Robert Moses (1888-1981) was one of the most influential figures involved in the planning and construction of urban infrastructure in the twentieth century. He has been both celebrated for his accomplishments—the completion of public works on a scale unrivaled by any other public official in American history—and sometimes vilified for the manner in which he achieved them. Most notably, among the projects that he oversaw were three enormous initiatives that changed the face of New York City: an extensive metropolitan network of highways and bridges that adapted the nation's largest city to the automobile age; dozens of public housing and urban renewal projects throughout the city; and new parks and recreational facilities in all five boroughs, including numerous public swimming pools, playgrounds, and the fairgrounds in Queens used for two world's fairs. Over his 50-year career as a public official, he earned a national reputation, such that he and his staff were sought after as consultants and expert advisers by many other cities across the United States.

Moses was not an architect or an engineer, nor was he formally trained as an urban planner, and all of his projects were designed and planned by others, but he is nevertheless widely regarded as the single individual most responsible for the shaping of modern New York City. This was a result of his remarkable ability to gather power, take advantage of ever-changing funding streams, and cut through bureaucratic red tape to complete public works projects that others could only imagine.

Early Years

Born in 1888 in New Haven as the son of a department store owner, Moses had a comfortable middle-class upbringing. When he was nine years old, his family moved to Manhattan, where he attended private school before returning to New Haven to attend Yale as a 16-year-old in 1905. When he graduated in 1909, he was one of only five Jews in his class. An avid reader and reportedly brilliant student, he continued his education, first at Oxford and then at Columbia University, where he was awarded a PhD in political science in 1914. In England and New York, Moses investigated the inner workings of public bureaucracies, writing a dissertation on *The Civil Service of Great Britain*, while also completing a detailed assessment of New York City's civil service system for the Municipal Research Bureau, a nonprofit reform organization. This work led to a job in the administration of incoming New York Governor Al Smith in 1919, the first of the dozens of appointed positions in state and local government that Moses eventually held.

His civil service reform efforts failed to achieve any notable results. Governor Smith recognized Moses talents, however, and after reelection in 1922 made him a key member of the administration. At this point, Moses first got involved with large-scale public works. Smith relied on Moses' expert knowledge of government bureaucracies to loosen the rusty cogs of government and produce a visible and tangible record of accomplishment, starting with parks projects. Moses used his arcane expertise to draft legislation creating two new agencies, the Long Island State Park Commission and the State Council of Parks. Smith's electoral mandate ensured passage, and Moses was installed as chair of both entities. As he would do often over the course of his career, Moses paid careful attention to all the
details of the enabling statutes to assure that these new agencies would be as flexible, durable, and powerful as possible.

Moses first big public works project was Jones Beach State Park, a brand-new public recreational facility, which opened to the public in 1930. As head of the Long Island State Park Commission, he used state funds to convert swampy, sparsely settled, and inaccessible dunes on the south shore of Long Island into elaborate bathhouses, fountains, monuments, and long pristine stretches of sandy beach, laced with landscaped paths and served by acres of new parking lots.

At the same time, to provide public access to the remotely located facility, Moses began work on a network of parkways spanning Long Island. The first of these were the Southern State Parkway (1927), the Wantagh State Parkway (1929), Ocean Parkway (1930), the beginnings of the Northern State Parkway (1930), and the Meadowbrook State Parkway (1934). These parkways, which earned Moses nationwide acclaim, were the product of his blend of ambition and pragmatism. They were parkways because he had not been put in charge of highways or roads, which were tightly controlled by the engineers at the State Highway Department and the federal Bureau of Public Roads. Instead, he had carefully written his commission's enabling statute to include the authority to build paths and access roads within parks. So, to build motorways throughout Long Island, he created ribbonlike parks with landscaped roads within them (i.e., parkways).

The idea was first demonstrated in nearby Westchester County, where the first modern American parkway, the Bronx River Parkway, had opened to great acclaim and public accolades in 1924. Heralded as a harbinger of a future where automobiles would enable the urban masses to drive through the countryside and escape the overcrowded city, the Bronx River Parkway invited duplication. Moses quickly stepped in, not only because he recognized the transformative social force of such transportation corridors, but also because he recognized that this type of project would garner the public and political support that civil service reform never had. In a pattern repeated often in his career, Moses adapted his activities to available funding streams, even while borrowing state-of-the-art planning and design ideas, like the modern parkway, that had been innovated or advanced by others.

As an opportunistic builder of public works, Moses was in the right place at the right time, partially by design but also somewhat by random chance. The unprecedented public spending initiatives of the New Deal coincided with the success of his first parks and parkway projects. His new reputation as a man who could get things done could not have come at a better time.

