulated, badgered, and appeased private-sector partners and federal and state officials to get his way. More often than is usually recognized, Moses had to trim projects to accommodate objectors. Fishman tells the story of Moses's defeat at Washington Square Park. Other unbuilt projects recorded in the book also testify to his limits. The outright failures were, however, unusual. More typically, Moses compromised in response to political, financial, community, and other pressures; thus the record of his set-

backs and concessions is wrapped up in the building history of the executed works; this fine-grained information is provided in the catalog entries.

Moses was a builder, and the overarching purpose of the book is to focus on what he built. His powerful personality tends to draw attention away from the structures themselves, but in the end, they are what shaped New York City and continue to sustain it. Moreover, his public works substantially expanded the public realm and set a standard of high-quality design that remains unmatched to this day. The exceptional distinction of Moses's public works of the 1930s were due to the trio of Aymar Embury II, architect; Gilmore D. Clarke, landscape architect; and Othmar Ammann, engineer. Although Ammann's genius as a bridge designer is well known, the important contribution of Embury and Clarke is here examined in depth for the first time. Moses believed that public architecture should be aligned with, and not ahead of, public taste. Embury and Clarke, both conservative designers, shared this view and adapted the great tradition of historical architecture and landscape design to ennoble the public sphere.

The rise of public-private partnerships and blurred boundaries of public space in our time set in sharp relief Moses's expansion of the public realm as well as his experimentation with public-private partnerships in the urban renewal work of the 1950s. Marta Gutman's essay on the eleven monumental outdoor swimming pools supervised by Embury and Clarke and opened in the summer of 1936 leaves no doubt that the pools constitute one of the finest bodies of American public architecture. Gutman analyzes the engineering of the pools as well as their social history, addressing in particular the charge that Moses promoted racial segregation at the pools. Martha Biondi, an authority on twentieth-century African-American history, also explores the impact of Moses's policies on minorities and looks into his presumed racism, particularly in the realm of housing, where she tracks his changing positions. Moses denounced the planning profession but planning is undeniably what he did. The essay by Joel Schwartz addresses Moses's relation to the planning tradition. Sadly, it is posthumously published. Underscoring Moses's debt to established planning theory, Schwartz sketches his ties to a discipline and mental outlook that favored large-scale, holistic urban thinking.

Moses grasped the city as a whole. Although he was oriented to the automobile, his preferred point of view for planning was from the sky, where people disappeared from sight and the city appeared as a physical tapestry of land masses, waterways, and structures. Moses used aerial photographs as a planning tool, a means that represented the strengths and weaknesses of his planning style. Aerial photos abetted his interest in the city as a whole. He did not see distinct neighborhoods, nor five separate boroughs, nor the kingdom of Manhattan. Moses saw New York City as a unit. His mission was to modernize the metropolis and keep it strong, and he dismissed as a necessary cost of progress the damage inflicted by public works on neighborhoods and people. The problem is that Moses felt himself uniquely able to interpret the public good. Putting his trust in experts, he doubted the capacity of democratic methods to arrive at the common good. What is the public good and how to achieve it in the context of city building? *Robert Moses and the Transformation of New York* offers new perspectives on these hard questions.

# ROBERT MOSES AND THE RISE OF NEW YORK

## THE POWER BROKER IN PERSPECTIVE

KENNETH T. JACKSON

Since World War II, America's northeastern and midwestern cities have been in both relative and absolute decline. Their once proud central business districts have typically slipped into retail and business irrelevance; their neighborhoods have lost their once dense networks of bakeries, shoe stores, and pharmacies; and their streets have too often become dispiriting collections of broken bottles, broken windows, and broken lives. After dark, pedestrians retreat from the empty sidewalks, public housing projects come under the sway of gangs and drug dealers, and merchants lower graffiti-covered metal gates. Too often, no one is at home. Newark, for example, had 439,000 residents in 1950; by 2000, that number had fallen to 272,000. In the same five decades, Buffalo fell from 580,000 to 292,000; Detroit from 1,850,000 to 951,000; Pittsburgh from 677,000 to 335,000; Philadelphia from 2,072,000 to 1,600,000; Boston from 801,000 to 589,000; and Cleveland from 915,000 to 478,000. The decline of Saint Louis was particularly astonishing. In 1950, that once resplendent Mississippi River city had 857,000 residents; by 2000, only 348,000 persons called it home.

To a large extent, the human exodus was fueled by a sharp decline in industrial employment. At midcentury, for example, Newark was a center of paint, jewelry, apparel, and leather manufacture. By the end of the twentieth century, those factories were forlorn and quiet; weeds and bushes were growing where hundreds and even thousands of laborers once earned a family wage. Similarly, Detroit in 1950 was the Motor City in fact as well as in name. All three great automakers made the Michigan metropolis their headquarters, and all focused their manufacturing operations in the dozens of plants in the metropolitan area. Meanwhile, Pittsburgh was so identified with the great blast furnaces along the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers that it

was everywhere known as the Steel City. But by 2000, the astonishing productivity of those cities was a thing of the past.

To an important degree, these changes affected all American cities, even those in the booming sunbelt, like Houston, San Diego, Dallas, and Jacksonville, if only because federal policies toward highways, income-tax deductions for mortgage interest payments, and the placement of public housing tended to follow a national pattern. In such places, the population rose because municipal boundaries were pushed out beyond the new subdivisions. But inner city neighborhoods suffered in those cities also. Thus, in Memphis, the total population grew from 396,000 in 1950 to 675,000 in 2000. But because the area encompassed by the city grew by about five times in those years, the absolute density of the community declined from 9,000 per square mile in 1950 to 2,000 per square mile in 2000, and many once thriving neighborhoods seemed deserted.

New York was part of this larger story. In 1950, it was the unchallenged center of American life, and its skyline was famous around the world. The city was a virtual United Nations in miniature, its citizens drawn from every continent and almost every nation. Its five boroughs were renowned for excellent public schools, pure and abundant water, spacious and well-kept parks, and matchless mass transit. New York was also the world's leading industrial city, and its many thousands of shops and factories produced most of the nation's women's clothes, one-fifth of its beer, most of its magazines and books, and many of its specialty goods. Its great harbor, protected from North Atlantic storms by the narrow opening between Brooklyn and Staten Island—later the site of one of Robert Moses's great bridges—was by many measures the largest and finest in the world. It was also the busiest port any-

where, and its hundreds of bustling docks and piers gave employment to tens of thousands of sailors, longshoremen, tugboat operators, maritime workers, and shipbuilders. Meanwhile, Wall Street was the heart of American finance, Madison Avenue of advertising, Seventh Avenue of fashion, Fifth Avenue of elegant shopping, and Broadway of entertainment.

But New York, imperial though it was, could not resist the larger national pressures toward dispersion, and post-World War II Gotham experienced the same malaise that gripped the other great cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Between 1950 and 1975, New York's population declined by almost a million persons, its factory employment plummeted by two-thirds, its public schools deteriorated, its infrastructure sagged, its parks fell victim to vandals, and its public transit system lost half of its riders. Around the huge city, crime rates rose, graffiti appeared on almost every surface, corporations moved their headquarters either to the suburbs or to the Sunbelt, the city fell toward bankruptcy, and President Gerald Ford famously told the beleaguered metropolis, "Drop dead."

The Bronx became the poster child of the depressed metropolis. So many landlords abandoned their apartment buildings that the city covered their windows with decals of lampshades and curtains to camouflage the offending residences. Whole blocks emptied of residents and habitable structures, and the results were compared unfavorably to bombed-out Dresden or Cologne in 1945. Just east of Crotona Park, in a neighborhood once enlivened by thousands of Jewish and Italian residents, Charlotte Street became an international symbol of abandonment and ruin. Popular perception associated shopping malls, corporate office parks, and suburban residential subdivisions with the future; cities seemed dangerous and decrepit, places where the problems of poverty, race, and crime came together in the perfect storm known as the South Bronx.

It was in this context that Robert A. Caro's *Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* appeared in 1974. Extraordinary in conception and execution, the book generated exceptional attention and won both the Pulitzer and Francis Parkman prizes as the best book of the year. It was a page-turner: persuasively argued, beautifully written, and thoroughly researched. It held that Moses was a brilliant and idealistic reformer who ultimately soured on politics and ruthlessly marshaled power to follow his own muse and become the greatest builder the United States had ever seen. Although *The Power Broker* is in many respects a monument to the awesome achievements of a dedicated public servant, its subtitle and overarching thesis suggest that the builder almost destroyed the city he was trying to save and that the desperation of Gotham in 1974 was partly the result of his misplaced priorities.

I posit a different hypothesis about Moses's impact upon New York. Unlike most cities in the Frost Belt (except perhaps Boston), New York has experienced a renaissance since 1975. In the space of three decades it changed from a poster child of urban despair to an international symbol of glamour, sophistication, success, competition, and safety. Meanwhile, its crime rate plummeted, public transit ridership increased by 50 percent, graffiti diminished, tourism exceeded forty million visitors per year, Broadway ticket sales set new records, and real estate prices—perhaps the

ultimate barometer of urban health in a capitalist society—reached levels unequalled in any city in the history of the world. In the single decade of the 1990s, the official population of the five boroughs surged by 700,000.

The reasons for New York's impressive turnaround since its nadir in the 1970s are many and varied. Some credit Mayor Edward I. Koch's take-charge attitude following his election in 1977. Others credit mayors Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg for restoring faith in the city's ability to handle its own problems. Still others point to the "broken-window theory" of crime prevention, the legalization of abortion in New York and adjacent states, the tripling of the prison population, the decline in the numbers of minority male teenagers, the passing of the crack epidemic, the growth of neighborhood-watch associations, or the surge in foreign immigration (legal and illegal).

Whatever the cause of the New York turnaround, it would not have been possible without Robert Moses. Had he not lived, or had he chosen to spend his productive years in isolation on a beach or a mountaintop, Gotham would have lacked the wherewithal to adjust to the demands of the modern world. Had the city not undertaken a massive program of public works between 1924 and 1970, had it not built an arterial highway system, and had it not relocated 200,000 people from old-law tenements to new public housing projects, New York would not have been able to claim in the 1990s that it was the capital of the twentieth century, the capital of capitalism, and the capital of the world.

Moses was such a complex figure and his accomplishments so diverse and numerous that it is necessary to break down his public career into a conceptual framework that allows us to see him in a larger national context. For the purposes of this discussion, let us consider the scope, price, and quality of the things he built; the nature of his vision; the question of his racism; the quality of his housing; and the issue of his financial honesty.

## ROBERT MOSES IN THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

By any definition, Robert Moses had an exceptional life. Even a simple list of his various pools, beaches, playgrounds, parks, parkways, expressways, bridges, public housing projects, Title I efforts, and Mitchell-Lama developments—not to mention Lincoln Center, the United Nations, and two world's fairs—runs to many pages. As Caro noted, Moses was the greatest builder in American history.

But *The Power Broker* exaggerates Moses's influence on American life and makes him too much of an evil genius. For example, despite the many miles of roadway attributed to Moses, New York never became as hospitable to the motorcar as other American cities. In Caro's narrower context, we do not learn that Detroit voters chose the highway over public transportation in the 1920s or that the city of Cincinnati built a subway line in the 1930s and never opened it. Similarly, *The Power Broker* ignores Los Angeles's construction of nine hundred miles of highways and twenty-one thousand miles of paved streets in the twentieth century, both totals substantially eclipsing those of New York. The great builder simply was swimming with the tide of history. During most of his lifetime, the question was not whether to build

highways or heavy rail systems; virtually everyone believed that the private car was the greatest invention since fire or the wheel. Public transportation seemed to be nothing more than a relic of the past. Thus, in a comparative sense, what is striking about the New York metropolitan region is not the number of its expressways, but rather their rarity; not the existence of traffic, but rather that congestion is actually less of a problem than it is in smaller cities like Atlanta, Houston, or Los Angeles; not the presence of a rubber-tire mentality, but rather that per-capita oil consumption in New York is easily the lowest in the United States.

Caro argues not only that Moses built roads on an unimaginable scale, but that he destroyed what was once the world's greatest public transit system and foreclosed possible future improvement by refusing to save space in the middle of his highways for rail lines. From the perspective of the 1970s, it no doubt seemed that the New York subways and buses were in crisis. Since that time, however, ridership has increased dramatically and the riding experience has become cleaner and safer. How that happened runs counter to Caro's thesis. Indeed, the explanation is exactly the opposite of the argument in *The Power Broker*. A century ago, when Moses was just beginning his career, fewer than 20 percent of the nation's transit riders were in the New York region; in 2006, between 35 and 40 percent of America's bus, subway, and commuter rail passengers are in the same area. Why has Gotham's public transit system survived when those of the rest of the nation have so often collapsed?

It is true that Moses took no action to save either the nickel fare or the subways. But those responsibilities were not his. Moreover, as most transit historians now agree, the nickel fare should have been abandoned in the 1920s, not the 1940s, when the infrastructure had deteriorated badly. Because the fare box could not pay for everyday operating costs, let alone new tracks or equipment, the subway system could not make the improvements that might have staved off the deterioration that plagued it after World War II. Finally, remember that Fiorello La Guardia, the sainted mayor of New York City between 1934 and 1945, was himself a vigorous advocate of the car who opposed rail transit and endorsed the ripping up of Manhattan trolley tracks.

Or consider the case of slum clearance and urban renewal. Moses was notoriously fond of bulldozers and ever anxious to clear away "slums" and to replace them with new buildings. Frequently remarking that you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs, he felt confident that he was doing the right thing as he ran roughshod over neighborhoods that many residents felt were viable, safe, affordable, and friendly. As Moses responded early in 1968 to a question about the concentration of low-income people in a few neighborhoods, "There's only one answer. That is to tear down every building in the slums and put up new ones on less land, then bring the people back."

Moses did tear down slums in New York, and he never built enough new projects to rehouse their dispossessed residents. But in a comparative sense, he was not so quick to turn to the federal bulldozer as the leaders of Detroit, New Haven, and White Plains—and the complaints in other cities were as justified as those in Gotham. He was sustained and supported in his slum

clearance efforts by the city's liberal establishment, which was perfectly willing to sacrifice working-class neighborhoods to luxury apartments, breathtaking medical and cultural centers, and expanded college campuses.

In the matter of public housing, Caro wrongly posits that the New York projects were disproportionately large (in fact, its 345 public housing developments in 2005 were not, on balance, as large as those in other cities) and that Moses cut corners in construction because he had such little regard for the poor. Rather, it was congressional legislation of 1937 that limited the amount of money that could be spent on individual units, essentially discriminating against Gotham, where land and construction costs were above average. Southern lawmakers were never eager to see Washington largesse lavished upon the nation's largest city, so they fought for, and won, stipulations that effectively tied Moses's hands.

It is of course true that New York had (and has) the largest stock of government-assisted units of any municipality in the United States. This might be expected in the nation's largest city. But Moses did not build as many apartments per capita as neighboring Newark, where Louis Danzig was as arrogant and iron-willed as Moses was. Nor were his projects as large as such Chicago behemoths as the Robert Taylor Homes.

In the national context, what made Moses unusual was his ability to marshal the resources necessary to see a project through from conception to completion. He built effective and talented teams of engineers and workers who were able to alter the physical environment with speed, efficiency, and attention to detail. The Bronx-Whitestone Bridge, for example, acclaimed by many as the most beautiful suspension bridge in the world when it opened on April 29, 1939, was finished *under* budget and three months *early*. It remains as impressive in the twenty-first century as it was before World War II. In contrast, the Tappan Zee Bridge, only twenty miles away, which Moses did not build, was over budget and behind schedule when it opened in 1956; and now in the first decade of the twenty-first century civil engineers are worried that without exceptional efforts the structure will collapse.

Moses's projects were unusual in their beauty, their structural integrity, and their durability. For example, Marta Gutman, in her essay on Moses and recreation, writes that it was not enough that he build a swimming pool or park; he wanted to build beautiful structures that could withstand both the test of time and the test of excited children. Not surprisingly, most of his projects merit our attention decades after his death because they continue to serve the people and the purposes for which they were first built. He gave his engineers, architects, and planners the resources and the direction to produce bridges, highways, buildings, and public facilities of high quality. And Moses prioritized ease of maintenance and inexpensive upkeep.

## THE VISION OF ROBERT MOSES

What did the power broker intend to do with the public's money? What was his ultimate aim? Was the purpose of redevelopment to build strong neighborhoods with active sidewalks and healthy retail establishments, or was the metropolitan region essentially a traffic problem? Was it the task of reformers to move cars and people over long distances quickly and efficiently? Did

Moses realize that parkways would more likely allow breadwinners to drive to work than families to drive to the beach?

Just as it is often said that the power broker liked the public rather than individuals, so also did he see the metropolis as a whole rather than as a series of discrete neighborhoods, each with a particular feel and history and pattern. Indeed, as Robert Fishman reminds us, Moses asserted that urban agglomerations are created "by and for traffic." Jane Jacobs, author of the acclaimed *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961 as an antidote to Moses's vision, disagreed completely, arguing that visionaries should plan "by and for neighborhoods."

Moses's lifelong tendency to value big projects over human-scale initiatives is suggested by his 1969 plan for the Rockaway Peninsula on the extreme southeastern edge of Queens. Concerned that more than 35 percent of New York's 6,600 acres of slums were located in either Bedford-Stuyvesant or East New York, he proposed moving 160,000 tenants from those areas to the Rockaways and then rebuilding in Brooklyn, section by section. Imagine the hubris of moving 160,000 people, but Moses proposed just that at a luncheon of the city's Housing and Planning Council on May 8, 1969. Had he made the suggestion twenty or thirty years earlier, when he wielded greater power, it might have come to fruition.

*The Power Broker* suggests that Moses was a perceptive dreamer and a visionary, the kind of exceptional intellect who could see beyond the limitations and clutter of contemporary life to the possibilities and potential of a very different future environment. Examples include his plan for a parkway that would follow the route of the Brooklyn water supply, for a West Side improvement that would cover the oppressive railroad tracks and junk heaps along Manhattan's Hudson River shoreline, or for an arterial highway system fit for the world's greatest metropolis. In fact, none of those ideas was original to Moses; all were derivative of plans conceived and published by others long before he laid claim to them. What made him unusual was not the originality of his thought but the personal qualities that allowed him to build where others could only dream. Moses the visionary was second rate; Moses the builder was in a class by himself.

### THE HONESTY AND INTEGRITY OF ROBERT MOSES

A recurring theme of *The Power Broker* is that New York's great builder was corrupt and only too willing to avert his eyes so that others might feed illegally at the public trough. Similarly, Caro suggests that Moses allowed investment bankers to overcharge for bonds, legislators to use inside information to speculate in real estate, and his own party givers to indulge in their expensive culinary and alcoholic tastes.

It is difficult to prove a negative—that Moses never acted nefariously or illegally. How could we be sure? Certainly, the history of cities, of builders, of politicians, and of organized labor suggests that powerful men have long been on the take and that opportunities for graft can overwhelm even upstanding and respectable individuals.

Robert Moses was born to wealth and privilege; educated at Yale, Oxford, and Columbia; and accustomed to the finer things of life. He had sufficient

resources to do as he wished and even to refuse payment when he thought that working for free might enhance his power and prestige. That said, he died a relatively poor man. His estate in 1981 was valued at \$50,000, less than that of many individuals who were born with nothing and worked for a salary all their lives. He never owned a fancy house or expensive automobile and was not known for his success as an investor. If he spent any time at all trying to engage in unseemly or illegal activity, this extraordinarily successful man was a dismal failure at it.

Rather, we should acknowledge that Robert Moses was a dedicated public servant in the best sense of that term. While he may not have built what we would have wanted, while he may not have listened to critics or to residents about to lose their homes, while he may not even have liked the cities he claimed to be serving, he nevertheless acted without the goal of gaining wealth from his actions. In this regard, Robert Caro captured the essence of the man: Moses was not interested in possessing women, owning real estate, or enjoying world travel. He sought power, influence, and importance.

### ROBERT MOSES AS A RACIST

Racism has been such a persistent and ubiquitous phenomenon in North America during the past four centuries that no one should be surprised that Moses was a racist. It would have been surprising if he could have overcome his time, place, and circumstances and used his enormous power to lessen the burden on people of color in a white man's world. The important questions, however, are not whether Moses was prejudiced—no doubt he was—but whether that prejudice was something upon which he acted frequently. Did he go out of his way to discriminate against African-Americans? Did he violate the trust placed in him by public officials to weigh all his actions and projects against a standard of equality for all citizens?

The evidence does not support Caro's claims that racism was a defining aspect of Moses's character, or that his actions had a disproportionately negative effect upon African-Americans. When he first came to a position of great responsibility in the 1920s, prejudice based upon skin color was an established fact in the metropolitan region. In the middle of Harlem, for example, the most famous black neighborhood in all the world, restaurants, theaters, and stores routinely treated African-Americans as second-class citizens. But Moses did try to place swimming pools and park facilities within reach of black families and accessible by convenient public transportation. He did not build bridges too low to accommodate buses so that black families would stay away from Jones Beach, nor did he control the water temperature so as to discourage black patronage.

Moses had contempt for the poor and rarely expressed admiration for African-Americans. But he did have a consistent and powerful commitment to the public realm: to housing, highways, parks, and great engineering projects that were open to everyone. While Moses was in power, the word "public" had not yet become pejorative, and the power broker was willing to override private interests in order to enlarge the scope of public action. In the twenty-first century, when almost anything "public" is regarded as second-

rate and when the city cannot afford to repair—let alone construct—grand edifices, that alone is a remarkable achievement.

I wish that Robert Moses had been in charge of the subways instead of the highways. I wish that he had been as concerned about equality for African-Americans as he was about the importance of open spaces and beaches. I wish that he had been as attentive to neighborhoods as he had been to highway interchanges and gigantic bridges. But he was what he was, and on balance he was a positive influence on the city. In fact, he made possible New York's ability to remain in the front rank of world cities into the twenty-first century. Had Moses never lived, America's greatest city might have deteriorated beyond the capabilities of anyone to return it to prosperity. As it is, the power broker built the infrastructure that secured New York's place among the greatest cities in the history of the world. Alexander Garvin has said it succinctly: "Nobody, not even Baron Haussmann in 19th-century Paris, has ever done more to improve a city."

Moses himself once said of the man who rebuilt the French capital in the 1850s and 1860s: "Baron Haussmann has been described as a talker, an ogre for work, despotic, insolvent, full of initiative and daring, and carrying not a straw for legality." Moses might have been describing himself. And so also Moses's conclusion about Haussmann: "Everything about him was on a grand scale, both good qualities and faults. His dictatorial talents enabled him to accomplish a vast amount of work in an incredibly short time, but they also made him many enemies, for he was in the habit of running roughshod over all opposition."<sup>1</sup> Baron Haussmann operated under the tutelage of Napoleon III. Moses also operated in a special time, when most people thought that government could and should do grand things for ordinary families. In the twenty-first century, circumstances have changed radically. Alan Altshuler and David Luberoff have even argued that the age of urban megaprojects has passed.<sup>2</sup> But whether or not another American power broker should emerge in the decades to come, Robert Moses will be remembered as a key actor in the rise of New York, not its fall.

## NOTES

1. Moses, *Public Works*, xi. See Selected Bibliography for full citation.
2. Alan A. Altshuler and David Luberoff, *Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Investment* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003), 270.



# REBUILDING NEW YORK IN THE AUTO AGE

## ROBERT MOSES AND HIS HIGHWAYS

OWEN D. GUTFREUND

When Robert Moses first came to power, in 1924, congestion was slowly strangling the great metropolis. Growing numbers of automobiles competed for scarce street space with streetcars, elevated trains, horse-drawn freight carts, and pedestrians. The city's street system, much of which had been planned and mapped more than a century earlier, could not handle all the traffic. By the time he lost power forty-four years later, Moses had supervised the construction of dozens of parkways, bridges, and expressways. His projects spanned all five boroughs and extended far into the northern and eastern suburbs, giving New York a coherent highway network to complement its comprehensive rail-based mass-transit system. The resultant balanced transport system, combining extensive subway and commuter rail lines with a far-flung web of major roads, enabled the city to grow and thrive in the auto age.

An assessment of Moses's impact, however, must take into account not only his impressive record of accomplishments but also the context of his times. Moses was the right person in the right place at the right time. He did not invent a vision of a new New York from whole cloth, but instead he deftly appropriated innovations and plans of others, adapting and combining them to suit his purposes and then readapting them as circumstances changed. He was a gifted opportunist and pragmatic administrator, able to shepherd public works projects through to completion at a breakneck pace by shrewdly accumulating institutional power and harnessing ever-shifting funding streams. These remarkable talents, in combination with good timing, enabled him to cast a larger-than-life shadow over New York City's history.

Moses started building roads in 1924, as soon as he took on his first public works project, Jones Beach State Park. In order to provide access to his lavish new recreational facility on the south shore of Long Island, he simul-

taneously began work on a network of parkways that would span the region. The first of these, the Southern State Parkway, opened in 1927, followed soon thereafter by the Wantagh State Parkway in 1929, as well as Ocean Parkway and the first major sections of the Northern State Parkway in 1930 (fig. E-15). Last among this first batch of Moses's Long Island parkways was the Meadowbrook State Parkway, which opened in 1934.<sup>1</sup>

Like most of his subsequent public works projects, these parkways were the product of Moses's blend of ambition and creative pragmatism. They were *parkways* for two main reasons. First, and probably foremost, Moses had not been put in charge of highways or roads, which were tightly controlled, in keeping with federal mandates, by the engineers at the State Highway Department and the federal Bureau of Public Roads.<sup>2</sup> But when he drafted the enabling statutes for the two new administrative positions that he assumed in 1924, the chairmanship of the State Council of Parks and of the Long Island State Park Commission, he shrewdly followed the precedent set by the Westchester Parks Commission the year before. His new posts could not officially encompass regular highway construction, so he ensured that they included the authority to build recreational routes and access roads within parks. He used this artfully created loophole to create ribbonlike parks with landscaped roads within them, i.e., parkways. Second, Moses had a successful model to follow. Just as he embarked on his public works career, the landscape architects Hermann Merkel and Gilmore Clarke completed the Bronx River Parkway, hailed as the first modern American parkway (fig. E-16). This pioneering project—proposed in 1906, under construction since 1916, and officially opened in 1923—was widely praised as a glimpse of a future where automobiles would enable the urban masses to drive through



E-15. Southern State Parkway, 1927

the countryside and escape the overcrowded city.<sup>3</sup> Moses, ever the keen observer, saw that this type of project would garner the public and political support that had escaped his earlier civil service reform efforts. Building upon Clarke's innovative design and public acclaim, Moses assembled his own team of landscape architects and engineers (including Clarke himself, as a consultant) and built the web of parkways that would link his Jones Beach masterpiece to the rest of the metropolitan area. As would happen again and again in his career, Moses demonstrated that he was a consummate opportunist, adapting his activities to the spending priorities of the times, even while selectively borrowing the planning and design ideas innovated or advanced by others.

Moses next turned to what was to become one of his most celebrated accomplishments, the project known as the West Side Improvement, which encompassed the wholesale salvage and redesign of Manhattan's western shore. Others had long ago suggested that great cities should have great waterfront parkways, but it was Moses who got the job done along the Hudson River. In 1905, Daniel Burnham had included a shoreline parkway in his plans for San Francisco, as he did in his plan for Chicago in 1908. John Nolen had proposed a harborfront drive for San Diego.<sup>4</sup> Robert Moses was one of many who recognized that New York could also have a similarly scenic waterfront thoroughfare. The idea had first been publicly proposed by the city engineer Nelson Lewis in the Manhattan borough president's annual report for 1922 and was promptly taken up and advocated by the Regional Plan Association (RPA) when it was formed that same year.<sup>5</sup> Lewis, along with his son Harold, was later retained by the RPA to survey the area's transportation facilities and develop a scheme for weaving together the entire metropolitan area with a coherent net-



E-16. Bronx River Parkway, near Woodlawn Metro-North Railroad Station, 1922

work of new highways. The resultant plan was eventually published in the landmark *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs* of 1929 (fig. E-17). It laid out, conceptually, many of the routes that Moses would eventually build, including waterfront highways on the shores of Manhattan.<sup>6</sup> By the time they were completed, Moses had left his own imprint on the projects that he supervised, always adjusting and updating them according to the circumstances. In this respect, the West Side Improvement—which included the Henry Hudson Parkway, the expansion and relandscaping of Riverside Park, and the Henry Hudson Memorial Bridge—is a classic example of a Moses project. He was not the only one to imagine such a highway, and was almost certainly not the first, but in the end he was the person who took the idea, shaped it by applying the latest design principles and lessons learned from previous work, and carried it through to completion.

Fortuitously, in the mid 1930s, just as Moses's first parks and parkway projects on Long Island had earned him a reputation as a man who could get things done, the federal government initiated an unprecedented flood of funding for public works projects: the New Deal. Consequently, in 1933, Moses was put in charge of the state's Emergency Public Works Commission. He promptly used money from the generous new federal work-relief programs, together with the park funds that he already controlled, not only to transform Manhattan's west shore, as he had long imagined, but also to build a network of new bridges and parkways stretching from Manhattan through the Bronx and into suburban Westchester County. The Saw Mill Parkway opened in 1935, the Henry Hudson Memorial Bridge in 1936, the West Side Highway in 1937, the Henry Hudson Parkway in 1938, and the Hutchinson River Parkway in 1941. For the two Westchester parkways from this period



E-17. Regional highway routes, May 1928, published in the *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*, 1929

(the Saw Mill and the Hutchinson River), Moses was primarily responsible only for the portions that extended into New York City. His influence on the northern segments was more limited and derived from his close working relationship with Gilmore Clarke and also from his power as chair of the State Parks Council, which controlled all state funds used by the Westchester Parks Commission. Meanwhile, he continued work on Long

Island parkways and bridges, including the Interborough Parkway (now the Jackie Robinson Parkway), which opened in 1934; the Grand Central Parkway, in 1936; the Marine Parkway and Bridge, in 1937; and the Bronx Whitestone Bridge, in 1939. The next year, 1940, was particularly busy, marking the openings of the Belt Parkway, the Cross Island Parkway, and the Long Island Expressway.

