

Transformation of New York City into an “Urban Mecca” by Robert Moses

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Introduction

Robert Moses is a famous American city planner who largely shaped the modern look of [New York](#) and its suburbs. Known as the “Master Builder,” in the middle of the 20th century, Moses significantly changed the largest city in the USA, setting the direction for its further development for many decades. Robert Moses was born in New Haven, Connecticut on December 18, 1888. His father was a successful real estate trader and owned a department store, but shortly after Robert’s birth, he sold his business, and in 1897, the Moses family moved to New York (Waller et al., 2023).

Education and Early Career

Robert received an excellent education: first, he entered Yale (one of the prestigious Ivy League universities), then continued his studies at Wadham College, Oxford University in the United Kingdom (where he received his master’s degree in 1913), and finally, in 1914, he defended his thesis about the British colonial administration at Columbia University of New York, receiving a Ph.D. in political science.

Political Ambition and Reform Efforts

Moses was a very ambitious young man, actively interested in politics. He believed that candidacies for a post in the government should be selected only based on the abilities and merits of candidates, not guided by political benefits or personal pre-emotions. In 1919, he began working for Alfred’s team, Al Smith, then governor of New York State. Moses developed a project to reform the government of the “Imperial State,” but in 1920, Al Smith lost the election, and Moses’ ideas remained unclaimed.

Development of the New York State Park System

Two years later, Smith again became governor, and Moses – his assistant (he wrote for Smith texts of speeches and drafted laws). The future “Chief Builder” was interested in the idea of developing a system of “state parks,” protected areas managed by the state government. In [New York](#) in 1885, the first such reserve in the United States was created – Niagara Falls, but in the early twenties of the last

century, to the east of the Hudson River, state parks were not. Robert Moses convinced Al Smith of the importance of increasing their number and, in 1923, led the newly created commission on the organization of parks on the island of Long Island.

One of the most serious obstacles Moses faced then was the financing problem. With Smith's support, Moses has decided to issue special "park" bonds worth fifteen million dollars. Then, Moses entered into a dispute with Franklin Roosevelt, the future governor of New York State and the President of the United States. Roosevelt believed that the most important thing for the state at that time was to build a road in the Hudson Valley, but eventually won the Moses point of view, thanks to the support of the press and the people of the state.

The first major project of Moses was Jones Beach State Park – a sixteen-kilometer long beach in the south-west of Long Island. During its creation, a lot of work was done, both construction and landscape (including beach reclamation and grass planting). In addition to the actual construction of the coastal strip (boardwalk, pools, parking lots, water tower, restaurants, etc), roads were built that provided convenient access to the new park. Jones Beach was opened to the public on August 4, 1929, and very soon became extremely popular with residents of New York City and the surrounding area. The new park became the largest construction project of the State of New York in a decade, and its lead, Robert Moses, earned the reputation of a talented organizer (Taguchi, 2021).

The development of the New York State Park system has made Robert Moses one of the most popular politicians of his time. Interestingly, in the 1920s, one of Moses' most active opponents was the future US President Franklin Roosevelt, who promoted his state development program (in particular, the idea of building a highway in the Hudson River valley). Later, having already occupied the Oval Office in the White House, Roosevelt tried to remove Moses from active work. Still, the public and press support allowed the "Chief Builder" to maintain his position. Be that as it may, in the thirties, at the height of the "Great Depression," Robert Moses was almost the only person in the US with serious experience in organizing large-scale public works. Almost every time the US government began financing a new program within the framework of the New Deal, Moses had already prepared concrete proposals with drawings, specifications, and other necessary documentation. Not surprisingly, he managed to actively attract and use the funds allocated by the Washington authorities.

Expansion of Urban Authority and Major Projects

In 1933, Moses used his popularity to support Fiorello La Guardia, who participated in the elections for the post of mayor of New York and, after his victory, was appointed to the post of city "Park Commissioner", having received enormous powers. Using federal funding, he began to create new parks, stadiums, sports, and playgrounds in the city. Among Moses' most famous projects of those years was the construction in New York, which often included huge outdoor pools.