**New York and the New Deal**

In 1933, he was put in charge of New York's Emergency Public Works Commission and in 1934 incoming Mayor Fiorello La Guardia appointed him City Parks Commissioner. In these new roles, Moses used federal work-relief grants, alongside state and city park funds, to go on a massive city-wide building spree: public swimming pools, new sports and recreation fields, and hundreds of new playgrounds throughout the five boroughs. He extended the network of Long Island parkways, completing the Interborough Parkway (now known as the Jackie Robinson Parkway) in 1934, the Grand Central Parkway in 1936, and both the Belt Parkway and the Long Island Expressway in 1940.

Furthermore, his highway-building activities were no longer limited to Long Island. In Manhattan, he oversaw the completion of the last stages of the West Side Highway and spearheaded the West Side Improvement Project. This latter project included an extensive relandscaping of Riverside Park as well
as the construction of the Henry Hudson Parkway, which upon its completion in 1937 extended along the Hudson River waterfront for seven miles before weaving through the Bronx to the city line. In suburban Westchester County, he helped to supervise the Saw Mill Parkway in 1935 and the Hutchinson River Parkway in 1941. To knit all of these routes together, Moses oversaw a number of crucial bridge projects, including the Triborough Bridge and the Henry Hudson Memorial Bridge, both of which opened in 1936, and the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge, which he brought to completion in 1939.

Moses drew extensively on New Deal grants and available state funds, and on many of these projects, he also installed toll booths to bring in additional money. This enabled him to borrow against these revenues, either to complete underfunded projects or to fund subsequent initiatives. The biggest such revenue generator, by far, was the Triborough Bridge, the keystone of Moses’ growing empire. Moses was able to use the toll revenues from the Triborough Bridge Authority, combined with the revenue streams flowing into his other bridge and parkway authorities, to continue building even after the end of the Depression-era work-relief programs. This strategy, using public benefit corporations to build and perpetuate his power, was—like his earlier emulation of the innovations of the Bronx River Parkway—modeled after the Port of New York Authority run by Austin Tobin, which had established precedents that Moses would adapt to his own purposes. Similarly, the Triborough Bridge itself had also been conceived, initiated, and approved by others before Moses completed the job. Construction had proceeded haltingly and had finally stopped altogether at the onset of the Depression, but Moses’ opportunistic administrative and resource-gathering skills rescued the endeavor.

A few years later, Moses expanded his reach even further. When the NYC Tunnel Authority ran out of money part way through the construction of the Queens-Midtown Tunnel in 1938, he rescued the project, completed it by 1940, and took over the controlling agency, eventually merging it with Triborough to form the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, his main base of operations for the next quarter century.

Moses’ Depression-era reach extended well beyond parks and parkways. In 1936, because of his proven track record of successfully pushing projects through to completion, Mayor La Guardia put him in charge of the newly created New York City World’s Fair Commission. To prepare for the fair, which would be held in 1939, Moses oversaw the construction of the Flushing Meadows Park on a waterfront site in Queens formerly occupied by ash dumps. In addition, he supervised the construction of new access highways and parking lots and the erection of the exhibit buildings—including GM’s famous Futurama and the iconic Perisphere building, which housed the Democracy display, both of which presented fairgoers with visions of cities of the future not unlike the one Moses was trying to build for New York, far-flung and expansive, yet held together by a web of highways and bridges. In Moses’ vision, and in the World’s Fair exhibits, there was an underlying assumption that everyone would be dependent on private automobiles for transportation.

**Postwar Power**

After the end of World War II, Americans did, in fact, increasingly turn to automobiles for routine transportation, not just for recreational excursions. As a consequence, toll revenues steadily increased on Moses’ bridges and parkways, fueling the growth, stability, and reach of his empire. For certain, he was no longer dependent on park funds, as he had been when he started. So, his highways no longer emphasized the carefully landscaped borders and medians of his earlier parkways, instead becoming more like expressways—less scenic, wider, and more efficient. After 1956, when federal interstate

highway grants began to flow freely, Moses abandoned parkway design aesthetic entirely.

This gradual transition can be seen by comparing his earlier parkways to the highway projects he worked on in the postwar era, including the Van Wyck Expressway (1950), the Sprain Brook Parkway (1953), the Prospect Expressway (1955), the Major Degan Expressway (1956-1961), the New England Thruway (1958), the Cross Bronx Expressway (1963), the Whitestone Expressway (1963), and the Staten Island Expressway (1964). His overall approach did not change, however, and even while the design of his highway projects shifted to adapt to the constraints and objectives of state and federal grant programs, he nevertheless continued to expand his own independent revenue base by building toll bridges, including the Throgs Neck Bridge (1961) and the Verrazano Narrows Bridge (1962).

