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'Robert Moses: The Expressway World'

from *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (1982)

Among the many images and symbols that New York has contributed to modern culture, one of the most striking in recent years has been an image of modern ruin and devastation. The Bronx, where I grew up, has even become an international code word for our epoch's accumulated urban nightmares: drugs, gangs, arson, murder, terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, neighborhoods transformed into garbage- and brick-strewn wilderness. The Bronx's dreadful fate is experienced, though probably not understood, by hundreds of thousands of motorists every day, as they negotiate the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which cuts through the borough's center. This road, although jammed with heavy traffic day and night, is fast, deadly fast; speed limits are routinely transgressed, even at the dangerously curved and graded entrance and exit ramps; constant convoys of huge trucks, with grimly aggressive drivers, dominate the sight lines; cars weave wildly in and out among the trucks: it is as if everyone on this road is seized with a desperate, uncontrollable urge to get out of the Bronx as fast as wheels can take him. A glance at the cityscape to the north and south – it is hard to get more than quick glances, because much of the road is below ground level and bounded by brick walls ten feet high – will suggest why: hundreds of boarded-up abandoned buildings and charred and burnt-out hulks of buildings; dozens of blocks covered with nothing at all but shattered bricks and waste.

Ten minutes on this road, an ordeal for anyone, is especially dreadful for people who remember the Bronx as it used to be: who remember these neighborhoods as they once lived and thrived, until this road itself cut through their heart and made the Bronx, above all, a place to get out of. For children of the Bronx like myself, this road bears a load of special irony: as we race through our childhood world, rushing to get out, relieved to see the end in sight, we are not merely spectators but active participants in the process of destruction that tears our hearts. We fight back the tears, and step on the gas.

Robert Moses is the man who made all this possible. When I heard Allen Ginsberg ask at the end of the 1950s, "Who was that sphinx of cement and aluminum," I felt sure at once that, even if the poet didn't know it, Moses was his man. Like Ginsberg's "Moloch, who entered my soul early," Robert Moses and his public works had come into my life just before my Bar Mitzvah, and helped bring my childhood to an end. He had been present all along, in a vague subliminal way. Everything big that got built in or around New York seemed somehow to be his work: the Triborough Bridge, the West Side Highway, dozens of parkways in Westchester and Long Island, Jones and Orchard beaches, innumerable parks, housing developments, Idlewild (now Kennedy) Airport, a network of enormous dams and power plants near Niagara Falls; the list seemed to go on forever. He had generated an event that had special magic for me: the 1939–40 World's Fair, which I had attended in my mother's womb, and whose elegant logo, the trylon and perisphere, adorned our apartment in many forms – programs, banners, postcards, ashtrays – and symbolized human adventure, progress, faith in the future, all the heroic ideals of the age into which I was born.

But then, in the spring and fall of 1953, Moses began to loom over my life in a new way: he proclaimed that he was about to ram an immense expressway, unprecedented in scale,

expense and difficulty of construction, through our neighborhood's heart. At first we couldn't believe it; it seemed to come from another world. First of all, hardly any of us owned cars: the neighborhood itself, and the subways leading downtown, defined the flow of our lives. Besides, even if the city needed the road – or was it the state that needed the road? (in Moses' operations, the location of power and authority was never clear, except for Moses himself) – they surely couldn't mean what the stories seemed to say: that the road would be blasted directly through a dozen solid, settled, densely populated neighborhoods like our own; that something like 60,000 working- and lower-middle-class people, mostly Jews, but with many Italians, Irish and Blacks thrown in, would be thrown out of their homes. The Jews of the Bronx were nonplussed: Could a fellow-Jew really want to do this to us? (We had little idea of what kind of Jew he was, or of how much we were all an obstruction in his path.) And even if he did want to do it, we were sure it couldn't happen here, not in America. We were still basking in the afterglow of the New Deal: the government was *our* government, and it would come through to protect us in the end. And yet, before we knew it, steam shovels and bulldozers were there, and people were getting notice that they had better clear out fast. They looked numbly at the wreckers, at the disappearing streets, at each other, and they went. Moses was coming through, and no temporal or spiritual power could block his way.

