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ROBERT MOSES RECONSIDERED: BLIGHT IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

A noted urban thinker reminds us what was lost when Robert Moses deemed areas 'slums' and tore them down. The third in a series of essays on an ambitious three-part museum exhibit. > *By Roberta Brandes Gratz*

"Everybody, it would seem, is for the rebuilding of our cities…But this is not the same as liking cities…most of the rebuilding under way and in prospect is being designed by people who don't like cities. They do not merely dislike the noise and the dirt and the congestion. They dislike the city's variety and concentration, its tension, its hustle and bustle. The new redevelopment projects will be physically in the city, but in spirit they deny it – and the values that since the beginning of civilization have always been at the heart of great cities."

These thoughts were written half a century ago by William H. Whyte Jr., best known for his championing of the activities in public spaces that define urban vitality. The part about "not liking cities," along with other pointed quotes from Jane Jacobs, Charles Abrams and Robert Caro, is included in the exhibit "Slum Clearance and the Superblock Solution" at Columbia University's Wallach Gallery, one of the three museum re-examinations of Robert Moses now on view in New York City.

The inclusion of such quotes – amid a great assortment of photographs, planning maps, brochures and historical information – is significant. One might otherwise think, except for one display case of community opposition memorabilia, that the powerful New York bureaucrat and builder Robert Moses did not have critics other than the unlucky residents and businesses in his bulldozer's path.

Whyte's quote, in fact, is from his introduction to one of the most valuable books about authentic urbanism, "The Exploding Metropolis," published in 1957 by the editors of Fortune Magazine, a group that included Whyte. Among other contributors, the book has an early piece by the paradigm-shifting urbanist (and Moses opponent) Jane Jacobs called "Downtown is for People."

The exhibit also includes an oft-cited Jacobs quote about public housing complexes: "What will the projects look like? They will be spacious, parklike, and uncrowded. They will feature long green vistas. They will be stable and symmetrical and orderly. They will be clean, impressive, and monumental. They will have all the attributes of a well-kept, dignified cemetery." How prescient were those words.

This exhibit highlights a number of projects Moses built under the "slum clearance" housing and urban renewal programs, all apartment buildings varying in design quality from the most familiar red brick "towers in the park," in Le Corbusier's famous formulation, to Kips Bay Plaza, designed by I.M. Pei, and Chatham Towers, by Kelly & Gruzen.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this exhibit is that it serves as a testimonial to an ill-conceived, erroneously premised strategy for the rebuilding of cities: the "superblock" replacement for neighborhoods. Moses' approach – total clearance and replacement with a tower in a park – has certainly not stood the test of time.

The approach championed by Moses' critics, that of combining conservation and new construction, is certainly in its ascendancy but not yet at the zenith. The kind of solid old buildings from the south Bronx to Crown Heights that Moses only knew how to tear down are being extraordinarily refurbished today. An interesting photo of "tenements" demolished to build the Williamsburg Houses shows three- and four-story rowhouses that would be valued today. Pictures of Wooster and Houston streets before demolition demonstrate, at least, how many more SoHo-style buildings filled with economic uses existed north of Houston. An endless variety of building types once filled most city streets. One can only wonder how different the city would be if more conservation than demolition had occurred.

As the exhibit points out: "No more than 15 percent of those displaced from renewal areas moved into public housing. The rest faced higher rents, and non-whites in particular moved to other slums. Title I aggravated a housing problem by reducing the supply of low-income housing."

But this exhibit, like the two others about Moses, is more celebratory than critical. And to look at some of the beautiful, large-scale color photos of such middle-income projects as Kips Bay Plaza, Washington Square Village, Chatham Towers, Lenox Terrace and others, one might think the consequence of Moses' building approach for the city was fine. That thousands of redeemable buildings were demolished, hundreds of thousands of people displaced – sometimes more than once – and millions of public dollars spent is minimally

depicted.

And, of course, seats of culture are more valuable to a city as individual anchors of districts around a city rather than concentrated mall-like on a single site. One could be grateful to Moses for Lincoln Center, if the massive displacement of people and businesses were considered a fair trade-off. The one photo of West 65th Street before demolition does not do justice to the diverse urban fabric that existed there. Similar areas of the West Side that remain to the north now have renovated brownstones, tenements and apartment houses occupied by a broad assortment of family formations.

To appropriately evaluate anything, the possibility must exist to weigh today against both what was replaced and what the alternatives were. Moses vociferously declared as “slums” what others might not have designated as such.

