
Joan Ockman

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

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Robert Caro's *The Power Broker. Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*.¹ (fig. 1 and 1a) Now in its seventy-fourth printing, the monumental 1,250-page work is now available for the first time as an Ebook, and it and its eighty-nine-year-old author have been feted all over town, including in a boat tour sponsored by New York's Municipal Art Society, the pages of the *New York Times*, and a newly opened permanent exhibition at the New-York Historical Society, where highlights from Caro's massive archive, acquired by the society in 2020—including all of his notes and documentation for the Moses book—are being showcased. Caro's acclaimed book was not, however, the first biographical account of New York's twentieth-century "master builder." That was Cleveland Rodgers's 1952 *Robert Moses: Builder for Democracy*.² (fig. 2 and 2a) Based on an

1 Caro 1974.

2 Rodgers 1952.

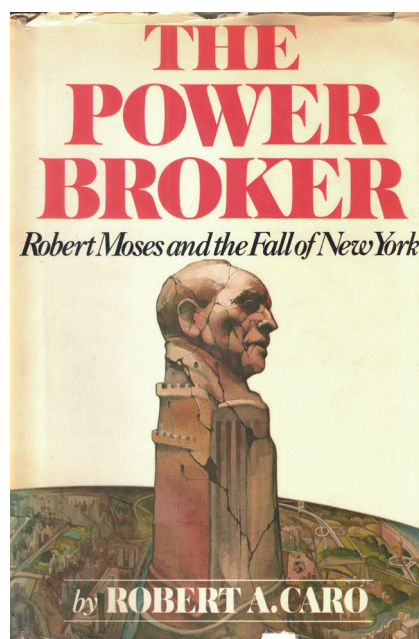


Fig. 1 Robert A. Caro: *The Power Broker. Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (1974).



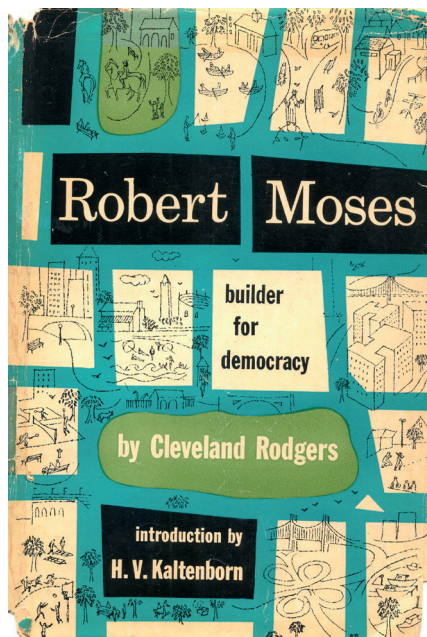
Fig. 1a Portrait of Robert Moses. From Caro 1974.

3 Ibid., xviii.

earlier profile published in *The Atlantic* magazine in February 1939 as “Robert Moses: He Builds for Democracy,” and recounting such pre–World War II achievements as Jones Beach, the Triborough Bridge, and the 1939 New York World’s Fair, the Rodgers book, written by a fellow urban planner and journalist, is not just a glowing success story but also a thoroughly researched history of the first part of Moses’s prolific career. As its subtitle conveys, it depicts Moses as a dedicated, brilliant, and effective civil servant who, despite being arrogant and abrasive (or maybe by virtue of these traits), is “a realist who performs miracles.”³ Rodgers tracks Moses from boyhood through the politically progressive New Deal era, when he worked in close association with one of the New York City’s most popular mayors, Fiorello LaGuardia, on into the immediate period after World War II, when Moses’s heroic deeds as city planning commissioner mirrored the confidence of a booming metropolis riding the tide of a triumphalist postwar nation and bidding to become the capital of the twentieth century.