For ten years, through the late 1950s and early 1960s, the center of the Bronx was pounded and blasted and smashed. My friends and I would stand on the parapet of the Grand Concourse, where 174th Street had been, and survey the work's progress – the immense steam shovels and bulldozers and timber and steel beams, the hundreds of workers in their variously colored hard hats, the giant cranes reaching far above the Bronx's tallest roofs, the dynamite blasts and tremors, the wild, jagged crags of rock newly torn, the vistas of devastation stretching for miles to the east and west as far as the eye could see – and marvel to see our ordinary nice neighborhood transformed into sublime, spectacular ruins.

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Moses seemed to glory in the devastation. When he was asked, shortly after the Cross-Bronx road's completion, if urban expressways like this didn't pose special human problems, he replied impatiently that "there's very little hardship in the thing. There's a little discomfort and even that is exaggerated." Compared with his earlier, rural and suburban highways, the only difference here was that "There are more houses in the way . . . more people in the way – that's all." He boasted that "When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax." The subconscious equation here – animals' corpses to be chopped up and eaten, and "people in the way" – is enough to take one's breath away. Had Allen Ginsberg put such metaphors into his Moloch's mouth, he would have never been allowed to get away with it: it would have seemed, simply, too much. Moses' flair for extravagant cruelty, along with his visionary brilliance, obsessive energy and megalomaniac ambition, enabled him to build, over the years, a quasi-mythological reputation. He appeared as the latest in a long line of titanic builders and destroyers, in history and in cultural mythology: Louis XIV, Peter the Great, Baron Haussmann, Joseph Stalin (although fanatically anti-communist, Moses loved to quote the Stalinist maxim "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs"), Bugsy Siegel (master builder of the mob, creator of Las Vegas), "Kingfish" Huey Long; Marlowe's Tamburlaine, Goethe's Faust, Captain Ahab, Mr. Kurtz, Citizen Kane. Moses did his best to raise himself to gigantic stature, and even came to enjoy his increasing reputation as a monster, which he believed would intimidate the public and keep potential opponents out of the way.

In the end, however – after forty years – the legend he cultivated helped to do him in: it brought him thousands of personal enemies, some eventually as resolute and resourceful as Moses himself, obsessed with him, passionately dedicated to bringing the man and his machines to a stop. In the late 1960s they finally succeeded, and he was stopped and deprived of his power to build. But his works still surround us, and his spirit continues to haunt our public and private lives.

It is easy to dwell endlessly on Moses' personal power and style. But this emphasis tends to

obscure one of the primary sources of his vast authority: his ability to convince a mass public that he was the vehicle of impersonal world-historical forces, the moving spirit of modernity. For forty years, he was able to pre-empt the vision of the modern. To oppose his bridges, tunnels, expressways, housing developments, power dams, stadia, cultural centers, was – or so it seemed – to oppose history, progress, modernity itself. And few people, especially in New York, were prepared to do that. "There are people who like things as they are. I can't hold out any hope to them. They have to keep moving further away. This is a great big state, and there are other states. Let them go to the Rockies." Moses struck a chord that for more than a century has been vital to the sensibility of New Yorkers: our identification with progress, with renewal and reform, with the perpetual transformation of our world and ourselves – Harold Rosenberg called it "the tradition of the New." How many of the Jews of the Bronx, hotbed of every form of radicalism, were willing to fight for the sanctity of "things as they are?" Moses was destroying our world, yet he seemed to be working in the name of values that we ourselves embraced.

I can remember standing above the construction site for the Cross-Bronx Expressway, weeping for my neighborhood (whose fate I foresaw with nightmarish precision), vowing remembrance and revenge, but also wrestling with some of the troubling ambiguities and contradictions that Moses' work expressed. The Grand Concourse, from whose heights I watched and thought, was our borough's closest thing to a Parisian boulevard. Among its most striking features were rows of large, splendid 1930s apartment houses: simple and clear in their architectural forms, whether geometrically sharp or biomorphically curved; brightly colored in contrasting brick, offset with chrome, beautifully interplayed with large areas of glass; open to light and air, as if to proclaim a good life that was open not just to the elite residents but to us all. The style of these buildings, known as Art Deco today, was called "modern" in their prime. For my parents, who described our family proudly as a "modern" family, the Concourse buildings represented a pinnacle of modernity. We couldn't afford to live in them – though we did live in a small, modest, but still proudly "modern" building, far down the hill – but they could be admired for free, like the rows of glamorous ocean liners in port downtown. (The buildings look like shell-shocked battleships in drydock today, while the ocean liners themselves are all but extinct.)

