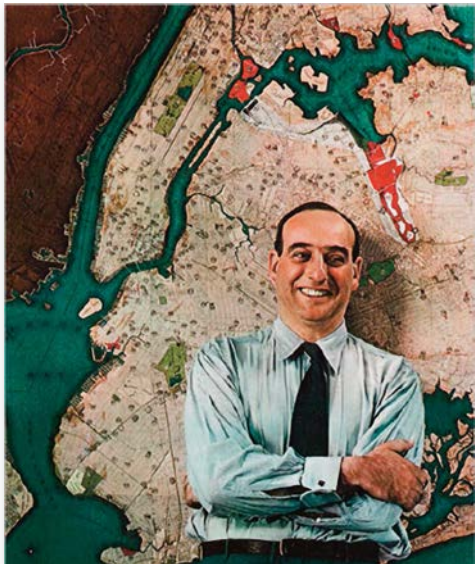




Robert Moses: A Study in Two Kinds of Ambition

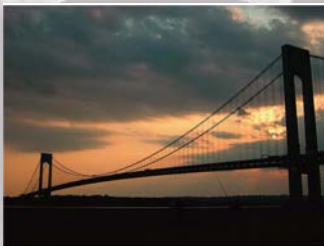
By John Stern

As a former urban and regional planner, I am enormously grateful to have learned



from Aesthetic Realism, the education founded by Eli Siegel, that there are two kinds of ambition, corresponding to the two selves in every person. One of the important principles arising from Mr. Siegel's lifelong study of humanity in all its aspects is that the greatest desire of every person is to like the world on an honest or accurate basis. But there is also an opposing ambition in us to have contempt, which Mr. Siegel defined as the "disposition in every person to

think he will be for himself by making less of the outside world." These two drives, or two kinds of ambition, were dynamically present in the man who has been called the greatest planner and builder of the 20th century: Robert Moses.

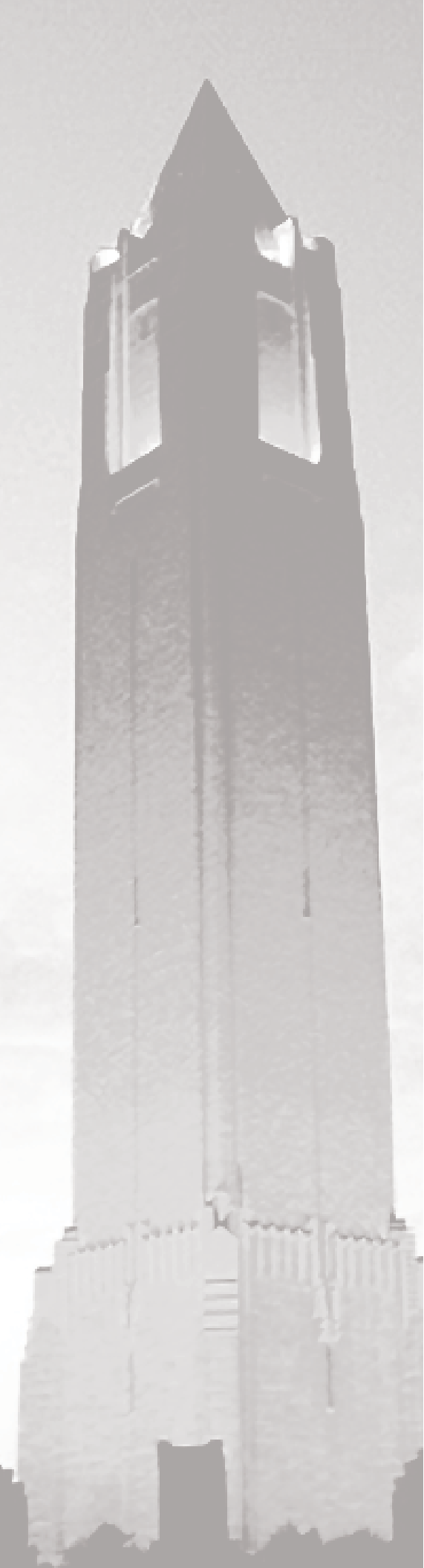


His imprint on New York City and the entire state is visible everywhere in the form of hundreds of parks and playgrounds, well-designed beaches and public swimming pools; seven soaring bridges: including the Triboro/Robert F. Kennedy, Henry Hudson, Verrazano-Narrows (at left), Bronx-Whitestone, Throgs Neck, Cross Bay, and Marine Parkway/Gil Hodges; and two tunnels: Queens-Midtown and Brooklyn-Battery/Hugh L. Carey. He built more than 600 miles of expressways and parkways (such as these on Long Island, shown here in an aerial view of the Northern State Parkway's intersection with the Meadowbrook Parkway).