In contrast, Caro’s weighty tome, which in 1975 won both the Pulitzer Prize for biography and the Francis Parkman Prize from the Society of American Historians, appeared at a moment when New York was on the brink of bankruptcy and when the urban renewal policy over which Moses had presided with increasing brutality from the late 1940s through the beginning of the 1960s was reviled and widely held culpable for the city’s decline. The narrative arc of Caro’s book bends as follows: Part I, The Idealist; Part II, The Reformer; Part III, The Rise to Power; Part IV, The Use of Power; Part V, The Love of Power; Part VI, The Lust for Power; Part VII, The Loss of Power. Caro left no stone unturned in his pursuit of completism. Yet given the impossibility of fitting all of it between two covers, more than a thousand pages ended up on the cutting-room floor. Astonishingly, the famous David-versus-Goliath battle with Jane Jacobs in the 1960s over the Lower Manhattan Express-

Fig. 2 Cleveland Rodgers: *Robert Moses: Builder for Democracy* (1952)



way does not even make an appearance. Not only would *The Power Broker*, taken together with Jacobs's 1961 *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, seal Moses's reputation for the next generation and lead to a schizoid view of his early (good) and later (bad) career, but in the dawning epoch of post-modernism its scathing indictment of a high-handed public official wielding almost unchecked power stood as an open-and-shut case against the hubris of modern urban planning.

Caro's book was not the last swing of the pendulum, though. In 2007 a substantial volume titled *Robert Moses and the Rise of New York: The Power Broker in Perspective*, edited by Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, distinguished architectural and urban historian respectively, was published in conjunction with a three-part exhibition curated by Ballon at different institutions around the city.⁴ (fig. 3) Intended to challenge Caro's verdict, it included newly commissioned photographs and contributions from a roster of authoritative contributors whose updated scholarship ranges from Moses's projects for public recreation, to his expressway and housing projects, to the critical backlash that his actions unleashed and that eventually brought him down. Jackson's introductory essay undertakes to place Moses within the broader context of postwar urbanism in the United States, recasting the power broker as a man of his epoch and – at the same time – a visionary pragmatist whose contributions to the modernization of New York City were indispensable to the city's future.⁵ It is no coincidence that this third, revisionist project occurred under the administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, when neoliberalism was in full, pre-recession swing, and building construction in New York City was booming again after decades of stagnation.

How to adjudicate among the Moseses of 1952, 1974, and 2007? Will the most recent publication be the last word, or is there more to come on this unexpectedly hard-to-pin-down figure? Do the three books' dramatically differ-

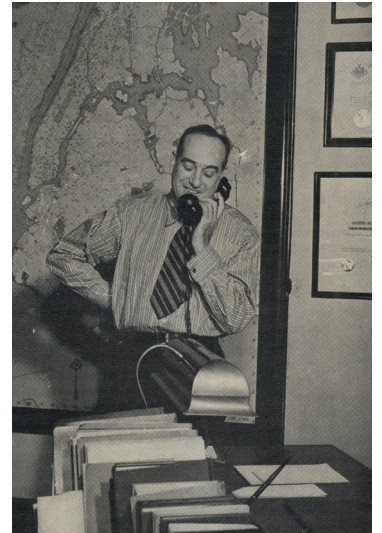


Abb. 2a Portrait of Robert Moses. From Rodgers 1952.

4 Ballon, Jackson 2007. The three exhibition venues were the Queens Museum of Art, the Museum of the City of New York, and the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University.

5 Jackson 2007.

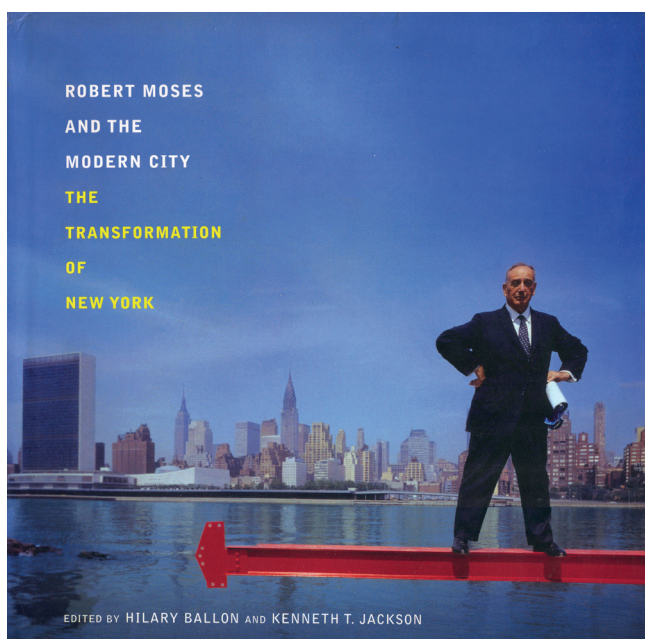


Fig. 3 Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds.: *Robert Moses and the Modern City. The Transformation of New York* (2007).

