

**THOMAS BENDER**

# Power Broken

*To build great cities, we need more citizen input—not another Robert Moses.*

---

**ROBERT MOSES AND THE MODERN CITY: THE TRANSFORMATION OF NEW YORK** EDITED BY HILARY BALLON AND KENNETH T. JACKSON  
W.W. NORTON • 2007 • 304 PAGES • \$50

**R**obert Caro's *The Power Broker* may be the most-read 1,000-page-plus non-fiction book in recent memory. It is studied by city planners, developers, government officials, activists, and informed citizens everywhere. Published in 1974 on the eve of New York's near-bankruptcy and reflecting new ideas about what makes a livable city, the book squarely blamed New York redevelopment czar Robert Moses for the Big Apple's despair (hence its subtitle: "Robert Moses and the Fall of New York"). And because Moses was the dominant city builder of the era—not only in New York, but nationally—Caro's compelling narrative spoke to the nationwide worry about urban decline. Today, New York is booming, and, unsurprisingly, Caro's harsh assessment of Moses's legacy is under attack.

This revisionism was on display earlier this year at "Robert Moses and the

---

THOMAS BENDER, *the author of* *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea*, *is a university professor of the humanities at New York University and the director of the International Center for Advanced Studies.*

Modern City,” a three-museum exhibit organized by the architectural historian Hilary Ballon and Kenneth Jackson, a historian widely known as the editor of the *Encyclopedia of New York City*. In the exhibit and accompanying book, the organizers insist on two propositions that are slightly at odds with each other. First, they argue that Moses laid the foundation for the recent resurgence of New York. Second, they contend that since his fall and the accompanying backlash against his tactics, urban progress in New York and cities across the nation has been stalled by an excess of citizen participation. This made the ensuing debate that ran across the pages of the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New Yorker*, and other publications more than a disagreement about history. Rather, it cut to the core of the question facing all cities today: Can democracies build? Or is the process of gaining citizen engagement preventing great projects from being carried through?

With large urban renewal agendas on the minds of mayors and developers nationwide, the discussion of Moses is timely, for it may help us clarify just what kind of democratic participation, transparency, and public accountability we need today. But what we need is not an embrace of the undemocratic and often damaging methods of Moses, but a careful rethinking of the forms of citizenship participation there should be in the development process.

**O**ddly, for all its revisionist claims, the basic narrative of the recent Moses exhibit is roughly compatible with Caro’s gothamized Greek tragedy. The seven well-illustrated pages of the tabloid-size newsprint guide to the exhibits repeat the usual story of Moses’ rise and precipitous fall: the much-admired early beaches, pools, and parks; then the arterial city of roads and bridges; concluding with the controversy surrounding Moses’ slum clearance and urban renewal efforts. The chapters in the accompanying catalogue, by various authors, are well worth reading, but rather than changing the narrative, their new research fills in and deepens it. They do not clearly support either the long-accepted or the revisionist judgment.

In other words, the difference between Caro’s book and the exhibit is not the evidence, or even the story told. Rather it is in the way the organizers have spun it for the press and in Jackson’s provocative four-page chapter in the catalogue, where he argues that cities all over the Northeast and Midwest declined for long-term economic and social reasons, and thus no one is really to blame for the “fall” of the American city. Indeed, Moses shared the urban vision of his counterparts in other cities, and they all had the special resources provided first by the New Deal and then the postwar funding of urban renewal. Caro, according to Jackson, thus exaggerated Moses’s importance: “He [Moses] was simply

swimming with the tide of history.” Yet without him the city “would have lacked the wherewithal” to meet the challenge of modern urbanism. He was a “public servant in the best sense of the term,” even if he did not “build what we would have wanted,” and “did not listen to critics or to residents about to lose their homes.” Thus the indispensability of Moses.

However, the claim that Moses’ work is the foundation for the city’s revival after 1975 cannot be proven by empirical evidence. Are the Moses projects the basis for the city’s recent flourishing? To some extent, of course, yes, the parks, bridges, freeways, and parkways are important building blocks for metropolitan New York. But the immediate engine of change in New York since 1975 was not anything that can be associated with Moses. In my view, it was the massive rehabilitation of the subway system under the strong but not dictatorial leadership of Richard Ravitch, and the political development of zoning regulations and city ordinances that allowed and promoted the conversion of old factory buildings, in places like SoHo, for residence. The latter not only reinvigorated a de-industrializing New York but also transformed the meaning of urban living around the world, making loft living a real estate slogan and a marker of contemporary urbanity. Both mass transit and those old buildings were, of course, objects of Moses’ scorn.

**Can democracies build? Or is the process of gaining citizen input preventing great projects from being carried through?**

The final major theme shared by the revisionists is the belief that twenty-first-century city-making requires a strong hand. Phillip Lopate, in his 2002 *Metropolis* essay that kicked off the Moses revisionism, writes that listening to architects express their longing for a new Moses made him question the common view that he “ruined or tried to ruin New York.” The more Lopate “witnessed New York City’s paralysis in tackling any new public works or large civic improvements,” the more he came to think the “old guy” had been mishandled by history. Ballon and Jackson take the same position. For them, Moses represents “effectiveness within a system of constraints.” The citizen defeat of Westway in 1985, a federally funded project to replace the West Side Highway, they claim, was the symptom of a disease that could be cured by a new Moses.