One section highlights how questionable Moses’ judgment was of what constituted a slum. Photos of the Upper West Side neighborhood where Park West Village now sits are quite telling. They portray middle-class African-American men dressed in business suits, a church choir, a multiracial classroom of smiling young faces, a sports team, assorted proud stoop-sitters, an Abbott & Costello film at the Park West Theater and an active street life. These photos scream out the question: From what was Moses saving the city?

One of the chief Moses critics of the day was attorney and housing activist Charles Abrams. A challenge to Moses by Abrams is prominently displayed: “Has it occurred to you that in the long run it is cheaper to rebuild and rehabilitate central areas than to provide transportation for real estate promoters who tout the virtues of outlying land?”

Moses dismissed all suggestions of alternatives to total clearance and to the misery caused by displacement, the results of which are still being felt today. “No one has yet suggested a way to clear slums without dislocating people,” he said.

As the exhibit notes, Abrams, Jacobs and others "called for a stoppage of slum clearance" and "favored the construction of new developments on vacant or under-occupied land." That strategy left plenty of room for demolition of the irredeemable, whether rotting tenements or unused commercial buildings. But the basic stability of socially cohesive neighborhoods would not have been decimated. And a good deal of the city’s wide variety of economic activity would not have been dislodged. And considerable public money could have been available for spending on schools, transit and other public necessities.

One alternative strategy is highlighted: the West Side Urban Renewal Project (from 87th to 97th Streets between Central Park and Amsterdam Avenue) championed by James Felt, chair of the Planning Commission, who was not known as a great opponent of clearance. The first project out of Moses’ control, this plan rejected the superblock, spared a splendid inventory of mid-block brownstones and encouraged citizen involvement in tree plantings and street clean-ups. The street grid was left intact with high-rise apartment buildings on the avenues in a variety of income combinations and with extremely important retail on the ground floors. Schools, churches and social service organizations are scattered throughout.

This was a very enlightened strategy at the time. “Renewal can be more like pruning a tree,” Felt said. But even with its so-called “spot clearance” and “selective intervention” approach, at least 5,000 people were displaced. Today that neighborhood is a vibrant and diverse mix.

But Moses defined “blighted” slums as a cancer to be erased in its entirety lest it spread. Blight referred to “economically ‘sick’ parts of the city” where it is not profitable to make or maintain improvements. The exhibit appropriately notes that “underutilized properties were often called blighted to justify their clearance.” How true that still is today in this city and across the country.

Big money was to be made in slum clearance. Title I of the 1949 Housing Act made that possible and the negative impacts inevitable. Big grants to cities were to be had with redevelopment projects. The city would buy land to resell at a loss to private developers. Two-thirds of the loss was covered by the federal government. This is the kind of program political leaders love – like the 90 percent federal funding for interstate highways – because of the federal money it brings into city coffers. The negative costs are never calculated.

The causes of slums, unfortunately, are not covered in this exhibit. Redlining, racism, blockbusting, land speculation, rent gauging by slumlords, migration of rural southerners into the city and the gradual departure of the middle class all undermined healthy urban neighborhoods across the country. Slum clearance solved none of these problems and, in fact, exacerbated some of them, especially land speculation and racism.

Interestingly, a chart in the first section of the exhibit is meant to reinforce the oft-repeated and widely accepted notion that cities were in desperate decline during the first half of the 20th century. Deteriorated housing, falling property values, migration of the middle class to the suburbs – these were and still are the buzzwords. “Slums provided the sharpest image of urban crisis, and the related rhetoric revealed the logic of slum clearance,” the exhibit tells us.

But the chart tells us that from 1940 to 1950, 109,000 people moved into New York City and 143,630 moved out. The greatest net in-migration was between the ages of 15-43, surely a productive group. The greatest net

out-migration was 45 years and up, with the rest coming from ages 0-14 and 35-44, obviously families with children. One can interpret this population movement in different ways, but a net loss of 34,630 in a city of nearly 8 million does not augur the crisis that is often depicted.

The more significant shifts occurred later, building gradually from the early 1950s through the 1970s. A careful and critical study of these three exhibits will show that Moses' own razing and reconfiguring much of the city, plus the push and pull of new federal funding for suburban development and highways, were the causes of the truly dramatic business and population shifts in late 20th-century New York City.

- Roberta Brandes Gratz