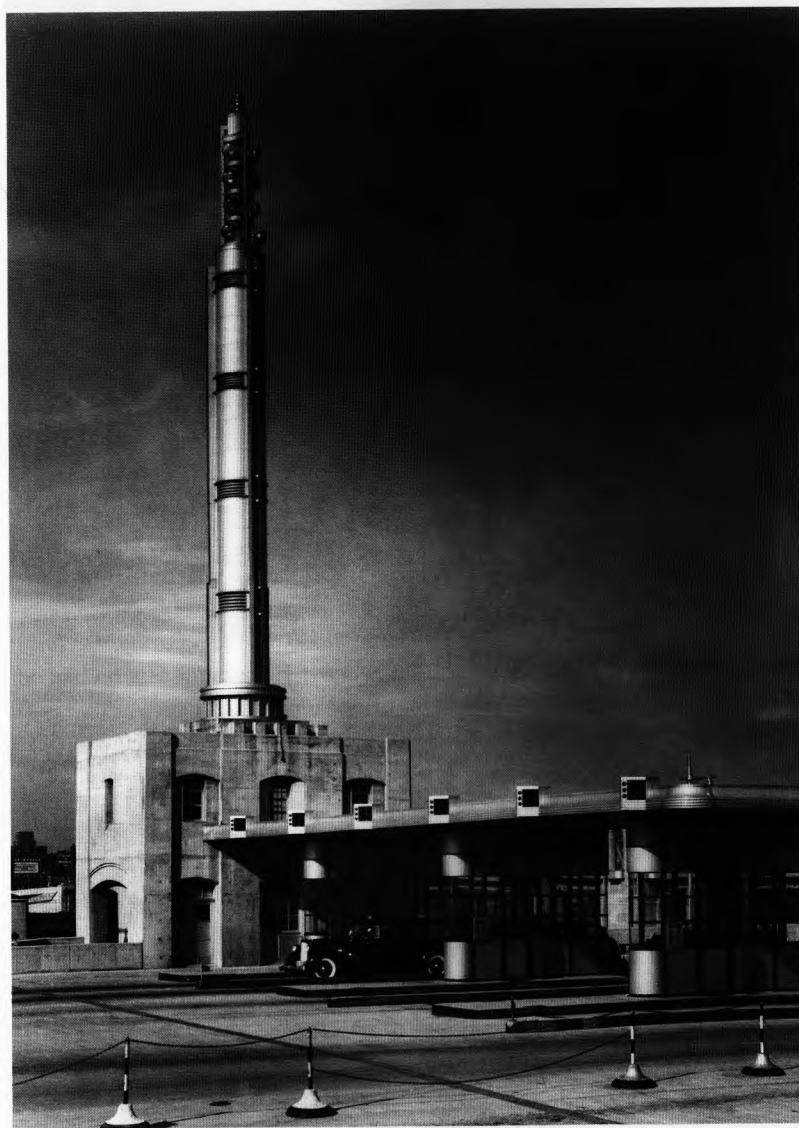
To finance these projects, Moses had to reach beyond parks money and New Deal work programs. Therefore, for all the new bridges and many of the new roadways, he installed toll booths and created special stand-alone government agencies to build, own, operate, and maintain the new facilities. As with his earlier appropriation of the innovations of the Bronx River Parkway, Moses's use of these special public benefit corporations was also patterned after a nearby pioneer that he had observed up close, the Port of New York Authority, run by Julius Cohen and Austin Tobin.<sup>7</sup> He recognized a legal structure similar to the Port Authority's would ensure that his new agencies would be flexible and durable tools to build his power, establish proprietary funding sources, and thereby expand his reach. Moses used the revenues gathered by these new toll-collecting agencies to obtain construction loans, pay for the initial planning stages of potential future projects, and eventually secure additional borrowing that funded subsequent projects. At first, he could take only an incremental approach to growing this toll-fed revenue machine. For example, the Henry Hudson Memorial Bridge was initially built as a single-decked span because lenders were uncertain if toll revenues would be sufficient to repay the cost of a more expensive structure. As soon as the first phase was opened and the toll receipts flowed in predictably, Moses could borrow the additional money needed to complete the second level of the bridge.

These new free-standing agencies seemed like a panacea to elected officials, who were seduced by the seemingly magical combination: major new public works projects, in the midst of the Great Depression, with little or no up-front outlay and no drain on public budgets for ongoing maintenance. Furthermore, the bonded debt of these agencies did not require approval via cumbersome and unpredictable ballot measures. Nor would the debt count toward state and municipal debt limits, which were already strained. Moreover, as Moses well knew from his earlier research and from his direct involvement in the creation of these agencies, they would have a life of their own, insulated from typical oversight and accountability measures.

The Triborough Bridge, of all Moses's toll roads and toll bridges, was by far the biggest revenue generator. Triborough, the keystone of Moses's otherwise fragmented highway network, was finished in 1936. Once opened to drivers, it quickly became the cash cow that sustained the growth of his rapidly expanding empire (fig. E-18). It was these toll revenues, collected by the Triborough Bridge Authority and the many other bridge and parkway authorities that he controlled, that enabled Moses to continue his building binge long after he had outgrown the limited funds available for parks and long after the expiration of the New Deal work programs. Not only was Moses's prized Triborough Bridge Authority based upon a structure innovated by others, the public benefit corporation, but the Triborough Bridge itself had also been conceived, initiated, and approved long before Moses got involved. Construction had been halted at the onset of the Depression only to be rescued later by Moses's opportunistic administrative and resource-gathering skills. Similarly, when the New York City Tunnel Authority ran out of money partway through the construction of the Queens Midtown Tunnel in 1938, Moses rescued the project, completed it by 1940, and took over the controlling agency, merging it with Triborough to form the Triborough Bridge and

Tunnel Authority. He was in the right place at the right time, with the right skills, and he took every opportunity to make the most of the situation, expanding his power, his tools, and his mandate.

During this same period, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia put Moses in charge of the 1939 New York World's Fair. Among the fair's most famous and most popular exhibits were two that offered the public a view of the future similar to that which Moses was already building: General Motors' Futurama, designed by Norman Bel Geddes; and Democracy, the core exhibit within the fair's iconic Perisphere. Both depicted a far-flung futuristic city held together by bridges and highways, with no mass transit. Even before the fair, many Americans had shared this view of the future, but these immensely popular scale models created even more converts. Outside the fairgrounds,



E-18. Manhattan toll plaza, Triborough Bridge, ca. 1937. Photograph by Richard Averill Smith. Collection MTA Bridges and Tunnels Special Archive



E-19. Grand Central Parkway, January 3, 1938



E-20. Cross Island Parkway, July 10, 1940



E-21. Grand Central Parkway, with adjacent bike path, February 14, 1941

Robert Moses's empire was still at work, remaking the metropolitan area along these auto-centric lines, and the public seemed to embrace each new project as a step into the future. Subsequently, Moses has often been criticized for excluding mass-transit facilities from all his projects. And, in hindsight, it is easy to see that it would have been desirable to integrate mass transit into them. It is also apparent that his failure to do so kept poorer New Yorkers—many of whom were African-Americans—from using most of his new transport network. There is little evidence, however, that anyone at the time was effectively advocating a transit-based alternative to Moses's auto based metropolitan transport plans. Prompted by federal policies that encouraged the dispersal of the huddled masses across the open countryside, the vast majority of the public shared his opinion that the automobile was integral to an optimistic view of the future, and that rail-based transit was associated with the overcrowded and dysfunctional cities of the past. Robert Moses was simply the most visibly effective instrument of these government policies and the related cultural preferences.

As time passed, the design of Moses's road projects gradually changed. Initially, this was a result of the rapidly advancing state of the art of parkways. Later, it was a product of shifts in the sources of funding and road usage patterns. The design approach used on the Bronx River Parkway was simultaneously groundbreaking and flawed, hampered by terrible inadequacies that came to light as auto use increased and technological advances allowed for higher speeds. Through the 1930s and 1940s, Moses's design team implemented improvements, even while retaining many signature elements, such as overly wide rights-of-way with careful landscaping, roadway routes that were integrated into the existing topography, rustic-style wooden signs, and grade separations at crossings, often utilizing architecturally distinctive stone bridges (figs. E-19–21). The Meadowbrook Parkway (1934) was the first to divide traffic in opposite directions along the entire route, either by a center barrier or by splitting the parkway into two separate roadways, each with its own carefully arranged alignment. This latter approach was used increasingly, and landscaped medians of variable widths became a standard parkway feature nationwide. Also, while earlier designs had lanes that were only ten feet across, sometimes even narrower to get under bridges or around obstacles, the lanes were later more consistent and wider, first twelve feet and then fourteen. Design changes that built upon Clarke's earlier innovations increasingly allowed for higher speeds and greater traffic capacities. Acceleration and deceleration lanes were lengthened; cloverleaves were used more frequently and their diameter expanded. Roadway geometry also gradually improved, with even smoother transitions and even gentler curves, now carefully banked. Instead of two narrow lanes in each direction, later roadways typically provided three wide lanes plus a full-width shoulder, which was often known as a break-down lane. One cumulative impact of all these changes was that eventually, by the 1950s, Moses's projects lost their parkway aesthetic altogether.<sup>8</sup> This transition, however, was not solely because of the incremental design changes and the increased focus on safely raising speed limits and on boosting technical efficiency. It was also a consequence of changes in the institutional and financial foundations of Moses's road-building power.

As toll revenues rose on Moses's bridges and parkways, he grew less dependent on park funds. Also, as predicted at the World's Fair, Americans increasingly turned to automobiles for routine transportation, including commuting to and from new suburban homes. Furthermore, although his many parkways had made it easier for cars to get around the metropolitan area, they had done nothing for trucks, which carried ever-greater quantities of freight through the region each year. Not only did the physical limitations of the parkways—narrow roadways, low bridges, difficult entrances and exits—make truck use impractical, the rules of the parkways prohibited commercial traffic. Moses could no longer proceed under the unrealistic presumption that his roads were mainly for recreational excursions, and he no longer needed to pretend that his roads were actually parks in order to obtain funding. Accordingly, when he resumed building after the end of World War II, his highways placed diminished emphasis on carefully landscaped borders and medians and favored designs that were less scenic and more utilitarian, with wider lanes, longer sightlines, and broader shoulders. This change in emphasis led to changes in Moses's design staff. Whereas the earlier parkways had been overseen by landscape architects like Gilmore Clarke, aided by engineers, the later expressways were supervised by engineers who only occasionally brought in landscape architects to consult on minor matters. This shift in professional dominance, from landscape architects to engineers, was manifest both internally, within Moses staff, as well as externally. For example, while Clarke's consulting firm was still retained by Moses for frequent projects, these were more likely, as time passed, to be parks and not highways. For the latter, Moses engaged his favorite consulting engineering firms, such as Jack Madigan's Madigan-Hyland. At the same time, because of changes in funding sources, more and more of Moses's projects had to meet strict federally mandated technical design guidelines and also were required—by law—to closely involve engineers at the State Highway Department and the federal Bureau of Public Roads. In order to ease this bureaucratic process, Moses shrewdly ensured that the plans for his projects were always prepared and submitted by staff or consultants with the same background and training as the bureaucrats themselves.

Once federal Interstate Highway funds became available in enormous quantities after 1956, incremental design changes ceased and Moses entirely discarded the last vestiges of parkway design characteristics. For more than thirty years, he had been able to bypass the federally imposed structure of highway planning and financing. Starting with park money, later making the most of the New Deal and generating his own revenue sources by levying tolls, Moses was able to realize his earlier projects almost wholly independent of the State-Aid and Federal-Aid highway systems. In any case, these aid systems had excluded urban highways and prohibited tolls, except on bridges. Furthermore, the grants were tightly controlled by highway engineers in Albany and Washington. After the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 added "urban extensions" to the grant-eligible highway system, however, and the amount of available federal aid ballooned starting in 1946, matched dollar for dollar by mandatory state contributions, Moses adapted his development approach so that some of his projects could qualify. The first of these was the Van Wyck Expressway, which was finished in 1950; the



E-22. Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, ca. 1960

Prospect Expressway followed in 1955. At the same time, he was not entirely finished building parkways. The Sprain Parkway, in Westchester County, running nearly parallel to the northernmost portions of the now almost obsolete Bronx River Parkway, was completed in 1953. Then, in 1956, when the Interstate Highway legislation raised the federal portion to 90 percent of construction costs, with enticing allotments for urban projects, Moses focused almost exclusively on qualifying projects.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, with this abundant new federal support came strict design standards and a ban on toll roads. In this environment, Moses's role changed as well. In many instances, his formal relation to these projects was as City Construction Coordinator. Yet, in some cases, he was able to construe new highways as approaches to bridges controlled by one or another of his authorities, and for these projects he had greater supervisory responsibilities. In all cases, he used his institutional and financial resources to expedite the projects, handling the inevitable political issues by drawing upon his extensive state and local influence, while also speeding the design processes by drawing on existing off-the-shelf plans prepared by staff engineers or external consulting engineers. Moses adapted, conforming to the new funding system and continuing to remake New York for the auto age, but now with an expressway aesthetic that was more efficient and safer than his earlier parkway efforts, and also markedly less scenic and attractive.

During the next ten years, Moses oversaw the completion of some of his biggest highways thus far, vital links in the city's modern transport system. They included portions of the New England Thruway, which opened to drivers in 1958; the Major Deegan Expressway, which was completed in 1961; the Cross-Bronx Expressway and the Whitestone Expressway, both finished in 1963; and the Staten Island Expressway, which opened to traffic in 1964, the same year that the last segments of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway,



E-23. Access roads in Manhattan to the George Washington Bridge, January 1955. Rendering by Julian Michele. Courtesy MTA Bridges and Tunnels Special Archive

including the Gowanus Expressway, were finalized (fig. E-22). Meanwhile, he continued to oversee the construction of additional toll bridges, completing the Throgs Neck Bridge in 1961 and linking the last of the five boroughs, Staten Island, to his metropolitan web in 1964 with an enormous suspension bridge across New York Harbor, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

Despite his ever-expanding reach, Moses suffered a series of setbacks in the late 1950s and early 1960s that eventually led to his fall from power. Earlier, interspersed among his many high-profile successes were occasional defeats. Sometimes, he lost battles over the exact route of one of his roads or the exact boundaries of a new park. Most of the time, however, these failures were overshadowed by his more frequent and more visible successes—thanks to his active and well-oiled publicity operations. In the prewar era, there were only two exceptions to this pattern: his abysmal run for governor in 1934, the one and only time he campaigned for elected office, and his attempt to build a Brooklyn-Battery Bridge in 1939. This latter effort, which turned out to be a harbinger of his postwar public battles, demonstrated two

important constraints on Moses's vaunted ability to get things done. First, although his power was immense, even at its peak it was not absolute. He wanted a bridge while others wanted a tunnel, and in the end he lost the battle. Politically powerful opposition could thwart Robert Moses. Second, despite his generally high popular support, he could not afford to disregard the instances when his proposals met with well-organized public disapproval. Later, defeats like these became more frequent and ultimately brought about his downfall.

Moses's later proposals were so controversial that they resulted in high-profile defeats. One reason is that, while his earliest projects had been at the edges of the metropolitan region, as time passed they gradually moved inward to more-settled and highly developed areas. Consequently, these proposals would displace more people, were more likely to disrupt established neighborhoods and communities, and generally had the potential to do more damage to existing property and the surrounding urban fabric (fig. E-23). Second, the altered design aesthetic of his roads, together with the perceived

need for more traffic lanes to accommodate ever-mounting traffic flows, meant that the later highways were much bigger and much uglier. Third, all across the nation, in city after city, urban Americans were beginning to resist the construction of additional expressways. Public sentiment no longer automatically lined up in nearly unanimous support of highway projects, as in earlier periods. Resistance grew. In New York, Moses had over the years displayed little sympathy for those who were displaced by his highways, nor had he demonstrated much willingness to listen to those who opposed his projects. On the contrary, his heavy-handed and imperious manner had tarnished his once-gleaming reputation. Moses himself fostered the growth of his own opposition.

For a few years, Moses was able to fight past this growing resistance. The Cross-Bronx Expressway and portions of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway were controversial, but he completed them anyway. He was less successful, however, with a series of projects that would have entirely rearranged Manhattan's core, the very heart of New York City. He revived plans for two highways that had originally been proposed in the 1920s by the Regional Plan Association, large expressways crossing from the East River to the Hudson, one through Midtown and one through lower Manhattan. In an abstract and theoretical way, the two expressways seemed to make sense: connecting the Hudson River tunnels with the East River crossings and removing all the through traffic from the city streets. But, in practice, both of these projects promised to do immeasurable damage to their highly developed surroundings, displacing many thousands of residences and businesses, creating divisive barriers, and slicing up the center of the metropolis. At the same time, Moses was also advocating two other highly controversial projects: a huge bridge across Long Island Sound, from Oyster Bay to Westchester County, and a widening of the lower portions of Fifth Avenue, including an incursion through Washington Square Park. None of these came to fruition. Finally, Moses could push his transportation efforts no further. The city's appetite for his highways seemed to have reached its practical limit, even as his remarkable ability to adapt his activities to changing circumstances seemed to have similarly run out. Times had changed, and his projects had changed; the two were not aligned and instead were in conflict. He was no longer the right man, in the right place, at the right time.

In 1960, as Moses's ability to launch new projects waned, and amidst mounting political problems related to his housing activities, he was persuaded to relinquish some of his New York City government positions in exchange for a lucrative seven-year contract as head of the 1964 World's Fair. Then, starting in 1962, Governor Nelson Rockefeller gradually reclaimed power from Moses at the state level. Whereas his talents and resources had once made him indispensable, so much so that successive mayors and governors had concluded that they absolutely needed him, Moses gradually became dispensable. In 1968, Rockefeller delivered the final blow, merging the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority into the newly formed Metropolitan Transportation Authority and removing Moses from power altogether.

Moses's highway-building efforts seemed to have been stopped at exactly the right moment. To be sure, without his remarkable talents, New York's

adaptation to the auto age would probably have been less extensive, and consequently less successful, leaving the city ill-equipped for modern times. Nevertheless, if he had been allowed to proceed, completing his last proposed spate of massive new expressways, he might have pushed the city past the proverbial tipping point, destroying its center in favor of easing suburban and peripheral travel and thereby undermining the long-term sustainability of the city's core. Instead, America's dominant city of the nineteenth century survived to thrive in the twenty-first century. It is worth noting, however, that despite Moses's extraordinary effectiveness, New York City remains the least auto-dependent city in the United States, by far. Ultimately, it was the conjunction of Moses's roads with the region's world-class mass-transit system that sustained the metropolitan economy.

Despite his frequent and outspoken disdain for urban planners, Robert Moses was one of the most influential figures involved in the planning and construction of urban infrastructure in the twentieth century. He has been both celebrated for his accomplishments—the completion of public works on a scale unrivaled by any other public official in American history—and vilified for the manner in which he achieved them. He earned a national reputation such that he and his staff were sought after as consultants and expert advisers by many cities across the United States. Neither an architect nor an engineer—all of his projects were actually planned and designed by others—Moses built his reputation upon his remarkable effectiveness as an administrator, his opportunistic appropriation of others' visions, and his artful public relations efforts, including a consistent outpouring of press releases, illustrated brochures, and guided tours for reporters. His expansive reputation was also based on his remarkable ability to gather and sustain power, to take advantage of ever-changing funding streams, and, ultimately, to complete highly visible public works projects that others could only imagine.

## NOTES

1. Names and completion dates for Moses's highway and bridge projects, as well as much of the biographical information, comes from three main sources: Caro, *Power Broker*; Gutfreund, "Robert Moses," in *American National Biography*; and Krieg, *Robert Moses: Single Minded Genius*.
2. Seely, *Building the American Highway System*.
3. On the Bronx River Parkway and the design details of early parkways, see Campanella, "American Curves," 40–43; and Davis, "Mount Vernon Memorial Highway," 20, 186–93.
4. Bittenwieser, *Manhattan, Water-Bound*, 155.
5. Gutfreund, "Path of Prosperity," 147–83.
6. Regional Plan Association, *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 2, 299–301; Nelson P. Lewis, Chief Engineer for the New York City Board of Estimate, untitled city planning pamphlet (New York: 1915); and Manhattan Borough President, *1922 Annual Report*, 35.
7. For more on the Port Authority and its innovations, see Doig, *Empire on the Hudson*, 47–73.
8. The best treatment of parkway design characteristics, and their gradual evolution, is Davis, "Mount Vernon Memorial Highway," 29–210, 639–709.
9. For details on the federal aid highway system and its attendant constraints, see Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl*, 9–59.



# ROBERT MOSES AND URBAN RENEWAL

## THE TITLE I PROGRAM

HILARY BALLON

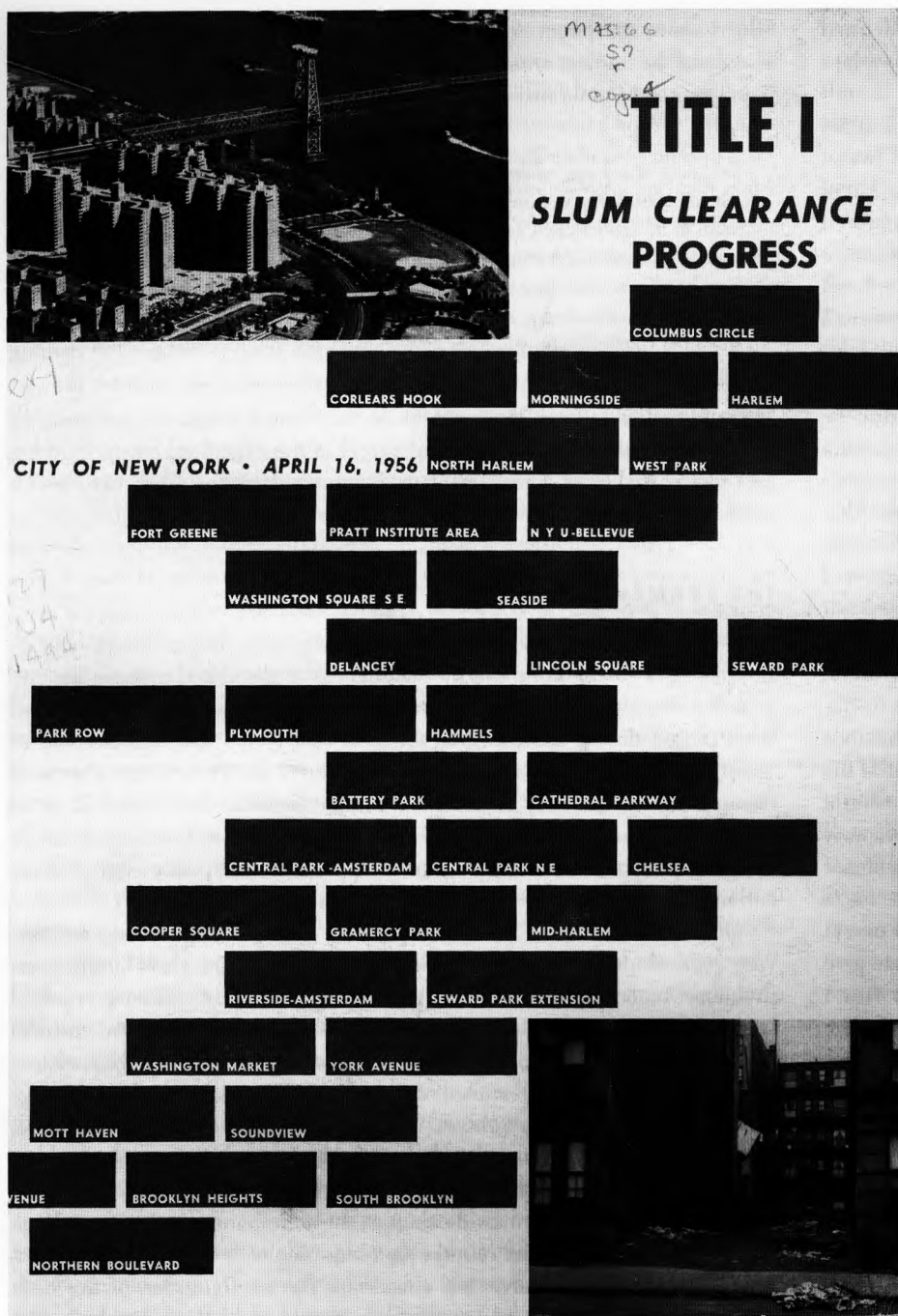
**R**obert Moses led the nation's largest slum clearance program in the 1950s. As in the 1930s, when he built a dazzling web of recreational facilities with New Deal dollars, so too his work in urban renewal was made possible by a federal program, Title I of the U.S. Housing Act of 1949. Title I provided deep federal subsidies for clearance of slum areas in order to stimulate their reconstruction by private developers.<sup>1</sup> Scores of cities, even in Alaska and Hawaii, joined the program. Although slow to take off, by 1960 Title I funding had set 838 projects in motion. Moses was the pacesetter and experimenter-in-chief.

As chairman of the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance, the entity through which he ran Title I from 1949 to 1960, Moses demonstrated his characteristic skill at capturing federal funds and expediting public works. He began planning early, in December 1948, and put in place enabling legislation so that when Title I became law, in July 1949, New York alone was primed for action. In January 1951, while other cities were still dumbstruck by the innovative legislation, Moses announced seven slum clearance projects, and he maintained that hectic pace to the end, as a tally of his work confirms. Moses obtained planning grants for thirty-two urban renewal projects, moved seventeen redevelopments into execution (another four were carried out by his successors) (fig. E-24). Due to his efforts, New York won more Title I aid than any other city. During his twelve-year reign over Title I, the city received \$65.8 million; Chicago, the second biggest spender, received less than half that amount, \$30.8 million.<sup>2</sup>

A productive record, yet it has long been considered a disaster, both for the city and for Moses, since Title I brought him down. In March 1960, when Moses was forced to resign as chairman of the Committee on Slum

Clearance, his approach to urban renewal was publicly rejected and his reputation was in tatters. Mayor Robert Wagner disbanded the committee and installed a new system designed to correct Moses's errant ways: his secretive selection of sites and sponsors, privatization of relocation, and opposition to preservation. His antidemocratic methods and indifference to community values had incited a citizen planning movement that he did not comprehend and could not accommodate. "The democratic way is to allow the people of the community to have a voice in its projected use," a citizen wrote the general. "We urge you to schedule public hearings in which we may participate before you proceed. We cherish the right to participate in the planning of our community." To which the uncomprehending general replied, "It must be obvious that this [planning issue] cannot be settled by a mass meeting."<sup>3</sup> Moses trusted the wisdom of professional expertise over the local concerns of residents, and he put the interests of the city over those of a neighborhood.

Our historical distance and experience of a thriving, resurgent city inevitably cast the Title I work in a new light. When Robert Caro published *The Power Broker* in 1974, the city was failing, the wounds of large-scale clearance were fresh, and urban renewal was still under way. Caro highlighted the sponsor scandals and Moses's Olympian blindness to the misery he caused. What we see fifty years later is rather different: the Moses projects have been absorbed into the fabric of the city; problems that he identified, such as the vulnerable stake of the middle class in the city, remain a challenge; and solutions that he devised remain valid, in particular, the potential of art centers and universities to serve as engines of redevelopment. It is time to reassess Moses's urban renewal program and its impact on the growth of New York City.



E-24. Brochure cover showing 35 slum clearance projects, some under way and others in planning but never built, 1956

This reappraisal is built on two main points. First, the New York Title I work should be understood in relation to Moses's attempt to negotiate between public and private claims on land use. The dominant Moses narrative plays up the myth of his unbounded power; in this story line, the Title I work demonstrates his gross abuse of power. Of course, Moses fostered the idea of his omnipotence to intimidate rivals, even as he battled the myriad

forces—political, bureaucratic, financial, democratic, journalistic—that hedged his power. This essay makes a point of reinserting his Title I work into the context of a national program in order to underscore the constraints Moses faced as well as his aggressive responses, particularly to federal rules that failed, in his view, to acknowledge the unique demands of building in New York City. Moreover, the national policy framework more sharply

defines the basic job Moses faced: managing the difficult and ill-defined partnership between the federal government, the city, and private developers in urban renewal.

"The federal bulldozer" was Martin Anderson's moniker for Title I in his 1964 critique of the program. True, the funding was mostly federal, but in other respects urban renewal was a local program.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Housing Act of 1949 gave responsibility for planning to local authorities, who structured their own urban renewal programs and determined the sites, plans, mixture of uses, developers, and methods of execution and relocation—albeit subject to federal approval. The local authority was also reliant on private investors to buy the land and redevelop it. The blinding effect of Moses—his larger-than-life persona, autocratic methods, astounding productivity, and publicity machine—obscures all but his role as decision maker, yet in truth he functioned as an intermediary between the government and private investors. He had to induce reluctant developers to enter the risky business of urban renewal while restraining counterproductive federal actions that undermined Title I. Moses may have had the personality of a commanding general, but in reality he was a middleman, negotiating between public and private interests in land use.

Throughout his life, Moses was devoted to both the public realm and the private market, two values that were at times in conflict. Indeed, the arc of his career and his evolving approach to public works take on greater meaning when seen in light of this historical American dilemma: how to balance private property rights and the public good. The intractable problem of the slums—a city killer—posed the conflict between public and private control of land in an acute form. Slums were the dark side of the private property regime: the cost of city services exceeded tax revenues, yet slumlords extracted profits from impoverished residents. As Moses saw it, he was on "a middle course between the leftwingers who want government to do everything . . . and the old-fashioned tycoons who still demand that the State give away its basic, legally inalienable, national resources."<sup>5</sup> His work on Title I can be seen as a culminating chapter of a career-long attempt to shape the processes of the market through planning.

The second major claim of this essay can be put simply: Moses had a coherent and intelligent plan. Whereas the standard view holds that he was subservient to real estate interests and proceeded opportunistically without a larger purpose, I argue that Moses had a strategic vision. His aim was to strengthen the center city in an age of decentralization, suburban drift, and urban decay. Toward this end, he pursued a three-part strategy: build housing for the middle class, expand higher education, and promote the city's cultural preeminence. Admittedly, this redevelopment agenda did not benefit all alike. The losers were those displaced from tenement districts: the poor, Puerto Ricans and blacks, and small-business owners, often banished to other slums. The beneficiaries were middle- and upper-class residents; universities, college students, and an economy propelled by brainpower; and cultural institutions, suburbanites, and tourists who saw New York as a cultural magnet.

What stands behind the Title I work is an idea of New York as an irresistible center of gravity. "I am not much of an evangelist," Moses allowed,

"but I share the latent American idealism which lurks under the hairiest chest and the hardest crust."<sup>6</sup> The lurking idealism in that most pragmatic of men stemmed from a driving faith in the city. He said:

For youth of any age, aware, observant, impressionable, the city is endlessly fascinating, and that is why so many families gravitate to population centers, why suburbs continue to be suburbs and satellites, why the vast hinterland may talk against the big town, deprecate and deplore it, minimize its attractions, but somehow can't keep away from it, why our domestic critics carp, groan, crouch, vent their spleen but are unable to tear themselves away . . . why, in spite of analogies with Babylon and Babel, traffic and other congestion, it will never be dispersed, decentralized and abandoned.<sup>7</sup>

It is unfamiliar to hear Moses speak in this lyrical mode, but his remarks convey something that was part and parcel of the expeditor, master builder, and power broker: a commitment to the survival of New York City, which motivated his urban renewal work.

### THE FRAMEWORK OF TITLE I

In retrospect, Title I seems a reckless assault on the urban fabric, both its physical and social order, but the willingness to shred and reshape the city at midcentury grew out of a broad consensus on the slum problem. It had been forged during the previous thirty to forty years and had become as widely accepted as our regnant street-centered model is today. Precisely because a countertheory of urbanism is now supreme and it is difficult to fathom how what we see as misguided was once idealized, we should begin by recouping the convictions that shaped national policy and Moses's actions.