Even a casual survey of development projects since the 1980s, whatever their merits, rebuts the supposition of urban paralysis. Whether one likes the Times Square redevelopment or not, it was a massive transformation in the heart of the city begun and carried out in the 1980s, as was Battery Park City along Manhattan’s southern tip. And certainly Donald Trump’s pharonic Riverside

South along the Hudson matches anything Moses did—though it did not require displacing people. Today, the recently approved Atlantic Yards project, a huge mixed-use development in central Brooklyn including an arena for professional basketball, proceeds, after a great deal of public discussion and review (albeit a controversial one) by government bureaucracies. After the political defeat of an ill-conceived plan for a professional football stadium in the Hudson Yards on the west side of Manhattan, a far better plan for mixed development there is moving forward. Westway and the stadium failed because they both proposed to hand valuable waterfront land over to private development that would be oriented to elite city and suburban users; citizen activism and political institutions contributed to an improved, if not perfect, result in both instances.

While czarists fear that development is blocked by democracy, it's hard to find city officials—i.e., the people overseeing the development—who agree. When Daniel Doctoroff, the deputy mayor for economic development and rebuilding who carries a large portfolio and possesses enough power to make community groups nervous, was asked by the *New York Observer* to compare development today with that of Moses, he said the difference was the “need for community input”—which he had no problem with, saying he could “go through a list of 25 or 30” projects, “not just in Manhattan, but in all five boroughs” currently under way.

Ballon and Jackson rightly insist that the top-down urban development of the postwar years was a national and not just New York phenomenon. But so too do the post-Moses redevelopment patterns of New York—adaptive re-use of older buildings, mass transit improvements, and large public-private partnered development—characterize lively development agendas nationwide. No czar seems necessary. In-town baseball stadiums have been built in Baltimore and San Francisco. In San Francisco, the stadium and a commuter train connection now form the southern anchor of massive redevelopment—partly new, partly reuse of old buildings. Los Angeles has focused on enhancing the “center,” including the cultural district emerging around Frank Gehry's new Disney Concert Hall, while Gehry contributed as well to Chicago's spectacularly popular Millennium Park. In a quite different key, Chicago is undertaking a massive transformation of publicly assisted housing, tearing down Moses-era towers in favor of smaller, dispersed housing projects. Voters in many cities, including unlikely ones like Denver and San Jose, have endorsed light rail systems. Or consider Phoenix, where an environmentally sensitive downtown redevelopment project, centered on a museum, public library, and court house, is part of a regional Public Art Master Plan. However one judges any of these projects, urban paralysis is not the issue.

Nevertheless, some of the city's—indeed, the country's—most influential voices

on city planning and architecture have come out in favor of “neo-Mosesism.” Writing in the *New Yorker*, architectural critic Paul Goldberger notes that Moses’s megalomania cannot be wholly excused by his time, but he nonetheless writes that “Moses’s surgery, while radical, may just possibly have saved New York.” Accepting the logic of the exhibit, he embraces power over democracy:

In an era when almost any project can be held up for years by public hearings and reviews by community boards, community groups, civic groups, and planning commissions, not to mention the courts, it is hard not to feel a certain nostalgic tug for Moses’s method of building by decree. It may not have been democratic, or even right. Still, somebody has to look at the big picture and make decisions for the greater good.

Not everyone agrees with Goldberger. *Wall Street Journal* critic Ada Louise Huxtable more forcibly rejected the historical context argument: “The fact that the gross misjudgments of his later years became apparent to many others, but not to him, as ideas about cities and planning changed, makes this a troubling rationale.” The rhetoric of the exhibit made Huxtable uneasy; the powerful images upstage “the mute testimony of old letters and news clips protesting wholesale demolition of homes and businesses.” She also worried that “the carefully inclusive narrative tells it all in safely worded labels that neutralize outrage.” In this context, a statement by Ballon in an interview with the *New York Times* is very unsettling. Speaking of the exploitation that went into the making of the Taj Mahal and generalizing from it, she observed, “My hunch is that the more we distance ourselves, we will forget the costs.” While revision is part of the normal work of history, preventing just that kind of forgetting is one of history’s highest callings.

**O**f course, the issue here is neither Moses nor what killed Westway; it is democracy. How accountable should the development process be to the affected community? What kinds of institutions and policies will secure that accountability? Where should we strike the balance between expertise and democracy? And how do we calculate the relative importance and collective costs of each?