As I saw one of the loveliest of these buildings being wrecked for the road, I felt a grief that, I can see now, is endemic to modern life. So often the price of ongoing and expanding modernity is the destruction not merely of "traditional" and "pre-modern" institutions and environments but – and here is the real tragedy – of everything most vital and beautiful in the modern world itself. Here in the Bronx, thanks to Robert Moses, the modernity of the urban boulevard was being condemned as obsolete and blown to pieces, by the modernity of the interstate highway. *Sic transit!* To be modern turned out to be far more problematical, and more perilous, than I had been taught.

What were the roads that led to the Cross-Bronx Expressway? The public works that Moses organized from the 1920s onward expressed a vision – or rather a series of visions – of what modern life could and should be. I want to articulate the distinctive forms of modernism that Moses defined and realized, to suggest their inner contradictions, their ominous undercurrents – which burst to the surface in the Bronx – and their lasting meaning and value for modern mankind.

Moses' first great achievement, at the end of the 1920s, was the creation of a public space radically different from anything that had existed anywhere before: Jones Beach State Park on Long Island, just beyond the bounds of New York City along the Atlantic. This beach, which opened in the summer of 1929, and recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, is so immense that it can easily hold a half million people on a hot Sunday in July without any sense of congestion. Its most striking feature as a landscape is its amazing clarity of space and form: absolutely flat, blindingly white expanses of sand, stretching forth to the horizon in a straight wide band, cut on one side by the clear, pure, endless blue of the sea, and on the other by the boardwalk's sharp unbroken line of brown. The great horizontal sweep of the whole is punctuated by two elegant Art Deco bathhouses

of wood, brick and stone, and half-way between them at the park's dead center by a monumental columnar water tower, visible from everywhere, rising up like a skyscraper, evoking the grandeur of the twentieth-century urban forms that this park at once complements and denies. Jones Beach offers a spectacular display of the primary forms of nature – earth, sun, water, sky – but nature here appears with an abstract horizontal purity and a luminous clarity that only culture can create.

We can appreciate Moses' creation even more when we realize (as Caro explains vividly) how much of this space had been swamp and wasteland, inaccessible and unmapped, until Moses got there, and what a spectacular metamorphosis he brought about in barely two years. There is another kind of purity that is crucial to Jones Beach. There is no intrusion of modern business or commerce here: no hotels, casinos, ferris wheels, roller coasters, parachute jumps, pinball machines, honky-tonks, loudspeakers, hot-dog stands, neon signs; no dirt, random noise or disarray. Hence, even when Jones Beach is filled with a crowd the size of Pittsburgh, its ambience manages to be remarkably serene. It contrasts radically with Coney Island, only a few miles to the west, whose middle-class constituency it immediately captured on its opening. All the density and intensity, the anarchic noise and motion, the seedy vitality that is expressed in Weegee's photographs and Reginal Marsh's etchings, and celebrated symbolically in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "A Coney Island of the Mind," is wiped off the map in the visionary landscape of Jones Beach.

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Moses' Northern and Southern State parkways, leading from Queens out to Jones Beach and beyond, opened up another dimension of modern pastoral. These gently flowing, artfully landscaped roads, although a little frayed after half a century, are still among the world's most beautiful. But their beauty does not (like that of, say, California's Coast Highway or the Appalachian Trail) emanate from the natural environment around the roads: it springs from the artificially created environment of the roads themselves. Even if these parkways adjoined nothing and led nowhere, they would still constitute an adventure in their own right. This is especially true of the Northern State Parkway, which ran through the country of palatial estates that Scott Fitzgerald had just immortalized in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Moses' first Long Island roadscapes represent a modern attempt to recreate what Fitzgerald's narrator, on the novel's last page, described as "the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world." But Moses made this breast available only through the mediation of that other symbol so dear to Gatsby: the green light. His parkways could be experienced only in cars: their underpasses were purposely built too low for buses to clear them, so that public transit could not bring masses of people out from the city to the beach. This was a distinctively techno-pastoral garden, open only to those who possessed the latest modern machines – this was, remember, the age of the Model T – and a uniquely privatized form of public space. Moses used physical design as a means of social screening, screening out all those without wheels of their own. Moses, who never learned to drive, was becoming Detroit's man in New York. For the great majority of New Yorkers, however, his green new world offered only a red light.

