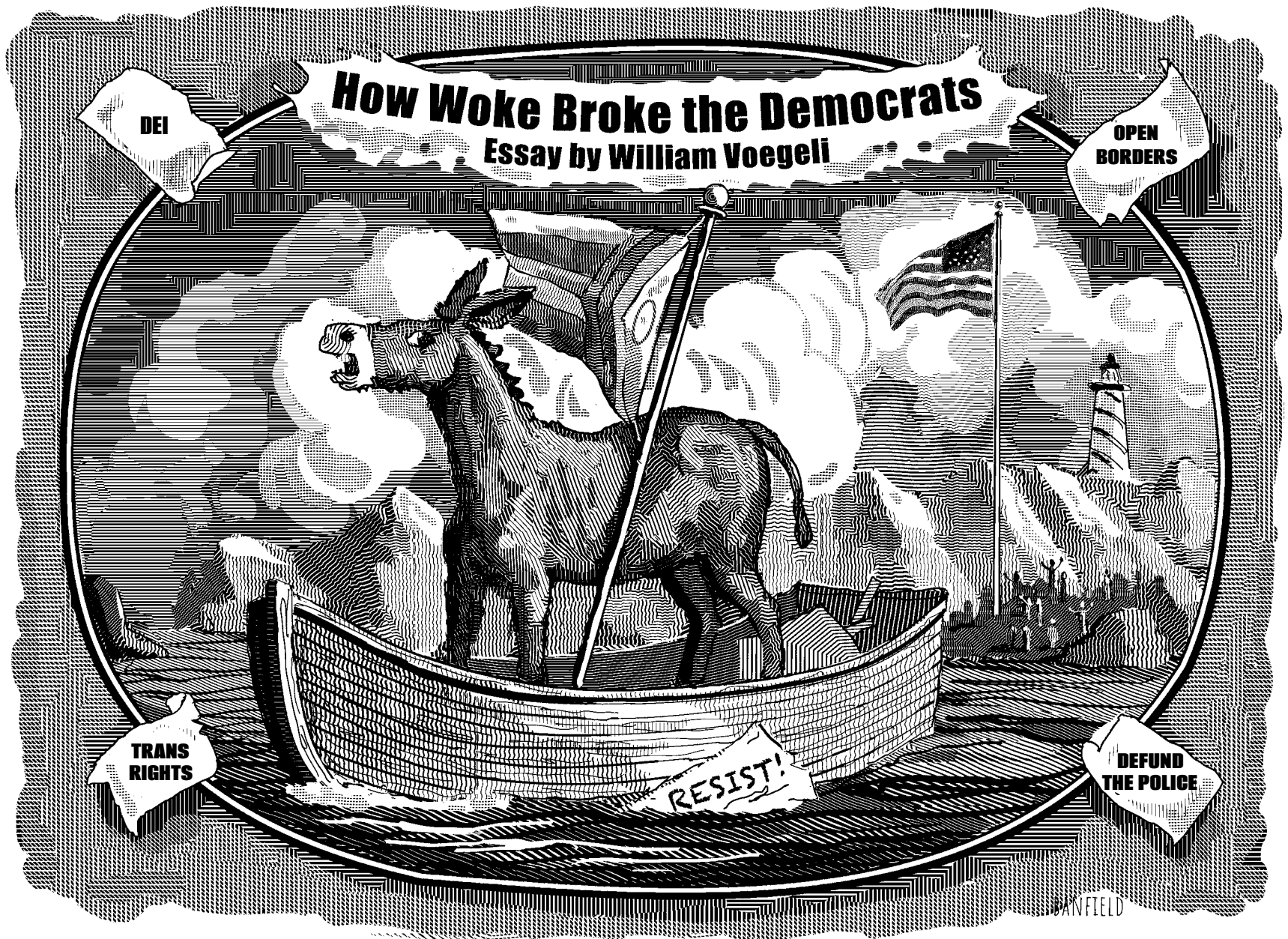


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Essay by John Masko

MY WAY, THE HIGHWAY

Robert Moses, hero of urban development.