Moses organized two World's Fairs. He coordinated the construction of more than 50,000 middle-income apartments, and had to do with public housing for more than half a million lower-income people. He constructed dams and power plants upstate (including this one near Niagara Falls; see photo below), and a dam and park at Long Sault on the St. Lawrence Seaway near Massena, NY. Moses also oversaw the coming-to-be of Shea Stadium, the United Nations buildings, Lincoln Center, and more.

Robert Moses was also called dictatorial, power-hungry, and vindictive. His life comments vividly on the two kinds of ambition. On the one hand, he was a creative, shaping force in America for 44 years, with a tremendous and imaginative ambition to improve the public's quality of life. On the other hand, his desire to be useful, particularly as he came to have more power, was accompanied increasingly by contempt, showing as unbr-





dled arrogance and spitefulness. Moses was a complex person, a rich study in the desire to be just and the desire to have and wield more and more power for its own sake. While not dealing with his life as a whole, I shall say some things about him in relation to these two desires, using as a principal source Robert A. Caro's magisterial 1974 book, *The Power Broker*.

1. Moses and Parks: His Greatest Pride

It may be that what Robert Moses loved most all his life was parks, which he thought about with fullness, designed, and built. Born in 1888 in New Haven, Connecticut, he studied at Yale, Oxford, and Columbia. In 1924 he became chairman of the New York State Council of Parks, and from 1934 until 1960 he was also New York City's Parks Commissioner (along with his chairmanships of several other powerful public authorities). In both parks positions he was at his creative best: he developed almost 200 new parks in New York City, on Long Island, and upstate, until New York had almost half the state park acreage in the entire nation.

In the 1920s he had seen city dwellers in long lines of cars on hot summer weekends, vainly seeking a shaded spot to picnic, or a beach at which they could swim. But what little existed was either private or open only to local residents. His ambition was to see that people from the sweltering cities have convenient access to beaches and parks, which would combine the freedom of natural wilderness with the order of man-made facilities for recreation.

2. Jones Beach: Ambition at Its Best

Perhaps the greatest example of his creative imagination is Jones Beach, which opened in 1929 and became a model for park designers all over the world. Robert Caro writes of Moses' plans, in which his ambition took the form of innovative facilities for people:

The bathhouses would have to be quite large, but they were buildings for people to have a good time in; the architecture must encourage people to have fun. It must be airy and light, gay and pleasant. There must be a thousand little touches to make people feel happy and relaxed.¹

This is a beautiful thing in a person: the desire to have people truly comfortable in space. When Jones Beach opened critics were amazed. They praised the tastefulness of its buildings (this is the West Bathhouse), the ingenuity with which delicate details had been worked in to their stone and steel, imaginative signs, the handsome tower housing the water tank, and the nautical theme in the design of everything, including railings, drinking fountains, trash cans, benches, and lampposts. (The original lighting pictured here is a ship's lantern, and the trash can is concealed by a ship's funnel.)²





Furthermore, Jones Beach was kept clean! Caro describes how Moses jolted bathers' consciences:

College students hired for the summer patrolled the boardwalk. Conspicuous in snow-white sailor suits and caps, they hurried to pick up dropped papers and cigarette butts while the droppers were still in the vicinity. To make the embarrassment of the litterers more acute, Moses refused to let the students use sharp-pointed sticks to pick up the litter without stooping. He wanted the earnest, clean-cut college boys stooping, because it would make the litterers more ashamed.³

But right next to his desire for splendid recreation areas for people, it seems Robert Moses had deep distaste for the public that was using his parks. Frances Perkins, first woman Secretary of Labor, said of Moses:

He doesn't love the people. It used to shock me because he was doing all these things for the welfare of the people, and then he'd denounce the common people terribly. To him they were lousy and dirty, throwing bottles all over Jones Beach. He loves the public, but not as people.⁴

Unfortunately, during his long and productive life, Robert Moses never heard the kind criticism he needed, which I had the good fortune to hear studying Aesthetic Realism. I was a quiet person who could act as though my greatest ambition was to be left alone, to depend on others and be involved with them as little as possible. But I also had another ambition, unknown to me: to have the depths of myself understood and encouraged, and to have a good effect on the people I met. That ambition began to be made conscious when Eli Siegel asked me in the first class I attended with him: "If you had one wish for a good change, what would you like it to be?"

John Stern — I want people to like me.



Eli Siegel — Do you know how much they like you?

JS — No, I don't.

ES — Do you feel *you* want to like people?

JS — I'm not sure.

ES — Do you say, "I don't want to like people," and they know it a little?

As I thought about this, I remembered how I wanted to feel superior to almost everyone I met. I was beginning to learn that I could never like myself unless I *hoped* to be fair to what other people felt and deserved. As a result of these questions and others, I began to see the people I met every day, and those I thought about in my work as a planner, with new eyes—with greater depth and width and conscious good will.