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Where did it all go wrong? How did the modern visions of the 1930s turn sour in the process of their realization? The whole story would require far more time to unravel, and far more space to tell, than I have here and now. But we can rephrase these questions in a more limited way that will fit into the orbit of this book: How did Moses – and New York and America – move from the destruction of a Valley of Ashes in 1939 to the development of far more dreadful and intractable modern wastelands a generation later only a few miles away? We need to seek out the shadows within the luminous visions of the 1930s themselves.

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Part of Moses' tragedy is that he was not only corrupted but in the end undermined by one of

his greatest achievements. This was a triumph that, unlike Moses' public works, was for the most part invisible: it was only in the late 1950s that investigative reporters began to perceive it. It was the creation of a network of enormous, interlocking "public authorities," capable of raising virtually unlimited sums of money to build with, and accountable to no executive, legislative or judicial power.

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Moses' projects of the 1950s and 60s had virtually none of the beauty of design and human sensitivity that had distinguished his early works. Drive twenty miles or so on the Northern State Parkway (1920s), then turn around and cover those same twenty miles on the parallel Long Island Expressway (1950s/60s), and wonder and weep. Nearly all he built after the war was built in an indifferently brutal style, made to overawe and overwhelm: monoliths of steel and cement, devoid of vision or nuance or play, sealed off from the surrounding city by great moats of stark empty space, stamped on the landscape with a ferocious contempt for all natural and human life. Now Moses seemed scornfully indifferent to the human quality of what he did: sheer quantity – of moving vehicles, tons of cement, dollars received and spent – seemed to be all that drove him now. There are sad ironies in this, Moses' last, worst phase.

The cruel works that cracked open the Bronx ("more people in the way – that's all") were part of a social process whose dimensions dwarfed even Moses' own megalomaniac will to power. By the 1950s he was no longer building in accord with his own visions; rather, he was fitting enormous blocks into a pre-existing pattern of national reconstruction and social integration that he had not made and could not have substantially changed. Moses at his best had been a true creator of new material and social possibilities. At his worst, he would become not so much a destroyer – though he destroyed plenty – as an executioner of directives and imperatives not his own. He had gained power and glory by opening up new forms and media in which modernity could be experienced as an adventure; he used that power and glory to institutionalize modernity into a system of grim, inexorable necessities and crushing routines. Ironically, he became a focus for mass personal obsession and hatred, including my own, just when he had lost personal vision and initiative and become an Organization Man; we came to know him as New York's Captain Ahab at a point when, although still at the wheel, he had lost control of the ship.

The evolution of Moses and his works in the 1950s underscores another important fact about the postwar evolution of culture and society: the radical splitting-off of modernism from modernization. Throughout this book I have tried to show a dialectical interplay between unfolding modernization of the environment – particularly the urban environment – and the development of modernist art and thought. This dialectic, crucial all through the nineteenth century, remained vital to the modernism of the 1920s and 1930s: it is central in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *Waste Lane* and Doblin's *Berlin, Alexanderplatz* and Mandelstam's *Egyptian Stamp*, in Léger and Tatlin and Eisenstein, in William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane, in the art of John Marin and Joseph Stella and Stuart Davis and Edward Hopper, in the fiction of Henry Roth and Nathanael West. By the 1950s, however, in the wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, this process of dialogue had stopped dead.

It is not that culture itself stagnated or regressed: there were plenty of brilliant artists and writers around, working at or near the peak of their powers. The difference is that the modernists of the 1950s drew no energy or inspiration from the modern environment around them. From the triumphs of the abstract expressionists to the radical initiatives of Davis, Mingus and Monk in jazz, to Camus' *The Fall*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Malamud's *The Magic Barrel*, Laing's *The Divided Self*, the most exciting work of this era is marked by radical distance from any shared environment. The environment is not attacked, as it was in so many previous modernisms: it is simply not there.

This absence is dramatized obliquely in what are probably the two richest and deepest novels of the 1950s, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959): both these books contained brilliant realizations of spiritual and political life as it had been lived in the cities of the recent past –

Harlem and Danzig in the 1930s – but although both writers moved chronologically forward, neither one was able to imagine or engage the present, the life of the postwar cities and societies in which their books came out. This absence itself may be the most striking proof of the spiritual poverty of the new postwar environment. Ironically, that poverty may have actually nourished the development of modernism by forcing artists and thinkers to fall back on their own resources and open up new depths of inner space. At the same time, it subtly ate away at the roots of modernism by sealing off its imaginative life from the everyday modern world in which actual men and women had to move and live.