

BOOKS:

A Pharaoh's Memoirs

A Review by Mary Perot Nichols

Public Works: A Dangerous Trade

by Robert Moses

McGraw-Hill, 952 pages, \$14.50.

No doubt the admirers of Robert Moses thought this gigantic tome by one of the world's master builders would go down as *the* definitive work on the trade. There would seem to be no other commercial reason for its publication. But reading Mr. Moses's egregious collection of self-congratulatory old *Newsday* columns, letters to and from famous people, his General Motors prize-winning essay on how to fill more cities with traffic, and so on, is a little like cutting through a wall of concrete with one's nose.

Never once does self-doubt afflict this remarkable man. Always it was his critics who were out of step, not he. What is fascinating about this book, if anything, is not what it does say but what it leaves out. Nowhere does it analyze how Mr. Moses became the most powerful public servant of his time in New York City and state. And that is the really important story, the one which should

be learned by all those interested in public administration—if only to keep the Moses phenomenon from happening again.

Interestingly enough, the two men who did learn most from Moses's example were Governor Nelson Rockefeller and his close associate, present Metropolitan Transportation Authority Chairman William Ronan. Ronan's jurisdiction, often referred to as the "Holy Ronan Empire," is a direct off-shoot of his studies of Moses. When he was a young college professor, Ronan wrote a bill, known as the Hult Bill, designed to cut down Moses's multitudinous powers. It was overwhelmingly defeated in the Legislature by the forces Moses was able to command. Having been thus defeated as a young man, Ronan became secretary to Governor Rockefeller and finally achieved chairmanship of the MTA with more powers than even Moses had dared to reach for. Rockefeller, of course, was to go on to great dreams of empire expressed by his outrageously expensive

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Albany Mall. The Mall is bad enough to be a Moses job, and one of the old Moses forces that has proven to be everlastingly grateful to Rockefeller is the building and construction trades unions. They will try to re-elect him governor this fall.

A glimpse into the Moses world and how he held it together was not possible until 1959, some 50 years after he began his public life. Then the cork blew and all sorts of genies came out of the bottle. It began with a headline in the *New York Post* on a piece by investigative reporters William Haddad and Joseph Kahn: "Slum Clearance Official's Bank Linked to Million \$ Title I Deal." That was on June 16, 1959. Throughout that summer, there was one shocking revelation after another about Mr. Moses's stewardship of the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance, of which he was chairman. And as each new scandal bubbled out, it became clearer and clearer just what the ingredients were that held the Moses empire together. The glue was money, big money. There was a dash of organized crime; there was a banker who, as chief selector of slum clearance sponsors, filled the coffers of his bank with developers' funds (otherwise you didn't get to sponsor a project); there was Tammany Hall in the form of Carmine G. DeSapio and the former law partner of Bronx Democratic boss Ed Flynn, Monroe Goldwater; there was DeSapio's PR man (formerly Trujillo's flack) Sydney Baron, who was a useful man to have for PR because he could also help you get sponsorship of a project; and there were the construction unions and construction bosses, and even the Catholic Church. Everyone was mining gold in the slum clearance program.

Before 1959 was over, the then Mayor of New York City, Robert F. Wagner, Jr., knew he had to unload Moses so that he could run against his own record, and that of Moses, as a reformer in the 1960 mayoralty election. There was a great churning among the mighty in New York City: how to get rid of Moses? Instead of being indicted,

Moses was to be given, in the words of Democratic State Senator Jerome L. Wilson, "the biggest old-age pension in history." That was the \$100,000-a-year presidency of the New York World's Fair. Buried in the early minutes of the World's Fair Corporation Board of Directors was the evidence as to just how big and safe that pension was. After the Fair had faced near bankruptcy and most of its banker-led finance committee resigned in a huff because Moses had played fast and loose with them about money matters, it trickled out that Moses's salary had been put in escrow in the beginning and thus was his no matter what happened to the Fair. What's more, the \$100,000 salary went on for a couple of years after the Fair closed and then was pared down to \$25,000 a year. The escrow deal showed a vivid realism on the part of Mr. Moses about the Fair's prospects—doubtless justified, since he knew better than anyone the caliber of men he had with him to run the Fair. It was the same cast of characters that had made the slum clearance program a national scandal. One might fairly say that the World's Fair was the last chance at the trough for some of the grand old boodlers of New York City. For Moses himself, it meant close to \$1 million, while many of the exhibitors he lured to the Fair were going bankrupt.

The press of New York showed remarkable resiliency. Once Moses was out of slum clearance and into the World's Fair, they wiped the record clean. There were a few small, snide voices like Douglas Haskell, then editor of *Architectural Forum*, who said, "They finally decided to sacrifice the World's Fair in order to save New York City." But by and large, the city-wide papers, their publishers in many cases investors in the Fair and recipients of splendid advertising supplements, lost the immense folders of clippings about the housing scandals in their morgues and never referred to them again. This was in aid of promoting the Fair, thought to be a civic and commercial event of paramount importance to the city's economy. In fact, the fiasco of

the Fair cost the city a lot in both money and prestige.