The three elements of Title I—large-scale clearance, replanning, and private redevelopment—emerged from a long-established view of the slum problem. According to that view, improvement of slum conditions required large-scale operations. The slums were a "cancer" endangering the future of the city, which if not excised would spread and destroy it. Rehabilitation of individual buildings or clearance of a single block was not enough to change the character of a neighborhood. Indeed, as a Title I manual explained, "Patching up hopelessly worn-out buildings on a temporary or minimum basis presents the possible result of slum preservation rather than slum clearance."<sup>8</sup> To achieve areawide change, the solution was to aggregate large properties, clear them, and rebuild on a large scale.

A second, related conviction concerned the configuration of the built environment. Urbanists and housing reformers as varied as Frederick Law Olmsted, Jacob Riis, Lewis Mumford, and Le Corbusier agreed on one thing: the traditional pattern of street-oriented, gridiron urbanism created unhealthy living conditions. It produced damaging population density and high land coverage that deprived people of basic human needs: open space, light, and air. Disinclined to attribute these problems to property relations and economic forces, American urbanists put their faith in changing the physical order of the city. Create a tabula rasa, enlarge the dimension of the grid by merging several blocks into one, and replace street walls with free-

standing towers on superblocks. This reform recipe had been promoted by modern architects since the 1920s and ultimately was rendered official doctrine by Title I. A Title I manual summed it up: "Bad housing is only one manifestation of slum conditions and fixing up substandard houses will neither cure nor even seriously alter the factors that make slums—unwise mixture of residential and commercial uses of land, overcrowding and bad planning of the land, lack of recreational facilities, frozen patterns of street layouts and traffic congestion." Comprehensive replanning was needed.

The third premise of Title I was that housing construction and redevelopment were private-market activities. An exception was made in the circumscribed field of low-income housing, which did not interest the private sector, but even in that area there was considerable resistance to government intervention. In order to appease the home-building industry and allies opposed to public housing, the sponsors of the U.S. Housing Act of 1949 choked funding for low-income housing while more generously subsidizing private redevelopment of slums. Acknowledging the anxiety about government intervention in the field of housing, Moses positioned Title I work as a middle path between the free hand of the market, which on its own would not cure the slums (slumlords made money), and a federal takeover of housing. "The size of New York's problem can be measured by the 9,000 acres of recognized slums which cannot be eradicated by ordinary private, speculative building. . . . [But] obviously, private capital must be brought into the picture on a large scale if we hope to escape a tremendously enlarged public housing program with all the implications which go with it."<sup>10</sup> As in other areas of federal policy, the idea of public subsidy was more readily accepted when the beneficiaries were not only the poor.

Although reflecting a consensus view of the slum problem, Title I came without a road map. Moses truthfully stated at the beginning of each slum clearance plan that the field of urban renewal was "new, untried and experimental" and that progress was therefore likely to be "slow and cumbersome." Title I proposed an unfamiliar model of public-private partnership. Such partnerships, now the norm in urban redevelopment, have become sophisticated instruments for shifting public responsibilities to private management, but Title I launched the first wide-scale use of this model of development. At that time, there was virtually no empirical experience to call upon in defining public and private roles, only the knowledge that previous efforts to interest private capital in the slum problem had largely failed.

Moses's approach to Title I was informed by his efforts in the 1940s to involve private capital in slum clearance. In 1942, New York State passed the Redevelopment Companies Law, an important step in expanding the powers of eminent domain and the definition of a public purpose to facilitate slum clearance. Taking advantage of the powers granted by this law, Moses assisted the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in assembling the sites for three slum clearance-redevelopment projects in Manhattan: Stuyvesant Town, Riverton Houses, and Peter Cooper Village. The Redevelopment Companies Law solved the problem of site assemblage but did not provide sufficient incentives to motivate private investors; Met Life stood alone. In an effort to appease Met Life and to attract other private investment, Moses sweetened the terms of the deal. The state law as amended in 1943 retained

rent controls but relieved private sponsors of rehousing obligations and extended tax exemptions. Moreover, Moses acquiesced to housing segregation in order to accommodate prevailing market conditions. The development of Stuyvesant Town embroiled Met Life in damaging controversies over tenant relocation, racial segregation, and rent controls—more reasons for private investors to avoid the messy business of slum clearance.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the Met Life experience, Moses remained committed to private slum clearance, and this bias shaped his attitude to the postwar program of the New York City Housing Authority. In 1946, it advanced a plan to build moderate-income units on undeveloped sites, where land costs were lower than those on developed sites. Although Moses was seen to dictate NYCHA policy and site selection, he initially opposed what was called the "no-cash subsidy program" for two reasons: he regarded the construction of middle-class housing as a private-sector activity, and he favored redevelopment in inner-city slums over construction on undeveloped land.<sup>12</sup> Moses ultimately backed the program, which had Mayor William O'Dwyer's support, but he disapproved of the approach. In drawing the line between public and private action, Moses firmly believed that the private sector could adequately meet the housing needs of the middle class. Put in the context of housing programs in the 1940s, in particular the failure of state laws to induce private investment and the expansion of NYCHA into middle-class housing, Moses's Title I work can be seen as a more aggressive effort to enlist private capital in urban redevelopment.

The essence of Title I was a land subsidy known as the write-down. The cost to the city of assembling and clearing a redevelopment site was greater than the market value of the cleared land. The federal government covered two-thirds of the loss or write-down, with the city absorbing the other third. It was expected that the city would recoup this loss through higher tax revenues as the value of the redeveloped property rose over time. The explicit purpose of the program was to stimulate private investors to build market-rate housing in slum areas. But while the Title I write-down discounted the cost of land, it did not diminish other expenses—construction, debt service, and taxes—that raised housing costs beyond the reach of the middle class. Congress had assumed that lowering the cost of land would be sufficient to decrease the cost of housing, but as Jeanne Lowe put it in her groundbreaking early study of Title I, "Congress was unsophisticated in its housing economics."<sup>13</sup> In an expensive city like New York, the framework of Title I yielded luxury housing. To obtain moderate-priced housing, government would need to provide other subsidies.

## THE MOSES RULES

As king of Title I, Moses had more concentrated power over the physical development of New York than any man had ever had or is ever likely to have again. Slum clearance involved all aspects of urbanism—not just roads and recreation, the domain Moses had commanded in the 1930s; not just housing, which was added to his portfolio in the 1940s; but every aspect of city growth—site selection, streets, circulation, sanitation, community facilities, social use, and design. Renewal projects were crafted by the Mayor's

**SLUM CLEARANCE PLAN  
UNDER TITLE I OF THE  
HOUSING ACT OF 1949**

*washington square  
southeast*

<i>location</i> .....	6
<i>redevelopment plan</i> .....	8
<i>typical development</i> .....	13
<i>relocation plan</i> .....	31
<i>effect on area</i> .....	34
<i>demonstration of blight</i> .....	41
<i>appendices</i> .....	55

AUGUST 1953



SLUM CLEARANCE PLAN

E-25. Pages from *Washington Square Southeast: Slum Clearance Plan under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949*, August 1953

Committee on Slum Clearance, which included leaders of relevant municipal departments: the New York City Housing Authority, City Planning Commission, Board of Estimate, Department of Buildings, Comptroller, and Corporation Counsel. But it was a committee in name only.<sup>14</sup>

Concentrating power in a redevelopment czar was not unusual. Most cities with robust Title I programs had powerful leaders: Louis Danzig in Newark, Edward Logue in New Haven and then Boston, Edmund Bacon in Philadelphia. Conversely, where power was dispersed, redevelopment often lagged, as in Boston until Logue arrived. Redevelopment intersected most parts of city government; to cut through the thicket of bureaucratic obstacles and compel coordinated action required concentrated power and fierce leaders like Moses and Logue.

But while wielding giant power at home, the redevelopment czars had relatively little power with the federal government. In a local context, Moses looked like Goliath; in dealings with the federal government, he sometimes came closer to David. Moses challenged federal rules that he thought obstructed the Title I program in three particular areas: sponsor selection, appraisal standards, and clearance procedures. The nitty-gritty information about operational intricacies presented here explains how Moses made a rough-hewn federal program work in a real estate market as expensive as Manhattan's.

**RULE 1: Prenegotiated Sales.** The federal guidelines neatly divided the public and private parts of the redevelopment process in prescribing the fol-

lowing sequence of events. The city selects a renewal site, buys it, relocates tenants, and demolishes the buildings; then and only then does the city sell the vacant land to a redeveloper who subsequently takes over. Moses upended the sequence so that city and sponsor interacted before the sale; selection of sponsor and site coincided at the outset of the process and preceded the city's acquisition of the site. In the federal model, competitive land auctions established fair market values on which the write-down was based; the higher the sale price, the smaller the write-down. In New York, the land auction was a ceremonial occasion with one party bidding on a prenegotiated sale. In theory, the auctions were open to other bidders, as Moses would inform prospective sponsors, but in practice, the advanced state of planning and customized terms at auction precluded other parties—only one groom comes to the altar.

Moses argued that cities could not afford to purchase and clear a multi-acre site only to discover afterward that no one would buy it. "If you are looking for private capital, you can't in a City like this persuade elected officers, the press and public to condemn and clear slums first and then look around for sponsors. You must snare them first," Moses explained to the Urban Renewal Agency. "Is there anyone dumb enough to think any Committee on Slum Clearance could persuade the governing body of New York (the Board of Estimate), with its shortage of capital funds, to condemn 50 odd acres of congested land in the center of Manhattan, like the Lincoln Square area, put out the tenants and raze the buildings, in the hope that in a year or so spon-

## DEMONSTRATION OF BLIGHT

- I *land use*
- II *condition of existing structures*
- III *age of existing structures*
- IV *land coverage*
- V *existing zoning*
- VI *commercial obsolescence*
- VII *residential obsolescence & tenant data*

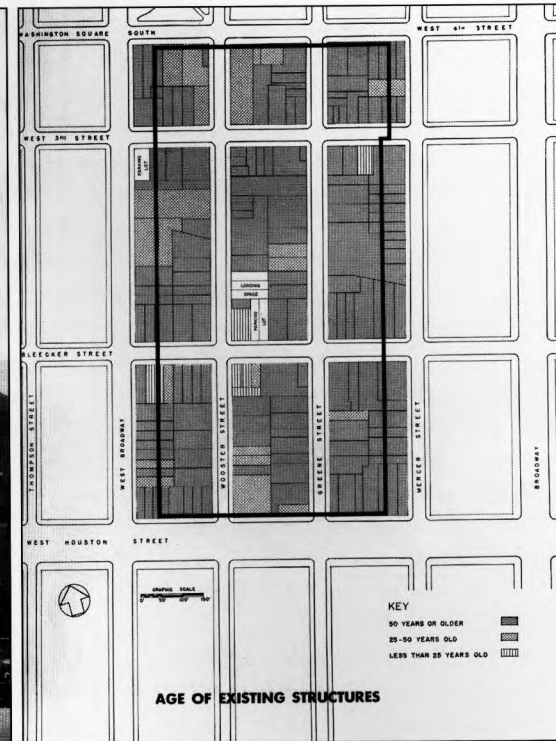
41

### III AGE OF EXISTING STRUCTURES

The existing buildings are old and 83% have been in use at least 50 years. Many are considerably older, some commercial structures date from the 1870's and 1880's and several residential structures evince the early development of this section of the city.

The balance of the buildings, or the relatively recent construction, consists of the New York University School of Commerce, 3 apartment buildings and the garages and other automotive buildings, but these were all in existence by the late 1920's.

Age contributes to obsolescence in these commercial structures because it prevents their adaptability to the requirements of present-day business.



sors of music, education, housing and what not would turn up eager to pay any old price to bail the City out?"<sup>15</sup>

Detroit and Newark learned this lesson the hard way. In Detroit, officials spent several years planning the redevelopment of the Gratiot area before testing the interest of the private sector. There were no bidders at the first auction, in 1952, and only two bidders at a second auction, in 1953. The land was sold and cleared, but when the buyer's renewal scheme proved unacceptable, the city canceled the sale and was stuck for a time with a desolate site.<sup>16</sup> After a similar experience, the Newark Housing Authority, the local redevelopment agency, changed procedures and gave precedence to developers. "We took an awful chance in the North Ward . . . by guessing at what redevelopers wanted," an official reflected. "Then we had to go around peddling vacant land. Now we let redevelopers tell us where they want to build." The new rule: "find a redeveloper first, and then see what interests him."<sup>17</sup> As Harold Kaplan explains in his study of the Newark Title I program, site feasibility forced the city to bypass the hard-core slums. The Title I requirement to attract private capital dictated a quest for the "right blight" with investment potential. In due course, the federal government accepted the procedure of prenegotiated sale, which became standard operating practice.

Site feasibility involved more than site selection; it included the development of a business plan to make the deal economically feasible for the investor. The Slum Clearance Committee was conceived as "a negotiating group of city officials," the corporation counsel explained, with Moses as the

negotiator.<sup>18</sup> Upon matching a sponsor with a site, he shaped a viable deal, determining the land resale price, the number of dwelling units in residential projects, and tax abatements, if any. Thus, by the time a project was introduced to the public, it was a fully packaged deal.

Moses presented the redevelopment projects to the public in stunning brochures designed by Richard C. Guthridge. Their bold graphics, potent images, detailed plans, construction schedules, and financial calculations made untested experiments in urbanism look like irrefutable, routine projects (fig. E-25). The brochures constructed a powerful visual argument and demonstrated Moses's sophisticated use of images, charts, and other visual material to shape perceptions. "I don't want the texts to be long," Moses instructed his staffer. "It's the schedules themselves, the plans and pictures that count with the statement that we mean business, that the procedure will be entirely fair and orderly and that hardships will be, so far as humanly possible, avoided."<sup>19</sup> The brochures also demonstrated Moses's commitment to professional expertise. The materials were prepared by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), whom Moses appointed as coordinating architects for the Title I program, and by two reputable real estate firms, Charles F. Noyes Company and Wood, Dolson Company. Deaf to the citizen's voice, Moses relied on experts in real estate and finance, architecture and engineering to translate the public good into specific renewal plans.

The brochures were organized in three parts: the redevelopment plan, demonstration of slum conditions, and appendices. The redevelopment plan

was cast in terms of square-foot and dollar calculations rather than social vision. It included a site plan, aerial rendering of the redevelopment, apartment layouts, business plan, and relocation schedule. The demonstration of slum conditions made the case that the area in question was, indeed, a slum. Title I did not define a slum or blighted area; it left the determination to the federal administrator.<sup>20</sup> For a definition of slum, one had to refer to the U.S. Housing Act of 1937: "The term 'slum' means any area where dwellings predominate which, by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement or design, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to safety, health or morals."<sup>21</sup> Following these indicators, Moses presented data on the existing structures: their age, condition, heating and sanitary facilities; land coverage; population density; and tenant data, including family size and income.<sup>22</sup> The appendices preemptively addressed controversial matters with supporting evidence: acquisition and resale appraisals to rebut federal questions about the write-down, and letters from city officials about tenant relocation.

The brochures were submitted to the Board of Estimate and City Planning Commission for public hearings and approvals, then to the federal administrator, the Federal Housing and Home Finance Agency, a division of the Urban Renewal Administration, for federal review and approval. "Be sure to mention the fact that the City Planning Commission will ultimately have an opportunity to report on the Title I project," Moses instructed a staffer editing a brochure. "I want this in the booklet so no one will be able to say that they will not, in the end, be consulted before final action is taken."<sup>23</sup> To Moses, public input was accomplished through such gestures. The degree to which he controlled the hearings has been overstated, however. Of the first set of seven plans, all published in January 1951, Moses dropped or revised four, as he learned how to tailor more successful projects.<sup>24</sup> During the public review process, projects were often delayed and modified to accommodate critics; for example, the City Planning Commission rejected the enlargement of West Broadway when it approved the Washington Square Southeast Title I. Still, Moses had an overwhelming rate of success, which was primarily due to the buy-in of the city's political and business leadership in the renewal program rather than to his puppetlike control of the Board of Estimate and City Planning Commission.

**RULE 2: Appraisals Based on Future Use, Not Market Value.** The write-down, the key to Title I, was a soft number. It was the difference between the acquisition price, which could be firmly established, and the resale price, which was based on guesswork. The write-down raised many questions. How, for example, would the city fund its one-third share of the write-down? "Can this be done by some special type of City-wide assessment based upon the theory that the amortization and interest will be met as the new buildings go up and become taxable?" Moses queried Spargo, his numbers man. "We certainly have to have some theory in mind to guide us in determining how far down we can write these values. . . . I know how difficult it is to spell things out of the Federal rules, but it is time we got down to essentials."<sup>25</sup>

Moses developed an unarticulated theory of the write-down: quasi-public institutions serving the common good should not pay market value for land.

Values should be based on the prospective use of the land. The concept of use value, now accepted, was a contentious part of Moses's Title I plans and sparked skirmishes with the federal government.

New York University (NYU) agreed to pay \$5 per square foot for the property on Washington Square South where the university library now stands. The city approved the deal, which covered the three-block area extending to Mercer Street, about a third of the Washington Square Southeast renewal area, but federal officials challenged the price. A private developer had entered a bid of \$10.50 per square foot for the land directly to the south (where Washington Square Village was later built). Land valuations should be the same on adjoining land: this was the position of the federal administrator James Follin, regional director of the Division of Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment of the Housing and Home Finance Agency. Moses and NYU countered that the lower bid properly reflected the public purpose of the university.

The chancellor of NYU, Henry Heald, was well versed in the civic arguments for slum clearance. As president of the Illinois Institute of Technology in the 1940s, he had pioneered in this domain, taking advantage of state laws to acquire and clear a slum area where he launched the construction of IIT's iconic campus, designed by Mies van der Rohe. Upon arriving at NYU in 1952, Heald responded enthusiastically to an overture from Moses. When Moses conveyed his dismay with NYU's previous leader, because of his silent response to vocal critics, Heald offered reassurance: "You need have no fear about my backing out of the program because there is some opposition to it. I learned long ago that no slum clearance project could ever be 100% popular."<sup>26</sup> When the federal government rejected the low NYU appraisal, Heald mounted a vigorous case for use value. He argued that, first, the university should not "be penalized because the area in which it is located is ideal for redevelopment"; second, New York City had a stake in the quality and scope of the service provided by NYU; and third, NYU would raise surrounding property values. "In many projects it is in the best interests of the public to include areas for institutional or public use which by their very nature will produce no direct dollar income. Such inclusion is justified where the institutional or public use serves a broad public purpose and where such a use, by adding an increment of value to the adjacent area, provides greater security for the private investment." Ultimately, Heald acknowledged, "there is no formula by which a fair value price can be arrived at for land for education use." Lacking an exact formula, Moses and NYU agreed on a 50 percent discount.<sup>27</sup>

Eventually, Moses and NYU prevailed, but the federal government mounted a similar challenge to the appraisal of the Lincoln Center site, which was lower than that of the adjacent housing site. Differentiated valuations benefited about a dozen quasi-public institutions, which paid land prices well below market value because they served a public purpose. Although the framework of Title I dictated a real estate orientation, Moses did not narrowly pursue the bottom line. His position was consistent with his career-long view of public works as an engine of economic development: a civic investment in public infrastructure will drive up property values and ultimately make economic sense.

**RULE 3: Sponsor Relocation and Clearance.** Federal guidelines defined tenant relocation and clearance as municipal responsibilities; this phase of work was supposed to precede the land sale. Moses rewrote these rules: he sold redevelopment sites before relocation and clearance and required the sponsor to handle these operations. The federal model assumed that the city would better manage the challenge. Moses believed that if the city ran relocation, political pressures would produce interminable delays. He was correct: after the city took control of relocation in 1960, it slowed to a snail's pace. Efficiency was Moses's critical concern. Conceiving of relocation as a practical and technical challenge, not a social problem, he envisioned relocation and clearance as an incremental process to be flexibly coordinated with the phasing of construction rather than as a stage precedent to construction.<sup>28</sup> Phasing allowed for the gradual displacement of site residents, but it also subjected them to abuses, and Moses's system afforded no protection to tenants awaiting eviction.

As a result of Moses's hands-off approach, relocation procedures varied from project to project, depending upon the sponsor's standards. There were bad sponsors, the most notorious being the team at Manhattantown. In 1954, a Senate investigation threw a national spotlight on this Upper West Side project, located between Central Park West and Amsterdam Avenue from 97th to 100th Street. The sponsors had acquired the renewal site in 1951; three years later, there was no new construction, and only a fraction of the site had been cleared. Meanwhile, the sponsors were making money as old-fashioned slumlords and collecting rent on condemned tenements while letting them rot. Moses subsequently imposed a municipal monitor, but he fiercely defended both private relocation and the right of Title I sponsors to collect rents before demolition.

There were also conscientious sponsors, like Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and Fordham University. They hired a reputable relocation firm, Braislin, Porter & Wheelock, which staffed an on-site relocation office and maintenance department. Communicating with owners and tenants in Spanish as well as English, the firm brought buildings into code compliance, maintained apartments during the waiting period, and actively assisted in the search for new housing. They paid brokers for listings and landlords for painting replacement apartments. The on-site office housed representatives of the New York City Housing Authority, who assisted in the search for public housing, and the New York City Bureau of Real Estate, the municipal body that monitored relocation.

Herbert Greenwald, a national Title I developer, also tried to handle relocation in a responsible manner (fig. E-26). He had come to the rescue in Detroit, where he bought the Gratiot area, and rescued the Pratt Institute project from a defaulting sponsor. Greenwald updated Moses on his progress in 1957:

Our relocation experience leads us to believe that the method of the Slum Clearance Commission, which has come in for so much criticism of late is overly much maligned. A sponsor willing and able to carry out his contract can do a good relocation job and possibly even a better job than City authorities. If the atmosphere of suspicion and bickering were not in the background, we might have proceeded more slowly in our relocation program. Despite our speed, no one suffered grievous injury. In the end,



E-26. Herbert Greenwald, May 27, 1957. Photograph by Hedrich-Blessing. Courtesy Chicago History Museum, neg. HB20465

bidders might be more eager for a project if an atmosphere of confidence were restored and a sponsor allowed to work in a more orderly fashion.<sup>29</sup>

Greenwald indicated another factor complicating relocation. After Title I's slow start in the early 1950s, all parties—the federal government, Moses, the press, and the public—demanded results. The pressure was to clear and build quickly, but responsible relocation attempting to address individual needs moved at a slower pace.

Even at its best, relocation was hobbled by structural forces with brutal consequences: underfunding of relocation and a severe shortage of affordable housing. Title I provided meager support for relocation expenses. Commercial property owners and tenants received no compensation under the 1949 legislation. (The Housing Act of 1956 permitted relocation payments up to \$2,000 to businesses.) Residential property owners received \$500; Lincoln Center and Fordham added bonuses for self-relocators (\$275 to \$500, depending on the apartment size); by comparison, NYCHA grants were \$100. Most important, there was inadequate replacement housing: a 1960 study put the shortage at 430,000 units.<sup>30</sup> The demand for low-income units was aggravated by the postwar influx of Puerto Ricans and southern blacks, by the cumulative effects of clearance necessitated by public housing and arterial highways as well as Title I, and by the incommensurate growth of the public housing program.<sup>31</sup> Tenants displaced by Title I clear-



ance could not afford the on-site replacement housing, which was intended for higher income residents. Nor could they typically afford to remain in the gentrified neighborhood. In theory, the best option was public housing, but it was in short supply, with waiting lists in the tens of thousands. In a relocation analysis of the first five hundred evicted families, Lincoln Center documented trends that generally characterized the Title I diaspora in New York City: 70 percent moved outside the neighborhood (broadly defined in this case as the Upper West Side); the average rent of the displaced rose from \$51.82 to \$65.26; and only 11.4 percent moved into public housing.<sup>32</sup>

### PAIRING UP WITH PUBLIC HOUSING

One response to the demand for low-income housing was to use a Title I site for that purpose. Moses pursued this strategy in the Washington Square South plan, which dedicated seven of forty acres to a New York City Housing Authority project, named Houston Houses on the plan (fig. E-27). As Joel Schwartz established, the lending community opposed this integrated approach.<sup>33</sup> So did the federal administrator who reminded Moses that Title I was intended for redevelopment by private enterprise: "It would not appear that the use of sites cleared under the Title I program exclusively or to a predominant degree for redevelopment in public housing would be consistent with this general policy."<sup>34</sup> Moses never again included public housing in a Title I project. He did not, however, abandon the idea of mixing incomes.

Morningside Gardens (the Morningside-Manhattanville Title I) introduced a new approach, which coordinated the Title I project with a neighboring public housing project. The expectation was that tenants displaced from the Title I site could be locally rehoused in the NYCHA project. In his report "Essential Postwar Improvements" of April 1946, Moses called for the coordinated construction of public and moderate-income housing:

There is, beyond question by the toughest individualist, a large part of our population which will have no decent lodgings, much less homes, unless government provides them on a frankly uneconomical basis, if dollars are the only measurement. . . . Those helped by the government should not be segregated, nor should they monopolize whole neighborhoods. This is why redevelopment, limited dividend and speculative building, with all the services that go with them, should go on step by step and block by block with public housing for the lowest income groups. Postponing one or another is a dangerous business. They must be timed to go together.<sup>35</sup>

It would seem that Moses had contradicted this position in the 1940s when, as the city construction coordinator, he was associated with a housing program that rebuilt much of the Lower East Side as public housing. Nevertheless, in the 1950s, when he controlled site selection for Title I, he located twelve of his seventeen executed projects beside public housing. Only in two cases, Morningside and Manhattantown, were the Title I apartments built in tandem with new NYCHA projects, the General Grant Houses and Frederick Douglass Houses respectively (fig. E-28). In the other instances, Moses chose Title I sites adjacent to preexisting NYCHA projects (fig. E-29).<sup>36</sup>

Coordination proved difficult: NYCHA and Title I were pulled in different directions by divergent constituencies, locational strategies, and funding

constraints. Moses was obliged to target more expensive, developed land for clearance, whereas the federal public housing program (Title III of the U.S. Housing Act of 1949) put limits on land costs that obstructed this approach.<sup>37</sup> The pairing of Title I and NYCHA projects offered various benefits, including the formation of mixed-income neighborhoods, but the coordinated projects did not come close to solving the relocation problem, as the numbers revealed: only 18 percent of the tenants displaced by the two Morningside slum clearance projects (the Title I cooperative, Morningside Gardens, and the NYCHA project, General Grant Houses) moved into public housing elsewhere in the city.<sup>38</sup> Moses did not reckon with the hard truth: public housing was no haven for Title I evictees.

Moses blamed NYCHA's tough eligibility standards, which ruled out single-parent families, noncitizens, and the unemployed. In 1959, he again suggested a coordinated Title I-public housing program with phased construction to deal with relocation. NYCHA would first build a low-income project on the site of the Polo Grounds (involving no evictions) to provide housing for those displaced from two proposed clearance sites in Harlem. William Reid, the chairman of the NYCHA, would not prioritize Title I evictees and reminded Moses that only 12 percent of tenants of Title I sites were relocated to NYCHA projects, attributing the low figure to the bonuses and finder's fees offered by Title I sponsors, which ostensibly made alternative housing more attractive. Moses's reply to Reid gives some sense of the intragovernment battles he fought and, as in this case, lost: "We had hoped for a better position and assurance which would make most of the tenants eligible. . . . It would be helpful if your staff, in reviewing applications for relocation to public housing projects, would be more liberal and flexible in qualifying our site occupants."<sup>39</sup>

Slum clearance affected black New Yorkers more profoundly than others. Some Title I projects were located in integrated neighborhoods, such as Manhattantown, and the result of redevelopment was to resegment those areas, with the expensive new housing generally pricing out minority residents. The discrimination in the housing market and the limited options available to blacks landed them in other slums, but Moses did not recognize this problem. "What type of housing is referred to by the term new slum?" Moses was asked in a questionnaire sent to him in 1957 by Whitney North Seymour, the president of the Municipal Art Society. Your letter "makes no sense to me," Moses answered. "I don't know who invented the term 'new slums' or what it means, and don't propose to be hornswoggled into any such silly controversy. When by the way, did the members of your Society stop beating their wives?"<sup>40</sup> The problem of the new slums and the racialized impact of clearance did not deter Moses. On the contrary, New York's thousands of slum acres reinforced his conviction of the need to bulldoze and build.

Moses compartmentalized the problems that he attacked and accepted what Scott Greer felicitously called the "cage of constraints" surrounding Title I policy.<sup>41</sup> That cage allowed Moses to ignore the secondary effects of Title I clearance: a housing crisis, resegregation and discrimination, and shrinking central-city housing options. He failed to acknowledge that slum clearance begat slums. His ability to see the city as an organic unity and the wide scope of his operations put Moses in the unique position to advance

integrated solutions. The tragedy is that instead he declared limited objectives to rationalize the social damage he caused.

### THE TITLE I DEVELOPERS AND FEDERAL ROADBLOCKS

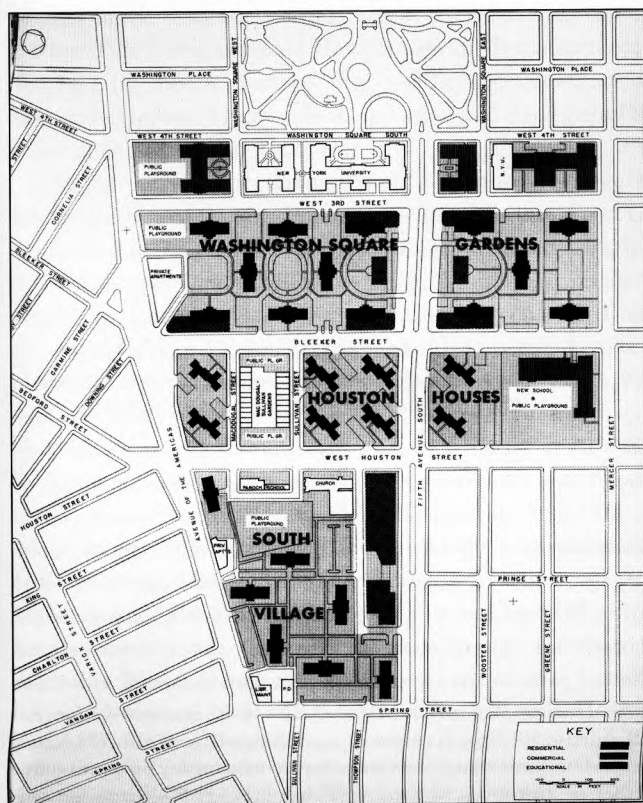
As a group, the New York Title I developers were suspect, tainted by their secretive selection. There was no transparent bidding process or established procedure to submit redevelopment proposals. Moses not only decided what the city needed and where; he also anointed the Title I sponsors with limited vetting. Construction delays and cases of malfeasance compounded the problem. Manhattantown became emblematic, shaping the view of sponsors as slumlords, political cronies, and cheats who profited from a state-sponsored land rush. Putting the program in historical perspective, William Zeckendorf described the write-down as “a variant of the land subsidies through which our early railroads were built.”<sup>42</sup> But in the early years of Title I, before regulations were loosened, there was no land rush. Absorbed by colorful sponsor scandals, the press missed an important and unexpected story: at the outset, Title I failed to attract private capital.<sup>43</sup> Moses certainly chose some bad sponsors, but the main problem was the risky business of slum clearance, not the sponsor selection process.