WHEN ISHMAEL, THE NARRATOR OF Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, first contemplated the shoreline of Manhattan, the city offered little to keep an ambitious landsman ashore. New York in the 1850s resembled the Eastern Seaboard's other cities—cramped, wooden, and small—even if its 515,000 residents edged it past Baltimore and Boston as the nation's most populous. New York's outer boroughs, not yet part of the city, were mostly rural. At the time of his death in 1849, two years before the publication of Melville's masterpiece, Edgar Allen Poe resided in an idyllic rural farmhouse in Fordham Village. It is now a historical site located on the Bronx's main thoroughfare, the Grand Concourse.

Just a hundred years after Ishmael's voyage, he would not have recognized his home city: skyscrapers and shoreline parks swarming with 8 million residents, joined by millions of commuters who came in every workday via recently constructed tunnels and suspension bridges. The world had changed, but New York had changed far more. While peer cities' populations had quadrupled or quintupled over the previous century, New York's had grown 16-fold. Even more consequentially, as the old European seats of power declined, the city had established itself as the world's unequivocal financial, industrial, and cultural capital. It was headquarters, the magnet that drew hyper-ambitious people from across the

country and around the world. More than any other city, as Tom Wolfe used to say, it was the place *where things were happening*.

How did New York do it? How did it leapfrog every other major East Coast city and stave off the upstarts of the Midwest and West Coast to embody the American Century? The answer lies in five tectonic historical developments working in concert: the industrial revolution, the transportation revolution, the skyscraper, mass immigration...and Robert Moses.

To a reader in 2025, the last of those may seem incongruous. How could a single person be judged to have exerted such an influence on New York's ascendancy? And yet, the list of public works in which Moses played

the leading role—putting together the funding, commissioning the plans, securing the permits, supervising the construction—is a catalog of the building achievements that rendered New York a hub of commerce and beacon of opportunity.

There were the bridges and expressways—Moses was responsible for nearly every one of New York’s highway bridges other than the George Washington—that allowed the city to become America’s leading trading port and distribution hub. There was the network of parks in the outer boroughs that first allowed cooped-up New Yorkers a view of the beauty that lay in their backyards. There were the parkways connecting the urban interior to those parks. There were the Henry Hudson Parkway and Franklin Delano Roosevelt Drive which allowed for easy transport around Manhattan. There were massive new housing efforts like Co-op City in the Bronx. There were the improvements to Central Park—a 19th-century bucolic romance that had fallen on hard times until Moses cleaned it up, added public facilities, restored its zoo, and helped facilitate new institutions like Shakespeare in the Park and the famous restaurant Tavern on the Green. There was Lincoln Center, home since its construction in the 1960s to the Metropolitan Opera, New York Philharmonic, New York City Ballet, and others. Shea Stadium. Rockaway Beach. Riverside Park. The list goes on.

For much of the 20th century, Moses’s influence on the physiognomy of New York and his central role in crafting the city’s modern identity were not disputed. To be sure, some objected to his high-handed methods—particularly those whom Moses publicly embarrassed in the media or in court, or the many victims of his private grudges and caprices, whose careers or lives were never the same after they crossed Robert Moses. But such, said the conventional wisdom, was the price of employing an urban planning prodigy.

Others had differences with Moses that were less personal than philosophical—some believed, for instance, that his diversion of public resources toward roadbuilding should have been counterbalanced with comparable investments in public transit. Or that he was too quick to resort to the bulldozer when his master plans required evictions or dismembered an established neighborhood.

Chief among these opponents was Jane Jacobs, the journalist and organizer who advocated for historical preservation over modernization and made her name largely through her public battles with Moses. Although Jacobs’s view impressed the intelligentsia, Moses’s more often won on the streets of New

York, where slums like Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem actually had to be lived in by real people, rather than visited by university professors for an occasional afternoon of “vibrant” urban tourism.

