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ROBERT MOSES RECONSIDERED: MOSTLY RIGHT THE FIRST TIME

A noted urban thinker takes in the centerpiece of a three-part exhibition re-examining Moses. Among other failings, the apostle of the auto starved mass transit, she says. The first in a series of articles on this ambitious exhibit. > *By Roberta Brandes Gratz*

The first thing to be said about the impressive exhibition “Robert Moses and the Modern City” at the Museum of the City of New York is that it is not a whitewash of the master builder, who once headed 12 separate city and state agencies at the same time, during his 50 years of extraordinary impact shaping New York state.

The exhibit covers the infamous Cross Bronx Expressway, for example, just one mile of which ruthlessly displaced 1,530 families and countless businesses and institutions. The community and every elected official from the governor and mayor on down urged a straighter route a block and a half away, but Moses refused to budge from his ill-conceived plan.

It spotlights the “Battle of Central Park” when, despite well-publicized opposition, Moses had the 67th Street playground demolished in the middle of the night to expand parking for Tavern on the Green. Until that time, the press loved him uncritically. This episode brought Moses his first negative publicity, eventually forcing him to cancel the parking plan and build a new playground.

And it cites his failed attempts to demolish Castle Clinton and to build a Brooklyn-Battery Bridge. And it includes his best known projects-that-weren't: the road through Washington Square Park and an expressway across lower Manhattan. Opposition to the park road was sparked by two Greenwich Village housewives and then championed by urbanist Jane Jacobs. Jacobs went on to lead the fight against the Lower Manhattan Expressway, probably Moses' biggest defeat.

This is all presented through a fascinating array of renderings, maps, photographs, models and documents, illustrating Moses' countless projects – from residential towers built under the rubric of urban renewal, to parks and playgrounds, to Lincoln Center, the United Nations and more.

The exhibition is provocative and should stimulate passionate debate on how to define appropriate new development, on what scale it should be mounted, and through what public process final decisions should be made. Most people know little more than hearsay about Moses, unless they have read – at least once – Robert Caro's definitive biography “The Power Broker.” This is one of the most extraordinary research accomplishments imaginable, with details probably even the author can't remember. Even two readings are not enough to grasp the complexities of this Yale-educated New Yorker who out-powered every governor and mayor “under whom” he served and overcame every elected official who ever got in his way, sometimes destroying them with true McCarthyite tactics.

The exhibition, masterfully curated by Columbia University architectural historian Hilary Ballon, clearly presents Moses as more constructive than destructive, more builder than demolisher, and the man probably most responsible for the city's greatest large-scale built achievements. He is shown in a film clip at the ribbon-cutting of Lincoln Center making one of his most quotable comments: “You can't make an omelet without breaking an egg.” He also said, “If the ends don't justify the means, what does?”

In the end, this exhibition is a celebration of what Moses got done because of his expressed love of New York. He declared that cities were in trouble – and the exhibition seems to accept this view unquestionably – and that “the city must be saved.” His vision was the only way to do it.

So yes, this exhibition is revisionist in that it puts a more positive face on Moses than the Caro opus. Understandably, given Ballon's expertise, the focus is on the physical results of more than 40 years of power and it does not try to probe the source of the power that allowed him to ride roughshod over anyone standing in his way. And, indeed, the physical achievements, whether judged good or bad, are undeniably mighty in breadth, scale and obstacles overcome.

But the danger in a revisionist view of history is that it takes on a life of its own. That life often then becomes myth, like the incorrect belief about Mussolini that “at least he got the trains to run on time.” Clearly, no one is all good or all bad, and Caro's book, despite what is often said, does have positive things to say about Moses. Of Robert Moses one must ask if the damage he wrought outweighs the good.

The exhibit does not give us permission to ask this question because it accepts Moses' own view of his era and

rationale for his actions. The city needed saving, he said – but the question should be “from what?” After the war, cities had problems that needed to be addressed – the infrastructure of existing roads and transit, deteriorated buildings that needed upgrading and some replacement, public facilities that needed repair. Urban vibrancy dimmed when resources were directed to the war effort, but the solution wasn't to demolish whole swaths of the urban fabric and hope that what remained wouldn't fall apart.