Moses was disheartened to find that relatively few developers were interested in slum real estate. In January 1950, he acknowledged that “for vari-

ous reasons those representing large reservoirs of private capital in banks, insurance companies, real estate and building enterprises have been hesitant to take a lively interest in slum clearance.” His report ends with an entreaty to investors: the “Committee recommends at this time that further steps be taken to invite a larger interest in this slum clearance and redevelopment program. We hope that additional private investment groups will come forward.”<sup>44</sup> Moses had encountered such resistance in the 1940s, and now discovered that the write-down did not sufficiently change the financial equation for investors.

Several discouraging factors were at work. First, slums were a real estate profit center. A 1957 study by the Council for Better Housing acknowledged that “favorable yields on the existing properties provide little incentive for redevelopment. It is more profitable to keep structures in their present conditions at a 67 percent return than to demolish them to erect new structures earning a smaller return.”<sup>45</sup>

Second, the pioneer redevelopers could not obtain financing. Banks would not fund the risky business of urban renewal without federal mortgage insurance, and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) adopted the same risk-averse attitude as banks. As the administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency explained, the FHA was not “permitted to insure houses in slum areas because a slum was regarded as beyond redemption.”<sup>46</sup> Thirty lending institutions reportedly refused to finance the NYU-Bellevue project.



E-27. Composite site plan of Washington Square South and South Village Title I redevelopments, January 1951. Houston Houses was planned as a public housing project.

E-28. Brochure cover showing aerial view of Morningside Gardens (bottom) and General Grant Houses, public housing project (top), 1957. Courtesy MTA Bridges and Tunnels Special Archive



E-29. Map of Manhattan, showing Title I projects executed by Robert Moses, with adjacent low-income housing of the New York City Housing Authority. Map by James Conlon

The FHA had been established to support housing construction but, following banker's logic, undermined the goals of urban renewal. Federal policy was at odds with itself. As Zeckendorf noted, "The FHA, while freely funneling funds to the suburbs, treated proposals to build in slum areas with about as much enthusiasm as your maiden aunt getting an invitation to a strip tease show."<sup>47</sup>

Moses complained incessantly to his federal contacts and lobbied Senator Robert A. Taft to amend the 1949 law, recommending mortgages of up to 90 percent of construction costs, without limitation on the basis

of room or apartment count.<sup>48</sup> Moses got the first part of the request, the 90 percent mortgage, when Congress amended the housing law in 1954 and authorized the FHA to insure urban renewal projects, based on the value of the completed redevelopment. The first government-insured mortgage for a Title I project anywhere in the nation was issued to Delano Village (the North Harlem Title I) in 1955.<sup>49</sup> The primary reason for the Title I standstill during its first five years was the policy of the FHA, not wayward sponsors. Once mortgage insurance was available, projects came to life.

But FHA insurance came with restrictions disadvantageous to city builders. The FHA set a maximum base cost of \$8,400 per room; an additional \$1,000 per room was allowed in areas of high construction costs, such as New York City, but only in apartments of four or more rooms. In order for city developers to qualify for FHA mortgages, they were compelled to reduce costs and build cut-rate housing. Moreover, a room had to meet an idiosyncratic FHA definition—balconies but not bathrooms were defined as rooms—that created an incentive to build balconies and penalized bathrooms. I. M. Pei, who was involved in several Title I projects, predicted that as a result apartments in Alaska would begin sprouting balconies; certainly they sprouted all over New York. At Kips Bay Plaza, Pei persuaded the FHA to count the alcovelike projection of the structural wall as balcony space, although it was inaccessible, and in this way his design complied with FHA price ceilings.<sup>50</sup>

The FHA was only one part of the problem. Title I entangled developers in a web of bureaucratic rules, red tape, and government oversight that caused expensive delays and timing problems. Standard developments did not impose these restrictions. And in New York, sponsors faced the additional burden of managing relocation. Given the financial risks, public scrutiny, and unproven market appeal of redeveloped slums, the early sponsors were often less motivated by business sense—there were safer investments elsewhere—than by commitment to an urban future. The pioneering sponsors included Herbert Greenwald, who worked with Mies van der Rohe; Abraham Kazan and Shirley Boden, leaders of the union-sponsored cooperative housing movement; Robert S. Olnick, who at the start of his career sponsored the Harlem Title I and provided Harlem with its first apartment buildings with doormen, at Lenox Terrace (fig. E-30); and, most important, William Zeckendorf, whose large-scale imagination and dazzling ambition made him a fine match for Moses (fig. E-31).

Having previously collaborated on the United Nations, Zeckendorf and Moses partnered again in connection with the Fort Greene Title I, announced in December 1952. This project provided Long Island University (LIU) with seven and a half acres to build a proper campus surrounding its outpost in a converted theater on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, where it served ex-G.I.s and a local student population.<sup>51</sup> Zeckendorf was president of the university's board of trustees and donated the funds (\$500,000) for the land purchase. The site met several of Moses's criteria: it was beside a public housing project (Fort Greene Houses), a park (Fort Greene Park), and Brooklyn Hospital, and could buttress an already significant investment in public resources. Still, Zeckendorf's association with LIU, a fledgling university founded in 1926, had to have been a major consideration in the selection of this site for Title I funding.

Zeckendorf's role in this early project was limited to financial support; his first venture as a Title I developer came a year later, in 1953, in the Southwest Washington project, which was followed by intensive Title I work between 1956 and 1958. As Zeckendorf explained in his spellbinding autobiography, his firm Webb & Knapp studied possibilities in about thirty cities and submitted proposals in half that number to reap a harvest of eight projects nationwide.<sup>52</sup> He entered New York in a big way in 1957, as sponsor of

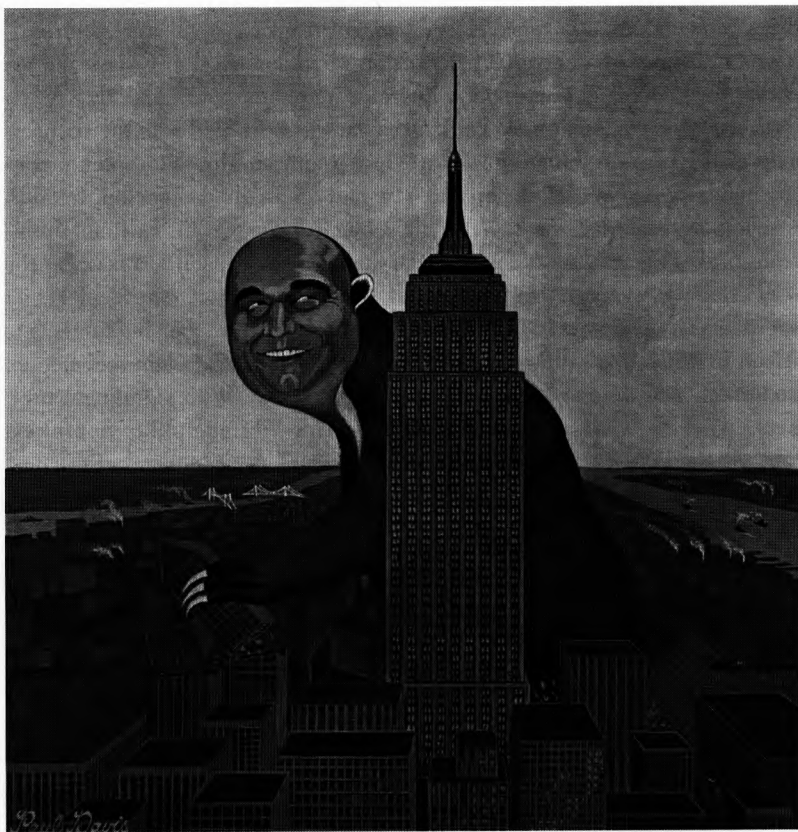
three projects. By this time, Moses had given up on small-time, inexperienced developers and favored veterans on whom he could rely to get the job done. Zeckendorf rescued the notorious Manhattantown and the NYU-Bellevue projects, paying the back taxes; he was rewarded with the sponsorship of the Lincoln Square housing, which required Moses to break a contract with the novice developer whom he had originally designated. In addition to deep experience with Title I, Zeckendorf brought his brilliant architect, I. M. Pei, who set a high design standard at Kips Bay Plaza, as the NYU-Bellevue venture was renamed. Alas, Zeckendorf overreached. To avoid bankruptcy, he sold his three New York City Title I housing projects to Alcoa in 1962 (bankruptcy happened anyway in 1965), which became an important institutional participant in urban renewal. With significant projects in Hyde Park, Chicago; Society Hill, Philadelphia; Southwest Washington; and New York City, among other places, Zeckendorf's Title I work was unparalleled and remains an untold chapter in the history of post-war American urbanism.

#### THE STRATEGY: HOW TO SAVE THE CITY

Moses proudly assumed an antivisionary stance: "I recommend you file the 'Master Plan of Land Use' and forget it." Contemptuous of "long-haired planners" who promoted wholesale change yet had no idea how to get things done, he saw himself as an administrator "driving persistently at limited objectives and reaching them. . . . There it is," Moses proclaimed in mocking self-debasement, "you can't expect anything better from moles who are blind, crawl short distances under the earth, and have only the most limited objectives."<sup>53</sup> In principle, he opposed master planning, but in practice he made and executed plans. The question is, what if any idea of the city informed those plans?



E-30. Doormen at the Americana, Lenox Terrace, 10 West 135th Street, ca. 1958. Photograph by Cecil Layne



E-31. Caricature of William Zeckendorf, by Paul Davis, 1961. The original caption reads: "The Sand Hog, or Badger (*Zeckendorfus barbarus*): A burrowing animal, fully webbed and napped except for the sharp claws used in operating its famous game called 'urban renewal.' In this process the resourceful little creature, equipped with such clever devices as ground leases, accelerated depreciation allowances, mortgage pyramids, and mergers—yet rarely a penny of its own money—can level a city faster than you can say 'Robert Moses.' Reproduces by subdividing. Approach of its bulldozing claws into hitherto unharmed areas marked by sudden appearance of white X's on windows and shutting off of heat unless taken to court, where it knows everyone anyway. Makes grunting noise that sounds like 'Title One! Title One!' abhors high ceilings, thick walls, and decorative architecture. Naturalists believe it instinctively builds drab buildings the way the beaver builds leaky dams."

The prevailing view of Moses is that he had no overarching urban public purpose. Caro portrays an empty soul crazed by power who, by the 1950s, had lost the public mission of his early years. Stressing Moses's "real estate project approach to community building," Jeanne Lowe sees Moses as servile to the market imperatives of Title I, a point echoed by Joel Schwartz. "Moses actually had in mind purposeful reclamations for mixed-uses, but under the studied indifference of investors adopted the opportunist approach. The resulting Title I's," Schwartz concluded, "had no central purpose other than to improve isolated areas, fill the city's write-down quotas, and preserve the prerogatives of the construction coordinator."<sup>54</sup> Granted, Moses was opportunistic; it does not follow that he lacked a guiding vision.

Indeed, a survey of his urban renewal projects indicates that his opportunism served well-defined goals.

Moses shaped Title I to reinforce the role of the central city and to keep New York the thriving center of a spreading metropolitan region and a magnet for suburbanites, the U.S., and the world. He pursued three objectives. Objective one was to recapture the middle class, which had chosen the suburb over the city, by building modern, affordable housing. Objective two was to establish New York as a center of higher education by making land available for university expansion. Objective three was to elevate the national and international stature of New York with magnetic world-class institutions: Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the Coliseum, and the United Nations. (The United Nations did not involve Title I clearance and thus is not discussed here, but it was part of this strategic vision.) Moses concentrated the Title I program in Manhattan: of the seventeen executed projects, thirteen were in Manhattan, two in Brooklyn, two in Queens. Manhattan represented the ideal ground for Title I: slums were extensive, land values inflated, and real estate interest high. But unlike other cities, which used Title I to lure banks and department stores and office buildings back into ailing downtowns, New York under Moses avoided commercial land uses. The only exception was the Coliseum, New York's first purpose-built convention center, which had a showcase role and fit with Moses's desire to put New York on display.

Economic critiques of urban renewal serve to highlight the opposing values that motivated Moses. In his penetrating study of 1965, Scott Greer concluded that the total costs of renewal were not reflected in the increased advantages of enterprises' returning to the central business district.<sup>55</sup> According to his economic reasoning, he saw no inherent benefit in a strong center city, whereas Moses had an a priori commitment to the city. Nationwide, Greer noted, few careful demand studies were made before urban renewal project sites were cleared. By the 1960s, Chester Rapkin and other urban sociologists were studying the economic opportunities in the region and the demand for inner-city, middle-income housing, but Moses did not collect such data. He molded renewal projects more on faith in the city than on empirical proof that middle-class families would come back from the suburbs and that universities and the arts were key to an urban future.

Moses warned that New York would become a polarized city of rich and poor unless it took aggressive steps to provide for the middle class. His first objective was to build affordable housing for teachers, nurses, garment workers, municipal employees—the broad middle class. New York City had a strong tradition of union-sponsored cooperative housing going back to 1926. Although Moses had no sympathy for the movement's ideology, his pragmatism led him into a productive alliance with the cooperators; through Title I, he launched the biggest expansion of union-backed cooperatives in the city's history: eight Title I housing cooperatives in all.

Moses found a partner in Abraham Kazan, a union leader focused on housing issues. In 1951, Kazan established the United Housing Foundation (UHF) to capitalize on Title I, and under his leadership the UHF sponsored three Title I cooperative projects: the East River Houses at Corlears Hook; Seward Park Houses, also on the Lower East Side; and Penn Station South.

The UHF was also slated to sponsor the Cooper Square Title I, which was canceled after Moses's reign ended. (It went on to sponsor the Jamaica Race Track development and Co-op City.) In each case, the UHF worked with a sponsoring labor union. Louis Pink, another UHF leader, sponsored Kingsview in Brooklyn, part of the Fort Greene Title I; and Shirley F. Boden, who got his start with Kazan, was involved with three Title I cooperatives. Boden structured the housing cooperative at Morningside Gardens, which was sponsored by a consortium of Morningside academic and religious institutions. He then established the Middle Income Housing Corporation, which sponsored Chatham Green and Chatham Towers (Park Row and Park Row Extension Title I) with the backing of city and state credit unions. Located near the heart of city government, these apartment buildings were intended to provide municipal workers with apartments they could afford to own. The last of the Title I cooperatives, Princess Gardens, a single building in the Lincoln Square development, rejected the ideology of cooperativism but retained the financial structure as a way of reducing housing costs.

The disappointing truth about Title I was that it naturally resulted in luxury housing unless market forces were restrained, or other subsidies provided, or both, as with the cooperatives. The cooperatives contained costs by three means: equity down payments at the start of the project allowed advantageous long-term mortgages and reduced financing costs; speculative profits were eliminated; and, thanks to Moses's advocacy, tax abatements were provided. After an initial down payment of roughly \$700 per room, owners paid modest monthly charges of about \$20 per room.<sup>56</sup> The tax abatements alone saved purchasers a meaningful amount: \$3 to \$4 per room per month, or \$149 to \$192 a year on a four-room apartment.<sup>57</sup> The city comptroller Lawrence Gerosa opposed the tax abatements, arguing that they undercut the Title I goal of growing the city's tax revenues. The comptroller's recommendations, Moses responded, "would ultimately make not only Manhattan but all of New York City a home for the very rich and the very poor, with no place for the real 'forgotten man' with middle income who can support himself if rents are reasonable."<sup>58</sup>

The cooperatives gave Moses a mechanism to control real estate market forces while populating the city with middle-class home owners. At the opening of the Seward Park Houses in October 1958, he paid tribute to the cooperators, "substantial and reliable people who have a real stake in the City . . . and ask only that City and Federal agencies help them get started. They don't want the City to be their landlord; they want to pay their way." With cooperatives, we shall "rebuild the City for those who want to stay and for those who, in increasing numbers, want to come back to town from the suburbs."<sup>59</sup>

The second objective of Moses's Title I program was to support higher education. He directed projects to benefit private universities—New York University and NYU Medical Center, Long Island University, Pratt Institute, Fordham University, and the Juilliard School—as well as the academic institutions on Morningside Heights. Yeshiva University and the Cooper Union were slated to participate in two canceled projects, Riverside-Amsterdam and Cooper Square respectively. The transfer of land to universities was a response to the postwar explosion of college enrollments. With the public

sector funding the expansion of the city colleges and the establishment of the state university system in 1948, Moses used Title I to support private universities, or what he preferred to call quasi-public institutions because they served the public interest.

Title I provided private universities with tools that they otherwise would not possess: eminent domain, land assemblage, and discounted land. Through Title I, NYU was able to shift its center of operations from the Bronx to Washington Square and complete its takeover of the south side of the square. As the development evolved and the sponsor of the private housing opted out, NYU acquired the entire renewal site, stretching from Washington Square to Houston Street. Fordham University was an invisible presence in Manhattan, with dispersed classrooms complementing the main Bronx campus. Moses provided a two-block site at Lincoln Square for a full-fledged campus. The Lincoln Square Title I also accommodated a new building for the Juilliard School, which expanded its curriculum and profile in a monumental new structure. (A high school of performing arts was added to the project after Moses's retirement.) Moses did not originate the idea of using slum clearance on behalf of universities; Henry Heald had previously done this in Chicago. But recognizing a good idea, Moses translated it into a large-scale building program and urban mission.

The third objective was to enhance the stature of the city with new institutions that would draw national and international attention. Both the Coliseum and Lincoln Center were publicized as proof of American urban progress; the former was a magnet for trade, the latter a beacon of cultural achievement. Lincoln Center, probably the most influential Title I project in the nation, demonstrates Moses's originality in execution, not in conception. When Fiorello La Guardia first conceived of a performing arts center, in 1938, he asked Moses to study the idea. Moses dismissed it, unable to imagine a project involving "so much expense, so much cooperation among quasi public and private interests and such complexities in the establishment of the operating corporation." He correctly gauged the future challenges that Lincoln Center would face, but he would reverse the position that he staked out in 1938.<sup>60</sup> Moses came to embrace La Guardia's vision as he witnessed the inability of the Metropolitan Opera and the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra to cope with the real estate challenges of New York City and recognized cultural institutions as a source of urban prestige and international renown.

Determined to assist the Metropolitan Opera in its thirty-year quest for a new home, Moses offered the organization two Title I sites, Columbus Circle and Washington Square, before the parties agreed on Lincoln Square. The forty-five-acre project, the city's largest Title I project, included land for Fordham, housing, and a commercial theater complex to be developed by Roger Stevens. When the federal government balked at the large write-down, Moses dropped the commercial complex, the part with the highest tax ratables. John D. Rockefeller III and the exploratory committee that he chaired were ultimately responsible for the high quality of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, which expanded from the opera and symphony to embrace five additional cultural entities plus a park with band shell, but Moses played an essential role in its realization.

Moses grasped the appetite for culture in the postwar period, a trend diagnosed by Alvin Toffler in his book *The Culture Consumers*, which appeared in 1964. The public marketing of Lincoln Center was part of its mission, with outreach to suburban audiences and school programs built in from the start. Historically, the opera and symphony were hermetic, and their elite donor circles provided limited financial support; by contrast, Lincoln Center launched a broad-based capital campaign, appealing to a wide public. Lincoln Center illustrated what Toffler described as an organizational revolution in the culture industry, a revolution fundamentally connected to the urban strategy that Moses devised, based on centralization, monumental architecture, and urban prominence.

### SUPERBLOCK SOLUTIONS

"I am inclined to think of it in terms of people rather than buildings," the *New York Times* editor Lester Markel wrote in explaining why he objected to Moses's approach to slum clearance. For Moses, the slums were like war-torn Dresden—dead structures to be demolished before new life could flourish. They were a physical, not a social, problem, to be cured by replanning and new building. "The big unresolved question seems to me to be this," Markel continued. "What do you do with the inhabitants of a slum area when you clear up that area for purposes other than low-income housing?"<sup>61</sup> These social matters fell outside Moses's shuttered view of the slum problem, but planning did not; planning was at the heart of the problem as he understood it. Replot the streets, replace the site plan, build anew, and the reformatted, upgraded city would generate a better life.

Yet, despite this environmental premise, Moses did not attach importance to urban and architectural design in his planning process. He determined land use and produced preliminary site plans, then turned the project over to the sponsor without imposing design standards. Moses conceived of design decisions as a matter of private choice, outside the sphere of government control.

The categorization of design as a private preference is unsurprising. Although buildings and site plans establish the physical framework of urban life and have long-lasting effects, design was, and still is, rarely considered a domain of public policy. Even so, given Moses's conception of urban renewal as a building program, his lack of interest in design was a serious blind spot. For all his overreaching power, when it came to physical form and urban design, Moses did not go far enough. He relinquished control of these fundamental aspects of renewal to the sponsor.

The planning process began with the land-use plan, which fixed the allocation and distribution of uses on a renewal site and wholly reflected Moses's decision making. Mixing tax-exempt and full tax-paying uses, he aimed for a net tax gain without adhering to a formula in balancing these uses. Although nonresidential uses came under attack on the grounds that slum clearance money should be used only for housing, the Housing Act of 1949 imposed no land-use restrictions if the site had been a residential slum.<sup>62</sup>

Next came the site plan, which involved a collaboration between the sponsor's architect and SOM, representing Moses. Although various

architects were involved in this work, site plans followed the same pattern. High-rise apartment buildings floated on a superblock, the towers set back from the street but usually aligned with the city grid. To bring apartment living into the automotive age, sites contained several surface parking lots and sometimes an underground garage.<sup>63</sup> To compensate for the closure of streets within the superblock, the bounding cross streets were enlarged to accommodate the displaced traffic. These extra-wide streets are, indeed, good for cars but further separate the projects from the surrounding fabric. Moses and his planners placed a premium on open space and reduced land coverage: renewal dramatically decreased land coverage from 80 to 90 percent in the slums to 30 percent in the redevelopments (fig. E-32). But despite its amplitude, the open space was fragmented by scattered buildings and parking lots, and landscaping was an afterthought. The promise of reduced land coverage all too often resulted in surface parking.

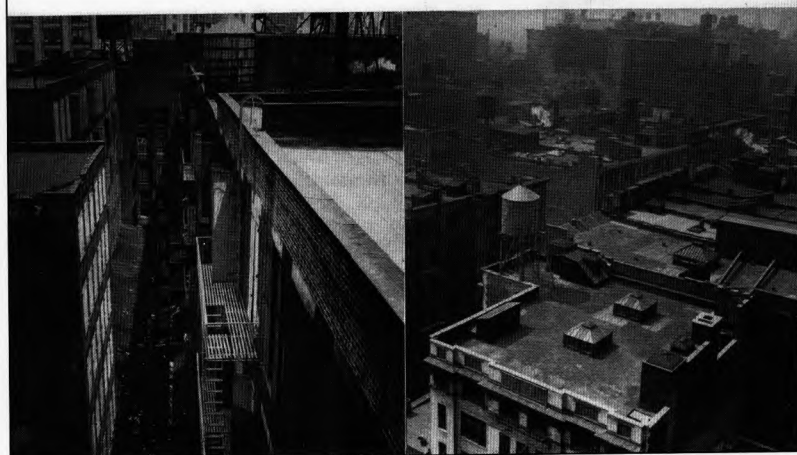
A banal but significant feature of the housing projects was the one-story commercial strip fronting on the avenue. The strips maintained the traditional building line and the commercial vernacular of the street while providing modern commercial space. Gone were the mom-and-pop shops of tenement buildings; the new commercial space could be flexibly sized to accommodate the larger retail operations demanded by national chains and postwar consumer trends. One of Harlem's first large supermarkets, if not the first, opened in the retail space at Lenox Terrace. Unlike the NYCHA projects, which excluded shops, the commercial-residential mix in Title I projects was an asset.<sup>64</sup>

The site plans often included new public facilities—a playground or school—or incorporated existing community facilities. Lenox Terrace is the best example of a flexible site plan; it wrapped the new structures around a preexisting play center (the Children's Aid Society and its playground), and integrated a church (formerly a theater), public bath, and power substation in the superblock (fig. E-33). The success of this approach reinforced Moses's effort to site Title I projects near existing community structures in order to shore up the public infrastructure.

Site planning was managed by SOM, a firm Moses had first hired in 1939, when it was newly formed, to work on the World's Fair and had used ever since. As Nathaniel Owings explained, the Moses connection helped the firm grow and "gave SOM a niche in the tight hierarchy which controlled architectural, planning, engineering and construction jobs in New York City."<sup>65</sup> By 1949, when Moses hired SOM to coordinate planning for the Slum Clearance Committee, there was no more distinguished corporate firm in the city. The urban renewal point men at SOM were Robert Cutler, one of the founding partners in the New York office; Kenneth Young; and Major General George J. Nold, an engineer with exceptional experience in managing large-scale projects. As director of the Joint Construction Agency, European Command, Nold headed the building program for all American fighting forces in Europe from 1953 to 1955, whereupon he joined SOM.<sup>66</sup> That Moses enlisted the military's top engineer to oversee the reconstruction of New York indicates his approach to renewal as a technical, engineering, and management problem.

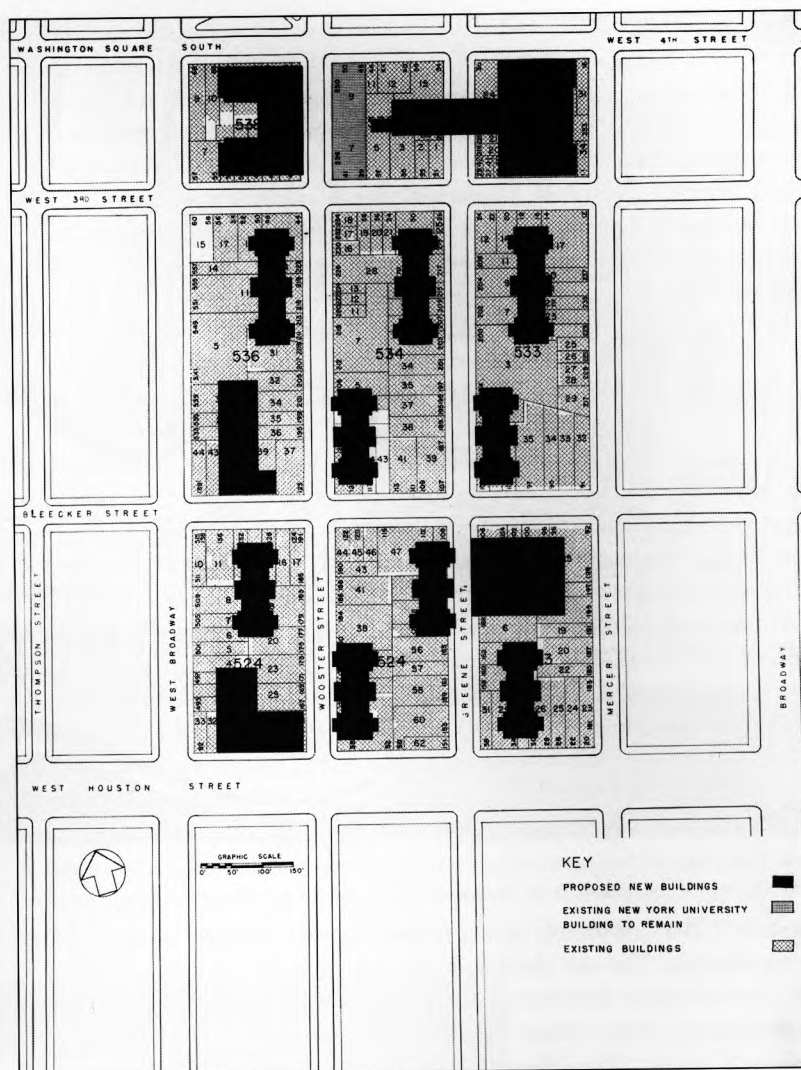
## IV LAND COVERAGE

The only land in the redevelopment site which is not solidly built up is in streets, sidewalks, two small parking lots and one off-street truck-loading space. The adjacent map indicates that the coverage within lot lines is virtually 100%. So little ground area is devoted to small, inadequate and isolated airshafts and light courts as to be negligible. In this respect no distinction can be made between commercial or residential properties.



E-32. Existing buildings and proposed new buildings showing reduction in land coverage, 1953

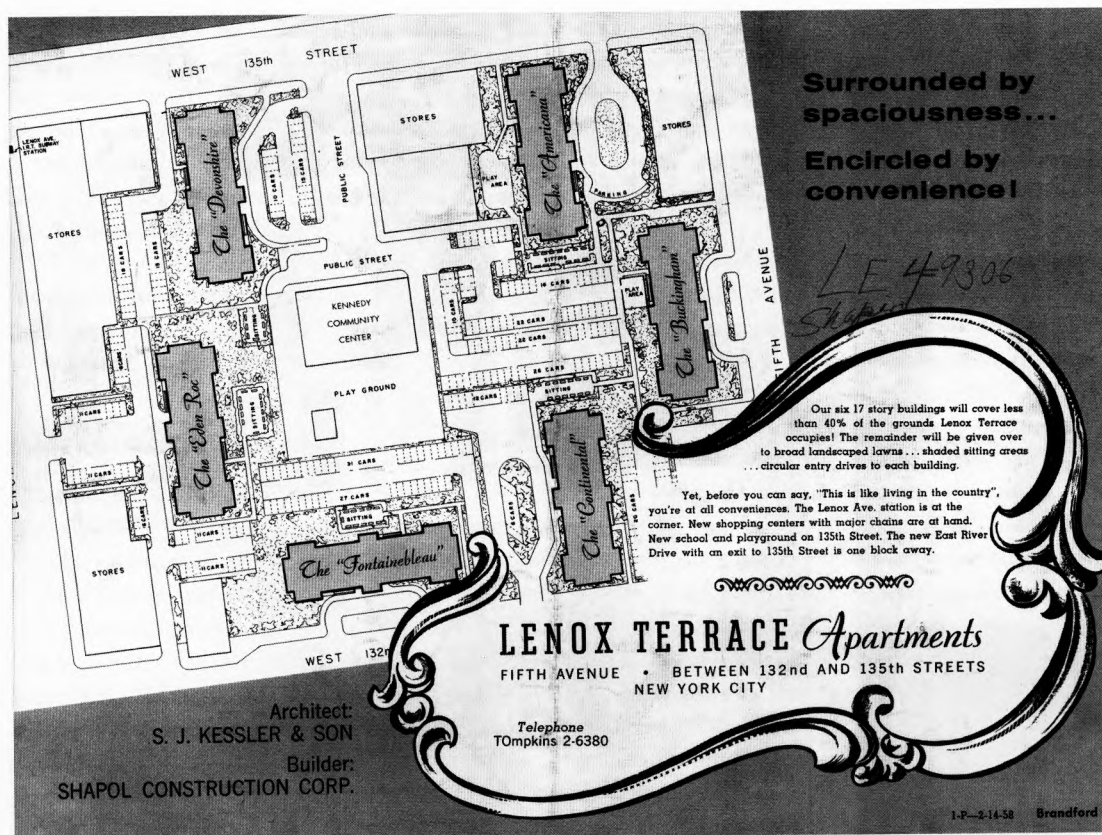
SOM did more than act as project manager; the firm worked with the sponsor's architects, approved all designs, and at times submitted its own plans (their site plans in the Harlem and North Harlem Title I brochures are notably uninspired). It is clear that Moses expected SOM to guide planning from an early stage, as when he instructed Cutler to "see what sort of attractive plan of the Riverside-Amsterdam area can be figured out with the City Planning Commission and Yeshiva University."<sup>67</sup> SOM, however, did not respond creatively to the urban design opportunity that Moses offered. Ultimately, Moses is accountable for the mediocre site plans that his committee issued, which he might have more fully controlled. Nevertheless, he was not schooled in urban design nor were most redevelopment czars. (The exception was in Philadelphia, where the urban designer Edmund Bacon shaped urban renewal and achieved significant refinement in design.) Moses hired distinguished professionals from whom he expected excellence



and outstanding performance. He had done as much in the 1930s: the talents of his top designers—the architect Aymar Embury II, the landscape architect Gilmore D. Clarke, and the engineer Othmar Ammann—can be seen in the high-quality designs of pools, recreational landscapes, and bridges from that period.