Despite Jacobs’s influence, it was widely agreed among New Yorkers and historians of urban planning into the early 1970s, even among many of Moses’s critics, that the benefits of his singular influence on New York decisively outweighed the costs. Even as political shifts stripped Moses of his bases of power in the Parks Department and Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, sending him into an unhappy retirement, the view that his career constituted a net disservice to New York would have been widely considered extreme.

Political Winds

EVERY BIOGRAPHER DREAMS OF UPENDING the consensus view of a prominent historical figure. Rare indeed is the writer who succeeds at this task as trium-

Discussed in this essay:

The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York, by Robert A. Caro.
Alfred A. Knopf, 1,296 pages,
\$70 (cloth), \$27 (paper)

phantly as Robert Caro did in his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Robert Moses, *The Power Broker*, published in September 1974, one month after Richard Nixon was driven from the presidency, at a time when Americans were primed to think the worst of governmental leaders. The book’s subtitle, *Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, made clear Caro’s intention to upend established judgments about Moses. For most of his career, Moses had been spoken of as the champion of New York’s ascendancy during the first half of the 20th century. Caro instead cast him as a lead villain in the drama of New York’s stagnation and decay in the 1960s and ’70s.

Caro’s basic indictment: Blessed with a genius for design, public administration, finance, and salesmanship, Moses had every skill required to transform New York into a great modern city. In his earlier projects, in which he prioritized public over personal benefit, he made several significant steps in that direction. Gradually, however, he acquired too much power by building a culture of patronage and sycophancy divorced from the

democratic process. Less and less accountable to the public, he became capricious and aloof, his projects increasingly counterproductive. With vigor, paternalism, and ruthlessness, Moses built New York into a city more congested, automobile-reliant, economically unequal, and ethnically segregated than it could, and should, have been. New York, Caro concludes, would have been better off without Moses.

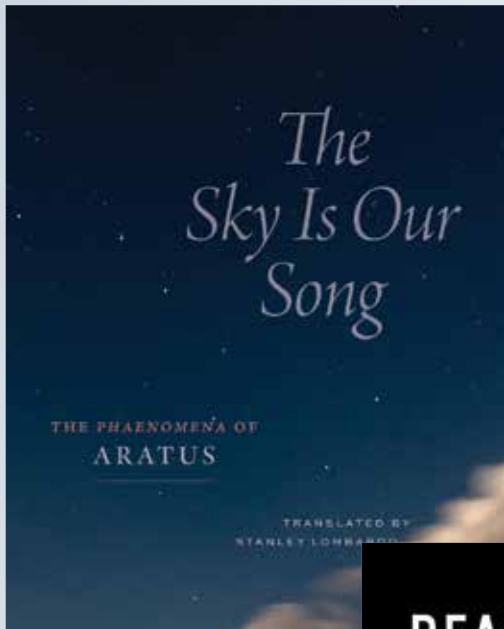
The Power Broker’s contrarian assessment of Moses has, over 50 years, become the orthodox view. Its initial popularity is easy enough to understand. In the era of civil rights and protest, the patrician reformist ideal that Moses embodied seemed increasingly foreign and illegitimate. A figure who cared little for the democratic process and preferred bulldozing opponents to brokering a deal was especially easy to scorn. That his views on racial and class equality fell short of 1970s standards made Moses an even more inviting target. (It is partly Caro’s racial *j’accuse* toward Moses that has led *The Power Broker* to resurface during America’s periodic racial “reckonings.” We saw this in 2020, for instance, when activists twisted Caro’s research to falsely suggest that the bridges on some of New York’s beach parkways were built intentionally low to prevent racial minorities who rode city buses from visiting Moses’s beaches.)

