

caa.reviews

critical reviews of books, exhibitions, and projects in all areas and periods of art history and visual studies
published by the College Art Association

CAA

follow us on
twitter

February 4, 2009

Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds.

Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York

New York: [W.W. Norton & Company](#), 2007. 336 pp.; 53 color ills.; 207 b/w ills. Cloth \$50.00 (9780393732061)



[Gabrielle Esperdy](#)

[CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2009.15](#)

Robert Moses did more to shape the modern landscape of New York than any other individual in the city's history. His urban vision dramatically, and irrevocably, transformed the entire metropolitan region in the middle of the twentieth century. This is the subject of a handsome volume of essays, photographs, and catalogue entries edited by Columbia Professors Hilary Ballon and Kenneth Jackson and published in conjunction with a three-part exhibition on Moses held in New York City in 2007.

The book opens with a portfolio of fifty-two color photographs by Andrew Moore, shot in 2005 and 2006. Moore presents a series of beautiful and evocative images. Depicting mainly the pools, recreation centers, parks, and apartment buildings for which Moses was responsible from the 1930s through the 1960s, they reveal how much these projects have become a part of the everyday fabric and life of the city: children splash in pools, a doorman stands beneath an entrance canopy. Mostly, however, Moore focuses on the structures themselves, capturing the details of expressionist brickwork, fluted concrete columns, and polished travertine, while minimizing the degree to which they replaced the existing street grid with superblocks.

Moore's photographs illustrate the volume's agenda just as clearly as Ballon and Jackson do in the introduction. Their goal is to provide a more nuanced portrait than black-and-white characterizations of the good Moses and the bad Moses. This judgment was established resoundingly in Robert Caro's monumental biography *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage, 1975). As Ballon and Jackson observe, Caro's subtitle linked Moses with the city's decline in the 1970s. By contrast, Ballon and Jackson seek to show how Moses contributed to the *transformation* of New York into a modern city. This is much easier to do from the perspective of the 2000s than it was for Caro, who was writing at a moment when it was difficult, if not impossible, to view Moses in anything but the most negative light.

A decade after *The Power Broker*, Marshall Berman eloquently and dramatically restated Caro's view in his book *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Penguin, 1982). In this telling, Moses was more destroyer than builder, a Faustian character whose megalomania single-handedly transformed the South Bronx of Berman's childhood into a nightmarish landscape worthy of Piranesi's *carceri*. It was perhaps inevitable that a figure as controversial and influential as Moses would eventually be subject to historical revision, if not full-scale rehabilitation. Particularly after 9-11, when the rebuilding of Ground Zero sank into a quagmire of public hearings and political infighting, some urbanists began to long for the days of Moses. This was not because they necessarily admired what he built, but because they admired his ability to cut through bureaucracy. Once again, the power broker's means overshadowed his ends.

Ballon and Jackson have done an enormous service by choosing to focus on those overshadowed ends: the projects themselves, which for better or worse have permanently altered the city and its environs. These are presented in a catalogue of built work and unexecuted proposals that occupies more than half the volume and serves as a pragmatic bookend to the romantic photographic portfolio that opened it. These entries cover projects Moses directly oversaw in New York City between 1934, when he became

parcs commissioner, and 1968, when he left his position as president of the World's Fair Corporation and departed public life. Organized by type, the entries include pools, beaches, neighborhood playgrounds and parks, city parks, roads and crossings, housing and urban renewal, and miscellaneous projects. Taken together, they document well over one hundred projects throughout the five boroughs.

The entries are fairly straightforward narratives examining each project from planning to execution or abandonment. The well-known controversies are all presented—the “one mile” of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, the Senate hearings on the Manhattantown Title I, and the arrest of Jane Jacobs at a public hearing on the Lower Manhattan Expressway—but they do not dominate the entries. Instead, it is the project histories and descriptions, along with the typological groupings, that make the catalogue so informative.

Enhancing the individual entries are short essays that provide historical context and overviews on such issues as policy, legislation, and financing. These essays not only help situate the projects on both the local and national scenes, they answer frequently overlooked questions such as how many playgrounds Moses actually built. There are also numerous renderings and photographs of site clearance and construction. Especially interesting are the period graphs and maps that chart Moses' accomplishments and goals. One wishes for a contemporary equivalent. It would have been extremely useful to have maps and tables for each project type with specific locations and data. A map documenting executed Title I projects in Manhattan is included, and it serves as a powerful illustration of Moses' impact on the island. (NB: An interactive map that accomplishes some of this is located on the related website, [“Robert Moses and the Modern City.”](#) Though other books, particularly Robert Stern et al.'s *New York 1930* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988) and *New York 1960* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997), provide more detailed architectural information about individual buildings and structures, having virtually all Moses-related projects catalogued in one place makes this volume a fine resource.