The failure of the Title I work to meet the same high standards has several causes. One was a lack of creative urban thinking: the architectural profession was not prepared to handle the great challenge of urban renewal.<sup>68</sup> The modernist paradigm of superblock urbanism was the default response, and Title I bluntly exposed its inattention to neighborhood scale and other social inadequacies. Procedural and programmatic issues also undermined design: a federal approval process that obstructed design improvements, Moses's deferral to private developers, and the bottom-line orientation of redevelopment. A letter from Cutler to Moses in 1959 captures SOM's complacent





E-33. Site plan of Lenox Terrace Apartments (Harlem Title I), from rental brochure, 1958

posture.<sup>69</sup> The inflexibility of the federal approval process blocked design improvements. The site plans and corresponding aerial views published in the slum clearance brochures were schematic and recorded an early stage of planning, but under certain circumstances those plans were binding. After approval by the Urban Renewal Administration and a grant of FHA mortgage insurance, any subsequent change in the site plan required new approvals. The case of Herbert Greenwald and the Pratt Institute Title I illustrates how the FHA obstructed design improvements.

Greenwald inherited a mediocre plan when he took over the housing portion of the Pratt Institute Title I project. For the Brooklyn block bounded by Myrtle and Willoughby avenues (Area B), S. J. Kessler and Sons made a typical site plan of parking lots and apartment slabs (fig. E-34). But, as Greenwald explained to Moses, "We felt that it was an anachronism to place automobiles between buildings . . . [and] much preferred the complete segregation of automobiles from people and green areas." Greenwald pursued an alternate plan for the project called Willoughby Walk with the consulting architects, SOM, and arrived at an agreement on what he regarded as a superior scheme. Greenwald provided Moses with an account of his failed effort to improve the design:

We then approached the FHA and were flatly rejected. Several alternate plans were devised for the benefit of the FHA Land Planner, and in April 1958, a compromise

plan was submitted to SOM which received their approval. At this juncture we went to see Mr. Lebwahl [the director of the Committee on Slum Clearance] and apprise him of our desire to execute the plans . . . and to enlist his support. To his credit . . . he went to the FHA with our people; that he made several telephone calls apprising the Land Planner and the Director at FHA that the SCC, SOM and the sponsor were in unanimous accord that the new site plan should be used. All this was to no avail.

As a final step, I discussed with the Director of FHA the possibility that I might appeal his decision to Washington. I was then told that if I insisted upon my plan, which would mean a reprocessing of the commitments (I was willing to pay for this), the jobs would be stopped and that no commitment would be available to me for Building # 3. With this immovable force, there could be no further argument. In order not to postpone the occupancy of the buildings, we reluctantly retreated to the original site plan.

We are disheartened that we were compelled to produce an inferior situation when an excellent alternative was available. We fought long and hard. SOM fought for us, Mr. Lebwahl was on our side, but the FHA controls the purse strings and I reluctantly yielded. . . . I can only promise you, in the Quadrangles we will have *ab initio* a site plan we believe in before we go to FHA for any commitments.<sup>70</sup>

Greenwald was forced to build Willoughby Walk as Kessler had planned it. He set Mies van der Rohe to work on the Quadrangles, his other part of the Pratt Institute renewal project, but Greenwald died in 1959—en route to New York to discuss Title I business, his plane crashed in the East River—which ended Mies's involvement and changed the course of this project as well as the Battery Park Title I, for which he was also the sponsor.

Design was also defeated by other government rules. "Don't touch it," Gordon Bunshaft of SOM warned Pei about Title I. "That's not for architects. That's for lawyers."<sup>71</sup> The busiest Title I architect in New York was S. J. Kessler and Sons, a firm headed by Melvin E. Kessler, an entrepreneurial figure who specialized in apartment buildings but whose real talent was mastery of the regulatory apparatus. He began his career at the New York State Housing Division; in private practice, he worked for the NYCHA, in 1946 built the first FHA-insured apartments in Scarsdale, and was quick to see Title I as a business opportunity. The Kessler firm was the housing planner on six Moses projects and, presumably on Moses's recommendation, was hired as the housing architect by sponsors of seven Title I projects.<sup>72</sup> Even Zeckendorf retained Kessler as a consultant to advise Pei on compliance with Title I/FHA rules.

Moses broke down the wall dividing public and private phases of redevelopment in order to negotiate financial plans, but he did not insert design into this conversation. Nothing was written into the ground rules to advance architecture. The rare cases of good design that survived both this process and the stringent economics of slum redevelopment represented an exceptional commitment on the sponsor's part and his patronage of a talented architect. There were five quality designs: Zeckendorf's Kips Bay Plaza, designed by Pei; the three towers for NYU (originally University Village, now called Silver Towers, and 110 Bleeker Street), also designed by Pei; Shirley Boden's neighboring cooperative projects, Chatham Green and Chatham Towers, both by Kelly and Gruzen; and Lincoln Center.

Nevertheless, there were limits to individual efforts. Absent public control, there was no mechanism to regulate how the parts of a renewal project related to one another or how a project related to the bounding streets. Each

sponsor was left to operate as if on a self-contained island. Lincoln Center demonstrates the best and worst of this system. Under the enlightened leadership of John D. Rockefeller III, Lincoln Center set high design standards and worked with internationally acclaimed architects. The plan created a cross axis to link up with Fordham, but Fordham turned inward, declining the invitation to extend the axis into its campus. More troubling, the Slum Clearance Committee did not consider how the superblock related to the environs. Lincoln Center is built on a platform that closes off Damrosch Park to the potential community of users residing across the street in the Amsterdam Houses, and ignores Amsterdam Avenue and the side streets. (At present, Lincoln Center is attempting to address some of the problems of the original urban design and animate 65th Street with a design by Diller Scofidio + Renfro.)

Once title was transferred to the sponsor, Moses drew a sharp line and claimed no right to intervene. "We have no control over [the selection of architects] and want none" was his policy position.<sup>73</sup> It was not that he was undiscerning or indifferent. Moses personally had conservative taste and held that the design of public works should meet conventional standards of beauty. For the preliminary designs of the project at Washington Square, he chose Eggers and Higgins, the successor firm of John Russell Pope known for its mastery of historical styles, as the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., and NYU's Georgian-style law school exemplify. When NYU unveiled Max Abramovitz's modern design for a student center, Moses complained to the university's chancellor:

You will remember that all the brochures and other publications and sketches published and circulated with respect to the Title I project promised Georgian architecture. There is genuine, not merely woozy sentiment on this subject, not only in the



E-34. Perspective of Pratt Institute Title I, with the Quadrangles (left), Pratt Institute (center), and Willoughby Walk (right), July 1953. Collection MTA Bridges and Tunnels Special Archive

neighborhood but throughout the City. . . . We develop enough support . . . only if we meet reasonable demands and expectations for the maintenance of the traditional Colonial or Georgian architecture which we have promised. While we cannot control what you do on the plot west of the area you acquired in connection with the Title I redevelopment [where Abramovitz's student center was located], I must make it clear to you that we shall have to use our full power in connection with the land incorporated in the Title I redevelopment to compel adherence to the Colonial or Georgian plan. [In public works,] I have to be something of a traditionalist.<sup>74</sup>

Moses's concern about community standards was legitimate; NYU eventually built misguided modern buildings on Washington Square.

It should be noted, however, that Eggers and Higgins did not offer a Georgian or Colonial design, but an overscaled superblock scheme. Their site plan demonstrates the extent to which the modernist agenda of superblock urbanism had been absorbed by the profession, including its most conservative wing. Despite his being a self-proclaimed traditionalist, Moses's urban renewal projects were a fulfillment of the modernist urban paradigm, not as interpreted by creative designers but in the vernacular of the professional mainstream. They delivered light and air and open space in a dense, high-rise setting. It was a model that privileged the experience of the apartment dweller rather than the experience of the pedestrian in the street. Perhaps that is why, according to my thoroughly unscientific, anecdotal evidence, these projects seem well appreciated by their residents.<sup>75</sup>

Notwithstanding the design failures of Title I, most of these projects are flourishing. This is a tribute in part to the gentrifying effects of the renewal projects on their environs and to the strength of New York City today. But the Moses-Title I template also had certain regenerative features that have fostered the reintegration of these superblocks in the urban fabric. The commercial strips on the streets have maintained street life, in contrast to the scenario at the housing enclaves built by the NYCHA. A size comparison of Title I projects across the country remains to be done, but my working hypothesis is that those in New York were relatively small: the Southwest Washington Title I encompassed 427 acres; New York's biggest slum clearance project, Lincoln Square, covered 45 acres; the average size of the Title I projects in Manhattan was 16 acres; Corlears Hook and Washington Square South were each 14.5 acres. The modest size of Moses's projects combined with the commanding authority of the city's great grid limited the deadening effects of superblock urbanism. Moreover, Moses embraced density, which is now recognized as a precondition of the city's diversity, vitality, and mass-transit system. Yet his Title I program notably failed to integrate buildings at varied scales and to combine rehabilitation with selective clearance, as in I. M. Pei's work at Society Hill, Philadelphia. Indeed, the rehabilitation issue brings us to the end of this story and exposes the outdated conceptual framework in which Moses was stuck.

### THE END OF BULLDOZER CLEARANCE

As criticism of Title I mounted across the nation, Moses took heart from his star lineup of New York City sponsors. He welcomed the prospect of congressional hearings in the city in 1959. "The more I think of it, the more the pic-

ture of a parade of witnesses including [those from] the top universit[ies], labor cooperative[s, and] all other reputable sponsors appeals to me—the sponsors of Lincoln Square for instance including the Performing Arts, Fordham, Red Cross, etc., Long Island University, New York University, Pratt Institute, the needle and building trades cooperatives, Morningside Gardens headed by David Rockefeller and including [President] Dwight D. Eisenhower as Honorary Chairman."<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, city leaders were moving urban renewal in a different direction. Moses was forced to resign in March 1960, and Mayor Wagner overhauled the urban renewal apparatus, establishing a central relocation bureau and the Housing and Redevelopment Board to manage Title I work under new procedures. According to Moses's tally, during his reign over Title I, 314 acres were cleared and 28,400 apartments were built. This compares to 30,680 public housing dwelling units built in Manhattan alone during the period from 1947 to 1959.<sup>77</sup> Moses's effort was prodigious, but in the face of the great structural forces reorganizing the metropolitan region and in a city as large as New York, the overall impact of Title I was small.

In 1956, the City Planning Commission hatched an alternative renewal program based on spot clearance and rehabilitation. James Felt, its chairman, obtained federal funding for a study of the Upper West Side based on the premise that conservation could rescue a declining neighborhood to avoid demolition. The 1949 housing law had funded only advanced planning and clearance; an amendment in 1954 authorized funding for rehabilitation and conservation to broaden the range of renewal strategies. (The 1954 amendment replaced the term *urban redevelopment* with *urban renewal* to signal the new approach.) Moses adamantly opposed rehabilitation. Trapped in a mind-set formed in the 1930s, he saw slums as a spreading cancer, and clearance and superblock urbanism as the only effective cure. His imaginative capacity failed him when a more modest approach to renewal took hold; he did not fathom how small-scale measures could transform a neighborhood and have large-scale effects.

Felt is an interesting counterpoint to Moses. His business was real estate; he had been involved in early clearance projects—his real estate company had assembled the land for Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town—and had run relocation programs. But Felt had a more nuanced view of the slums than Moses had. In 1939, he distinguished three stages of decay: areas in need of clearance, areas where complete rehabilitation was appropriate, and "twilight zones" requiring strict code enforcement. But this dissenting view went underground in the 1940s, as demands for bold action swayed public policy.<sup>78</sup>

The West Side Urban Renewal Study was published in 1958.<sup>79</sup> The plan covered a larger territory than typical of Moses's renewal plans: a seventy-four-acre, twenty-block area from 87th to 97th Street and from Central Park West to Amsterdam Avenue. While worried about "creeping blight," Felt's study looked at the city through a new lens that revealed the social fabric of the Upper West Side. It praised the positive role of block-improvement associations and community groups, and endorsed racial integration as a goal. Under the banner of "self-preservation" and incremental change, the West Side Renewal Plan overthrew the superblock model and pursued selective inter-

E-35. West Side Renewal Plan, new and rehabilitated buildings with public walk through block, 1958



vention with the existing gridiron street pattern left intact (fig. E-35). A fine-grained analysis sorted out high-rent elevator buildings in good shape, structurally sound old-law tenements and run-down brownstones in need of remodeling, and structures to be demolished. Instead of the speedy, military-style implementation that Moses favored, Felt called for slow, “judicious phasing.” The West Side Plan signaled a complete paradigm change from clearing to pruning: “Renewal can be more like pruning a tree,” Felt explained, “resulting in a healthier and more fruitful organism.”<sup>80</sup> Pictures of street tree plantings, community fix-ups, and streetscapes with buildings at different scales indicated the new, small-bore approach to the city.<sup>81</sup>

Wielding the watchword of reformers, the West Side Plan called for a “comprehensive” approach to renewal, including more open space, school improvements, and expanded community services. In practice, Moses integrated these elements in his Title I projects, but he rhetorically denounced the idea of comprehensive planning and its collaborative, all-inclusive approach; his pragmatism led him to segment issues into containable, circumscribed tasks. Moses’s strength and weakness were one and the same: the pursuit of limited objectives. Moreover, in looking at tenement blocks, Moses did not see the self-healing powers that Jane Jacobs extolled in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961 in response to urban renewal. He saw the destructive forces of real estate speculation that profited from slums and a need for sweeping government action.

Some of the problems with Title I, which recurred across the country, flowed from the law, its real estate orientation, and built-in assumptions about

clearance. Other problems flowed from Moses’s management of the program and his abstracted, bird’s-eye-view of the city. Yet, to a surprising degree, he managed to stretch the framework of Title I in order to provide middle-class housing, expand higher education, and create a world-class performing arts center. He developed innovative strategies of urban renewal that remain effective engines of economic redevelopment, and he tackled serious problems, in particular the lack of affordable housing, which persists in Manhattan where the high cost of housing is squeezing out the middle class.

In response to constraints on his maneuverability and scope of action, Moses tactically pursued limited objectives. This approach was the precondition of his prolific record of public works, but it also rationalized his willful disregard of collateral effects and refusal to pursue comprehensive solutions. Moses failed to go far enough in asserting public control over relocation and over the planning and design process; these two major shortcomings of New York’s Title I program were not due to his overreaching but to his reticence to assert public control over the private sector.

To a generation of post-Moses urbanists, his concentrated power made him a public danger. Yet, exaggerating his power and disregarding the constraints that he faced—from federal policy and local politics, lending institutions, and citizen groups—reinforces the myth of omnipotence that Moses shaped and distracts from the clash of public and private interests in urban space and land markets that he embodied. His Title I work crystallizes the persistent challenge of directing market forces to serve public goals and of promoting a public good that transcends local interests.

## NOTES

- While my view of Moses was primarily formed through archival work, I drew on the rich literature from the 1960s on the national Title I program. Three outstanding books in particular deserve to be better known: Jeanne R. Lowe, *Cities in a Race with Time: Progress and Poverty in America's Renewing Cities* (1967), the sole book to address design issues; Charles Abrams, *The City Is the Frontier* (1965); and Scott A. Greer, *Urban Renewal and American Cities: The Dilemma of Democratic Intervention* (1965). The Title I program is spottily discussed in Robert Caro's *Power Broker* (1974), which highlights Manhattantown and Lincoln Center, sponsor scandals, and relocation problems. The most important book on Title I is Joel Schwartz's *New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (1993), which established the deep bed of support for Moses's renewal agenda. I am in awe of the book's archival depth, which allowed Schwartz to track decision making with astounding texture. In contrast to his close-up view of political dynamics, my essay considers renewal as urbanism, by which I mean urban design and physical and social planning.  
Throughout this essay I refer to *urban renewal* because it has passed into common usage, but technically the correct term to describe Moses's work is *redevelopment*. The 1949 law referred to urban redevelopment; as amended in 1954, the law adopted the term urban renewal to indicate a broader range of planning options, including rehabilitation as well as clearance.
- The key source on the legislation is Mark I. Gelfand's *Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933–1965* (1975). Moses followed the congressional debate over federal housing policy and advised the senators who took the lead on the issue: New York's Robert Wagner; Mr. Republican, the Ohio senator Robert A. Taft; and the Louisiana senator Allen Ellender. Hearings in 1943 opened a legislative battle that divided on the scope of federal intervention, more specifically the degree to which the government should be involved in housing construction. In 1945, the senators introduced a housing bill; it failed to pass in 1946 and again in 1948, but Moses discerned the shape of compromise legislation and began to plan in anticipation of its passage.  
Moses described the preparatory measures in the two reports of the Committee on Slum Clearance: *Preliminary Report on Initial New York City Projects under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949*, July 14, 1949; and *Second Report to Mayor William O'Dwyer from the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance by Private Capital*, January 23, 1950.  
Of the 32 projects for which Moses obtained planning grants, 26 resulted in published plans; and at the time of Moses's resignation, in 1960, the following 6 projects were in the stage of advanced planning: Cooper Square, Seward Park Extension, Delancey Street, Mid-Harlem, Division Street, and Bellevue South.  
For national data, see U.S. Housing and Home Finance Agency, Urban Renewal Administration, *Urban Renewal Project Directory* (Washington, D.C.: 1960), cited in Kaplan, *Urban Renewal Politics*, 3. Also see the compilation of national data on urban renewal in Anderson, *Federal Bulldozer*, appendix A.
- Dunbar McLaurin, letter to Moses on the development of the Polo Grounds, August 26, 1957, and Moses's reply, August 29, 1957, New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Robert Moses Papers, Box 116, File: Committee on Slum Clearance 1957. This archive is hereafter abbreviated as Moses Papers. The archive is uncataloged and only roughly organized by the positions that Moses held, for example, Slum Clearance Committee, Construction Coordinator, Parks Department. Each box contains numerous unnumbered files; I have provided the name exactly as it appears on each file.
- Anderson, *Federal Bulldozer*.
- "The Critics Build Nothing," an address by Robert Moses at a luncheon meeting of the New York Building Congress, November 10, 1959, Moses Papers, Box 117, File: Housing File 1/1/59–12/31/59, Library Corr. Folder 4 of 6.
- Moses, "Practical vs. Theoretical Planning," *Public Works*, 477.
- Remarks of Robert Moses at the Annual Teachers' Institute of the Archdiocese of New York, March 5, 1959, Moses Papers, Box 117, File: Housing File 1/1/59–12/31/59, Library corr. Folder 4 of 6.
- Division of Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment, Housing and Home Finance Agency, *The Relationship between Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment and Low-Rent Housing* (Washington, D.C.: 1950), 13.
- Ibid.
- This statement appeared at the beginning of every plan published by the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance.
- On the Redevelopment Companies Law of 1942, the 1943 amendment that liberalized the private sector obligations, and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company's developments, see Schwartz, *New York Approach*, 82–83, and chap. 4.
- In NYCHA's no-cash subsidy program, rents averaged \$74 to 75, the level required to cover operating expenses; in subsidized low-income projects, rents averaged \$37 to \$38.
- Lowe, *Cities in a Race with Time*, 184.
- Moses made decisions, assisted by indispensable and long-time deputies: George Spargo, an engineer turned financial analyst; Harry Taylor, and later William Leibold, both lawyers who served as staff director. George Spargo was assistant to the director, who began working for Moses in the 1930s after serving in the Queens borough president's office. Like his boss, Spargo wore multiple hats: in the parks department, Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, Office of the City Construction Coordinator, and on the Slum Clearance Committee. Moses lent him to Mayor O'Dwyer, whom Spargo served as deputy mayor. In 1938, when Spargo was an executive officer at the parks department, he was known the Accelerator. Moses commended his ability in financing Triborough bonds. In 1959, Spargo became embroiled in a controversy over a conflict of interest when it was revealed that he was the director of a bank making mortgage loans to slum clearance sponsors; see Wayne Phillips, "Spargo Is Dropped from Slum Agency," *New York Times*, January 29, 1960. Leibold, the director of the Slum Clearance Committee, was a lawyer at the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority.
- Remarks of Robert Moses at the conference of the Federal Housing and Home Finance Agency, Region I, April 17, 1958, Moses Papers, Box 117, File 1: Committee on Slum Clearance 1958.
- On the Gratiot area urban renewal, see Roger Montgomery, "Improving the Design Process in Urban Renewal," in Wilson, *Urban Renewal*, 459–66; and Waldheim, *CASE: Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe*.
- Kaplan, *Urban Renewal in Politics*, 24.
- John P. McGrath [Corporation Counsel, 1947–51], letter to the editor, *New York Times*, July 27, 1959.
- Robert Moses, memorandum to William S. Leibold, December 3, 1956, Moses Papers, Box 116, File: Robert Moses's Library Corr. From Housing File Folder 1 of 3.
- The law offered the following definition: "'Urban renewal area' means a slum area or a blighted, deteriorated, or deteriorating area in the locality involved which the Administrator approves as appropriate for an urban renewal project." U.S. Housing Act of 1949 as amended through August 1955, Title I, Section 110. The original language was even broader; it defined a redevelopment area as "an area which is appropriate for development or redevelopment and within which a project area is located."
- U.S. Housing Act of 1937, Section 2.3.
- The relocation surveys were completed by Frederick E. Marx, associated with Wood, Dolson, then later as vice president of Helmsley-Spear. On Marx's work for the Slum Clearance Committee, see Peter Kihss, "Slum Aide Hints Job Favoritism," *New York Times*, July 18, 1959.
- Robert Moses, memorandum to Harry Taylor, December 11, 1950, Moses Papers, Box 90.
- The next 13 plans, published between September 1951 and August 1957, were all executed. But the last 6 plans, published between November 1958 and June 1959, ran into trouble. Moses quickly withdrew one plan (Gramercy), and two were executed (Park Row Extension and Soundview, a Mitchell-Lama project), and the fate of 3 projects (Riverside-Amsterdam, Battery Park, and Cadman Plaza) was determined by Moses's successors.
- Robert Moses, memorandum to George Spargo, September 5, 1950, Moses Papers, Box 90.
- Henry Heald, letter to Moses, December 6, 1952, NYU Archives, Box 12, Folder 5. This folder contains other relevant correspondence between Heald and the Slum Clearance Committee.
- Henry Heald, memorandum to James Follin, April 3, 1954, NYU Archives, Box 12, Folder 7.
- See Moses's letter to J. Anthony Panuch, the special adviser to Mayor Wagner on housing and urban renewal, commenting on the desirability of a central city agency for tenant relocation, October 16, 1959, Moses Papers, Box 117, File: Housing File 1/1/59–12/31/59.
- Herbert Greenwald, letter to Moses, December 26, 1957, Moses Papers, Box 117, File: Committee on Slum Clearance 1958.
- Panuch, *Building a Better New York*, 35.
- The Committee on Slum Clearance quantified "concurrent government displacement activities" estimated as of April 30, 1956: New York City Housing Authority (public housing), 20,853; Committee on Slum Clearance (Title I), 15,385; Bureau of Real Estate (schools, parks, playgrounds, hospitals, traffic arteries), 14,897; State-Federal Arterial Road Program, 10,320. Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance, *Comprehensive Relocation Plan. Park Row NYR3. Title I Urban Renewal Project* (New York: [1956]), 7.
- Braislin, Porter & Wheelock, Inc., *The First 500 Families: A Relocation Analysis*, mimeographed report, [1960]. I consulted a copy in the Fordham University Archives, Box P-M-15, Folder LCPA, Subcommittee 1958; another copy can be found in the Lincoln Center Corporate Archives. On studies of relocation in other cities, see Wilson, *Urban Renewal*, part 4, "Relocation and Community Life," 291–404.
- Schwartz, *New York Approach*, 143.
- N. S. Keith [Director, Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment], letter to Moses, February 27, 1950, Moses Papers, Box 90.
- Moses Papers, Box 90. For another endorsement of this policy, see Robert Moses, letter to Helen Harris [Executive Director], October 21, 1958, Moses Papers, Box 117, File: Committee on Slum Clearance 1958.
- This strategy, which is at odds with the prevailing view of Moses, has rarely been noticed; an exception is Joshua Benjamin Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor since World War II* (New York: New Press, 2000), 114. The twelve Title I projects with the neighboring NYCHA project are as follows.

<u>Title I</u>	<u>Housing</u>	<u>Adjacent Public Housing</u>
Corlears Hook	East River Coop. Houses	Vladeck & Baruch Houses
Columbus Circle	Columbus Circle Apts.	Amsterdam Houses
Harlem	Lenox Terrace	Abraham Lincoln Houses
Lincoln Square	Lincoln Towers and Princess Gardens	Amsterdam Houses
Manhattantown	Park West Village	Frederick Douglass Houses
Morningside	Morningside Gardens	General Grant Houses
Park Row	Catham Green	Governor Alfred E. Smith Houses
Park Row Ext.	Chatham Towers	Governor Alfred E. Smith Houses
Penn Station South	Penn Station South	Chelsea Houses
Seward Park	Seward Houses	La Guardia and Rutgers Houses
Fort Greene	University Towers and Kingsview	Walt Whitman & Ingersoll Houses
Hammel	Dayton Towers	Hammel Houses

37. Schwartz, *New York Approach*, 172. Title III limited property acquisition to 25 percent of total project costs.
38. John T. Metzger, "Rebuilding Harlem: Public Housing and Urban Renewal, 1920-1960," *Planning Perspectives* 9 (1994), 276. Abraham Kazan described the resistance of the NYCHA to rehouse tenants dislocated from the United Housing Foundation sites; see "The Reminiscences of Abraham Kazan," 1968, 425, in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University.
39. Robert Moses, letter to William Reid, September 2, 1959; Reid, letter to Moses, December 4, 1959; Moses, letter to Reid, December 9, 1959, Moses Papers, Box 118, File: Housing File 1/1/59-12/31/59, Robert Moses—Library corres. Folder 6 of 6. There was generally a sizable gap between the preclearance estimate of tenants eligible for public housing and the actual number that relocated to public housing. Moses attributed the gap to two factors: an estimated 20 percent of eligible families either rejected units offered or did not apply for public housing, and 4 percent proved to be ineligible at the time of processing their applications. Moses also argued that Title I relocation was comparable to that of the NYCHA. See Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance, *Comprehensive Relocation Plan. Park Row*, 13-14, 28-31.
40. Whitney North Seymour, letter to Moses, January 3, 1957, and Moses's reply, January 7, 1957. Moses Papers, Box 116, File: Committee on Slum Clearance 1957.
41. Greer, *Urban Renewal and American Cities*, 125.
42. Zeckendorf, *Autobiography*, 202.
43. Several writers on urban renewal have called attention to the low investor interest in Title I; see Anderson, *Federal Bulldozer*, chap. 7; and Lowe, *Cities in a Race with Time*, chap. 4.
44. *Second Report to Mayor William O'Dwyer from the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance by Private Capital* (January 23, 1950), n.p.
45. City-Wide Council for Better Housing, *New York City's Slum Clearance Committee: A Critical Study* (New York: 1957), 24.
46. "Big Slum Project Insured by F.H.A.," *New York Times*, September 30, 1955.
47. Zeckendorf, *Autobiography*, 203.
48. Robert Moses, letter to Robert A. Taft, November 28, 1952, Moses Papers, Box 90.
49. "Big Slum Project Insured by F.H.A."
50. "Pei's Apartments Round the Corner," *Architectural Forum* 11, no. 5 (August 1961), 106-14.
51. Zeckendorf, *Autobiography*, 227.
52. *Ibid.*, esp. chap. 16 and 17.
53. Robert Moses, "Commissioner Moses Dissects the 'Long-Haired Planners,'" *New York Times Magazine* (June 25, 1944), 38.
54. Lowe, *Cities in a Race with Time*, 48; and Schwartz, *New York Approach*, 301.
55. Greer, *Urban Renewal and American Cities*, 157-59.
56. At Corlears Hook, the down payment was \$625 per room and monthly maintenance was \$17 a room. At Morningside Gardens, the down payment was \$750 per room, monthly maintenance, \$21.
57. Stephen G. Thompson, "Co-op Housing: N.Y.C. vs. U.S.A.," *Architectural Forum* 111, no. 1 (July 1959), 133.
58. Robert Moses, letter to Mayor Robert Wagner, May 24, 1956, in response to the *Report to the Board of Estimate on Title I Slum Clearance Projects and Tax Exempt Housing*, Lawrence Gerosa, Comptroller (May 9, 1956), Moses Papers, Box 116, File: 1956 Robert Moses' Library Correspondence from Housing File Folder 3 of 3.
59. Remarks by Moses at Seward Park, October 11, 1958, Moses Papers, Box 117, File: Committee on Slum Clearance 1958.
60. *Report to the Mayor from the Park Commissioner on the Proposed Municipal Music Art Center* (September 20, 1938), brochure. A manuscript copy of the letter from Moses to Mayor La Guardia of the same date is in the Moses Papers, Box 97.
61. Lester Markel, letter to Moses, March 4, 1958, Moses Papers, Box 117, File: Committee on Slum Clearance 1958.
62. Amendments in 1954 and 1959 increasingly liberalized the restrictions on nonresidential uses.
63. An amendment to the zoning law adopted on June 21, 1950, required new dwellings to provide garage or parking space for cars of occupants. In A and B districts (most of the Title I sites), parking spaces had to be provided for 20 percent of the dwelling units. See New York City Planning Commission, *Planning Progress 1940-50* (New York: 1951), 24.
64. On the absence of stores in public housing and the resultant problems, see Charles Grutzner, "Shopping Scarce in City Projects," *New York Times*, June 16, 1957.
65. Nathaniel Alexander Owings, *The Spaces In Between: An Architect's Journey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 77.
66. Nold was consulting engineer to SOM from 1955 to 1962, when he died.
67. Robert Moses, letter to Robert Cutler, June 5, 1959, Moses Papers, Box 118, File: Committee on Slum Clearance 1959.
68. On the demise of CIAM and the related establishment of an urban design program at Harvard, see Eric Mumford, "The Emergence of Urban Design in the Breakup of CIAM," *Harvard Design Magazine* 24 (spring-summer 2006), 10-20. This special issue, on the origins and evolutions of "urban design" 1956-2006, contains other relevant articles on the state of urban design in the 1950s. Also see idem, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1958-1960* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).
69. Robert Cutler, letter to Moses, September 17, 1959, Moses Papers, Box 118, File: Committee on Slum Clearance 1959. I should like to acknowledge a potential bias in my sources. It may be that the SOM archives would afford a different perspective on their role as consultants. My initial queries did not turn up relevant material but continued research is needed.
70. Herbert Greenwald, letter to Moses, October 2, 1958, Moses Papers, Box 117, File: Committee on Slum Clearance 1958.
71. Cited by Cannell, *I. M. Pei*, 143.
72. The Kessler firm was the housing planner on the following projects: Manhattantown, NYU-Bellevue, Lincoln Square, Battery Park, Gramercy Park, and Riverside-Amsterdam. Kessler designed the following buildings: Lenox Terrace (Harlem Title I); Park West (Manhattantown Title I); Willoughby Walk (Pratt Title I); the two projects in Rockaway, Seaside and Hammels; Kips Bay, with I.M. Pei (NYU-Bellevue); and Washington Square Village, with Paul Lester Wiener (Washington Square Southeast). Kessler, together with his father and brother, had a 5-percent ownership interest in the corrupt Manhattanville project. This combined with his dominant role in Title I cast suspicion on the firm, and in July 1959 Mayor Wagner barred him from obtaining additional Title I work. "New York's Title I Controversy Spotlights Architect Kessler—A Combination of Know-How and Know-Who," *Architectural Forum* 3, no. 2 (August 1959), 13-15; and Wayne Phillips, "Barred Designer Has 2 Slum Jobs," *New York Times*, November 2 1959.
73. "Statement by Robert Moses, Chairman as to Architectural Services of the Kessler Firm," July 2, 1959, Moses Papers, Box 118.
74. Robert Moses, letter to Henry Heald, September 2, 1955, Moses Papers, Box 116, File: Housing Correspondence for Mr. Moses's Library Project Jan. 1, 1955 to Dec. 31, 1955.
75. When asked to recommend an architect, Moses offered these respectable suggestions: SOM; Eggers and Higgins; McKim, Mead & White; Harrison & Abramovitz; Voorhees, Walker, Kelly and Gruzen; Chapman, Evans & Delehanty; and Brown, Guenther and Booss. Memo, November 30, 1959, Moses Papers, Box 117, File: Housing File 1/1/59-12/31/59.
76. Robert Moses, letter to Congressman Charles Buckley, July 27, 1959, Moses Papers, Box 118, File: Housing File 1/1/59-12/31/59; Robert Moses—Library corres. Folder 6 of 6.
77. Metzger, "Rebuilding Harlem," 283, note 3.
78. James Felt, "The Problem of the Old Law Tenement: An Address before the New York Metropolitan Association of Real Estate Boards at the Hotel Commodore, N.Y.," brochure, January 11, 1939, 7.
79. James Felt, New York City Department of City Planning, *A Report on the West Side Urban Renewal Study to Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Board of Estimate of the City of New York, and to the Urban Renewal Administration* (New York: [1958]), 8. The study was prepared by the following team of consultants: Donald Monson, general consultant; Elizabeth Kempton, community organization consultant; Brown & Guenther, architectural consultant (Moses also used this firm); Chester Rapkin, economic consultant.
80. *Ibid.*, 85.
81. In some respects, the West Side plan vindicated Moses's point of view. In a supporting study of the real estate market in the renewal area, Chester Rapkin, a planner at the University of Pennsylvania, confirmed Moses's view that rehabilitation was not financially sound for tenement owners: rehabilitation costs ran high and resulted in less rental income if rehabilitated properties met higher occupancy standards. Sustained government intervention and subsidy were needed for the middle class, while the demand for luxury and moderate-income apartment houses would grow. Rapkin, *Real Estate Market*.