Unquestionably, *The Power Broker*’s staying power has something to do with Caro’s uncanny sense of the political winds. But even more important were its novelistic style, character development, complex parallel storylines, sense of suspense, and above all its damning length. Through his command of language, structure, and fact-finding, Caro managed the consummate act of historical revisionism, taking the man responsible for almost every large civic project in New York City for 50 years and entering his name into the history books as an undisputed villain.

Caro’s takedown of Moses was so complete that it prompted a near-total loss of interest in Moses as a subject for study, much less for emulation. In the decades since *The Power Broker*, not a single new biography has been written of a man who was previously regarded as one of the greatest practitioners of urban planning in world history. Caro’s has turned out to be—at least up to the present day—the final word. Apart from a couple of edited essay volumes, a far shorter hagiographic biography, *Robert Moses: Builder for Democracy*, written by Cleveland Rodgers 22 years before *The Power Broker*, and a more recent graphic novel about Moses, it is the *only* word.

But it is unjust for Moses’s legacy to remain a permanent casualty of Caro’s me-

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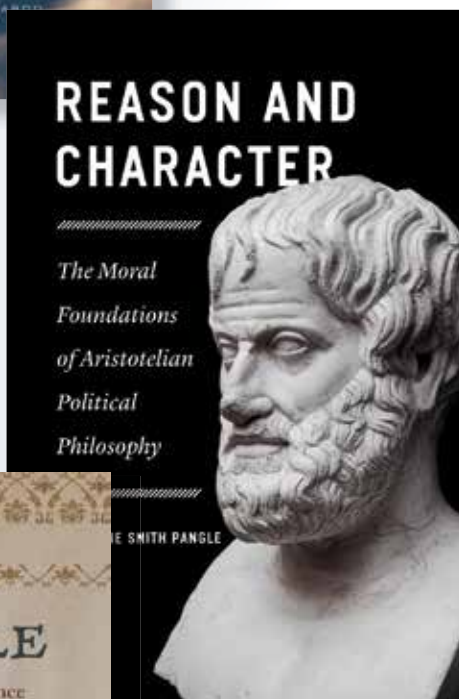
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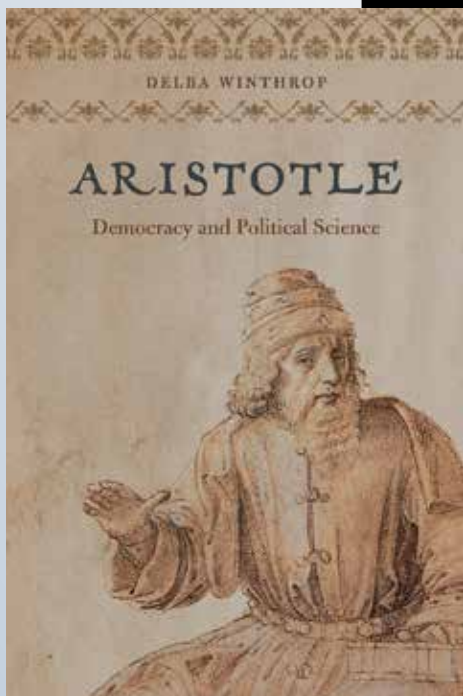
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ticulous character assassination, for it is *The Power Broker's* very skill that makes it misleading. Despite his compelling prose, Caro's reliance upon a basic fallacy of argumentation renders his appraisal of Moses's overall impact unbalanced at best, deeply dishonest at worst.

All or Nothing at All

THAT FALLACY LIES IN CARO'S TENDENCY to think counterfactually about Moses's shortcomings but not about his accomplishments. For a Moses project that Caro and the rest of us consider a nearly unalloyed good—say, the construction of Jones Beach, giving hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers a year a place to escape while staying close to home—Caro never invites the reader to consider how the trajectory of New York might have changed had Moses never built it, or had a similar project been attempted by less competent hands.

