

in the fight against Robert Moses and his bad works.

But Marshall Berman got a bit carried away describing the swashbuckling Moses striding along the Long Island coast planning Jones Beach in his head. Yes, it was heroic and Jones Beach stands as a monument to the best in Moses. But Berman neglects to mention the ugly side of Jones Beach—that Moses deliberately designed the bridges too low for buses which made it difficult for blacks and other poor people to get there. Jones Beach was built for the white middle class.

Berman talks about “Thinking Big” and “the romance of construction,” how as a bourgeois manifestation, it was admired by Karl Marx. But who cares if Marx admired bourgeois construction? Thinking Small is just a pejorative used by a romantic. Thinking Human would be a better expression. There are places that Moses wanted to slum-clear that are now unslumming themselves. Take the South House Street artists loft section, known as SoHo. Or Little Italy or Chinatown. All these places are thriving while the East Side of Manhattan and Midtown, with their highrise buildings and wind-swept canyons, are dehumanized, crime-ridden, and just plain dull.

Instead of using Moses as a model, why not take a look at what is being done to preserve and enhance the human scale in Canadian cities? There is plenty of construction going on in Toronto, for example. But instead of mucking up the whole town with high-rises, entire blocks of two-family houses are being preserved. And the same density which highrises provide is being created by building low rise houses within the core of the blocks. (The need for population density downtown, to generate tax revenue and to support services like schools and subways is recognized but dealt with in ways that do not tear apart the fabric of the neighborhood.)

Berman seems to be preparing us for the public pressure for public works which is already occurring (10,000 New York construction workers demonstrated near City Hall recently and threatened to “tear this goddamn city down” if they didn’t get work—such as on a new West Side Highway). But is a “massive” public works program the answer? To me

“massive” anything is a totalitarian concept. I’ll take Jane Jacobs’ *Death and Life of Great American Cities* to Karl Marx anyday. The construction workers would not only “tear this goddamn city down” if they don’t get work, but they would even pave it over completely if they could.

Why not think about just what it is we need to save our cities and ourselves, instead of thinking about grandeur. There are lots of buildings that demand rehabilitation. Funded by a special federal works program, the construction workers could tear up the Long Island Expressway which they themselves built and then lay railroad tracks on it. Unions of painters could create huge public murals in a new program modelled after the old W.P.A. Arts Program.

Construction workers could even help erect gigantic outdoor sculptures and fix up our schools. No, this isn’t a very grand vision—just a human one.

[PEOPLE ARE JUDGMENT]

Berman is right that buildings are judgment. What is physically left standing is what historians note. During the Lindsay administration I worked in Moses’ old agency, the Parks Department, and I sadly watched Thomas P. F. Hoving turn from a Moses critic into another Moses. Yet the things we did then, which seemed to change the hearts of the people, were not construction projects. They were simple things like happenings in the parks in which thousands of people came together and participated. We closed Central and Prospect Parks to cars in favor of bicycles and it didn’t cost a cent. Nor did we create any monuments to ourselves or give one worker another job. Yet for many it made the city livable.

I no longer look back on the New Deal with nostalgia and see now that it was the beginning of the Imperial Presidency. The best bulwark we have against fascism in this country is in small, difficult-to-penetrate units—small businesses and low-rise neighborhoods where people know each other, where they experience family and close friends.

I look to Canada as a model because it never gave up its provinciality, and even managed to accommodate

British Columbia, a socialist province, capitalist provinces, as well as provinces with a mixed economy. And Canada lacks the immense federal power our government has. Jane Jacobs, when she recently became a naturalized Canadian citizen, was asked what she liked most about Canada. Her answer was that fortunately Canada had no melting pot theory—that ethnic diversity and ethnic enclaves are still encouraged.

I do not “see our society disintegrating into a multitude of guarded and embattled camps—ethnic, class, regional, religious, racial, sexual,” as Berman does. I see it trying to protect itself from Big Brother. There is a totalitarian spirit in all of us when we become frustrated by not seeing our own views imposed on the world around us. It should be kept in check. I opt for creative anarchy.

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## John H. Schaar

**“Robert Moses did not create the social forces he served; he did not invent the automobile. At most, he exposed our national traits in gigantic characters of stone and steel, thereby revealing us to ourselves. If we can learn to see, that will be his greatest public work.”**

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I think the greatest weakness of Caro’s book and Berman’s review is that neither sheds much light on the question of the precise relationship between Moses and the masses. Caro entitles his book *The Power Broker*. The title sufficiently indicates his understanding of Moses’ power. He subtitles his book *Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. That formula contains Caro’s understanding of the

consequences of Moses' power—that through the accumulation of vast and autonomous power, Moses decimated democracy and the human landscape of New York City. Berman explains the relationship as a “tragic contradiction” between Moses’ “love of the public and the hate he felt for actual people.” That contradiction produced glories for the first 20 years of Moses’ building career, when he was opening the countryside to recreation with his splendid parks and parkways; and horrors during the next 20 years, when the more bridges and expressways he built, the more cars appeared to choke them, so the “magnificent arteries with which Moses had hoped to weave the city together had coalesced into a hangman’s knot around the city’s neck.”

