

Robert Moses: Politics, Ideas, and Large-Scale Planning

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE arenas of power and ideas have always been complex. Intellectuals often disdain practical policy makers even as they court them, because they know, albeit sometimes grudgingly, that it is through the triumphs, defeats, intrigues, and conflicts of men and women of action that ideas shape events. In urban affairs, few have illustrated this more dramatically than Robert Moses.

Moses recently has been the subject of a major three-venue exhibition in New York City: *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Road to Re-creation*, showing at the Queens Museum of Art through May 27; *Robert Moses and the Modern City: Remaking the Metropolis*, at the Museum of the City of New York, on Fifth Avenue, through May 28; and *Robert Moses: Slum Clearance and the Superblock Solution*, at the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, which ran through April 14. All three spotlight the life and work of a man who loomed over both the city and the state of New York. To know the story of Gotham is to know the story of Robert Moses. In his obituary in 1981, the *New York Times* acknowledged that Moses had “played a larger role in shaping the physical environment of New York State than any other figure in the 20th century,” citing urban philosopher Lewis Mumford’s judgment that after 1900 “the influence of Robert Moses on the cities of America was greater than that of any other person.”

The *New York Times* called him “in every sense of the word, New York’s master builder,” noting that his projects included Triborough Bridge, Jones Beach State Park, Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, Long Island’s parkway system, the Niagara and St. Lawrence power proj-

ects, 658 playgrounds in New York City, 416 miles (669 km) of parkways, the extension of the state’s initially “modest” amount of parkland to nearly 2.6 million acres (1,052,194 ha), the establishment of New York as America’s “first city for the automobile age” well before the Los Angeles freeway system, and radical transformations of established neighborhoods. Moses’s concept of New York called for an all-embracing approach to planning of the kind that Mumford critically called “megalopolis”—a futuristic complex of freeways, tunnels, open spaces, vast structures, and showpiece developments, including civic centers and the 1964–1965 World’s Fair.

Equipped with scholarly credentials, an analytic and creative mind, a major capacity for work, and a seemingly natural talent for political maneuvering, Moses chose to make his way in the corridors of power rather than of scholarship. So adept was he that he managed to become a force to be reckoned with in areas of public policy and planning in which he held no formal qualifications, yet in which he ultimately wielded influence of a degree and scope that many an elected politician would envy. Like New York itself, his tale is about how an individual with indefatigable determination can work the system and eventually control it, about thinking big, about rising to the top and then falling—from a great and glorious height—into near oblivion.

Robert Moses with the model of the proposed Brooklyn Battery Bridge, 1939.

Moses lost his last political base (as head of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority) in 1968. He was the subject of an acrimonious political backlash against his urban renewal policies in which he came under heavy fire from critics including urban activist Jane Jacobs (she successfully blocked his plan to run a lower Manhattan expressway through SoHo). To his bitter dismay, he was dissected in Robert Caro’s 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *The Power Broker*. He ended his days surrounded by an urban planning culture that resented his evident preferences for big over small, for new over old, for the cor-

Whether you admire his legacy or abhor it, Robert Moses’s influence on New York City continues to remind us that, for better or worse, urban design is an intensely political business—and one in which personal vision can have far-reaching, practical results.



PHOTOGRAPH BY C. M. SPIEGELT

porate “I” over the public “we” for automobiles over pedestrians, for the bureaucratic over the organic, for hubris over humility as a planning philosophy, and for backroom wheeling and dealing over democratic public participation.

The generation that looked to writers like Jacobs for intellectual leadership favored an iconic New York perpetuated by image makers such as classic comic book artist Will Eisner. By contrast, Moses had appeared bent on rebuilding the city from the ground up into a monumental, sleek superstructure for the 21st century. In recent decades, however, urban thought has been increasingly resonating with many aspects of his style. In addition, because most great intellectual and political dramas acted out in New York tend to have repercussions elsewhere in America, whether Moses’s detractors like it or not, no one who is concerned with urban design can afford to forget or overlook the enigmatic influence of Moses.

Those who reduce him to a summary of static public policies, attitudes, and initiatives, good or ill, fail to see the layered complexity of the man and the ideas that drove him and survived him, and that continue to inform our urban discourse. Part of this complexity derives from the different eras Moses represented. Because of his continuing influence on our discussions and his conflict with critics like Jacobs, who is still a highly contemporary figure despite her death last year, he seems—and, in many ways, is—very much of the 21st century. Yet he was born in New Haven in 1888 into an America in which Abraham Lincoln was a more recent figure than Jimmy Carter is to us today. By the time Moses died, at 92, he had created a body of work encompassing the intellectual climates of both the Model T Ford and Neil Armstrong’s steps on the moon. To come to grips with his contribution, it is necessary to consider how planning has evolved in America.

Though the philosophical roots of urban planning can be traced back to antiquity, with the development of early cities based on responses to military, agrarian, and trading circumstances, scientific inquiry into the nature of cities is fairly recent. In the 19th century, traditional themes of urban governance began to be merged with infrastructural and political factors associated with the advent of industrialism. It can be credibly argued that urban planning as a specialized professional discipline did not actually emerge in the United States until the 20th century.

Thus, when Moses graduated from Yale in 1909, professional planning in America was just beginning. He furthered his studies at Britain’s Oxford University, where he began a program of academic research on the British civil service. This became the basis of his doctoral thesis in political science, which was accepted in 1914 at New York’s Columbia University. The philosophical framework with which Moses set out to make his mark therefore stemmed not from urban planning studies but from political science. He was drawing on an intellectual heritage that was more inclusive, mature, and conspicuously related to public policy issues than was the urban planning of his day.