Sandwiched between the portfolio and the catalogue are seven essays that begin with an overview by Jackson that places the master builder in historical and historiographic perspective and tackles his problematic legacy. Jackson directly addresses the charges of corruption, racism, and anti-pedestrianism that his opponents and his biographer regularly leveled at Moses, and he usefully compares Moses' accomplishments to those of his contemporaries in Los Angeles, Detroit, and Newark. This national context is important because much of the Moses scholarship to date has been narrowly parochial. For Jackson, it is also a critical aspect of the volume's revisionism, offering a corrective to what the editors see as a persistently distorted understanding of Moses. This is a worthy goal, but one that should be pursued with caution, for in contextualizing Moses, Jackson risks minimizing the deleterious impact of his work. Acknowledging that there were other urban power brokers running rampant with the so-called federal bulldozer does not render Moses' post-war work any more palatable.

The remaining essays offer a similar corrective by focusing on deliberately narrow aspects of Moses' career. Though the essays by Marta Gutman, Owen Gutfreund, and Ballon all nod at a broader context—the public realm, the auto age, and urban renewal, respectively—their strength is in examining Moses' projects too often overshadowed by the outsized persona of the man himself: the 1930s recreation sites, the pre-war parkways and post-war expressways, and the 1950s Title I housing projects. After so much demonizing, it is almost a relief to read about such straightforward design and policy issues as water filtration, median landscaping (or lack thereof), and the fiscal complexities of cooperative apartments. The authors are not so naïve as to pretend that these seemingly neutral issues are without social and political implications, and they take pains to reveal the consequences of Moses' interventions in the built environment.

Two of the shortest essays in the book offer the greatest challenge to the standard views of the power broker. Martha Biondi scrutinizes the charges of Moses' racism from both cultural and legislative perspectives. She looks in particular at efforts to desegregate Stuyvesant Town after Moses engineered its status as whites-only restricted housing. Biondi's essay is fascinating, not because she revises or reverses the standard view of Moses as a racist, but because she reveals the complexity of how Moses' attitudes toward race manifested themselves in the public realm through what she describes as “his extraordinary constitutional and legislative interventions in promoting racial segregation in New York” (117). Moving far beyond the anecdotal evidence of racial bias that Caro dwells on in *The Power Broker*, Biondi shows the impact of institutionalized racism in the Jim Crow era, even in the New Deal, even in the North, even in liberal New York City.

Robert Fishman takes on Moses' critics by examining in great detail the controversy surrounding Moses' proposal to redesign Washington Square with arterial roadways through the center of the park. This incident is instructive because it clearly illustrates Moses' preferred modus operandi (as Fishman characterizes it), demonstrating how he defused the impact of protest and manipulated public opinion in order to achieve his desired results. Fishman shows how Moses courted controversy to prop up his bona fides as a champion of the modern city. But Fishman's subtle analysis also reveals how Moses' critics finally found the chink in his armor by attacking “the urban doctrine that he represented” (123). In the case of Washington Square, his critics offered a reasoned critique of modernist urban planning as espoused by the International Congress of Modern Architecture and executed by Moses. As Fishman convincingly argues, when they finally defeated the power broker after a six-year battle, the terrain of American urbanism had shifted; and when Jacobs and William Whyte took the lessons they learned at Washington Square and applied them to

urban planning, New York would be transformed just as surely as it had been by Moses himself.

So ingrained is a knee-jerk, negative response to the legacy of the power broker that, in its quest to examine Moses with more fairness and balance than he is usually accorded, *Robert Moses and the Modern City* risks being seen as scholarly apologism and historical relativism, regardless of its actual, thoughtful contents. But if postmodernism has taught us anything, we should, at the very least, be able to tolerate, if not accept, a complex, even ambiguous view of Moses' contributions to New York City in the twentieth century and beyond. This volume's true and lasting significance may well be its leveling effect on all subsequent evaluations of Moses and his legacy. From now on, Caro's power broker will have to compete with Ballou and Jackson's master builder.

[Gabrielle Esperdy](#)

Associate Professor, School of Architecture, New Jersey Institute of Technology

gabrielle.esperdy@njit.edu

Copyright ©2009 College Art Association, Inc. [Terms of Use](#)

275 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10001 | T: 212-691-1051 | F: 212-627-2381 | caareviews@collegeart.org