I fail to see how this reveals the “tragic contradiction” in Moses. It seems to me, rather, to reveal that Moses was a good and faithful servant of our national romance with the automobile and our national dream of personal independence through mobility. That dream has now, to be sure, turned into a nightmare but it was surely *our* dream that produced the nightmare, not Robert Moses’ tragic contradiction between loving the public and hating people, which somehow made him wish to choke us in our own exhaust fumes. If there is tragedy, it is an American tragedy, one in which we are (nearly) all implicated.

Biographies, of course, and commentaries on them as well, highlight the individual and obscure the social background. Let me, therefore, from my securely scholastic redoubt as commentator on the commentator on the biography of The Man, try to set the accent marks right.

Both Caro and Berman are fascinated, almost obsessed, by Moses. Caro’s 1,246 pages and Berman’s hyperbolic comparisons (Moloch, Ozymandias, Gilgamesh, Faust, Kurtz) are sufficient proof of this obsession. Both are convinced that Moses had more power than anyone ought to have, and that as his career went on he used this power more and more cruelly and destructively. Both seem intent on finishing the work that Rockefeller began: as he destroyed the man’s power, they will destroy the man’s myth as a great public servant. This approach to the

subject obscures three or four aspects of the relationship between the individual actor and the social setting.

First of all, one person’s power is relative to other persons’ weakness. Robert Moses was such a giant because, with few exceptions, the other public figures around him were such pygmies. They lacked vision while he had one. They were content to leave things largely as they were, while he burned to get things done. They feared combat, while he sought it. They wanted mainly to hang onto their offices and incomes, while he was above the corruptions of money. Robert Moses stands head and shoulders above the huge chorus of actors in Caro’s book and Berman’s commentary—a dreary pack of boodlers, grafters, petty bureaucrats, hirelings of one or another special interest. Among the pack, he was distinguished for vision, drive and courage. He needed no whip to tame the Tammany tiger; only a few shouts and a bale of money.

Secondly, power is of different kinds and comes from different sources. Caro opens his book with two vignettes that tell an important tale, though he and Berman appear to miss the point of the story. In the first, young Bob Moses, second best freestyler on the Yale swimming team, proposes to team captain Ed Richards that they could get more money for the team by deliberately deceiving a certain generous and noble old benefactor. Shocked, Ed Richards refuses the suggestion. Moses says he will go ahead and do it anyway, or resign from the team. Richards says, “Well, Bob, your resignation is accepted.” Bob never swam for Yale again. In the second vignette, 45 years later, City Park Commissioner and City Construction Coordinator Robert Moses stands before newly-elected Mayor Robert F. Wagner and threatens once again to resign unless the major appoints him to still a third office, which the mayor had earlier told his supporters he would not do. Wagner folds under the threat and signs the appointment.

Caro says the difference between the two encounters was that in the second Moses had power, while in the first he did not. One could more accurately say that in the first encounter Richards had power, while in the second Wagner did not. Richards had the

simple moral courage to stand up to an immoral suggestion, even at the price of losing an excellent swimmer. Wagner lacked that courage. Throughout his career, Moses met very few men like Richards and very many like Wagner.

Thirdly, Moses’ power was augmented by his ability to seize and to master some of the dominant social tendencies and structural forces of his and our time. Beginning with the New Deal, for example, and rapidly accelerating after World War II, the federal government became the dominant force in financing urban public works. Moses saw this growing centralization and knew how to exploit it, before most others did, and better than they could. Similarly, power within the city had become so fragmented under the American penchant for the separation of powers that just one agency or two, with its own source of funds, was able to level the disunited and parochial power of dozens of others. The Triborough Authority was not an inherently powerful social engine. Rather, the other agencies were the pathetically weak structures of standard American institutional architecture.

Finally, Moses did not create the social forces he served. He did not invent the automobile. He did not develop the technology that reduced the length of the work week, thereby producing the demand for recreation. He did not devise the huge capitalist corporation, with its ability to build and shape material and human landscapes according to its own will and interest. Nor, above all, did he initiate the flight of the white middle classes from the cities. The millions of whites who have left New York City for the white suburbs would have left with or without Robert Moses’ expressways.

