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)

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
parks 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 Manhattan-town 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 buildings and structures, having virtually all Moses-related projects catalogued in one place makes this volume a fine resource.

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 Ballon and Jackson’s master builder.

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With New York poised for a building boom, the legacy of Robert Moses is getting a fresh look, and maybe he doesn’t look so bad. The bulldozing bully who callously displaced thousands of New Yorkers in the name of urban renewal. The public-works kingpin who championed highways as he starved mass transit. And yes, the visionary idealist who gave New York Lincoln Center and Jones Beach, along with parks, roads, playgrounds and public pools. This is the Robert Moses most of us know today, courtesy of Robert A. Caro’s Pulitzer Prize-winning biography from 1974, *The Power Broker*, which charts Moses’ long reign as city parks commissioner (1934-60) and chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (1946-68). Robert Moses’s vast building program aimed to modernize urban infrastructure, expand the public realm with extensive recreational facilities, remove blight, and make the city more livable for the middle class. This book offers a fresh look at the physical transformation of New York during his nearly forty-year reign over city building from 1934 to 1968. In his various roles in city and state government, Robert Moses reshaped the fabric of the city, and his legacy continues to touch the lives of all New Yorkers. Revered for most of his life, he is now one of the most controversial figures. *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson (eds), New York and London, W.W. Norton, 2007, 336 pp., US$50.

2007 saw three related events in New York City: in March, Columbia University hosted a conference on the life and legacy of Robert Moses (to which Robert Caro was originally not invited) in conjunction with a three-part exhibition that had opened in January. In his introduction, entitled ‘Robert Moses and the Rise of New York: The Power Broker in Perspective’, Jackson argues for a revisionist view of Moses, despite his faults: ‘He was what he was and on balance he was a positive influence on the city.’ SUBSCRIBE TODAY! Subscribe to Questia and enjoy