The influence of Robert Moses increased even more when he became head of the Trayborough Bridge

Authority (connecting the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan districts of New York, today known as the Robert Kennedy Memorial Bridge). Thanks to Moses, more than sixty million dollars were allocated for the bridge's construction (more than was required for the construction of the Hoover Dam). After introducing the bridge into operation in 1936, the income received from it (transport fees) and the issuance of the Triborough Bridge by the Authority allowed the financing of other major projects, largely making Moses independent of the city authorities (Boeing, 2021).

Robert Moses was one of the organizers of the 1939 World Expo in New York. The exhibition, which was visited by more than forty-four million people, was erected in Queens at the site of the former landfill. After the exhibition was over, one of the largest fleets in New York, Flushing Meadows, was defeated. By the end of the thirties, Robert Moses was famous, respected, and influential in New York. The Atlantic Monthly wrote in February 1939 ... about the growing appreciation of millions of New Yorkers of all ages and classes to a man who, in less than five years, rebuilt or repaired a significant part of the metropolis ... Robert Moses sets an example of the most far-sighted and constructive use of public money Journalists talked about Moses, that it combined intelligence with the character of a wounded lion and was called his firework man.

Postwar Infrastructure and Energy Projects

In the forties and fifties, the influence of Moses increased even more. The New Yorker magazine wrote that ... for seven years between 1946 and 1954, the seven years in which the most intensive construction of public facilities in the history of the city was conducted, there was not a single project – school or sewerage, library or pier, hospitals or the pool – which would have been built by any of the city agencies without Moses' approval of its design and layout...

In the post-war decades, with the direct participation of Robert Moses in New York City, the connected Queens and Bronx Bridge Tross Neck and the world's longest suspension bridge, Verrazano between Brooklyn and Staten Island, were built; Shea Stadium in Queens, for decades former home to New York Mets baseball players and New York Jets football players; The largest complex of theaters and concert halls Lincoln Center in the Upper West Side; the Coliseum Col Columbus Circle Convention Center, the Coney Island Aquarium, the United Nations Headquarters complex in Midtown Manhattan and many other famous buildings. At the same time, Moses was also actively engaged in the construction of highways in New York that cut through residential areas and greatly facilitated the movement of cars (although, at the same time, they destroyed the existing urban development). Then, the Cross-Bronx Expressway, the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the Belt-Parkway complex, and other roads were built.

In 1952, Robert Moses headed the New York State Department of Energy. During the nine years in office, he led the construction of several hydropower facilities, including the Moses-Saunders Dam on the St. Lawrence River and the Niagara power station (later named after him).

Decline of Political Influence

In the sixties, Moses' political influence gradually began to weaken. To some extent, his position was influenced by his participation in several unpopular projects, including the demolition of the Pennsylvania-Station Railway Station and the plans to build a motorway through Greenwich Village and Soho in Lower Manhattan. Another unfortunate undertaking was holding the 1964 World Exhibition in New York, which failed to repeat the success of the 1939 exhibition and did not meet the financial expectations of the organizers (Roseau, 2021).

Legacy and Impact on New York

In 1972, Robert Moses resigned from his last official position – the head of the Transport Office of Trayboro. He worked for the State of New York for forty-four years (with six governors) and, at the same time, thirty-four years in the city of New York (with five mayors) for his long career, occupying twelve different posts. During the time when Moses directed the development of New York City, the area of city parks increased two and a half times, fifteen open pools, hundreds of tennis courts, baseball fields and sports grounds were created or reconstructed. He actively participated in constructing thirteen bridges, more than four hundred kilometers of highways, residential buildings with a total capacity of about one hundred and fifty thousand apartments, and many famous New York public buildings and structures. After a while, some critical remarks are made; in particular, it is believed that the high-speed roads created by Moses in the largest US city hindered the development of public transport (including the metro). Nevertheless, no one disputes that it was the “Chief Builder” who had a huge impact on the creation of modern urban infrastructure in New York and the development of transport, energy, and parks in the Imperial State. Robert Moses died on July 29, 1981, having lived ninety-two years. In his honor in the state of New York, several parks, roads, and dams are named.

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