In sum, I think both Caro and Berman ascribe both too much and too little force to Robert Moses. At the most he caught up and expressed on a large scale tendencies and attitudes that are very deep in our culture. He did not wreck New York. Nor, as Berman would have it, did he almost singlehandedly destroy the “romance of construction,” giving rise to the worry that today’s young will only destroy and not build. We Americans have never understood that a noble city must be the home of those who

live in it, rather than a stage for the advancement of private interests. Nor have we ever been able to see the romance of construction in other than physical terms, so that, as our material culture expands, places fit for the habitation of the human spirit diminish. Robert Moses exposed these national traits in gigantic characters of stone and steel, thereby revealing us to ourselves. If we can learn to see, that will be his greatest public work.

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## Alan Temko

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**“At times Moses included gifted men among his planners and designers, but they could not possibly be ranked as ‘giants of their profession.’ To actual giants such as Frank Lloyd Wright or Walter Gropius, he responded viscerally, calling them subversive or un-American.”**

**T**he chief faults of Berman’s curious essay are that it tells too much about Berman, too little about Moses and the real quality of his work, and almost nothing—except for misleading generalities—about Caro’s extraordinary book. Although Berman likens Caro’s achievement to Dickens’ and Balzac’s, the huge tome in fact is not great urban literature, still less fine historical or biographical writing, but, rather, a masterpiece of investigative journalism which exposes a unique *coup d’état* in environmental politics. As a record of uncontrolled bureaucratic authoritarianism operating within supposedly legitimate government, it deserves the most serious critical appraisal—on a level far higher than

Caro’s—at every stage of his seemingly interminable account of Moses’ seizure and retention of enormous power in New York for nearly half a century.

Instead of giving the book the careful reading it requires, however, Berman has taken the occasion for a widely inaccurate outpouring of rhetoric, which evades all of the thorny political, economic, and social issues Caro has raised, most notably the vexing problems of “democratic” urban development and humane architecture in a technological age.

Berman totally neglects Caro’s excellent treatment of the stratagems which enabled Moses to master La Guardia, for example, in gaining control of the housing program in defiance of the Mayor’s wishes; and, what is more, the invulnerability of Moses to FDR’s efforts to dethrone him during the full noon of the New Deal. Still more puzzling is Berman’s omission of the intricate alliances between Moses and banks and other financial institutions, the construction industry and its contemptible unions, real estate sharks and insurance finaglers, with eventual connections to the underworld itself.

Caro has overturned a sizable rock here, and some very repellent creatures have scampered from beneath, but Berman is content to remark lightly that Moses learned from Al Smith to give a bribe and call it a fee. Strangely enough, Berman loses interest in Moses’ corruptive political role after mentioning his early success under Smith. This may be because Berman is under the delusion that Smith founded an authentic welfare state in spite of the phantasmagorical squalor, crushing poverty, and governmental impotence that afflict New York as it hurtles towards Mumfordian doom fifty years later.

Even more puzzling is Berman’s notion that latter-day Luddities of his own “New Left” generation had much to do with Moses’ downfall. They were too young, of course, to have joined in early battles against Moses which date back to the Thirties; but, in truth, their whole participation in the environmental movement, except for the isolated episode of People’s Park in Berkeley, has been marginal. One of their great tragedies has been the failure to develop a coherent environmental politics on a positive, demo-

cratic basis, rather than a plebeian infatuation with inner-city squalor that verges on slum-loving.

Certainly New Leftists were conspicuous by their absence from the famous freeway “revolts” in San Francisco and other cities, which predated effective resistance in New York. They were also mighty rare in that stronghold of the *haute bourgeoisie*, the Sierra Club, which has been the real command post in the fight to save wilderness and coastlines from further devastation. In New York, where Mumford and other critics had opposed Moses for years, the chief contribution of the New Left was to join, belatedly enough, the well-educated members of the professional class—many of them architects, planners, and journalists with close ties to the Establishment—who had led the fight against the brutal Lower Manhattan project, just as comparable, uptown liberal intellectuals had long before opposed the paving of Central Park.

No, the overthrow of Moses was engineered—I guess that’s the right word—by the equally formidable, unprincipled, and utterly opportunistic bullies of Nelson Rockefeller, himself a “big” builder, a “do it” man, who, among other things, perpetrated the hideously extravagant Albany Mall, and who, as Gore Vidal noted in a far more insightful review of Caro, is the real owner of the United States.

It is worth pointing out here, however, that the chief moral opposition to the insensate engineering mentality typified by Moses has almost always been patrician—from Ruskin and Morris to Mumford—even though it has often been socialist and democratic, or at least anti-plutocratic, in mood. The search for environmental excellence by its very nature has traditionally been a refined pursuit. Even today, when social justice has been made inseparable from true excellence in architecture and planning, it still requires trained awareness and a degree of higher culture which Berman—although he is a bright and gifted writer—simply does not possess.

Neither, I fear, does Caro; and although he has taken pains to read back issues of *Architectural Forum*, not always a reliable guide, Caro’s unfamiliarity with the history and aesthetics of the modern movement—of *all* archi-