If Moses was admired by the powerful, at least before the stench became too noticeable, he was anathema much earlier to the powerless. His slum clearance ventures proceeded with unbelievable ruthlessness. In one supposed development, Manhattantown, the developers milked the tenement poor for five years without putting up a structure—like any other slumlords, they collected full rents while letting the buildings deteriorate. The scandal finally forced a change in sponsorship. Other developments began to be fought desperately by tenants who no longer believed that relocation was good for them. Respectable civic organizations like the Women's City Club began to document that there was no way of even tracing the people relocated to make way for the projects. Areas like Hunts Point in the Bronx and East New York in Brooklyn are now disaster areas because of Robert Moses, who used them as dumping grounds for the poor he was throwing off future slum clearance sites. Sometimes, indeed, they were evicted two and three times. The Moses legacy to New York City even today is one of profound distrust between citizenry and their government.

The poor were not his only victims. On the south of Washington Square, Moses tore down a perfectly decent middle-income apartment house with family-size apartments. His Slum Clearance Committee lied to the South Village neighborhood when it told them that the new project, Washington Square Village, was to be for them. It was not. It became luxury housing, and the now cynical Italian-Americans in the neighborhood dubbed it "Tammany Towers."

If I write with some passion it is because my acquaintance with Mr. Moses had a profound effect on my own life. I was a political innocent in 1957, merely a park mother who used Washington Square. Then I found out that Robert Moses intended to put a four-lane depressed highway through that small square. I discovered that the threat to

the park was not a new one but had, in fact, been going on since the 1930's. In the late 1930's, Moses's designs on that park were to turn it into a traffic rotary with the corners rounded off. Known as the "bathmat plan," it was defeated by architects and city planners and local citizenry. Moses waited and by the early 1950's he began to make noises about a roadway *through* the park. Another park mother, Mrs. Shirley Hayes, decided the only way to head Moses off was to close Washington Square Park to traffic, buses, etc. (There was then a single road through the park.) Everyone responsible thought she was a nut. But Mrs. Hayes fought on until she was joined by planners, architects, city planning critic Jane Jacobs, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, Lewis Mumford, and hundreds of others.

It was Moses himself who finally damaged his own cause the most. Angri-ly responding to citizen protests against the Washington Square highway, Moses said, "The developers of the Washington Square South apartments were formally, officially, and reliably promised under the Slum Clearance Act a Fifth Avenue address and access for the large new population . . ." The neighborhood became enraged at Moses's secret deal that would have sacrificed their park so that "slum" clearance developers could have a more profitable address. Like many others, I spent three years of my life in defeating that roadway. I joined political clubs. I joined city-wide civic organizations in order to get them to oppose the road. I began to write for the *Village Voice*. Every facet of Carmine DeSapio's obvious deal with Moses to get that roadway through was explored until finally DeSapio himself, to stave off defeat by the Village Independent Democrats, had to turn against the road.

Moses lost, and after the park was closed to traffic, and in spite of official denials that such a plan ever existed, a ramp was quietly dropped from the design for the Lower Manhattan Expressway at West Broadway, exactly where it would have joined with the projected Fifth Avenue South that Mr. Moses

wanted to give the real estate developers. Moses's long-term grand design, it began to come out, was a great Fifth Avenue boulevard edged with luxury projects going right down into the heart of Lower Manhattan. The Lower Manhattan Expressway (also defeated) had a dual *raison d'être*: it was both a slum clearance device and a way to pump more cars into the city. Mr. Moses's multiple roles as Parks Commissioner, slum clearer, and arterial highway coordinator all came together in his attack on Washington Square.

Mr. Moses does not dwell on his defeats in his book. He makes no reference to the Washington Square Park controversy at all. As for Washington Square Village, the only complaint he makes is that the press magnified the employment there of one Vincent Gigante, "a 31-year-old former boxer," who "was acquitted May 27, 1958, of the charge that he tried to murder Frank Costello, the gambler, the previous year . . ." To Moses, this was dirty pool on the part of a *New York Times* reporter, Charles Grutzner. However, Grutzner was no ordinary *Times* reporter; he was and is the *Times* expert on the Mafia. Vincent "the Chin" Gigante was no ordinary one-time marksman; he was a full-time working hood who was later sent to prison with the *capo di capi* of the New York Mafia, Vito Genovese, for narcotics conspiracy. Moses chooses not to notice this history, just as he reacted furiously to the later revelations in 1959 that Thomas J. Shanahan, chief sponsor selector for Slum Clearance projects, knowingly picked another Mafia-connected fellow, Louis Pokrass, as a sponsor of a Harlem project after throwing out a perfectly respectable set of sponsors who had been willing to take it on. Shanahan, who was also Carmine DeSapio's bankroller, receives slight mention in Moses's book for a very good reason. It was his activities, sanctioned by Moses, which finally got Moses expelled from one of his most powerful city jobs, Chairman of the Slum Clearance Committee.