When it comes to Moses's more controversial projects, however, counterfactuals abound. For page after page, Caro invites us to consider how the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn might have remained more vibrant had Moses chosen to run the elevated Brooklyn-Queens Expressway a block or two over from where he did. Would the neighborhood's main commercial artery have survived? How many fewer evictions would have been required? Likewise for numerous other Moses projects, such as the highway built through the South Bronx promontory of Spuyten Duyvil.

As an aside, the curiously large amount of ink Caro spills over the tiny nook of Spuyten Duyvil highlights a further challenge for any biographer taking on a career as multifacetedly consequential as Moses's. Spuyten Duyvil happens to be the place where Caro himself lived while writing *The Power Broker*. It drives home the fact that in writing about a subject who undertook hundreds of major projects, the choice of what to include and what to exclude is crucial, and can say more about the author and his own times than it does about the subject. In any case, Caro's account demonstrates how easy it is to take the accomplishments of a great career for granted while questioning its shortcomings. If an author does this incessantly enough, he generates a warped view of his subject, in which the shortcomings seem to outweigh the accomplishments.

Moses's chorus of critics (inspired by Caro) point to the many instances in which the "power broker" held a (metaphorical) gun to the head of other public officials (or even

the public itself) in order to get his way. *The Power Broker's* opening vignette, for instance, featured Moses deploying one of his favorite pressure tactics—threatening to quit—when Mayor-elect Robert Wagner only reappointed him to two out of the three city posts he had held under the previous administration. Unwilling to face the mayoralty without Moses's knowledge and skill at his side, Wagner folded and appointed him to the third post.

Caro likewise presented several episodes in which Moses used his proprietary access to federal and state funding or political connections to stonewall other officials' better alternatives to his projects (say, a tunnel when a Moses bridge would have been too disruptive). When you've got the cash, or when you've got the construction unions on your side, Moses would tell them, you can make the rules. The subtext of Caro's presentation of such episodes is that had Moses been less power-hungry, strong-willed, self-serving, and boorish, the planning and implementation of these projects would have been more democratic, just, efficient, and civic-minded.

But this is a fantasy. The uncomfortable fact is that owing to Moses's singular combination of organizational genius and personal intransigence, the only realistic alternative to his projects being built the way he wanted them was nothing at all. Why?

First, there is the matter of money. Moses mastered the financial potential of the public authority—a quasi-private business structure entrusted with the administration of public works—in a way that no public official managed before or since. Through his Triborough Authority, he was able to use toll collections on existing public roads and bridges to finance new ones—circumventing the funding limitations of a city and state chronically short on cash, in order to build engineering marvels that those governments could never have afforded on their own.

Second, in a state with a talent for wrapping red tape around virtually every government task, Moses had a knowledge of laws and regulations and how to use them for the public benefit unparalleled by any state legislator or public official in his day.

Third, there was Moses's vision. From his earliest time working in New York City government, few days went by when Moses was not out in the field, in search of underappreciated parcels of land or natural resources that might be turned into parks or thoroughfares. His deep understanding of public needs and how to marshal those resources to meet them, and of how to link his projects together into a cohesive whole that could redefine a city and a state, was unique.

Fourth, there were his project management skills—finding builders he could trust and motivating them to work at seemingly super-human speed to fulfill his vision. It is difficult to review the record of Moses's construction of Jones Beach, which required the placement of a massive artificial sandbar that many considered an engineering impossibility and which Moses drove to completion ahead of schedule through a brutal winter, without the impression that only Moses could have done it.

And lastly, there were his public relations skills. His command of the media reinforced his ability to get elected officials, unelected bureaucrats, labor unions, and public opinion on the same page. With such a singular combination of talents, it is hard to imagine that any other official or group of officials could have achieved half as much.

Ironically, these personal qualities cannot help but leap off the pages of *The Power Broker*, even as Caro seems to discount their significance. Could Moses, had he been a bit nicer, have done more for the city of New York than he ended up doing? Caro certainly thinks so, but I'm not so sure. For as Caro inadvertently shows on many occasions, the qualities that made Moses a liability at a dinner party—brazenness, directness, and disregard for rules—were key to many of his greatest successes.