Mending the urban fabric, repairing and replacing different pieces around the whole city, could have included many new projects – but never on the ripping scale of what Moses proposed. And it wasn't as if parks, roads and housing didn't get built before Moses, or wouldn't have without him, especially during Works Progress Administration and after when the faucet of government money was fully open and good designers needed work.

Until World War II, Moses built beautiful “parkways,” not “throughways.” Parkways were for leisure driving and major roads went around cities, rather than through them, without steamrolling the residents and businesses in their path. The car culture was emerging, not yet booming. In fact, a photo in the exhibit of Broome Street where the Lower Manhattan Expressway was supposed to go, has what by today's standards would be light traffic.

The automobile industry was to be the vehicle to put the nation back to work. An assortment of post-war national policies, including the 1956 Highway Act, purposely spurred on that emerging car culture. Moses' roads created traffic, as all new roads inevitably do. Experts told him this. They told him to build transit, too. He refused to listen.

And while the exhibit acknowledges that Moses neglected “the values of mass transit,” that is an understatement. He starved the transit system, which was at its optimum when he came to power, diverting funds to build roads. The federal government provided 90 percent of highway funds but the city had to come up with the other 10 percent and cover things the feds would not.

On Moses' watch the city's transit system actually shrank. He took down the Second and Third Avenue Els – promising a (still-missing) Second Avenue subway in their place! And the streetcar system was totally removed, an important link in what was an efficient transit network. Since the trade-in of the Westway funds for transit money in the mid-1980s, the MTA, with enormous capital budgets, has been rebuilding the collapsing system Moses bequeathed us.

As public transit diminished, highways grew, and pulled people to the suburbs. Early suburbs had evolved along major rail lines, not highways. Rail service shrank due to bad internal decisions and competition from increasing truck freight. The suburban exodus began slowly, then boomed as new roads and suburban developments proliferated, heavily funded by Washington. None of it happened naturally.

Contrary to the idea that the city was hemorrhaging people in the 1950's, in fact people began moving to the suburbs in that decade for many reasons. I know this from personal experience. My father opened the first drive-in dry cleaner in a shopping center in Connecticut in 1953. But we had been “pushed out” – he had four stores in Greenwich Village – by Moses' massive clearance of the southwest Village.

In the Bronx, arguably, the Cross Bronx Expressway initiated the destruction. The 60,000 people in its path were forced to move. Urban collapse spread like a virus. Co-op City was an attempt to keep people in the city, but only made things worse, vacuuming out the Grand Concourse. Estimates indicate more than 500,000 people were evicted for 627 miles of highways and dozens of housing and urban renewal projects. No one has calculated how many factories and businesses and jobs were driven out, which experts today claim were leaving anyway. That too is a large, erroneous assumption with a small kernel of truth.

Yes, as the exhibition helps us understand, it would have been a very different city without Moses.

The city hit bottom in the 1970s, either despite or because of the massive disruption caused by the Moses era. The federal money for big clearance projects either diminished drastically or went dry. Government leaders found new, creative solutions, often following citizen-led efforts. The natural, organic process of regeneration finally had a chance to take hold. From Soho to Kelly Street in the Bronx, from Washington Heights to Crown Heights, from Astoria to Stapleton, the city today is reborn not by big projects but by a gradual and natural urban process that enhanced rather than displaced the rich assortment of people, culture and economy that we now celebrate today.

It is not uncommon today to hear people complain, “you can't get anything big done anymore.” One has to wonder what city they live in. The \$6 billion Third Water Tunnel, planned since 1954 and under construction since 1970, is the country's largest public works project. A rail link to JFK was built, no small accomplishment given the dissent and debate surrounding the first announced plan, and its eventual rejection. Grand Central Terminal, New York's best face to the visiting and commuting world, was reclaimed as a city jewel. Battery Park City is in its third decade. Central Park was restored to much of its original Olmsted-Vaux glory and other parks are being similarly transformed in a big way.

Imagine, without Moses, it all got done and continues to get better. Maybe a museum exhibit should spotlight this contrasting approach to urban change.

-Roberta Brandes Gratz

Roberta Brandes Gratz is the author of the books "The Living City: Thinking Small in a Big Way," and "Cities Back From the Edge: New Life for Downtown." She is the chairman and founder of The Center for the Living City at Purchase College, established in collaboration with urbanist Jane Jacobs, to build on her work.