Contrary to what the revisionists argue, participatory agenda-setting can work in a city of millions, and in its rather awkward way it already has. It stopped Westway and the stadium, and some years ago in San Francisco public opposition forced the dismantling of a half-finished freeway, making possible the Embarcadero development. The problem is not the capacity of the public to think about urban issues, but rather the absence of appropriate rules and insti-

tutions. As a result, citizens have turned to historical preservation commissions and environmental impact regulations to stop development. Neither is a city-making tool, and their scattershot deployment has produced some very odd reasoning and oddly justified results. A scarce and tiny fish in the Hudson River can stop a highway, and a building of neither historical nor architectural interest is brought forward to stop a building project. It is absurd, but until there is a rethinking of just how democracy can have an effective voice, such strategies will be deployed.

Instead of talking about a new construction czar for cities, we should be talking about democratic institutions for managing current and future development. We need deliberative planning tools that work better than the grab-bag of clumsy mechanisms for public participation we have now, which are rightly resented by developers and neighborhoods, if for different reasons. Transparency and responsibility—with respect to public financing in its various forms—are fundamental. Representative institutions also are necessary, ones that organize dialogue at the different scales of the neighborhood, the borough, the city, and perhaps even the region. City planning should understand itself as, ultimately, the work of city-making rather than simply the agency of growth and development. The mechanisms of citizen empowerment must be clearly defined, and that power must be appropriate to the role envisioned.

To accomplish that, some institutional innovation is necessary. We need to think more imaginatively about future forums, perhaps turning to creative uses of new technologies. Without making too much of it, let me mention a recent example. When the future of Ground Zero was still undecided, a group of 80 civic organizations led by the Regional Plan Association, using a novel technology of networked laptops and some kind of sorting program, brought together in two meetings a few thousand representative New Yorkers to deliberate on guidelines for rebuilding. I participated in it. We were broken up into groups seated at round banquet tables. Each table was quite diverse and mostly unknown to each other (though by accident one person at my table was an old friend). There was a policeman, a fireman, an arts foundation program officer, a minority rights lawyer working on behalf of Chinese, residents of Battery Park City and other downtowners, and a couple of people from New Jersey and the boroughs. The preferences that emerged from our table and others were then fashioned into a set of design directives. The results were fairly general, but they pointed toward a plausible urban aspiration for an area of the city that had evolved into something both more and less than a financial center. A memorial was the highest priority, with some disagreement as to whether it should be figurative or abstract. Mixed use for the area was strongly favored—offices, street retail, residence, and

cultural. Anything suggesting a new “freedom tower” was rejected.

This was in many ways a model for public participation. The problem was that nobody with power was listening; a non-accountable, appointed authority made all of the decisions. The result—an abstract memorial, a “freedom tower;” maximization of office space—was Moses all over again. A state-level public authority, accepting no public participation (not even by the elected officials of New York City), with power but no civic legitimacy and freed of city building and development regulations, produced neither an appropriate plan nor a well-managed rebuilding project. Rather than Moses, here the maestros were Larry Silverstein, a dogged developer whose grasp of city life is limited to square footage and rent; George Pataki, a governor with power but without vision, save for a fantasy of national office on the horizon; and David Childs, an architect apparently without principle and surely without professional skills adequate to the challenge. Operating in the manner of Moses, these lesser men have put together an embarrassing urban intervention all too reminiscent of the failures of Moses in his later, more authoritarian phase.

**City planning should understand itself as the work of city-making rather than simply the agency of growth and development.**

Ignoring the public’s wishes not only risks unappealing projects, it also undermines the sense of commonweal that makes democracy function and gives legitimacy to government. The built environment is more important for securing a just city than we realize. All changes in it have social implications; the question is whether these implications move society toward greater or lesser social justice. This is not a new concern: Jane Addams at Hull House working in 1890s Chicago had a vision of public participation in city-making that included a public evaluation of its contribution to social justice. That vision, which has fluctuated over the century, is today on the margins of urban thinking and politics, but it should be moved front and center. Municipal capital investment and publicly assisted development should be required to provide a “social impact statement” that would examine and explain how these plans lessen (or increase) inequality and social disadvantage.

Attention to these concerns is especially needed in this area because they have been ignored for too long. The aim of urban renewal, as the exhibit pointed out, was to transform urban America for the middle classes. The policy was pursued everywhere, but with particular vengeance by Moses in New York: Tear their houses down, and they will go away. The dispossessed, if they remained, ended up in dangerous, soul-sapping public housing projects, like Chicago’s infamous

Cabrini Green and the Robert Taylor Homes.

With the exception of Huxtable's evocation of the mute victims of Moses's work—500,000 of them—amid the pictures of progress in the exhibit, the silence in respect to this social war waged against the poor and working classes of New York tells us something of democratic commitment. Democracy, so absent in the exhibit and the discussion, protects the weak. Those who do not fund campaigns, who do not hire lobbyists, have numbers. But they need forums where their voices can be heard and actually attended to—not only because of their numbers, but because they are citizens of the city. Such a process will be messy; democracy inevitably always is. And the lure of an easy shortcut, such as installing a new Moses, is tempting. But such a course will build cities and a society that not only ill-serves those living there, but also the democratic principles at the heart of who we are as a people. Today, when American cities will soon confront the challenge of massive public investment in cities for infrastructure and for adaptation to environmental and energy constraints, civic accountability needs to be on the agenda. ■