
Joan Ockman

The Power Broker in Context(s): On the Historicity of Architectural History

Abstract

The article traces three different perspectives on the architect and urban planner Robert Moses in order to show how historiographic positions vary with the mood or ‘structure of feeling’ of the time in which the historian is writing.

The focus is on Robert A. Caro's influential 1250-page, multi-award-winning book *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, which was first published in 1974. But a good 20 years earlier, a well-researched book by Cleveland Rodgers had appeared that judged the first part of Moses's career very differently. Then, in 2007, Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson revisited Moses's prolific career on the occasion of a three-part exhibition curated by Ballon; while they sought to take a more even-handed approach, placing his work in the broader context of postwar urbanism in the United States, they made little effort to contextualize their own position at a moment when neoliberalism was in full sway and building construction was booming in New York City after decades of stagnation.

Taking Robert Moses as an emblematic case, the present article stresses not just the complex legacy of powerful historical figures but also the historicity of the authors who write about them.

Keywords

Historiography, Robert Moses, Double Temporality, Structure of Feeling