# ROBERT MOSES, RACE, AND THE LIMITS OF AN ACTIVIST STATE

MARTHA BIONDI

In a stunning coincidence, on August 1, 1943, the Harlem Riot began and the *New York Times* published an essay by Robert Moses in which the parks commissioner denounced civil rights laws, praised the leadership of Booker T. Washington, and proudly described—in detail—his successful effort to sabotage a civil rights amendment to the 1938 New York State constitution.<sup>1</sup> This conjuncture—the essay and the uprising—discloses a surprising and dramatic collision between traditional Jim Crow thinking and the new mood of fast-growing migrant black neighborhoods. How could Moses, the quintessential modernist and activist city builder, espouse such myopic ideas? Moreover, he was a northern New Dealer, and a Jew writing just as a black-Jewish alliance to fight religious and racial bigotry in New York was about to commence.

“There are stories of unrest among our colored citizens,” he wrote, no doubt referring to the wave of racial violence that swept the nation that year, most lethally in Detroit, where a riot in June led to thirty-four deaths, seven hundred injured, and six thousand federal troops occupying the city. Detroit catapulted urban racial conditions into the national spotlight. In New York, the mayor and other officials scrambled to interpret the unrest and devise schemes to prevent a riot. Robert Moses, however, chose this volatile moment to explain why the government should not take the lead in securing racial justice. “We have, it is true, a Negro problem,” Moses announced, although he cautioned against following those “Negro leaders who accept nothing but complete social equality” and offered praise for those “following in the footsteps of Booker T. Washington.” Washington, who died in 1915, symbolized a strategy for black advancement that Moses favored: ethnic self-help and evolutionary development, better known as accommodationism. The dreaded alternative was “social equality” between blacks and whites, which in the Jim

Crow mind-set was an unnatural state of affairs that antidiscrimination laws might forcibly and disastrously impose. (Think Reconstruction.) Of course, “social equality” was also Jim Crow code for interracial marriage—indeed, for a whole range of intimate social interactions, of which, as we shall see, racially mixed swimming pools were a leading example.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Moses tried mightily to ensure that a legislative civil rights movement would not happen in New York. Arguably his most significant racial intervention in New York was his extraordinary effort to nullify a proposed civil rights amendment to the state constitution. In 1938, delegates to the constitutional convention proposed a pioneering clause that would authorize the state to aggressively combat discrimination in *private* housing, education, and employment—areas not covered under the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The clause read: “No person shall be denied the equal protection of the laws of this state or any subdivision thereof. No person shall, because of race, color, creed or religion, be subjected to any discrimination by any other person or by any firm, corporation, or institution, or by the state or an agency or subdivision of the state.” Moses persuaded the delegates to insert the phrase “in his civil rights” after the word “discrimination,” a change, he hoped, that would make “the whole thing meaningless,” since prevailing case law defined “civil rights” rather narrowly.<sup>3</sup> Moses boasted of his handiwork in the *New York Times Magazine*. “You cannot legislate tolerance by constitutional amendment or statute,” he wrote. “It is difficult enough to attempt to carry out guarantees of equal protection by the government. It is impossible . . . as applied to private persons, firms, corporations and institutions.”<sup>4</sup> The consequences of Moses’s actions were far-reaching but not as restrictive to antidiscrimination legislation as he had hoped.<sup>5</sup>

Not long before Moses's essay appeared in the *Times*, he had been in the headlines as the leading supporter of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company's decision to exclude African-Americans from its new housing project, Stuyvesant Town. Instead of using this unprecedented joint public-private housing venture as an opportunity to encourage integration, which many city and civic leaders were urging him to do, Moses clung to the traditional rationale that racial integration was a risky investment and would deter private capital from urban redevelopment. Not surprisingly, the city's decision to enter into such a deal had sparked an outpouring of criticism, and Moses used the essay to lash out at his critics. "Unfortunately, housing reform attracts crackpots and irresponsible enthusiasts . . . and sensible projects must run the gamut of hysterical attacks and insane criticism from perfectionists, day dreamers, and fanatics of a dozen breeds." Clearly unnerved by popular scrutiny and criticism of his plans, the parks commissioner assailed "long-haired critics, fanatics and demagogues who refuse to recognize the difference between public and private enterprise."<sup>6</sup>

This portrait of Moses may not come as a great surprise to readers of Robert Caro's *Power Broker*, which characterizes him as indifferent and often hostile to the needs of black New Yorkers. There are various anecdotes, for example, describing Moses's personal aversion to black and white children swimming together. Yet, in many ways, *The Power Broker* underplays his extraordinary constitutional and legislative interventions in promoting racial segregation in New York. Caro omits the epic story of Stuyvesant Town, the Moses-aided, whites-only housing project that launched the fair housing movement in the United States. Perhaps for Caro, writing in the aftermath of the southern civil rights movement and the many media evocations of the liberal north, it seemed compelling to personalize the origins of race-based policy decisions in New York City. In this view, part of Moses's abuse of power was his ability to project his personal biases onto the metropolitan landscape.<sup>7</sup>

But none of this was unique to New York City or to Robert Moses. Swimming pools became particular hot spots in the civil rights struggle in both the North and the South, as whites deployed all manner of tactics, including violence, to forestall sharing their bathing water with bodies of color. The owner of Palisades Park in New Jersey called in police officers to physically eject youthful members of the newly formed Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) who were conducting "stand-ins" to protest the park's whites-only pool policy. Echoing the shifting rationales of Moses and other defenders of segregation in the postwar era, the owner defended his policy in overtly racist terms as a prudent business practice and in anticommunist terms, labeling the protest a communist plot.<sup>8</sup> In 1957, the legendary civil rights activist Robert F. Williams led the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch in Monroe, North Carolina, in an effort to get the city to open the public swimming pool to black children for one or two days a week. The protests followed the drowning deaths of several black children in dangerous, isolated swimming holes. But city officials balked, saying they would have to drain and refill the pool every time the black children used it.<sup>9</sup>

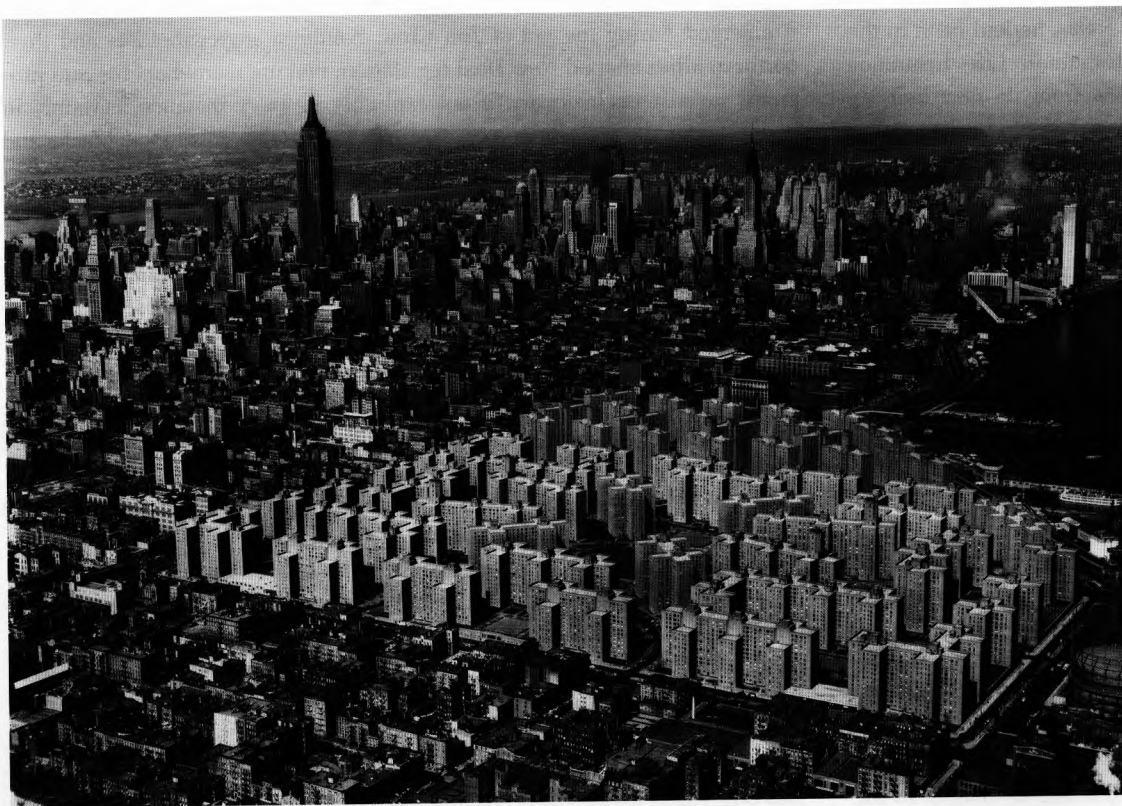
Nor was Robert Moses's defense of restricted housing anomalous. Indeed, his career exemplifies a central tragedy of modern American liberalism—that

it emerged during the era of Jim Crow. Southern segregationists and their northern allies shaped New Deal legislation, making many benefits and programs racially exclusionary, if not explicitly in every instance, certainly in both intent and effect. From social security to mortgage insurance, blacks and whites benefited unequally from the liberal state.<sup>10</sup> Scholars of housing, especially Kenneth T. Jackson, Douglass Massey, and Nancy Denton, have shown the central role that race has played in shaping building, home sales, rentals, and mortgage lending throughout the United States.<sup>11</sup> Residential segregation was produced by a dense web of public and private actors, most notably the Home Owners' Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration, which kept racial maps of cities and redlined mixed or black areas. Thus, the federal government itself, not just private banks and builders, was a major force in the decline of inner cities and the spread of all-white suburbs across the nation as the twentieth century unfolded. These housing policies generated a powerful ideology according to which the presence of black people lowered property values and thus fueled considerable white violence as African-Americans sought new homes and neighborhoods. Robert C. Weaver, a long-time housing advocate and the secretary of housing and urban development during the Johnson administration, argued that such violence went hand in hand with public policy. As long as racially restrictive covenants were embraced by the respectable classes, he believed, the lower classes would deploy their own tactics for preserving neighborhood "racial purity."<sup>12</sup> This was the professional culture that shaped Robert Moses. A critical demand that civil rights leaders were making just as the deal for Stuyvesant Town was signed, and just as the black migration out of the South was at its peak, was for modern urban liberalism to reject the historic conflation between race and residence, and to insist upon, as they often put it, "democratic living."

This is what the Stuyvesant Town struggle was all about. It began in June 1943, when the City of New York and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company signed a contract to create the largest urban redevelopment housing project in the United States (fig. E-36). It would provide thousands of modern, spacious, low-rent apartments exclusively to young veterans and their families. But the deal sparked a firestorm of controversy when it became clear that Frederick Ecker, the president of Met Life, was determined to restrict occupancy to whites only. "Negroes and whites don't mix," he said on the eve of the Board of Estimate's favorable vote; "if we brought them into the development it would be to the detriment of the city, too, because it would depress all the surrounding property." The battle for Stuyvesant Town, as it came to be known, launched the modern fair housing movement in the United States. Yet Met Life never surrendered, going all the way to the United States Supreme Court to defend its "right" to discriminate, a right that Robert Moses had handed them on a silver legislative platter.<sup>13</sup>

In 1943, the parks commissioner engineered an amendment to the 1942 Redevelopment Companies Act specifically to ensure that Met Life would be free to bar blacks from Stuyvesant Town. "If control of selection of tenants" is "to be supervised by public officials," he insisted, "it will be impossible to get insurance companies and banks to help us clear sub-standard, run-down, and cancerous areas in the heart of the city." Moses strongly urged Ecker not to give in to Mayor Fiorello La Guardia's last-minute attempt to





E-36. Stuyvesant Town (foreground) and Peter Cooper Village, ca. 1950. Photograph by Thomas Airviews. Collection MTA Bridges and Tunnels Special Archive

add language to the contract signaling nondiscriminatory tenant selection. The law and contract authorized an unprecedented transfer of state resources to a for-profit private venture, including a twenty-five-year tax exemption estimated at \$53 million, the ceding of public streets, and the condemnation of private property, which involved the forced removal of ten thousand residents.<sup>14</sup>

Activists endeavored to desegregate Stuyvesant Town through a variety of tactics: lawsuits, legislation, and eventually direct action, by subletting to black families. A broad popular mobilization finally pressured the city council to integrate the complex; but the judicial branch consistently upheld Stuyvesant Town's right to discriminate in tenant selection. Moses's interventions—both in his narrowing of the antidiscrimination amendment to the 1938 state constitution and in his deletion of public oversight of tenant selection from the Redevelopment Companies Law—were instrumental in the court's reasoning. In June 1947, just as occupancy of Stuyvesant Town was about to begin, three African-American veterans sued Met Life. The named plaintiff was Joseph R. Dorsey, a former army captain, social worker, and resident of a condemned tenement in Harlem. The NAACP, the American Jewish Congress, and the American Civil Liberties Union brought the suit, which was argued by Thurgood Marshall, Will Maslow, and Charles Abrams. Maslow headed the American Jewish Congress's Committee on Law and Social Action and drafted many of the antidiscrimination laws passed in New York State after the war. He argued that government assistance to

Stuyvesant Town qualified as state action under the equal protection clauses of the U.S. and state constitutions. The tax exemption, use of eminent domain, and government-determined rent and profit ceilings, all made possible under a public law that had deemed Stuyvesant Town a "superior public use," qualified as "state action."<sup>15</sup>

In July 1947, Justice Felix C. Benvenega of the State Supreme Court ruled in favor of Stuyvesant Town. "Housing is not a civil right," he wrote in a ruling that showed the effects of Moses's action at the 1938 constitutional convention. In addition, because there was no "established civil right where the question of private housing accommodations were concerned," he refused to enjoin the discriminatory tenant selection process. The *People's Voice*, a Harlem weekly, expressed incredulity that "a property which in effect is a township" could be deemed beyond state control. "With its money and power," the newspaper warned, "Metropolitan is crystallizing patterns of segregation and condemning thousands of Negroes to a secondary citizenship status for generations to come." Since the Redevelopment Companies Law had already been copied in eleven other states, such foreboding was based on real and rapid legal and social changes. Leo Miller, a white resident of Stuyvesant Town, who fought in the Battle of the Bulge, where "the courage and sharp shooting of a Negro machine-gunner saved my life," asked, "Can anyone of us who live in Stuyvesant Town say he may not be my neighbor? I can't." Another white veteran and his wife said, "we don't want our children growing up as part of a privileged group and believing from

their experiences that Negroes are a people apart. And we don't think our taxes should be used to support an unnatural division of people."<sup>16</sup>

The attorneys appealed *Dorsey v. Stuyvesant Town* to the state's highest court. In July 1949, in a four-to-three decision, the New York State Court of Appeals affirmed that there was no state role in the operation of Stuyvesant Town. Judge Bruce Bromley, whose opinion galvanized an NAACP campaign for his defeat at the polls in November, concluded that Stuyvesant Town's selection of tenants did not constitute state action. According to the court, the state action extended only to Met Life's clearing of the site, but its activities as a landlord were private.<sup>17</sup> Judge Stanley H. Fuld in his dissent reached the opposite conclusion: "Stuyvesant is in no sense an ordinary private landlord. Its title bespeaks its character. With buildings covering many city blocks, housing a population of twenty-five thousand persons, Stuyvesant is a 'Town' in more than name. Its very being depended upon constitutional amendment, statutory enactment and city contract. The exercise of a number of governmental functions was absolutely prerequisite to its existence. As a geographic entity, Stuyvesant Town was created by the City's exercise of its eminent domain and street-closing powers and by its act of transferring such condemned land and public property to respondents."

Also critical to the decision was Bromley's finding that the state legislature "deliberately and intentionally refrained from imposing any restriction upon a redevelopment company in its choice of tenants." The handiwork of Robert Moses had succeeded. The judge reasoned that the many efforts of Moses and other city officials either to expressly permit or fail to stop the well-known discriminatory intent of Ecker amounted to a kind of immunity for the state:

The matter of the exclusion of Negroes from the development arose in connection with the approval by the Governor of the 1943 amendments to the Redevelopment Companies Law and in contract negotiations between Metropolitan and the city. Commissioner Robert Moses, active in the plan, stated publicly to the Governor and the board of estimate that if any requirement was imposed which deprived the landlord of the right to select its tenants, no private venture would go into the business. Certainly the general impression was created—which Metropolitan did nothing to dispel—that Stuyvesant Town would not rent to Negroes. . . . In the board of estimate at least three votes were cast against approval of the contract on the ground that exclusion on racial grounds would be practiced. The contract was finally approved without any provision regarding discrimination in the selection of tenants. It may be noted in passing that thereafter the New York City Council passed legislation withholding tax exemption from any subsequent redevelopment company unless it gave assurance that no discrimination would be practiced in its rental policies. This provision, however, expressly excluded from its operation any project "hitherto agreed upon or contracted for."<sup>18</sup>

In striking contrast, Judge Fuld found that governmental approval of a discriminatory contract itself constituted impermissible state action. "Especially in two items . . . the city contract sanctioning the very discrimination complained of and the city legislation actually ratifying that discriminatory conduct, do I find most clearly that 'state action' which the Federal Constitution interdicts."<sup>19</sup> Robert Moses's imprint on the ruling is striking; the case illustrates the profound impact that an appointed official could have

on formulating New York State law. But there were many more contradictions. Moses was the quintessential state activist—he used public authority to literally rebuild the city—yet the government somehow became useless when the challenge was promoting racial reform.

Change at Stuyvesant Town came at a snail's pace. For the next twenty years, the city did virtually nothing to enforce the 1951 law barring discrimination in publicly aided housing projects. In 1960, there were 47 black tenants out of a total tenant population of 22,405, or 0.2 percent. In 1968, the city's Commission on Human Rights initiated a complaint against Met Life because the numbers of black tenants in its three large housing projects—Stuyvesant Town, Peter Cooper Village, and the enormous Parkchester in the Bronx—were extremely low. In Parkchester, 0.1 percent of tenants were black. Peter Cooper housed ten black families in its 2,495 apartments. In many respects, Stuyvesant Town was an ominous harbinger of the mass dislocation and of the race and class bias in Title I of the 1949 Housing Act. It set the pattern for postwar urban redevelopment: the transfer of prized urban space to the white professional class under the reformist rubric of slum clearance. But there was a positive outgrowth to Stuyvesant Town. It mobilized a national fair housing movement. Formed in 1949, the New York State Committee against Discrimination in Housing helped to win passage in 1950 of a law barring racial discrimination in any housing constructed under Title I; it also helped to gain passage of a state law in 1963 barring discrimination in private housing. This group spawned the National Committee against Discrimination in Housing, which campaigned for fair housing laws across the country, culminating in the passage of the federal Fair Housing Act in 1968.<sup>20</sup>

Robert Moses himself seems to have been somewhat chastened by the growing civil rights upsurge in the city and by the resulting shifts in public opinion. He began to engage in historical revisionism. In his book *Robert Moses: Builder of Democracy* (1952), Cleveland Rodgers said that "the long and bitter conflict over admitting Negroes as tenants to Stuyvesant Town came as a surprise to Moses." Ecker becomes the sole culprit. According to Rodgers, "Moses' conclusion about the case is that while Mr. Ecker is an 'exceedingly able, experienced, shrewd, hard-boiled, conservative gentleman,' he has some poor advisers; that he should take more Negro tenants in both Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village (which does not have partial tax exemption), and that the company management 'needs more of the milk of human kindness' and 'to keep abreast of the times.'"<sup>21</sup>

Some of that milk could have been used to assuage the turmoil and disruption of peoples' lives that accompanied many of Robert Moses's projects, most famously those authorized under Title I of the 1949 Housing Act. Once again, critics discovered a special deal, an exception to the rules, engineered by Moses behind the scenes. This time it was an exception to the Housing Act's requirement of government supervision of tenant relocation: only in New York City was an arrangement created whereby the private developer would oversee relocation. Coincidentally, a leading critic of this ad hoc relocation process, Elinor Black, happened to be married to Algernon Black, the leader of the New York State Committee against Discrimination in Housing. As a member of the Women's City Club, she helped to conduct a study of the effects of "slum clearance" on an upper Manhattan site and concluded that

neither Moses, as head of the Slum Clearance Committee, nor the private developer were properly relocating tenants. In fact, they were not in possession of information about where people had gone, even though the law required this. Elinor Black found that this unsupervised relocation was worsening slum conditions and overcrowding in nearby neighborhoods—hardly the “slum clearance” that the public had authorized. The Women’s City Club also reported that Title I had disproportionately uprooted poor and working-class blacks and Puerto Ricans, populations that faced considerable discrimination in finding new housing. A *New York Times* study in 1954 confirmed that Moses had failed to oversee the relocation, as required by law.<sup>22</sup>

Suspicion that urban redevelopment was exacerbating racial segregation was confirmed four years later when the press revealed that Moses’s slum clearance committee was asking for racial identification on relocation forms—an unlawful act. If, as this practice suggested, residents of comparatively heterogeneous “slums” were being relocated to neighborhoods or housing projects along racial lines, then residential segregation in the city was getting worse. The city council, which a year earlier had passed a landmark law banning discrimination in private rental housing, quickly condemned the practice, and Moses’s committee released a statement that it would desist. Still, the episode indicates the continuing power of racial classification in determining residential patterns, especially for a population with little control over the matter. According to the veteran African-American journalist Ted Poston, Title I and the forcible demographic transfer it provoked—a process that black New Yorkers called “Negro Removal”—was a cause of the Harlem riot of 1964.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, as a direct result of discrimination at Stuyvesant Town, Moses became a builder of housing for middle-income African-Americans. As a defense against litigation, he urged Ecker to build projects in black communities to show that he was also undertaking “model housing for colored folks.” In 1944, Met Life announced the construction of the Riverton Houses in Harlem, an affordable, middle-income development “for Negroes” (fig. E-37). Thus, this project did not signal a change of heart or constitute support for integrated living. Yet, despite Ecker’s pledge that Riverton would be segregated and exclude whites, Harlemites knew that it would be subject to a new municipal antidiscrimination law—albeit one that had purposely exempted Stuyvesant Town. Because Harlem was a neighborhood of extreme overcrowding, residents welcomed the prospect of more than 1,200 modern apartments. When Riverton opened in 1947, Met Life judged the 50,000 applicants for the 1,232 units according to their “desirability,” a category that African-Americans allegedly had not been able to fill downtown. The Riverton became a fashionable residence, home to, for example, future mayor David N. Dinkins and the future court of appeals judge Fritz W. Alexander.<sup>24</sup>

The success of Riverton made an impression on Robert Moses, who was determined that New York would take the lead in building Title I projects and, therefore, in attracting federal dollars. Riverton likely taught him a lesson about the unmet housing needs of middle-class African-Americans, thus giving him the confidence to imagine an eager constituency for a slum clearance project uptown. Shortly after passage of the Housing Act, Moses proposed the construction of Lenox Terrace, to be located between 132nd and 135th streets and between Fifth Avenue and Lenox Avenue, now Malcolm X



E-37. Lenox Terrace under construction (center), Abraham Lincoln Houses (cross-shaped towers at right), and Riverton Houses (double-cross slabs), early 1958. Fairchild Aerial Surveys, Inc.

Boulevard, but it suffered many delays and did not open until 1958. The builder encountered difficulty in acquiring financing for this Harlem property; but Moses interceded and convinced the Bank of Savings and New York Savings Bank to make the loan—an example of what determined leadership could accomplish.<sup>25</sup> Ten years later, Lenox Terrace had become a highly sought-after uptown address; its residents were a cosmopolitan cross section of Harlem, including politicians, musicians, actors, and activists; nurses, teachers, and social workers.<sup>26</sup>

Moses’s public works not only housed people and provided recreation and roadways, they also created tens of thousands of good jobs. The distribution of these jobs further illustrates how the liberal state disproportionately benefited whites, although African-Americans would increasingly demand equal access to public works employment. Two examples, both of which prompted the involvement of civil rights leaders, demonstrate the point. The first concerns the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel. While black workers had long been employed in tunnel building, they were typically assigned to the most dangerous and lowest paying positions. When several black workers complained of discrimination in pay and promotion at the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, a project under Moses’s supervision, they were met, according to an NAACP attorney, “by a reign of terror.” The men took their case to the newly created State Commission against Discrimination, but Moses refused to intervene or address their grievances. Two workers later won small settlements, but according to Ed Cross, a tunnel worker who led the fight for equality, he and several other African-American workers were blacklisted from tunnel building for the next several years in retaliation for having testified before the commission.<sup>27</sup>

The second example is the 1964 World’s Fair, an enormous undertaking that entailed years of planning and major construction at its site in Flushing

Meadows Park in Queens. Moses left his Slum Clearance Committee post in order to oversee construction of the fair. Building the fair in the park had the same advantage that building Rochdale Village on the site of the old Jamaica Race Track did (see pp. 00): no one lived there, so no difficult and messy tenant relocation was needed.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, Moses was once again charged with racial bias, this time regarding his labor force. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. complained in 1962 that there were no African-Americans among the sixty-four executives planning the fair. As we have seen, Moses did not respond well to criticism. In a public speech, he assailed “professional integrationists who charge us with color bias because we don’t appoint Negro vice-presidents as such, and seek to compel us to dictate and police the employment and administrative practices of every exhibitor and concessionaire, foreign and domestic, at the fair.”<sup>29</sup>

Like many employers, Moses clearly had not interpreted the 1945 Law against Discrimination to mean that businesses actually had to hire black people.<sup>30</sup> Note his use of the phrase “as such,” which suggests opposition to black inclusion as a goal in itself, which was of course the logic of civil rights enforcement. He used the phrase in a similar fashion in his book *Working for the People* (1956) in describing his opposition to the proportional-representation method of electing the New York City Council. Civil rights advocates had applauded its ability to produce a more ethnically, racially, and religiously representative body, but Moses, echoing other critics, argued that “proportional representation is the architect of communism and disorder. Its twin objectives are to enfranchise minorities as such and to kill big parties.”<sup>31</sup> Clearly, we are supposed to see the first objective as problematic. But even Moses himself could not turn back the tide of the civil rights movement. A month after Powell’s protest, Moses hired an African-American, Dr. George H. Bennett, for the international division of the world’s fair; moreover, the Urban League announced that it had reached an agreement with the commissioner “insuring equal access to all jobs connected with the exhibit.” The league credited community groups, which had threatened to picket the fair and lobby the White House, with the victory.<sup>32</sup>

It is troubling that the man who built so much of the New York metropolitan area’s infrastructure was influenced by the long arm of Jim Crow in shaping national racial ideology and practices. Many of Robert Moses’s most admired creations have racist overtones. The beautiful Jones Beach State Park he built in the 1930s today has more than twenty-three thousand parking spaces and still no easy access by public transportation. Robert Caro’s view that Moses intended to discourage nonwhite attendance, although based on anecdotal evidence, gains credence from the very well-documented history of racial discrimination and exclusion that surrounded so many of Moses’s undertakings.<sup>33</sup> But the built environment of New York City is not forever bound by Moses’s vision. Certainly, his parkways, expressways, bridges, and tunnels are traversed by the most diverse population in the world—some of whom might be on their way to Jones Beach. And his numerous housing developments have become increasingly multiracial.

