

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

“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.”

The 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-

ecture, for that matter—has led to the single grave weakness in his otherwise admirable book. He repeatedly overpraises Moses and his planners and designers, who at times included gifted men, but who—with the exception of the great bridge engineer O. H. Ammann—could not possibly be ranked as “giants of their profession.” Moses responded viscerally to actual giants such as Frank Lloyd Wright or Walter Gropius, as Caro shows, when he called them subversive or un-American.

Thus Moses’ numerous, but largely undistinguished designers produced buildings that were usually mediocre, and often much worse. Apart from pure works of engineering (even though some of these, such as Triborough Bridge, were ungainly), and the exceptionally sensitive landscaping of his best parks and roads, most of his architecture was marred by heavy traditionalism, more Teutonic than Venetian. In contrast to his fastidious early work at Jones Beach, it was coarsely detailed from the 1930s onward. In the case of asphalted, inner-city playgrounds, it could be brutal. His colossal housing projects, as Caro realizes, are of course among the most stultifying ever erected in so-called “advanced” countries. Basically, they are all as bad as the recently dynamited Pruitt-Igoe complex in St. Louis.

It is true that Jones Beach stands as a *chef-d’oeuvre* of social architecture on the grand scale that overrides its eclectic associations (as do the suave Gothic parodies at Princeton and Yale); but Moses never again brought the same elegance, wit, and social conviction to architecture, even though his engineering remained, on the whole, at a high level. His taste was pitilessly revealed in the fiasco at Flushing Meadows, architecturally the most vulgar World’s Fair on record.

Caro makes much of this clear, and he also modifies his praise of Moses’ park designs by noting that they are cut by massive traffic facilities which, in Riverside Park and elsewhere, in turn cut off the public from access to the water.

Berman, on the other hand, does not trouble even to make these distinctions. The result is an absurd panegyric

of Moses the Master Builder, larded with irrelevant literary allusions culled from *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Great Gatsby*. There is a garbled reference to *Gilgamesh*, and *Faust II* portentously dragged in. But Berman characteristically does not cite an episode such as the instant destruction of the cottage of aged couple Baucis and Philemon, which would have been directly applicable to Moses’ wanton clearance program.

Nor does it serve much purpose to say that Moses drove “some of his best architects and engineers in the country . . . harder than anyone had ever driven them, to do work that would be bigger, faster, cheaper, and more beautiful than anything they (or anyone else) has ever done—and they loved him for it, and gave him their best.” More than *anyone* else? This kind of hyperbole is simply embarrassing to the informed reader, who might recall D. H. Burnham’s transformation of Chicago lakefront from a swamp into the most magnificent series of waterside parks in any American city, far more extensive—as well as easily accessible to beaches—than Moses’ Riverside Park.

Unfortunately, Berman is innocent of environmental awareness on this order. He does not see that to create “an elegant variation on the Venice Campanile” does not reveal a sure command of “cultural history” in Moses, but rather fear of the richest cultural possibilities of the present, not only in architecture but in modern art, which Moses loathes. Nor does Berman seem aware of any but the most obvious texts of Marxism, else he might have referred to Engels’ powerful castigation of Manchester, where, a century before Moses’ highways, he discerned the upper classes swiftly passing the half-hidden quarters of the poor as they traveled main thoroughfares from the suburbs to the core of the city.

None of this, I suppose, is surprising in Berman, who, instead of grappling with real problems of environmental criticism, is very free with words such as “beautiful” and “brilliant,” forgetting that the great bridges spanning San Francisco Bay may be as beautiful as any of Moses’ bridges in New York. Would New York have turned out much differently without

Moses? Probably as much as Rome without Sixtus V, possibly more than Athens without Pericles, perhaps less than Paris without Haussmann and Napoleon III. Cities are shaped by tremendous impersonal forces which transcend personal design, but it is precisely these forces which Berman has yet to comprehend.

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Marshall Berman

“Moses poses problems that every industrial society, capitalist and socialist, must face. What kind of cities do we want to live in? What kinds of building really *can* make our lives better? In my work on Robert Moses, I have been trying to reach a point from which this kind of thinking can begin.”

Rather than answer point for point, or return abuse for abuse, I want to explore again some of the larger cultural issues that underly this whole discussion. The respondents emphasize two central themes that are essential to Caro’s account of Robert Moses’ “bad character” (Goodman), his characteristic style of personal malice and meanness, the gratuitous spite and petty vindictiveness that poisoned so many of his works; second, his brilliantly corrupt methods of wheeling and dealing, “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.” (Temko)

I certainly didn’t mean to deny these aspects of Moses, and I am glad to see them spelled out. But I did make a strategic decision to deemphasize them, in favor of other qualities, both good and evil, which I considered more essential to his overall achieve-