ent characterizations reflect transformations in Moses himself, or are they the product of a more judicious and balanced scholarship that comes with historical distance and cumulative professional diligence? Or are they ultimately reflections of their own times? What is clear is that however much the most recent book and exhibition strove to rationalize Moses's autocratic behavior and to counter the allegations of racism repeatedly leveled against him—which Jackson more or less brushes off as typical of the time (“such a persistent and ubiquitous phenomenon in North America during the past four centuries that no one should be surprised”⁶)—Jackson and Ballon offered no self-reflection and little effort to contextualize their own position.

6 Ibid., 70.

A further gloss on the perspectival nature of historiography is contained in a somewhat uncharacteristic book by Caro that appeared in 2019. While in the process of completing the final volume of an even bigger *magnum opus* than the *The Power Broker*—a five-part biography of U.S. president Lyndon Baines Johnson, on which he has been working on since 1976, already over 3,000 pages long with no announced completion date yet—Caro took time out to write a relatively short book titled *Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing*.⁷ In it he provides insights into his uniquely exhaustive research method. Concerning a particularly memorable chapter of *The Power Broker*, “One Mile,” a minutely detailed history of the area of the South Bronx devastated by the construction of one of Moses's most destructive and despised projects, the Cross-Bronx Expressway, he writes:

7 Caro 2019. Caro's italics.

“When I began researching Robert Moses's expressway-building, and kept reading, in textbook after textbook, some version of the phrase ‘the human cost of highways’ with never a detailed examination of what the ‘human cost’ truly consisted of or how it stacked up against the benefits of highways, I found myself simply unable to go forward to the next chapter. I felt I just had to try to show—to make readers not only see but understand and feel—what ‘human cost’ meant.[...] But I wasn't fooling myself: I also knew it was going to take months, perhaps six months, to research that neighborhood – to learn what it had been like before the expressway came, to find (because they were scattered now) and interview people Moses had evicted because they had been in the expressway's path.”

Recognizing that he was going to face a no less daunting task in chronicling the consequences suffered by the South Bronx in the wake of the highway's construction, Caro continues:

“I knew also that I was going to be frightened sometimes in doing the research; I had spent some days interviewing in East Tremont already, going into buildings where the stench of urine and of piles of feces in corners was so thick in the lobbies that it made your eyes tear, walking up stairs past walls that had been torn open so that people on drugs could get at the copper in the pipes inside. [...] The truth was that from

the moment I thought of dramatizing the human cost of highways, I just couldn't write the book about the great highway builder—couldn't outline it, even—without showing the human cost of what he had done.”⁸

8 Ibid., xiii–xiv.

Caro's determination to get close enough to things to immerse himself and his readers in “the human cost” is no doubt at odds with conventions of scholarly detachment. His painstaking method of truth-seeking, combining a relentless pursuit of facts with both compassion and the compulsion to tell truth to power, could be summarized as scholarly rigor with a human face. Of course, to a greater extent than other forms of historiography, biography is a genre that invites the historian's empathetic identification. Yet as Caro suggests, the real subject of *The Power Broker* is ultimately not the outsize personage of Robert Moses but rather those who directly experienced his impact.

At the same time, comparison of the three books on Moses introduces a more general, if less frequently considered, issue: namely how the mood or “structure of feeling” of the time in which the historian is writing gets introduced into the narrative. I use the term in quotation marks, coined by Raymond Williams, to refer to “a particular quality of social experience and relationship [...] which gives the sense of a generation or a period,” of “values as they are actively lived and felt.”⁹ Shifting focus from the historian's subject matter back to the historian, in other words, the somewhat unusual question I wish to pose here is, how does the historian *feel* about the subject on which she is writing? Beyond being an empathic leap into the time and events about which the historian is writing, history-writing also harbors the feeling or affect that is inherent in the period *in which* she is living. Or to put it more theoretically, historiography is always shadowed by a double temporality. In the parallel realm of fiction-writing, this temporality is classically described as a distinction between the time of narration (of story-telling) and the time of the narrative (of the story). In both kinds of writing, historical and literary, the gap or tension between the two temporalities inevitably colors the events being recounted. But whereas in literature nonsynchronicity is understood as a foreordained and inherent property of the work, in historiography the author's own historicity, or presence/presentness in the work, often goes unacknowledged and is more of a stealth effect. This means—as we have seen in successive books on Robert Moses written from different historical and ideological vantage points—that historical writing always demands circumspect reading.¹⁰