Robert Moses fashioned a city, a region, a state that all future New Yorkers will use, regardless of his original intent. Moreover, some of his projects that were sharply criticized for uprooting and destroying communities of color—

especially the Sheridan Expressway in the Bronx and the Gowanus Expressway in Brooklyn—are now targets for reform by vibrant diverse communities. In the Bronx, the goal is to demolish an ill-conceived, underused expressway; in Brooklyn, the goal is to move the Gowanus underground.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, an important and enduring lesson of the Moses era is that popular participation and oversight of urban governance cannot be thwarted by back-room deals or elite fiats, at least not for long, and not forever.

## NOTES

1. Moses, “What’s the Matter with New York?” 8.
2. *Ibid.*, 9.
3. Moses’s addition remains in the New York State constitution.
4. Moses, “What’s the Matter with New York?” 9.
5. For example, in 1945 the state enacted the Law against Discrimination, which barred discrimination by private employers and labor unions, and it explicitly defined employment as a “civil right” under the 1938 state constitution. Moses was a vocal opponent of this historic first state fair-employment law in the country. Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 18–19.
6. Moses, “What’s the Matter with New York?” 11.
7. Caro, *Power Broker*, 510–14.
8. Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 82–84.
9. Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 83–84.
10. A recent book on this subject is Ira Katznelson’s *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Norton, 2005).
11. Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Douglas S. Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
12. Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 113.
13. *Ibid.*, 122–23.
14. *Ibid.*, 122.
15. *Ibid.*, 124.
16. *Ibid.*, 128.
17. *Dorsey v. Stuyvesant Town Corp.*, 299 N.Y. 512; 87 N.E.2d 541; 1949 N.Y. LEXIS 961; 14 A.L.R.2d 133.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 135.
21. Rodgers, *Robert Moses*, 215–16.
22. Caro, *Power Broker*, 970–76; “City Lags in Help to Slum Tenants,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1954.
23. *New York Times*, June 18, 1958; and Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 226. The earlier destruction of the predominantly black San Juan Hill neighborhood in order to build the Abraham Lincoln Houses near Lincoln Center also produced race-based tenant relocation. See Elizabeth Hinton, “Bomb Blast in San Juan Hill: the Destruction of Manhattan’s Other ‘Black Belt,’ 1900–1948,” (bachelor’s thesis, New York University, 2005).
24. Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 123–24.
25. “Luxury Housing Opens in Harlem,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1958; “Builder to Start Harlem Project,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1957.
26. Ernest Dunbar, “The View from Lenox Terrace,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1968. Peter Eisenstadt has noted Moses’s leadership in the construction of Rochdale Village, a racially integrated housing cooperative in South Jamaica, Queens, which opened in 1963. He argues that Moses’s views on race had not really changed, but that he had come to believe that resisting fair housing laws was no longer worth the effort. Eisenstadt, “Rochdale Village and the Fate of Integrated Housing in New York City” (2006), unpublished paper.
27. Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 102–4; and Caro, *Power Broker*, 736.
28. Caro, *Power Broker*, 1062; and Eisenstadt, “Rochdale Village.”
29. “Powell Inquiry Set on Negroes at Fair,” *New York Times*, March 12, 1962.
30. Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 99–104.
31. Moses, *Working for the People*, 17.
32. *New York Times*, April 21, 1962.
33. Caro, *Power Broker*, 318–19.
34. Omar Freilla, “Burying Robert Moses’s Legacy in New York City,” in Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres, eds., *Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism and New Routes to Equity* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2004), 75–98.

# REVOLT OF THE URBS

## ROBERT MOSES AND HIS CRITICS

ROBERT FISHMAN

In the end, Robert Moses was a gift to his critics, but, for most of his career, his critics were a gift to him. As political scientist Raymond Moley observed, Moses “utterly destroyed the old concept that a public administrator must avoid controversy.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, Moses needed his critics because they had a vital role to play in the self-created drama of the man the *Daily News* called “Big Bob the Builder.”<sup>2</sup> Moley’s uncontroversial public administrators of the past had by preference worked behind the scenes, patiently assembling broad coalitions to support the long-term infrastructure projects—water, sewers, docks, bridges, subways—that had transformed New York. Moses by preference always “went public,” turning every project into a ritual combat in which he personified progress, efficiency, rationality, and a disinterested zeal for the public good. His opponents, by contrast, were cast as “selfish and shortsighted”<sup>3</sup> or, as he once put it, “partisans, enthusiasts, crackpots, fanatics, or other horned cattle.”<sup>4</sup>

In the course of his career, Moses perfected his own version of the master politician’s art of rhetorical jujitsu: turning the force of an attack back on the attacker. This political theater emerged fully developed in Moses’s first great joust with his critics, the battle to run the Southern State Parkway in Long Island through the elite estates of Wheatley Hills in the 1920s. A prudent civil servant would have worked to enlist the area’s wealthy landowners in the park project and gratefully accepted whatever land they chose to donate or sell. Moses, by contrast, boldly threatened to appropriate whatever land *he* wanted. When the estate owners protested, they were greeted with a headline in the *New York Times*: “A Few Rich Golfers Accused of Blocking Plan for State Park.”<sup>5</sup> After that, the impassioned protests of “abuse of power” from critics like W. Kingsland Macy only reinforced the negative

image that Moses had thrust on them and burnished his own reputation for advancing the public good.<sup>6</sup>

Moses was thus able to combine the high-minded idealism of a public servant with the insults and innuendos of a Tammany politician. But Macy and the other “rich golfers” were only the first in a series of critics who found themselves unwilling players in the drama written by Big Bob the Builder. The estate owners were followed by the townships that controlled the Long Island waterfront that Moses wanted for Jones Beach; they were snobs, reactionaries, and profiteers standing in the way of healthy recreation for the people. Then came the gift that kept on giving: the New York City politicians whose graft, ignorance, and laziness had stalled the great Triborough Bridge project, wasted the people’s resources, and deprived the city of the key transportation link that it needed. In this fight, Moses was able to defeat even the greatest master of political jujitsu at the national level, Franklin D. Roosevelt. When in 1934 Roosevelt attempted through his secretary of the interior, Harold Ickes, to remove Moses from the Triborough Bridge Authority<sup>7</sup>—“the President has a feeling of dislike of him that I haven’t seen him express with respect to any other person,” Ickes wrote in his diary—Moses responded by casting FDR as yet another politician attempting to interfere for selfish ends with the People’s Administrator. With the support of Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia, Moses forced Ickes and Roosevelt to back down.<sup>8</sup>

Moses even used his critics’ frequent charges of bullying and disrespect for the law to his own advantage. James Scheuer, a housing activist and later a congressman, asserted, “I cannot think of a public servant whose talent for colorful vituperation has been so frequently exercised since Catiline berat-



E-38. Washington Square Park and environs, looking north, 1925. Fairchild Aerial Surveys, Inc.

ed the Roman Senate 2,000 years ago.”<sup>9</sup> But far from moderating his “colorful vituperation,” Moses flaunted his bullying. He claimed with great effect to be a bully for the people, and his many critics counted as testimony to his effectiveness in getting things done. One astute observer even compared Moses to Baron Eugène Haussmann, who had transformed nineteenth-century Paris under the authoritarian government of Louis-Napoléon. Haussmann’s “dictatorial talents enabled him to accomplish a vast amount of work in an incredibly short time, but they also made him many enemies, for he was in the habit of riding rough-shod over all opposition.” That observer was Robert Moses himself.<sup>10</sup>

The drama of Big Bob the Builder required the audience’s continuing belief that Moses, like Haussmann, was engaged in a series of great works as necessary for the greatness and even the survival of twentieth-century New York as Haussmann’s boulevards and sewers had been for nineteenth-century Paris. As long as that belief remained strong, even devastating criticism could be marginalized. In 1951 and in 1954, for example, the Women’s City Club of New York produced two stunningly documented reports on the human consequences of forced relocation, especially on poor black households, for the Manhattantown urban renewal project on the Upper West Side. But these reports did not challenge the basic logic of slum clearance and radical rebuilding that made such relocations inevitable. The reports in the end argued only for more efficient relocation, i.e., more resources for the man who supervised relocation, Robert Moses.<sup>11</sup>

As his critics eventually realized, Moses could be challenged only by a fundamental critique of the urban doctrines that he represented. Moses by his own choice *personified* those doctrines, and thus opened for scrutiny the

nexus of planning power and doctrine that in other cities and at the national level was carefully concealed among a score of anonymous bureaucracies. (With perhaps greater wisdom, Moses’s great rival in the New York region, Austin Tobin, always masked his power behind the institutional facade of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which he headed).<sup>12</sup> The ultimate story of Moses and his critics was how the critics rewrote the drama of Big Bob the Builder, casting him as the principal villain in their own production of “The People versus the Planner.”

This rewriting was a long process, and the final script was not produced until the appearance of Robert Caro’s biography in 1974. But for me, the key incident was one that Caro omits completely from his book: the battle of Washington Square, the long-running controversy, from 1952 to 1958, over Moses’s attempt to push a highway through Washington Square Park (fig. E-38). Lower Fifth Avenue stopped at the park, with only a carriageway used mostly as a bus turnaround continuing to the narrow streets to the south. Moses sought to expand the carriageway into a four-lane arterial that would continue as Fifth Avenue South past his Southeast Washington Square urban renewal project, cutting through what is now Soho and ultimately linking up with his cherished elevated Lower Manhattan Expressway at Broome Street.

Today, we are shocked that a parks commissioner could have proposed an act that Lewis Mumford rightly called “civic vandalism . . . [that would have] cut the Square into two unrelated halves . . . endangered pedestrians and children and reduced, by many hundred square feet, an inadequate—and therefore doubly precious—recreation space.”<sup>13</sup> Moses could hardly have been surprised, when word of his plan leaked out in 1952, that a small but impassioned group of Greenwich Village mothers whose children depended

on the park went to the city's Board of Estimate to win a temporary reprieve. As a *New York Times* headline announced in May 1952, "Villagers Defeat New Traffic Plan/Project that Would Put New Roads in Washington Sq. Park Upset by Women."<sup>14</sup>

This "upset" was part of Moses's *modus operandi* with his critics. A local group was provoked into raising objections, and then their objections were relentlessly criticized and marginalized by Moses and his allies. The Washington Square Committee, as the women called themselves, would join the Long Island golfers and the Tammany politicians as one more manifestation of Moses's superior wisdom and concern for the greater good of all New Yorkers. But in the unique setting of Greenwich Village, Moses's jujitsu was finally turned against him.

The women's effort to save their park became a rallying point for a full-scale critique of the Moses approach, drawing in such figures as Mumford, William H. Whyte, Charles Abrams, and, above all, one of the park mothers, Jane Jacobs. It was in defense of Washington Square that these and other activists first brought to the fore the issues that now define American urbanism: the primacy of diverse neighborhoods as the real essence of the city; the privileging of the pedestrian and mass transit over the automobile; the meaning and importance of public space; the value of the traditional streetscape over the towers-in-the-park of urban renewal; and the wisdom of the citizen over and against the top-down expertise of the planner. As Charles Abrams said in a remarkable 1958 speech titled "Washington Square and the Revolt of the Urbs," which anticipated not only Jacobs's work but virtually all subsequent urban theory, "It is no surprise that, at long last, rebellion is brewing in America, that the American city is the battleground for the preservation of diversity, and that Greenwich Village should be its Bunker Hill. . . . In the battle of Washington Square, even Moses is yielding, and when Moses yields, God must be near at hand."<sup>15</sup>

Like so many other decisive battles, the battle of Washington Square was fought over terrain that was seemingly marginal to the main conflict. In Moses's highway master plan of 1955 for the New York region, the *Joint Study of Arterial Facilities*,<sup>16</sup> Fifth Avenue South is a minor connection compared to such megaprojects as the Cross-Bronx and the (never-built) Cross-Brooklyn expressways, the Narrows bridge, and his plans for gargantuan elevated Lower Manhattan and Mid-Manhattan expressways. Yet, there is a deeper appropriateness that Moses wound up being bogged down in Greenwich Village. The very scope of his 1955 map implied that only the regional scale mattered, and that only an administrator with the power and vision to see the region as a whole could transform New York into a modern metropolitan area. But ever since escaping the relentless order of the 1811 Commissioner's grid, the Village had exemplified the importance of unique neighborhood character in the larger metropolis—what Jane Jacobs would celebrate as "close-grained diversity."<sup>17</sup> In taking on Greenwich Village, Moses had found his Opposite.

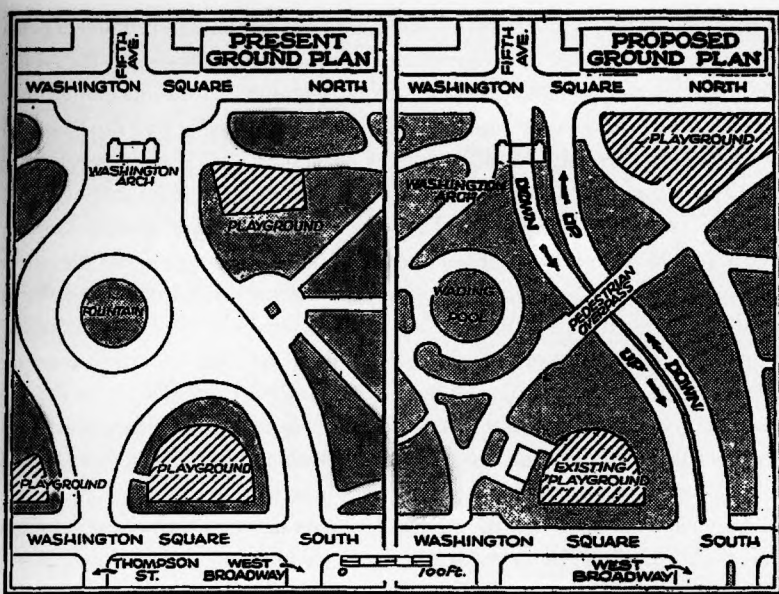
The regional vision that Moses was attempting to impose in the 1950s had undergone significant changes since the 1920s era of the Long Island parkways and Jones Beach. Then, he had viewed the automobile and the highway as a means for the middle class to escape the city for its unspoiled hinterlands.

In the 1930s, his work on the Triborough Bridge led him toward a more radically modernist view of automobile transportation and of the city in general. Like so many self-proclaimed hardheaded realists, Moses was increasingly captivated by a vision—the vision of a city of towers-in-parks and expressways—that derived ultimately from Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine* (1922) and *Plan Voisin for Paris* (1925) and the CIAM (Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne) Athens Charter (1933). As specified by Le Corbusier's disciple (and later dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design) José Luis Sert in *Can Our Cities Survive?* (1942), this doctrine held that the typical urban fabric of New York City was fundamentally obsolete, its narrow streets and dense dwellings a failing relic of the horse-and-buggy era. Like Sert, Moses rejected the solution put forward by Lewis Mumford and Rexford Tugwell to deconcentrate the central city and move population and industry to "New Towns" spread throughout the region.

Moses, again following the CIAM vision, proclaimed instead that "our big cities must be rebuilt, not abandoned."<sup>18</sup> Even he never proposed the complete demolition of New York's urban fabric, but he did envision massive slum clearances that would open up whole districts for the modernist landscape of towers-in-the-park and wide express highways that would save New York as a great city. This landscape first began to take shape in the low-rent housing projects built after the Housing Act of 1937, and Moses himself promoted its first definitive version, the highrise towers-in-the-park for the middle class of Stuyvesant Town (1947), sited on the East River adjacent to the FDR Drive.<sup>19</sup>

Postwar national politics created the dizzying prospect that the federal government might be the chief funding source for the large-scale urban transformation that Moses envisioned. The Housing Act of 1949 had the federal government assuming all the capital costs for low-rent projects as well as deeply subsidizing the acquisition of expensive urban land by eminent domain for middle-class Title I projects. When the Interstate Highway System was proposed by the Eisenhower administration, Moses became the principal spokesman of the U.S. Conference of Mayors in urging that the interstates "must go right through cities and not around them."<sup>20</sup> To secure urban support for passage of the bill, Congress agreed with Moses, which meant that his megaprojects like the Lower and Mid-Manhattan expressways would now be eligible for 90 percent federal funding. Although President Harry Truman had earlier rejected the idea of coordinating urban slum clearance and highway projects at the federal level, Moses's position as both chair of the Mayor's Slum Clearance Committee and Construction Coordinator gave him exactly those combined powers to rebuild New York as the world's great modernist city.<sup>21</sup>

With such sweeping visions, Moses might have overlooked the small patch of green called Washington Square Park. But the way this patch interrupted the flow of traffic seems to have offended him. As early as 1935, he proposed widening the streets around the park for improved traffic flow, but opposition from New York University students and faculty deterred him.<sup>22</sup> By the early 1950s, however, he had identified twelve acres of industrial lofts and aging apartments south of the square as a "blighted" area to be demolished for a middle-class Title I project. As modernist urbanism recommend-



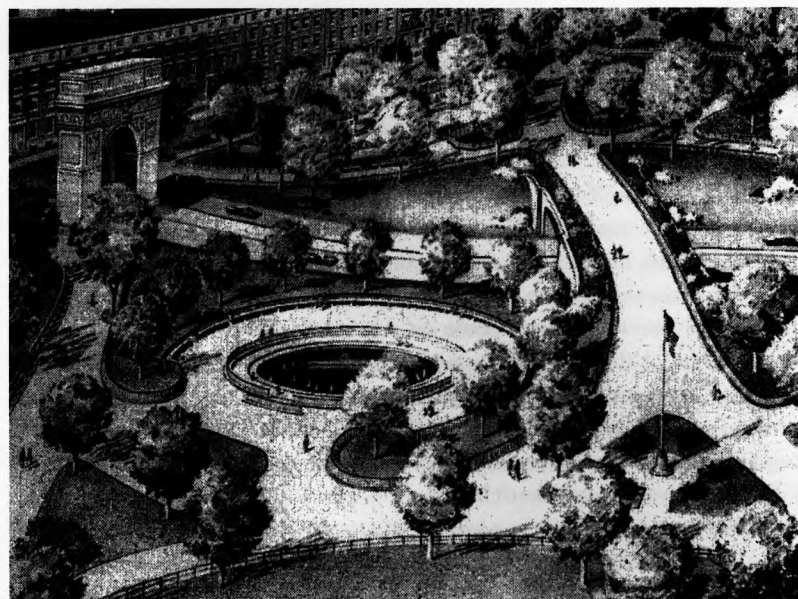
E-39. Comparative plans of Washington Square Park with Moses's proposed alterations at right, 1955

ed, he intended to coordinate slum clearance and new towers with a new highway. He would cut a four-lane highway straight through the park, continuing through the “blight” and “industrial slums” we now call Soho to link up with the projected Lower Manhattan Expressway (figs. E-39, 41).<sup>23</sup>

But this “civic vandalism,” as Mumford called it, never happened, and the critic who did the most to stop it was not Mumford, Jane Jacobs, or any other famous author, but a now-forgotten local activist named Shirley Hayes. An aspiring actress who gave up her career to be the mother of four children, she personified the Village's unique “social capital.”<sup>24</sup> For more than six years, she defied Moses to keep her Washington Square Park Committee active and united, and yet her name does not even appear in the index to Caro's 1,250-page book.

Moreover, Hayes's contributions were more than organizational. A week after her initial success at the Board of Estimate in May 1952, she put forward the demand that would define the controversy and lead eventually to her improbable victory. After several other groups had suggested smaller and less obtrusive roadways, Hayes proclaimed that the goal of the committee was not to negotiate with Moses for a *better* road but to ban *all* traffic through Washington Square and to resist any attempt to widen the roads around the square.<sup>25</sup> This simple demand had deep significance, because it implicitly elevated the needs of this single neighborhood—a safe place for children to play, a lively place for adults to congregate—over the increased traffic flow that Moses saw as imperative for the city as a whole. “Cities are created by and for traffic,”<sup>26</sup> he proclaimed in his version of Le Corbusier's motto “The city that achieves speed achieves success.”<sup>27</sup> Hayes and her allies would define urban success in very different terms.

Jane Jacobs had a vivid memory of the only time she saw Moses in person: when, to justify the road through Washington Square, he appeared



E-40. Hulan Jack's revised proposal of roadway, 1957

before a meeting of the city's Board of Estimate that Hayes, Jacobs, and other activists had made necessary. “He stood up there gripping the railing, and he was furious at the effrontery of this [opposition] and I guess he could already see that his plan was in danger. Because he was saying ‘There is nobody against this—NOBODY, NOBODY, NOBODY, but a bunch of, a bunch of MOTHERS!’ And then he stomped out.”<sup>28</sup>

Urbanist Marshall Berman has rightly emphasized women's perspective in Jacobs's work, and it was precisely the ability of this “bunch of mothers” to see what was best for their children and for their neighborhood that gave them the critical faculty to challenge conventional planning wisdom.<sup>29</sup> Moses was clearly unaware that he was now facing not just the local protesters he was used to pushing aside but the mother of all citizen activist groups. This group could mobilize every form of influence from intellectuals ruminating on the meaning of the city to hardball politicians and backroom operators. As Hayes and her allies well understood, Moses as parks commissioner and the compliant traffic commissioner T. T. Wiley could not simply implement the road plan. That required the approval of the Board of Estimate, the powerful body composed of Mayor Robert Wagner Jr., two members elected city-wide, and the five borough presidents. Packing these meetings with energized protesters became the committee's principal form of political theater, with the “performances” spilling out into numerous protest meetings held throughout the Village and, of course, in the park itself.

The success of these protests depended to a significant degree upon the activist role of the first-in-the-nation alternative neighborhood newspaper, the *Village Voice*. The *Voice* began publication in 1955, and its editor, Dan Wolf, immediately took up the cause of saving the park.<sup>30</sup> The *New York Times* would cover the story with competence and objectivity, always giving the protesters' side as well as Moses's. But the *Voice* opened its columns and editorial pages



to Hayes and her colleagues, not only to publicize rallies but to engage the larger issues raised by the controversy. *Voice* readers found, in articles sandwiched between ads for Dizzy Gillespie at the Village Vanguard, Sonny Rollins at the Five Spot, and Brecht and Ionesco at off-Broadway theaters, the *intellectual* opposition to Moses that would transform American urbanism.

Dan Wolf himself initiated this opposition with an editorial in the paper's third issue that tried to define the special role of the park in the neighborhood. Although he does not use the term *public space*, his editorial is perhaps the earliest insertion of that key concept into the Washington Square debate and into the larger debate on American urbanism. The editorial is also notable for the way that he ties the idea of public space to the parallel ideals of community, identity, and diversity. "It is our view," Wolf begins, "that any serious tampering with Washington Square Park will mark the true beginning of the end of Greenwich Village as a *community*. . . . Greenwich Village will become another characterless place." As he goes on to explain, "Washington Square Park is a symbol of unity in diversity. Within a block of the Arch are luxury apartments, cold-water flats, nineteenth-century mansions, a university, and a nest of small businesses. It brings together Villagers of enormously varied tastes and backgrounds. At best, it helps people to appreciate the wonderful complexity of New York. At worst, it reminds them of the distance they have to cover in their relations with other people."<sup>31</sup>

A subsequent Wolf editorial brought into focus what would be another great theme both for this protest and for the development of American urbanism: citizen participation. Wolf was reacting against a statement made by Moses's trusted aide Stuart Constable to the *World Telegram and Sun*: "I don't care how those people [in Greenwich Village] feel. They can't agree on what should be done. They're a nuisance. They're an awful bunch of artists down there." Wolf replied, "Not only do we applaud Mr. Constable's outspokenness in this matter, but we feel he is right when he says that Villagers are a nuisance. Anyone who joins in community action to preserve local traditions and resources is always a terrible nuisance to The Authorities. We hope there are thousands of nuisances like that within a stone's throw of this office."<sup>32</sup>

Wolf backed the force of his rhetoric by opening the *Voice* to extended statements by sympathetic writers and planners who reinforced the radical idea that Moses, in fact, did not embody Progress and asserted that the local "nuisances" had a far better idea of the larger urban common good than he did. The best examples of these once-radical challenges came in a panel discussion at the New School that the Joint Emergency Committee to Close Washington Square Park to Traffic—an umbrella group that united Hayes's organization with other sympathetic groups—organized in June 1958. The panelists included the anthropologist Margaret Mead, the journalist and urbanist William H. Whyte, and Charles Abrams, the housing activist and chair of the New York State Commission against Discrimination, whose talk was reprinted in full by the paper.

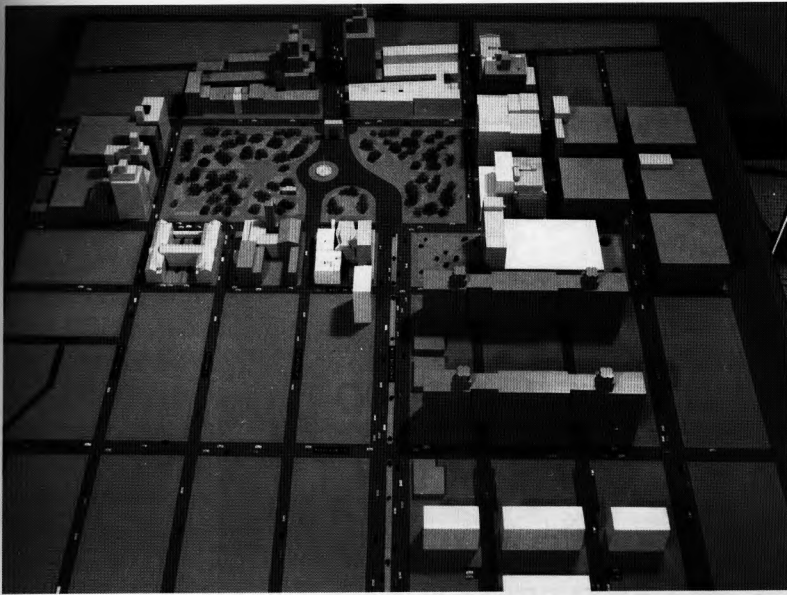
Whyte introduced the then-novel theme that the towers-in-the-park middle-class housing planned for Washington Square South did not embody progress or the salvation of the city. The projects were, he pointed out, "planned by people who don't like cities, and in far too many cases they are

not design[ed] for people at all. If you've seen one urban redevelopment project you've seen almost all. No hint of tradition, nothing native in the architecture is allowed to interrupt their vast redundancy . . . no sense of intimacy or of things being on a human scale." The solution, he told the "packed audience," was to "raise hell!"<sup>33</sup>

It was Charles Abrams, who raised the most effective hell that evening, with his "Washington Square and the Revolt of the Urbs." Abrams was the "anti-Moses," a professor of planning at Columbia University who moved in the same privileged circles as Moses, but who used his influence to fight racial discrimination and to preserve urban diversity.<sup>34</sup> His book *Forbidden Neighbors* (1955) remains the locus classicus for the whole fair-housing movement in cities and suburbs, and his "Revolt of the Urbs" is for me the locus classicus for all subsequent critiques of Moses. In fewer than two thousand words, he sounded all the themes that authors from Mumford to Jacobs to Caro would use to radically reinterpret Moses and his works.

Abrams began with the ringing proclamation of "the revolt of the urbs" as "the revolt of urban people against the destruction of their values; of the pedestrian against the automobile; the community against the project; the home against the soulless multiple dwelling; the neighborhood against the wrecking crew; of human diversity against substandard standardization."<sup>35</sup> The talk is perhaps most remarkable for its brilliant melding of a planning critique with a larger social vision. He ties the Village's "rediscovery of what is good in our cities" to a larger stand against the "heedless destruction that has been the theme of the slide-rule era 1935–1958": "The old city could have been made more livable but was subordinated in national concern for the new suburb. Instead of improving the city, the motif of the past 23 years has been to flee it and hem it in. In the process, the city became the residuum to which the poorer people were relegated . . . and federal aid was geared toward clearance, not restoration, and to elimination, not discovery." Yet, this discovery was being made, in spite of Robert Moses, by a new group of citizens, the "urbs," who were learning to value place as we would now put it—"community roots, a new social interaction . . . local schools, parks, and playgrounds"—and to fight the "reckless destruction of their good existing buildings." His conclusion would resound in a thousand other threatened neighborhoods: "Greenwich Village is sound. It needs no broad highways, no great projects, no straightening out of streets. Its values must be rediscovered, and built upon, not destroyed."

Just as Abrams and Whyte were broadening their criticism of Moses to encompass the whole philosophy of urbanism that he personified, the four-year battle over the road through the park was coming to a climax. Moses used his control over the process to alternate long delays with abruptly scheduled key votes in the City Planning Commission and the Board of Estimate, testing his opponents' patience and their ability to respond quickly. Far from compromising, he now insisted that the road be *widened* to 48 feet, but run through the park in a trench below grade, crossed only by a few pedestrian bridges. Moses nevertheless seemed to acquiesce when the Manhattan borough president, Hulan Jack, the highest ranking black elected official in the city, proposed a 36-foot-wide "compromise" roadway (fig. E-40). By May 1957, Jack's compromise appeared to have won over "respon-



E-41. Model of Washington Square Park, with existing through road, NYU buildings south of square, and Washington Square Southeast Title I at right, April 1961

sible” public opinion and even several Village groups.<sup>36</sup> But the compromise was destroyed by Moses himself when, in November 1957, he sent Jack a condescending “Dear Hulan” letter in which he instructed the borough president that only a 48-foot road would do.<sup>37</sup>

If Moses thought he could now get all that he wanted, he was very much surprised by the effectiveness of the “bunch of mothers” who outmaneuvered him at the supposed height of his influence. Hayes and the Village activist Raymond S. Rubinow had formed a Joint Emergency Committee that not only succeeded in keeping the Village united behind the demand to ban all traffic but managed to secure thirty thousand signatures on a petition to close the park to traffic.<sup>38</sup> The joint committee then succeeded in out-broking the power broker by putting pressure on the boss of the city’s Democratic machine, Carmine De Sapio. This “last of the bosses” lived in the Village, and his power base was thus vulnerable to the Village Independent Democrats, like the young Ed Koch, who were mobilizing against him. To defend himself, De Sapio threw his support to the mothers.<sup>39</sup> He appeared before a “raucous” Board of Estimate meeting on September 18, 1958, and, as the *Voice* put it, “made an impassioned plea for human values.”<sup>40</sup> Jack then withdrew his road proposal and instead supported an “experimental” closing of the park to traffic.<sup>41</sup> On November 1, 1958, the Village celebrated its victory as De Sapio held one end of a ceremonial ribbon and Jane Jacobs’s daughter, Mary, representing the children symbolically reclaiming their park, held the other that closed the park to traffic.<sup>42</sup>

Moses’s defeat was not yet complete. A year before the closing, he had predicted that such a move would “result in a traffic mess as bad as anywhere in the city” and reflected that “letting this mess develop might be the best way to educate the public under the democratic process.”<sup>43</sup> When the road through the park was closed, Moses demanded to widen the streets

around the park “with the park corners rounded to permit free flow of traffic.”<sup>44</sup> But if Moses really expected the neighborhood to reverse itself, he was completely mistaken. As Jane Jacobs pointed out, the “mess” never materialized, as cars found alternate routes and people found alternate means of transportation.<sup>45</sup> Dan Wolf at the *Voice* drew this lesson: “Rarely has there been such a clear demonstration of the superior predictive judgment of a community over that of the ‘official’ city experts. . . . Perhaps the greatest significance of the Washington Square fight is the proof that when the common sense and good judgment of citizens in a community are focused on the thorny problems of complicated urban life, they may contribute profoundly to their solutions.”<sup>46</sup> Long before becoming Big Bob the Builder, Robert Moses had concluded his doctoral thesis on the British civil service, written at Columbia in 1914, with an admiring reference to Woodrow Wilson’s contrast between the statesmanship of the expert civil servant versus the mob rule of the masses.<sup>47</sup> Not only did the Washington Square controversy produce a powerful critique of the doctrines of urban renewal that Moses had sought to implement for more than twenty years, but it generated a powerful critique of the ideal of expertise on which he had based his whole career.