3. Two Kinds of Ambition Clash

I believe Robert Moses' increasing lack of interest in what other people felt hurt him, and in time helped ruin him. As the years went by his accomplishments multiplied. He was a formative force and seminal thinker in the fields of parks, highways, and urban renewal. For almost four decades he was seen by the press and public as the man above politics, who got things done for the public benefit.

But along with this he acquired more and more power. In "An Outline of Aesthetic Realism," Eli Siegel wrote:

Power had by yourself has two consequences: you respect the person yielding to that power; or you have contempt for him. In the second possibility lies much of the social misery of America and the world.⁵



Increasingly, as Robert Moses got and used power, he had contempt for the people forced to yield to him. His great ambition to benefit the public was hurt by his insistent ambition to have his own way, often regardless of what other people deserved, and he went out of his way to punish anyone who opposed him. This made for the unfeeling methods which he permitted to be used to uproot up to half a million people from their homes for his urban expressways and other projects.⁶ And because he was interested exclusively in transportation by automobile, he had no interest in the urgent need to improve commuter railroad, subway, and bus services. All this often made for needless extravagance in the way the public's money was spent for condemnation, demolition, construction, and interest on the debts incurred by borrowing the large sums needed. Moses' ambition to have his own way made for enormous pain in thousands of the very people he was ambitious to benefit.

4. Some Human Costs of Having Two Ambitions

Construction of highways in New York City under Moses displaced up to a quarter million men, women, and children, even though there were sometimes alternate routings which required much less displacement, but which he adamantly refused to consider. Looking back in 1998, Caro cited "the heart-breaking callousness with which he evicted the tens of thousands of poor people [whom he called 'the animals'] in his way, which—in the words of one official—'he hounded out like cattle' "⁷

The neighborhood of East Tremont in the Bronx is



an example. Thousands of residents being displaced for the Cross-Bronx Expressway were intensely pressured to move. Years later Mrs. Lillian Edelstein remembered, “As soon as the top floor of a building was empty, they’d start tearing off the roof and top stories, even. While people were still living in it, [workers] were tearing it down around their heads.”⁸ Vandals broke in and stripped vacant apartments, terrorizing the people remaining, and there were muggings. As Caro writes, “Terror, that most effective of eviction agents, stalked through the boarded-up, half-empty neighborhood.”⁹

Mr. Siegel explained:

*Selfishness and self-love have been made too academic. These or this can make for family disputes, the downfall of love, but also large misfortune in a nation, a city, a region.*¹⁰

And Robert Moses’ fierce insistence on having his own way led in time to his total loss of power. Although his reputation was tarnished by increasing public criticism of his callousness, his power was still intact. In 1962, however, he threatened to resign most of his positions in order to have his own way with New York State’s governor—a tactic that had always been successful before. But this time it backfired. The governor was Nelson A. Rockefeller—who insisted on his *own* power—and he not only accepted Moses’ resignations, but in 1967 stripped away Moses’ final position.

Moses’ long career has been summarized in recent years by at least two men. In 2007 Professor Kenneth T. Jackson of Columbia University commented: “Without those bridges and tunnels, without those expressways,



without the public housing, without the recreational facilities, the quality of life in the region would be much lower than it is now.”¹¹ And Robert Caro pointed out in 2006: “The city, and indeed the whole region in which we live our lives, is still one shaped by his vision and by the savage determination with which he drove it to realization.”¹²

Aesthetic Realism shows that when we go against our greatest ambition, to be just, and go instead for self-glory regardless of the cost to others, we cannot like ourselves. As Robert Caro writes, after Moses’ fall from power, he suffered because “he couldn’t get away from himself.”¹³ I believe he couldn’t get away from how coldheartedly he had dealt with so many of the people who lived in the paths of his projects.

Studying his life has had me see even more keenly how kind the knowledge of Aesthetic Realism is, and how, through it, we can have our greatest ambition be a conscious and proud purpose.

Endnotes

¹ Caro, Robert A., *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974, p. 222)

² Hanc, John, *Jones Beach: An Illustrated History* (Guilford, Ct: The Globe Pequot Press, 2007, p. 62)

³ Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 310

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 318

⁵ *New York Times*, August 16, 1976

⁶ Caro in *The New York Times Book Review*, December 14, 2014, p. 45; *The New York Times Magazine*, April 26, 2015, p. 60

⁷ Caro, “The City-Shaper” (*The New Yorker*, January 5, 1998)

⁸ Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 882

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 882

¹⁰ Siegel, Eli, *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known* (No. 10, June 6, 1973)

¹¹ Shavelson, Michael B., “Bob the Builder” (*Columbia Magazine*, Winter 2006-2007, pp. 32, 34)

¹² *ibid.*, p. 37

¹³ Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 1155