Moses preens quite a bit in *Public*

Works over praise from the mighty. He quotes their letters ad nauseum. Like the one Nelson Rockefeller sent him after throwing him out as head of the State Parks Council. Moses was able to accept the bitter pill because, as he modestly puts it, "Cordial relations were restored with the Rockefellers, as evidenced, among other things, by the naming after me of the Niagara Power Station and Park, the principal state park on the St. Lawrence, the causeway to Fire Island, and the park on Fire Island, and by my association with the Governor's transportation program, with John D. Rockefeller III at Lincoln Center, and with David Rockefeller in the improvement of downtown New York." Elsewhere in the book, Moses lets us know that he was put on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's pad for \$25,000 a year as a "consultant," and later raised to \$35,000. The Rockefellers know how to do these things nicely. One piece of Moses history I did not know is just how close Moses was to the Rockefellers on a number of projects outside New York City. He was consultant to the Rockefellers' South American corporation, IBEC, in Brazil and Caracas, as well as to Laurance Rockefeller's Dorado Beach development. Moses used to spread the myth that he had little interest in money and that his only public salary was his \$25,000 as Parks Commissioner of New York, but he did a hefty bit of consulting. He did his bit to muck up Portland, Oregon, the Vieux Carré in New Orleans, Baltimore, and other cities with his single-minded concentration on one form of transport, the automobile.

There is not a trace of regret for any of this. His only mention of air pollution is in connection with an attack on Mayor John Lindsay for not building the Lower Manhattan Expressway. He says indignantly that "the city even issued statements to the effect that any elevated expressway would poison the air in the entire neighborhood and threaten the lives of passersby and residents." Moses never addresses himself to whether those statements were accurate,

for the environmental effects of what he wrought in highways is beyond his ken. He is a little more interested in water pollution. And for a very good reason—sewage treatment plants require millions of dollars for construction.

So the good things one can say about Moses are that he was against water pollution and one other interesting abomination. He was vehemently opposed to the construction of underground fall-out shelters. It is never very clear why, unless he was sure he was not destined to head up the program or he feared that a shelter program would divert funds from highway building. But he describes a conference at Arden House, sponsored by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in 1957. Who should be its chairman but President Nixon's present Dr. Strangelove, Henry A. Kissinger. The purpose of the conference, says Moses, was to push the shelter program which had just received a big spread in *Life*. Moses says he and an aide, George Spargo, poured cold water on the idea of spending \$24 billion to burrow underground. He attacks the late Henry Luce for his motives in advocating shelters, noting that the only explanation for it is that it "was a cold-blooded circus sensation to boost circulation." That is the conclusion Moses says he arrived at "in retrospect." But I wonder. Moses was very mad at the Luce publications for not boosting the World's Fair enough; he attacked them for ingratitude since they had the contract to publish the official Fair guide. "In retrospect" I would guess this was more likely to be the source of Moses's animus toward Luce.

The real story of Robert Moses will have to wait until the long-researched, unauthorized (so unauthorized that Moses tried to get the publisher to kill it) biography by Robert Caro, a former *Newsday* reporter, comes out. This volume, to be published by Simon and Schuster under the title *The Power Broker: The Story of Robert Moses*, will come out this fall. It chronicles, I am given to understand, his early days as an idealistic reformer and shows at what

point in Moses's life he began to turn cynical.

Moses as a young idealist somehow escapes me, since I have only experienced him in later life. He has pretty well etched out any such softheadedness from his book. The Moses I will remember is the Moses I saw on a telecast in 1963 as he was struggling with the problems of opening the World's Fair. He was having trouble getting many countries to participate. But there was one country and leader he really admired. "They [the Spanish] have leadership and discipline there—I don't care if you like the government or not." And of the Caudillo himself, Moses said, with a trace of wistfulness, "When he says something, that's it." For those who get that far in Mr. Moses's book, there is a fine photograph of Moses and the Caudillo on page 552. Not one to be made self-conscious by a rising storm of criticism, Moses had rushed over to Spain to pin a medal on Franco just at the moment the World's Fair came to be recognized as a disaster. But that's not in the book—some cautious editor undoubtedly ruled out any explanation of what Moses was doing with Franco on that occasion. ■

The Political Puzzle

Answers to the June puzzle:

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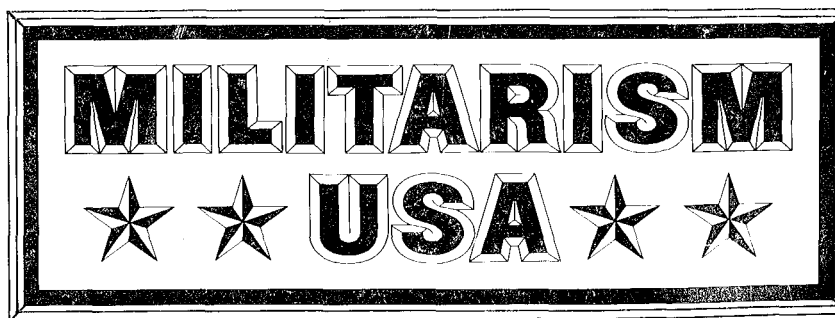
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