The *New York Times* celebrated the closing of Washington Square, with caution. An editorial asserted that “Washington Square was unique, a place that merited exemption from ‘progress,’” and concluded, “This is one neighborhood that is to be allowed to stand still.”<sup>48</sup> But if the *Times* was implying that other neighborhoods should not seek to share the same exemption, then it too was proved wrong. Washington Square may have been unique, but the Washington Square model for stopping highways proved remarkably reproducible, both in New York City and nationwide. Four years later, the neighborhoods in the path of the Lower Manhattan Expressway employed this model—a solid bloc of energized citizens who then impel their local representatives to forceful opposition—to stop this key link in Moses’s vision of arterial highways that “go right through cities.” Backed by more than six hundred of his constituents in Little Italy, the assemblyman Louis DeSalvio told the Board of Estimate in December 1962, “except for one old man, I have been unable to find anyone of technical competence who is truly for this so-called expressway, and this old man is a cantankerous, stubborn old man . . . [and] the time has come for the stubborn old man to realize that too many of his technicians’ dreams turn out to be nightmares for the City.”<sup>49</sup>

Moses was certainly not alone in his continuing support for the Lower Manhattan Expressway—the project was not definitively stopped until 1969<sup>50</sup>—but he was indeed increasingly isolated among urbanists, as writers involved in the battle of Washington Square brought the key themes of the debate to a national audience. In the midst of his efforts to prevent Moses’s “civic vandalism,” Lewis Mumford published perhaps his greatest single essay in his long career, “The Highway and the City” (1958). “The fatal mistake we have been making is to sacrifice every other form of transportation to the motorcar,” Mumford proclaimed. “Today, the highway engineers have no excuse for invading the city with their regional and transcontinental trunk systems.” Instead, he called for a *balanced* system of transportation: the revival of mass transit in cities, and the recognition that for “urban space,



E-42. Brochure cover showing Lower Manhattan Expressway (proposed), looking east from above the West Side Highway, ca. 1959. Rendering by Julian Michele. Courtesy MTA Bridges and Tunnels Special Archive

short distances, and high densities” the pedestrian must be at the center of transportation planning.<sup>51</sup>

The work that truly brought the battle of Washington Square into the heart of planning theory was Jane Jacobs’s *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). Compared to Shirley Hayes, Jacobs had been more a foot soldier than a leader in the actual battle, collecting petitions from her neighbors and speaking out at local rallies and the Board of Estimate. (Her first mention in the *New York Times* referred to her as Mrs. James Jacobs.<sup>52</sup>) Although *Death and Life* presented a national perspective on urban issues, it was dedicated to her family and to New York City. The struggle to save the unique built environment of the Village and its park was the leitmotif that ran through almost every chapter. Mumford once defined the city as a place where significant conversations could take place.<sup>53</sup> One way of measuring Jacobs’s achievement is to say that *Death and Life* is the distillation of all those conversations that the fight with Moses generated. Jacobs turned the Village

experience into a coherent philosophy of urbanism that had the power to displace even the great CIAM manifestos of Sert and Le Corbusier.

William H. Whyte had asserted that the towers-in-the-park projects were failures. It was Jacobs who demonstrated in detail why they failed and why the “obsolete” streets and sidewalks of the Village provided a much more complex urban environment. Dan Wolf had perceived the unique value of public space for a community. Jacobs broadened his insights by taking the issue of public space out of the parks and squares and onto every sidewalk in the city. Charles Abrams recognized that “the values [of Greenwich Village] must be rediscovered and built upon, not destroyed.” It was Jacobs who fully accomplished this rediscovery, analyzing the way every element of the “obsolete” Greenwich Village streetscape—from the “eyes on the street” to the stores on the sidewalk to the narrow roads and mixture of workplaces and residences—fostered the “close-grained diversity” that is the essence of urbanism.

Above all, Jacobs vindicated Shirley Hayes’s original intuition that sav-

ing the park for her children and her neighbors' children was somehow more important than all Moses's megahighways. Where Moses had asserted that "cities are created by and for traffic," Jacobs asserted that they are created by and for neighborhoods, for the intense sociability, diversity, and complexity that only a pedestrian-oriented, densely built city can generate. In one great book, Jacobs completed the "transvaluation of urban values" that a true critique of Moses demanded.

It would be deeply satisfying to end this essay with the observation that Robert Moses fully merits the obloquy that has become the conventional response whenever his name is mentioned. But perhaps he deserves a brief attempt at the fairness that he so seldom accorded to others. We today can only rejoice that he was stopped before he bisected Washington Square Park and, even more, before he bisected Manhattan Island with his two mega-expressways (fig. E-42). But Lewis Mumford, writing in 1959, demanded with impeccable consistency that, once the expressways were stopped, the Narrows bridge, which threatened to displace more than eight thousand people on the Brooklyn side alone, should be stopped also.<sup>54</sup> Today we can hardly imagine the region functioning at all without the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, the Cross-Bronx Expressway, and so many other Moses works. Greenwich Village may not have needed new roads, but the New York region certainly did.

Moses was the last of the driven men who strove with obsessive tenacity to connect New York City to its hinterland and to the nation. His auto obsession was an echo of the canal, bridge, rail, and subway obsessions that in their times successively dominated the city. Precisely because he was stopped by his critics before he could fully implement his single-minded utopia, Moses inadvertently left the New York region with the potential for Mumford's ideal of a balanced system of transportation. New York has thrived since Moses's time in large part by repairing and renewing the already existing rail and subway infrastructure to bring them into balance with his roads. Such balance required the keen attention to urban diversity and complexity that Moses's critics brought to urban theory. As the metropolitan region outgrows its aging infrastructure and bold new initiatives are called for, a place must be found for Moses as well as for his critics.

## NOTES

1. Raymond Moley, foreword to Moses, *Public Works*, xi.
2. *Ibid.*, 292.
3. *Ibid.*, 294.
4. Moses, "Plan and Performance," 128.
5. *New York Times*, January 8, 1925; Caro, *Power Broker*, chap. 11.
6. "Macy Says Moses Abuses his Power," *New York Times*, September 14, 1925.
7. Quoted in Moses, *Public Works*, 174. This strange memoir with extensive documentation is notable for Moses's willingness to quote at length the comments of his critics.
8. Moses, *La Guardia*, 15.
9. "Housing Expert Replies to Moses," *New York Times*, November 12, 1959.
10. Moses, *Public Works*, xi.
11. Black, *Manhattantown Two Years Later*, 32-34; and Women's City Club of New York, *Tenant Relocation at West Park: A Report Based on Field Interviews* (New York: The Club, 1954).
12. Doig, *Empire on the Hudson*, 374-90.
13. Mumford, "The Skyway's the Limit" (1959), in *Highway and the City*, 226.
14. Sanka Knox, "Villagers Defeat New Traffic Plan," *New York Times*, May 28, 1952.
15. Charles Abrams, "Washington Square and the Revolt of the Urbs," *Village Voice*, July 2, 1958.
16. At this point, Moses and the Port Authority were operating in tandem.
17. Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 14.
18. Moses, *Working for the People*, 88.
19. Moses, *Public Works*, 430-33.
20. *Ibid.*, 293.
21. Joel Schwartz's *New York Approach*, Robert Moses, *Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (1993) remains the best analysis of Moses's powers and supporters during this period.
22. "Protests at Park Plans," *New York Times*, April 12, 1935.
23. "Slum Project Assailed," *New York Times*, January 23, 1954.
24. Douglas Martin, "Shirley Hayes, 89; Won Victory over Road," *New York Times*, May 11, 2002.
25. "Traffic Ban Is Aim in Washington Sq.," *New York Times*, June 4, 1952.
26. Moses, *Public Works*, 308.
27. Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning*, trans. from *Urbanisme*, pub'd. 1928 (New York: Payson and Clark, 1929), 114.
28. Jane Jacobs, interview with James Howard Kunstler, Toronto, September 6, 2000, [www.kunstler.com/mags\\_jacobs2.htm](http://www.kunstler.com/mags_jacobs2.htm).
29. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, chap. 5. Berman's pages on Robert Moses and the Expressway World (290-311) remain the most trenchant cultural critique of Moses.
30. Kevin McAuliffe, *The Great American Newspaper: The Rise and Fall of the Village Voice* (New York: Scribner, 1978), 91-97.
31. Dan Wolf, "The Park," *Village Voice*, November 9, 1955.
32. Dan Wolf, "Those People Down There," *Village Voice*, May 30, 1956.
33. William H. Whyte, Jr., quoted in "Projects Assailed as 'Dull Utopias' at Packed Meeting," *Village Voice*, July 2, 1958.
34. A. Scott Henderson, *Housing and the Democratic Ideal: The Life and Thought of Charles Abrams* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
35. Abrams, "Washington Square."
36. "Road Through Square Likely," *Village Voice*, May 1, 1957.
37. Murray Illson, "Moses Fights Jack on Roadway Plan," *New York Times*, November 2, 1957.
38. Charles G. Bennett, "Showdown Looms in Washington Sq.," *New York Times*, September 16, 1958. For Rubinow, see Robert McG. Thomas, Jr., "Raymond S. Rubinow, Master of Civic Causes," *New York Times*, April 8, 1996.
39. Clayton Knowles, "Hearing Date Set on Village Road," *New York Times*, September 12, 1958.
40. Dan Wolf, "Villagers Win Major Victory," *Village Voice*, September 24, 1958.
41. Charles G. Bennett, "Washington Sq. Traffic to Halt while Road Issue Is Decided," *New York Times*, October 24, 1958.
42. Mary Perot Nichols, "City Closed Square Saturday," *Village Voice*, November 5, 1958; "Symbolic Ribbon Ties Off Sq. as Hundreds Celebrate Ban on Traffic," *New York Times*, November 2, 1958.
43. Joseph C. Ingraham, "Moses Says Jack Reneges on Road," *New York Times*, December 24, 1957.
44. "Moses' Road Plan for Park Revived," *New York Times*, September 24, 1959.
45. Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, chap. 18.
46. Dan Wolf, "One Month Later," *Village Voice*, November 26, 1958.
47. Moses, *Civil Service of Great Britain*, 134.
48. "Washington Square," *New York Times*, April 11, 1959.
49. Louis DeSalvio, quoted in Moses, *Public Works*, 307-8. Strangely enough, Moses quotes DeSalvio's polemic at length, perhaps only so that he can then denounce DeSalvio's "personal denunciation, billingsgate and libel." Old habits die hard.
50. Maynard T. Robison, "Rebuilding Lower Manhattan" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1976), chap. 5.
51. Mumford, *Highway and the City*, 247, 249, 254.
52. "De Sapio Supports Study," *New York Times*, December 20, 1957. In addition to De Sapio and Jacobs, Victor Gruen also spoke out against the road at this meeting.
53. Mumford, *City in History*, 117.
54. Mumford, "The Skyway's the Limit," 227-29.

# ROBERT MOSES AND CITY PLANNING

JOEL SCHWARTZ

Joel Schwartz died before he could complete his essay for this volume. We include this unfinished draft, however, as a tribute to his scholarship on Robert Moses and in grateful recognition of the generous spirit of this kind and decent man. KJ

**R**obert Moses was not fond of city planning. This judgment rests largely on Moses's relentless attacks on "the long-haired planners" and his ridicule of their collectivist vision. It also stems from three episodes that evidenced Moses's intolerance of what planning meant. First, he dismissed Rexford Tugwell's cherished "greenbelts" in the late 1930s, which forced the New Dealer to withdraw as chairman of the city planning commission. Second, the aggrandizement of the Federal Title I program, a kingdom over public works after World War II, was unprecedented in the city's history. And third was the dustup with Jane Jacobs over megaliths and an expressway that threatened Greenwich Village. Never mind that Tugwell once called Moses the "second or third best thing that ever happened" to New York; that other cities, like Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit, suffered greater depredations to their neighborhoods from Title I clearance; or that Ms. Jacobs's wrath was more justly aimed at anti-urbanists, like Le Corbusier. The condemnation is chiseled in stone: Robert Moses's hubris, his hijacking of city planning into a vehicle for personal power, destroyed whatever contribution the discipline might have made to the public good and led to, according to Robert Caro, the fall of New York.

The problem with this judgment is that it takes city planning as a tangible ideal, when it was more often a receding goal, unreachable in most American cities and certainly beyond the grasp of New York. Jon A. Peterson in his book *The Birth of City Planning in the United States: 1840-1917* (2003) has emphasized comprehensive planning's far-reaching, multifaceted approach to the large city and its problems: transportation, central business districts, housing and health, neighborhood refinements—all taken together. This was the ideal of the "master plan" as it took form in the years before World War I. But for New York the opportunity for master planning was an

opportunity that had come and gone. Merchants along Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh avenues launched the idea of zoning to protect the Ladies' Mile from obnoxious garment workers. And Dual Subway Contracts put into permanent form the commercial and business concentration in Manhattan as well as linear cities strung along transit routes in the outer boroughs and surrounding counties. Between these two developments, major planning questions within New York had been put to rest.

## PLANNING IN THE 1920s

In the decade after World War I, city planning was torn between mundane pretense and ambitious endeavors in master planning. The creation of vast rail and transit grids trumped major planning issues. The holistic approach had lost ground to narrow specialties like traffic control, sewerage, or tenement reform, when it was not ensnared by zoning and subdivisions. Hundreds of communities took up zoning; in most this amounted to a reactionary zeal to "protect" home grounds against the "invasions" of gas stations, oil tanks, and apartments.

There was, of course, the sustained effort by the Regional Plan Association of New York and Its Environs (RPNY), sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation. RPNY was most notable for its forecasts of continued centripetal growth as Manhattan and Brooklyn spun out their manufacturing plants and port facilities to cheap zones on the periphery. RPNY's rail expert, William R. Wilgus, and its chief theoretician, Thomas Adams, called for rationalization of the region's transport and "reconcentration" of urban densities along outlying rail junctions. RPNY gave the intellectual imprimatur to the most important of metropolitan visions (the latest version of the

city-efficient): the land near Wall Street was too valuable for the tenements that sat on it; the Lower East Side deserved clearance and gentrification; and the working class needed to be shifted to the outer boroughs. To reclaim the evacuated portions of the Lower East Side, Clarence A. Perry called for the rebuilding of the evacuated portions of lower Manhattan into svelte *pieds-à-terre* built as “neighborhood units.” Harland Bartholomew saw six-lane boulevards as the means to smooth commercial traffic, promote abutting real estate, and cordon neighborhoods into natural zones. Local boosters, encouraged by the RPNY, pushed for city-busting highways. One can almost hear their refrain, “We need to destroy the Lower East Side in order to save it.”

Far more grandiose were the plans of a small, clamorous group, the Regional Planning Association of America, led by Clarence Stein, Benton MacKaye, and Lewis Mumford, which came to represent comprehensive planning’s shining image. They admired British reformer Ebenezer Howard’s idea for “garden cities,” tightly controlled places of thirty thousand people surrounded by agricultural greenbelts. Guided by technocrats who understood mankind’s “dominion of the earth,” the RPAA wanted government to transform “sterile villages” in the Hudson and Mohawk valleys into a series of urban diadems linked by “townless highways” and “giant power,” energy of the St. Lawrence, Niagara, and Black rivers to drive light-metals plants or Ford Motor-type assembly-line facilities. From this distance, the RPAA’s vision seems typical of the hubris that took hold between the wars, the faith in big research by government, universities, and foundations that spawned high-brow committees to comment on recent social trends, national resources, even Professor Alfred Kinsey’s collection of twenty thousand sexual histories. These all aimed at achieving the totalist view of American life as an objectified, quantified mechanism. Within that perspective, Moses was a creature of his time.

Moses started out a sterling candidate for the planning cause. At Oxford, he studied public administration, admired the steeliness of the English civil service, and came under the sway of British socialists like Graham Wallas, who coined the term “Great Society” to capture the hopes for a purposeful public sphere. Moses returned to America enamored of this viewpoint and worked for the good-government crowd in New York City. Through family connections, Moses gained notice of Alfred E. Smith, then New York State Assembly leader, who admired the bright, young Columbia Ph.D., made him secretary of his Reconstruction Commission, a position that meant working with the executive budget, the gubernatorial cabinet, the New York Port Authority, state power development, and public housing. Nearly all these plans were swept away by the Warren Harding presidential landslide in 1920; but when Smith again became governor in 1922, he brought Moses back with a renewed agenda. Moses became the architect of the state’s comprehensive park system, the coordinator of regional highways, and chief advocate of the state power authority.

Giving Moses the parks portfolio, Governor Smith expected his protégé to draw together the development of parks across the state. In a series of reports, Moses gave him that much and more. He called upon Albany in 1924 to take a “unified and comprehensive” approach (which became his mantra), enact a state council on parks, and provide for an executive secretary (assuredly him) “to insure the continuance of unified state park plan-

ning.” There was no time to be lost. Burgeoning cities, from New York to Buffalo, needed protected watersheds for their aqueducts and hydropower; and, just as important, recreation grounds for families, children, and seniors. (In this respect, Moses shared the reformers’ concept of the city as an archipelago of settlement areas, each with its own youth program.) For Gotham and its suburbs, Moses sketched a “Grand Circuit” drive, the equivalent of the “townless highway,” from the Bronx River Parkway reaching past Peekskill and circling Bear Mountain State Park, then back again via the Palisades Interstate Parkway.

In his first report of the State Council in 1925, Moses embellished upon the necessity of state-wide planning. Recreation grounds, like the Catskills Forest Preserve and Allegany State Park, flanked the zone of urban growth that spread along the Hudson and Mohawk valleys. Further concentration of commerce, industry, and people within this corridor, accompanied by the continued emptying of the agricultural countryside, gave the State Council both the opportunity and duty to acquire acreage for recreation. Moses even brought the State Council to the verge of city planning, when it called for the coordination of park and parkway plans between city and state officials. It also recommended that New York City purchase the Brooklyn waterfront at Gerritsen Basin and Dyker Beach, and “the remaining wooded areas of Queens and Richmond”—greenbelts by another name. These proposals represented a toe placed into the waters of city planning, but a telling one.

## HOUSING AND RECREATION

One common theme of the Moses story is that he muscled his way to control city planning by the late 1930s. But planning New York-style was Moses’s turf from the start. The city had no planning apparatus until Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia appointed an advisory committee in 1934, the same year that he made Moses parks commissioner with a five-borough (“unified and comprehensive”) authority. In the minds of La Guardia and civic leaders, New York was potentially a galaxy of recreation areas; and this goal, so vital to civic leaders, gave the parks commissioner a mandate to create a far-reaching strategy for parks, parkland, and parkways, which enabled him to retain the moral high ground.

But the many parks and parklands that dominated the process of comprehensive planning more accurately undermined it. At the NYCHA, policies for slum clearance hinged on the fact that the site had a long relationship with a social settlement—and adequate recreation space. As one site-picker put it, they featured “self-contained” stands of slum housing preferably ten blocks in length, “with suitable provision for social life and recreation.”

This site opportunism, in the midst of the Great Depression, made it probable that any Moses plan, any plan, would captivate civic leaders. In the summer of 1938, Moses made no secret of his dismay at the dilatory, uncoordinated approach of the NYCHA toward creating a programmatic message for New York State voters on the Housing Amendment—and a coherent housing program for the city. He urged Mayor La Guardia to revamp the NYCHA by placing it in the hands of seasoned housing administrators or, as he clearly preferred, a single housing czar. Soon after the passage of the Housing

Amendment, Article XVIII of the State Constitution, in November, 1938, Moses unveiled his own plan, calling for a combined, massive housing program of ten low-rent projects and five subsidized limited-dividends with a price tag of \$200 million. As far as he was concerned, he was the only one who understood what Article XVIII heralded: the power of eminent domain to create superblocs and appurtenances for nearby parks. He shrewdly located clearance projects near parks, taking advantage of his control over recreation in the city. Moses made clear to civic leaders that housing without recreation, streets, and related improvements would be a joke. He accused the NYCHA chairman Alfred Rheinlein of shopping around for cheap land without having a definite program. Moses recommended instead that the NYCHA concentrate on a few plots where something could be accomplished for the entire neighborhood.

Of course, Moses also shopped around for park sites and for locations for public housing. His criteria for the latter typically were: a large enough acreage, close to parkland or playground (or better yet, defined by it) and close to industrial properties but not compromised by them (or ruled out altogether as not slum clearance), not crossed by a major thoroughfare that would endanger the project's coherence, the right kind of low-assessed valuations, and convenience to mass transit. Along with all this, Moses wanted to segregate the races. All his criteria were neighborhood-specific; they had virtually nothing to do with city-wide or regional concerns, other than to maintain racial boundaries.

Moses's attitude toward picking housing sites was summed up in a memo written on October 2, 1942. "I have been looking at Astoria for many years—knew it when it was still quite a flourishing place with fine big houses facing Hell Gate and the East River. Then smaller houses and apartments of various kinds were built. Then came our Triborough Bridge, the folding up of the ferry and the decay of the community. Today there is an opportunity to acquire a large tract at low cost, to build a bulkhead out into the river with a park and esplanade along the waterfront, to wipe out some pretty poor buildings, a few fairly good ones, and to build on native land. There can be a really first-rate housing plan here with small ground coverage and three- or at the most four-story buildings. If there is such a thing as drawing people out of certain poor neighborhoods to better ones, it can be done here."

This opportunistic approach to construction projects put Moses on a collision course with the City Planning Commission. During 1939 and 1940, under the chairmanship of Rexford G. Tugwell, the Planning Commission revealed a series of initiatives for slum clearance sites, schools, highways, parkland, and open space in New York's master plan. But many of the key features seemed less than masterful. The January 3, 1940, map adhered to the simplest criteria, which amounted to proximity to recreation space, transportation, and industrial employment. With the Queensbridge Houses in mind, the commission saw an opportunity for more people to live closer to their work, especially the very poor, who needed to save on carfare; and given that their work was generally harder and less rewarding, they needed leisure time and a place for recreation. In effect, the Planning Commission saw the city as static, with neighborhoods that needed refurbishment for a stable population. There would be no grand shift of population; working-class New York would remain where it was, with no forecast of any major

reallocation of the city's population beyond the old observations of the RPNY. The declining industrial sector north of Canal Street deserved recycling as a residential area. The map of highways and expressways would "make it possible to drive speedily from any section of the city to any other on continuous modern highways free of traffic lights."

The Master Plan on Land Use, revealed in fall 1940, featured what was dubbed as "greenbelts" and captured the imagination of the city and the ire of Robert Moses. One of his team, George Spargo, quickly concluded, "This is 98% ivory tower." The plan purported to envision the city's 1938 pattern of land use as it gradually gave way to a first stage in 1965 and a second stage in 1990. Acreage set aside for residences would shrink from 100,000 in 1938 to 91,000 fifty years later. Land needed for commerce and industry would increase from 18,000 to 30,000. But the most dramatic transformation would occur in the outer boroughs, where some 51,000 acres of vacant space would be collapsed to little more than a thousand; and the area devoted to parks, large "open institutions," and cemeteries would nearly triple from 29,000 to over 76,000 acres—equivalent to sixty-five Central Parks. The Planning Commission never spelled out its expectations for the use of such expansive greenbelts; nor for that matter what their relation was to the working class in the projects near the industries along the East River. What, after all, was the meaning of greenbelts—which Ebenezer Howard deemed as forests and agricultural land—in New York City, other than parkland?

The Planning Commission never described how these greenbelts would be realized, through eminent domain (enlarged to encompass whole reservations rather than circumscribed park sites) or through zoning. Or perhaps tax delinquency might be encouraged or even taxation of unearned increments. Moses warned Mayor La Guardia on December 4, 1940, that the Master Plan for parkways and land use was "more than an innocent diversion," that once these projects were on the map, property owners would know the city's official intent. The impact on values, assessments, and likely improvements were all thrown into the bargain. At the December 11, 1940, hearings, Moses pounced on the specter of tax delinquency and municipal bankruptcy.

Tugwell was unsuccessful against Moses's large projects because he was not an infighter and did not have much allegiance to a revitalized New York. He preferred the greenbelt approach because it meshed with the suburban trend and did not raise the challenge of dealing with central city slums. Greenbelts would involve less eminent domain than the proscriptions on property involved in indicative planning of a powerful kind, not to mention the differential taxation of unearned increments.

## TITLE I

The Title I program involved the use of federal subsidies to write down the cost of slum clearance. Moses never spelled out any visionary sense of how the redevelopment would transform New York. In 1942, he told Paul Windels that at least one substantial park or playground area should be included in each large project. This veritable cliché was grasped by Al Smith, who told Governor Herbert Lehman that the project for the Lower East Side should, of course, include recreation space, wide streets, and

“everything else that goes with proper slum clearance.” In late 1942, Moses wrote to Frederick H. Ecker, the Metropolitan Life chief who was scanning the city for another insurance-company housing project. A member of the City Planning Commission and constituting its subcommittee-of-one on housing, Moses had been studying Queens. He alerted Ecker to the possible use of two racetrack sites for a Met Life development related to incidental streets, recreational and other improvements. Although there were two likely sites in southern Queens and a third on the Queens-Nassau border, Ecker focused on the Lower East Side, which he considered having the additional value of anchoring population in Manhattan.

Hardly a community failed to thrust ideas on Moses, the construction coordinator. The list included Chelsea, the Lower East Side, Cooper Square, Delancey Street, Washington Square, Bloomingdale, and Morningside Heights. All featured standard, American Institute of Architects-approved plans with bulldozer clearance on a superblock scale, a high-rise apartment on a large plaza, and an underground garage or interior parking lot. All assumed widespread tenant dislocations to squatter camps in New Jersey (in the case of Washington Square), makeshift rooming houses (Manhattantown), or public housing sites under construction or in blueprint (Morningside Heights). The final version of Delancey Street, sponsored by a local settlement, called for leveling an enormous superblock near a cross-Manhattan expressway. Redevelopments proposed by the city’s planners, in fact, included cross-Manhattan expressways at 125th Street, 97th Street, 47th Street, 34th Street, and Houston Street, none of which ever materialized.

Opportunism rather than grand commercial visions drove Moses’s Title I projects. And he refused to go along with many gargantuan ideas, either because plans went far beyond the city’s overall needs or because they were too taxing on the infrastructure. Moses rejected both the Columbia University plan for the redevelopment and clearance of nearly all of Morningside Heights to 125th Street and the NYU-Bellevue plan for a similar reach along First Avenue. And famously, Moses denied Walter O’Malley’s plans for a new domed stadium for the Brooklyn Dodgers on Flatbush Avenue. Moses concluded that the borough needed housing more than it needed a modern replacement for Ebbets Field.

### ST. JANE AND THE DRAGON

Was Jane Jacobs a heroine or did she merely give an eloquent voice to Greenwich Village chauvinism, bolstered by reform Democratic politics, which combined into a selfish NIMBYism? Although Jacobs attacked the RPAA—Clarence Perry ethos and its contempt for urban dwellers and ordinary contact, her real concern was the preservation of politically functional districts and their reform Democratic clubs. She favored increased population density—beyond the planner’s orthodoxy of twelve people per acre—to promote diversity. Her preference was at least 100 persons per acre—the Village had 125 to 200 per acre, but arranged in a variety of building styles and heights. Her interest in diversity, her allowance of factories and plants, for instance, was not tied to any economic or jobs strategy but to foster a varied “ambience”—a carnival atmosphere in the West Village, an array of

delights and attractions for the flâneur, the casual observer, and the middle-class café idler. Note that she applauded changes from factories to services and residences, never the reverse. She could abide woodwork factories, coffee bars, and offices, all compatible with residential streets, as long as they did not overwhelm them in scale. She supported blue-collar jobs only when they sustained the ambience of middle-class residential neighborhoods.

Considering Jacobs’s blithe comments about “unslumming,” the bootstrap improvement of incomes without an incomes policy, she was naïve and simplistic compared to Moses, who recognized that municipal policies must be the handmaiden to economic development, particularly in a post industrial economy. Moses had a responsibility to the entire city, the city of work and manufacturing. He was complicit in Title I’s ravaging of thousands of blue-collar jobs across lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. But he was more of a mercantilist, whose economic policies were suffused with a kind of crony capitalism. At the very least, Moses was a handmaiden for the emergence of post-industrial New York, whose economy would see health and hospitals as the city’s largest generator of wealth. In the end, Jacobs’s recommendation for district control of planning and redevelopment (with soft mortgages) was a recipe for NIMBYism, for dog-in-the-manger Villagers and Upper West Siders.

What has been comprehensive planning’s impact on New York? What kind of a city might it have been had Moses stuck to narrow interests? Would it have been appreciably different? If Moses had not intruded on the planning process, would the New York City Housing Authority have not built the phalanx of public housing that shadows the Lower East Side? One could argue that the City Planning Commission has done little more than engage in zoning reviews and, far more important, track the city’s changing demography. But did the commission’s zoning reviews appreciably alter the reality of central Manhattan’s shift of office towers west of Sixth Avenue? Or overcome the NIMBYism that prevented gentrified towers from impinging on Chelsea, Hell’s Kitchen, or even the svelte East Side? Did the Planning Commission anticipate vast changes that would foreclose on the Seventh Avenue garment district or recognize the social transformation of Flushing, Queens, into the city’s third commercial hub, a cacophony of immigrants, languages, and human vitality that rejuvenated New York in spite of the Planning Commission’s indifference to borough government? Was it planning that ushered in the prodigious growth of the city since 1980 and once again made New York into the storied town of eight million?

New York has been transformed by global forces quite beyond the reach of the planning commissioners’ ability to understand, let alone anticipate. Probably, in this respect, the most important planning activities have been connected with the Board of Education and the laying out of schools and districts and the construction of CUNY’s impressive system of community colleges. This seems a reminder of Friedrich Hayek’s judgment of British central planning after World War II: to have a plan meant that all must get behind it, allow no dissidence or doubt as to its validity, maintain a totalist front toward its implementation, lest the whole scheme unravel. Exactly how could comprehensive planning be made an object for pluralist, cacophonous New York?