Theoretically, political thought had by then already intruded into the urban planning debate, which, though not necessarily concerned directly with urban planning, presented ideas with important implications for planners. These included writings by thinkers as varied as Niccolo Machiavelli, Karl Marx, John Dewey, John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Henry George. In practice, however, such politicoeconomic treatises tended to focus on broader political problems than city planning, the political content of which was left, in 19th-century America, largely to journalists like Jacob Riis and activists like Jane

Addams. Given this fact, it is not surprising that when Moses started tackling assignments in urban planning, his style and paradigms were set by the political model that he himself had chosen as his PhD subject: the British civil service.

This service was, in effect, an immense apparatus for planning and for administering plans, which required (as Moses had argued in his dissertation) increasing professionalization. It was a model that provided intellectual ammunition for Moses to inject into his campaigns in New York: campaigns conducted on the premise that sound city planning was an integrated backroom activity requiring a single-minded, big-picture, highly professional administrative approach—an imperial vision.

Armed with these ideas and intellectual credentials, Moses joined New York’s Municipal Research Bureau, which dispensed advice nationally on municipal government reform. In 1914, he became an adviser to New York Mayor John Mitchel on city government restructuring. After Mitchel was unseated in 1917, Moses became chief of staff of a commission on reorganizing state government, under Governor Al Smith. The commission’s report did not become policy, but it triggered a long relationship between Moses and Smith, who, on reelection in 1922 after a period out of power, began appointing Moses to public projects. Moses pursued these with a passion and skill that turned each project into a fresh power base; in time, he developed an extraordinarily interlocked network of spheres of state and municipal authority.

Moses possessed a combination of abilities that was well suited to the securement, retention, and enlargement of power. He not only had a gift for organization, but also he understood the social workings of organizations—their structures, cultures, and the ways their admin-

istrative parts interacted politically. Though not a lawyer, he had a keen legislative mind and the talents necessary to write regulations and policy directives that met the needs of the agencies they were supposed to serve while at the same time consolidating and advancing Moses’s own fiefdoms. He could draft proposals that compellingly steered actions in the direction he wished them to go. He was devoted to his work for its own sake, pursuing it with a relentless dedication—as though out of a sense of duty—that was at once fiercely personal and coldly impersonal. As he had independent means, he did not have to rely on his official posts for financial support, and much of his public service was performed without pay.

For Moses, manipulating the wheels and cogs of government to achieve far-reaching, widespread civic effects, with professional acumen and on an enormous scale, was precisely the type of planning and administration for which city and state governments were responsible. This was the vision that he had brought with him from the 19th-century British civil service system, which was consistent with a belief in the preordained destiny of particular types of public administration. It was invested with a sense of mission, of professional aloofness, of wholeness, of the grandeur of the enterprise, and of determination—even honorable ruthlessness—as administering was conducted in the interests of the greater good. Both the vision and the way in which Moses pursued it are highly debatable. However, this vision is not just peculiar to Moses. It is a philosophical idea of wide currency and application. In the United States, it takes the form of a polarity between those who prefer to see more power gravitate toward states, counties, and towns—in a grass-roots democracy—and those who believe the complexity of modern society requires the federal government to take a stronger role.

In 1660, encouraged by the writings of Sir Francis Bacon, science was institutionalized for the first time with the creation of the Royal Society of Science under patronage of the British Crown. For the first time, the amassing of scientific knowledge was supported by government authority and collective social resources, which no individual researcher could ever match. (According to Martin Hoffert, professor emeritus of physics at New York University, "Most of the modern technology that has been driving the U.S. economy did not come from market forces. The Internet was supported for 20 years by the military and for ten more years by the National Science Foundation before Wall Street found it.")

The creation of new knowledge resources has economic dimensions that connect strongly with the find-

ings of development economists such as Richard Florida, professor of public policy at George Mason University. His research on creative communities currently is attracting strong interest from planners, who are coming to understand increasingly that economically fertile cities, towns, and neighborhoods can be nurtured into existence by sufficiently visionary administrators. Science and technology, in their creative and responsible management as well as in their innovation, are now consequential enough to warrant the highest levels of government leadership.

As we engage these tasks, and determine how best to manage the enormous government authority, large-scale planning exercises, and regional planning approaches that they imply, the style, ideas, mistakes, and successes of Moses will likely grow more relevant to our choices of

what to do as well as what to avoid doing. Studying the conceptual background to Moses's work helps in understanding why he was an important practitioner of large-scale, centrally driven, professionally managed regional planning that is likely to become increasingly relevant.

Whether you admire his legacy or hold it in contempt, Moses's influence on New York continues to remind us that, for better or for worse, urban design is an intensely political business—and one in which personal vision can have far-reaching consequences. Although Moses did much to alienate many, we are heading into an age in which we will need people like him. We will need his sense of passionate urgency as well as some form of the integrated regional vision that drove him.

The current exhibitions in New York City, which invite a timely re-

examination of an intriguing and highly relevant figure, were organized by Hilary Ballon, of Columbia University. She and her Columbia colleague Kenneth Jackson have also had published a book of essays and images from the exhibition: *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (Norton). **U**

N. J. SLABBERT is U.S. representative of the Truman Group, a Brussels-based group focusing on geopolitical and economic analysis for leaders of business and government. He can be reached at N.J. Slabbert@GMail.com.