9 Williams coined the concept of structures of feeling in his early book *Marxism and Literature* (Williams 1977), pp. 128–35; definition quoted pp. 131–32. More recently, this concept has been folded into theories of affect and the history of emotions, although rarely focused, as I am proposing here, on the historian's own practice.

10 Pace “postcritical” polemics! In fact, not two but three levels of narration are typically at play in fictional narratives: that of the author (the actual narrator of the work), the fictive narrator (a character within the work, whose point of view ranges from the omniscient to the unreliable), and the narrative situation. In historiography, only the first and third levels enter in. In this sense, the writing of history is ostensibly less “mediated” than the writing of fiction. Yet the narratological relationship between the historian and her historical subject is arguably no less contextually or ideologically inflected than that between the novelist and her fictional subject. On this point, Hayden White's poststructuralist interpretation of historiography paradoxically converges with Manfredo Tafuri's critique of “operative” history; see White 1987 and Tafuri: “The Historical ‘Project,’” introduction to Tafuri 1987: 1–21.

Author

Joan Ockman leads Yale's PhD program in architecture and served from 2020 to 2024 as the Vincent Scully Visiting Professor in Architectural History. She is also an Adjunct Professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Weitzman School of Design and previously taught at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation for over two decades and served as Director of Columbia's Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture from 1994 to 2008. In addition to Yale, Penn, and Columbia, she has held teaching appointments at Cooper Union, Cornell,

Harvard, Graduate Center of City University of New York, and the Berlage Institute in the Netherlands. She began her career at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, where she was an editor of *Oppositions* journal and was responsible for the Oppositions Books series. Among her many edited publications are her award-winning anthology *Architecture Culture 1943–1968* (Rizzoli, 1993); *The Pragmatist Imagination: Thinking about Things in the Making* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2001); and *Architecture School: Three Centuries of Educating Architects in North America* (MIT Press, 2012). She was honored by the American Institute of Architects for collaborative achievement in 2003 and named a Fellow of the Society of Architectural Historians in 2017.

Literature

Ballon, Hilary and Jackson, Kenneth T. (eds.) (2007): Robert Moses and the Modern City. The Transformation of New York. New York: W. W. Norton.

Caro, Robert A. (1974): The Power Broker. Robert Moses and the Fall of New York. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Caro, Robert A. (2019): Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Jackson, Kenneth T. (2007): “Robert Moses and the Rise of New York: The Power Broker in Perspective.” In: Ballon / Jackson 2007: 67–71.

Rodgers, Cleveland (1952): Robert Moses. Builder for Democracy, introduction by H. V. Kaltenborn, New York: Henry Holt.

Tafuri, Manfredo (1987): The Sphere and the Labyrinth. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press [orig. 1980].

White, Hayden (1987): The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.

Williams, Raymond (1977): Marxism and Literature. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Figures

Fig. 1 Robert A. Caro: The Power Broker. Robert Moses and the Fall of New York (1974)

Fig. 1a Portrait of Robert Moses. From Caro 1974.

Fig. 2 Cleveland Rodgers: Robert Moses: Builder for Democracy (1952)

Fig. 2a Portrait of Robert Moses. From Rodgers 1952

Fig. 3 Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds.: Robert Moses and the Modern City. The Transformation of New York (2007)

Recommended Citation

Joan Ockman

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

In: Wolkenkuckucksheim | Cloud-Cuckoo-Land | Воздушный замок,
International Journal of Architectural Theory (ISSN 1434-0984), vol. 28., no. 44/45,
Presence of Architectural History, 2024/2025, pp. 97–102.