With steadily growing funding from toll collections, Moses became less and less dependent on the political support of mayors and governors. In fact, they soon became dependent on him and his stellar public works record, his flush bank accounts, and his easy access to the capital markets that arose from the ever-growing stream of toll revenues. Furthermore, they discovered that they could not control him. His various official positions were for staggered, overlapping, or even perpetual terms, and he was in charge of so many different agencies that he had made himself indispensable. In fact, his list of positions actually lengthened as politicians continued to ask for his help on a widening array of tasks. In 1946, he took on three important new posts. He was asked to chair the Mayor's Committee for a Permanent World Capital and was centrally involved in the process that eventually brought the United Nations to its current site in New York. He was also appointed to the newly created position of City Construction Coordinator and designated the chair of the Emergency Committee on Housing.

Moses' next wholesale citywide initiatives, slum clearance and urban renewal, serve as another example of his shrewd and opportunistic approach to public works. He seemed to be at his best in situations that called for someone to rapidly and efficiently draw down federal and state funds for ambitious undertakings. To alleviate the postwar housing shortage and poor conditions in many urban neighborhoods, the federal government was prepared to devote enormous sums to the twin goals of slum clearance and public housing construction. Yet again, Moses was the right man at the right place and time. His repertoire expanded to encompass this new activity under the auspices of the Slum Clearance Committee, which he chaired on its creation in 1949.

Moses knew that a key to success in this endeavor would be preparation. Accordingly, he tried to anticipate each successive federal initiative so that he could be ready and waiting with turnkey plans and applications. Ultimately, he would oversee numerous low- and middle-income housing projects throughout the city as well as huge redevelopment efforts for educational and civic institutions. Best-known among these are the New York Coliseum, which was completed in 1956 and has since been replaced by the Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle, and the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, which opened in 1962. The largest performing arts complex in the world, Lincoln Center provided new and modern state-of-the-art facilities for the New York Philharmonic, the New York City Ballet, the New York City Opera, the Metropolitan Opera, the Public Library for the Performing Arts, and the Juilliard School.

Moses' activities had the greatest impact in the New York City metropolitan area, but his power also reached across the farthest corners of the state. In 1935, he arranged for the construction of two bridges connecting Grand Island to the mainland near Buffalo. He was also responsible for the Thousand Islands Bridge to Canada, near Massena, which opened in 1938. Later, as chair of the New York State
Power Authority, he presided over the financing and construction of a hydroelectric power dam on the St. Lawrence and Niagara rivers in 1958 and 1961, respectively. In both instances, he simultaneously created new state parks, and the scenic parkway he built at the Niagara site is now known as Robert Moses Parkway.

Declining Years
In the late nineteen fifties and early sixties, even as his power was extending into these new areas and his responsibilities grew to encompass an ever-larger range of public works activities, Moses ran into a series of setbacks that eventually led to his ouster. Granted, he had experienced occasional defeats earlier in his career, interspersed among his many high-profile successes. The most visible of these were his failed run for governor in 1934 and his attempt to build a Brooklyn-Battery Bridge in the forties. The later defeats, however, were more frequent and more damaging. This was partially because some of his later initiatives were inherently more controversial, but it was also a consequence of his imperious manner. As his power and activities expanded, he demonstrated little patience or sympathy for those who opposed his projects, nor for those who would attempt to supervise him. From the grassroots to the backrooms at City Hall and the State House, opposition to Moses was quietly growing.

The newspapers first turned a consistently critical eye toward Moses' projects when a crowd of stroller-pushing Manhattan housewives blocked a team of his bulldozers on their way to build a new parking lot in Central Park in 1956. This was followed in 1959 by another public relations disaster when he tried to prevent Joseph Papp from offering free Shakespeare performances in city parks. That same year, he was ensnared in ongoing scandals involving contractors and developers working on his slum clearance projects. Moses himself was never implicated in the improprieties, but the bad publicity tarnished his reputation nonetheless.

To make matters worse, his next round of major highway projects ran into stiff and well-organized opposition. He urged the construction of two huge cross-Manhattan Expressways that had been on the drawing boards since the twenties, one through midtown and one across lower Manhattan. His latest bridge project, an enormous effort to cross Long Island Sound, also faced powerful resistance. Each of these proposals carried the prospect of considerable disruption. The expressway projects in particular seemed to threaten the urban fabric of Manhattan, the heart of the metropolis. The resultant stream of bad publicity and public outcry provided an opportunity for elected politicians to chip away at Moses' power.

Gradually, he was forced to give up his many positions. In 1960, he relinquished most of his New York City positions in exchange for a seven-year contract as head of the 1964 World's Fair. The 1939 site in Queens would be reused for this return engagement, but Moses took charge of the extensive renovation and expansion of many of the park and highway facilities in the area, as well as the construction of Shea Stadium (1962). At the state level, Governor Nelson Rockefeller began to reclaim power from Moses starting in 1962, appointing new officials to take Moses' seats on state agencies, one by one. Finally, in 1968, Rockefeller merged the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority into the newly formed Metropolitan Transportation Authority and in so doing removed Robert Moses from power altogether.

Moses died in 1981 in West Islip, Long Island.
See also

Further Readings


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