A Legacy in Full

BUT *THE POWER BROKER* DID NOT merely argue that Moses could have done better had he not fallen prey to hubris—a resolution that neither the affirmative nor negative could ever definitively prove. Caro went further, arguing that New York would have been better off without Moses. In an interview for *The New York Times* in 2007, Caro was asked whether he thought New York needed a new Robert Moses. His answer: “We don’t need a new Robert Moses because he ignored the values of New York. If anything, I see the city moving today to correct his ravages.”

Now, whether New York City has corrected anything at all since 2007 is highly debatable. But it is the first half of Caro’s remark that betrays his astonishing misunderstanding of his subject—a misunderstanding that seems to have become more pronounced with the passing years.

Every schoolchild in America learns that one of the greatest things about our country is that it is a melting pot—a place that takes the world’s human potential and integrates it into our social compact. New York represents that American promise more than any other place. But although we frequently celebrate and debate the role of mass immigration in our national ethos, seldom do we think about the daunting logistical challenges past immigration presented us with, and how we managed to surmount them.

In the opening chapters of *The Power Broker*, we get a sense of some of these challenges. In Robert Moses’s youth, New York was a city that had exceeded its carrying capacity. Wave after wave of immigrants and rural American transplants had arrived, and the city had no

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where to put them. As Moses’s mentor, Governor Alfred E. Smith, experienced as a young man, these immigrants typically lived lives of urban misery and squalor. The city lacked housing, open space, and common gathering places. Even for those New Yorkers who were comfortably middle class, New York was so overcrowded and its infrastructure so decrepit that it was close to unlivable. Leaving the city on its narrow roads and bridges took many hours, and most people were unable to think of leaving at all.

Given these challenges, it is no overstatement to credit Moses with saving New York. Through his parks, parkways, and housing complexes, he made an unlivable city livable. Unlike any other city in the world that experienced an equivalent population spike to New York’s (say, London in the 19th century

or Rio de Janeiro in the 20th), Moses’s New York accommodated its population spike without shantytowns, mass homelessness, or squalor.

Meanwhile, his bridges and highways enabled New York to continue growing the local economy that would make the city a decent place to live for its immigrants’ children and grandchildren. A frequent criticism of Moses’s predilection for highway building is that far from reducing auto congestion in New York, his highways increased it. That’s true enough, but these critics rarely seem to think much about what highway congestion meant: that for the first time, residents of New York were able to participate in the American dream of mobility—to own a car, to move to the suburbs and own a house with a lawn and commute to the city, or to travel out of the city on the weekends and then return. The highways relieved the pressure on a city that had locked most of its population in.

Robert Caro and other critics of Moses have made valid criticisms. Moses did displace a huge number of people from their homes (hundreds of thousands) in order to build his projects, forcing them to accept city buyouts or find rentals elsewhere. It is also unquestionably true that in his park and road building, Moses did more for New York’s middle class than he did for its poor. While Caro tries to attribute this tendency to a contempt for the downtrodden, the likelier explanation is simpler. Moses, a vain man, lived for public adulation. And in the era in which he worked, public officials were more likely to receive public notice—whether from Washington officials or *The New York Times*—for projects that benefitted the more visible members of society. Moses did not make New York more equal, but he did give those millions who managed to rise into its middle class something to look forward to. He also helped the city at large to remain functional and vibrant into the future—a legacy that benefitted, and continues to benefit, all New Yorkers.

The critics of Robert Moses have had their day. They once provided a valuable corrective to the Moses worship of an earlier era, but if today’s America is to have any hope of learning from the genius of our greatest urban innovator, it is time for us to move on and to consider his legacy in its remarkable totality.

John Masko is a writer living in Boston.

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