



The Rational Walk @rationalwalk

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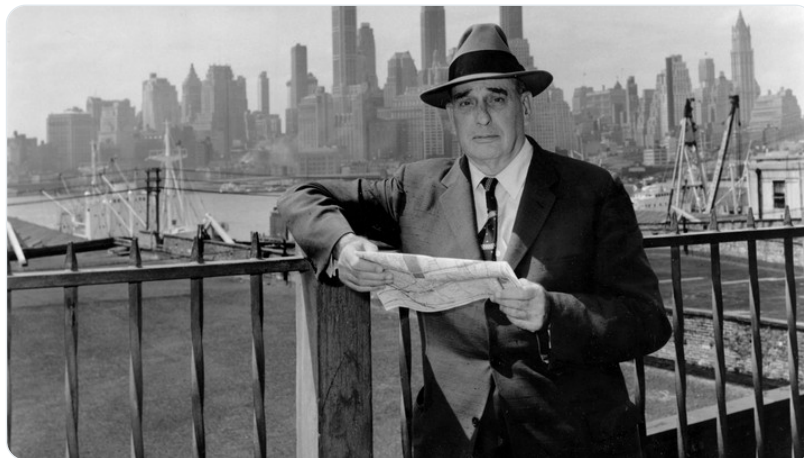
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Who was Robert Moses?

He reshaped New York but is unknown to most people who have not read Robert Caro's "The Power Broker".

Who was Robert Moses and why should you care?

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Robert Moses developed massive infrastructure projects, most notably in the New York City and on Long Island and was a larger than life figure from the 1920s through the 1970s. He lived from 1888 to 1981.

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“You can draw any kind of picture you like on a clean slate and indulge your every whim in the wilderness in laying out a New Delhi, Canberra or Brasília, but when you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax.”

— Robert Moses

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Moses came of age in the early 20th century as an idealistic young man who saw the problems of New York City and had a burning desire to have a personal impact. He was a progressive and an idealist.

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Moses was a third generation American and by the turn of the 20th century, the family was worth ~\$1.2 million -- in excess of \$30 million in today's money. He was raised in the tradition of "noblesse oblige" -- and felt that the wealthy had a duty to help the poor.

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Moses studied at Oxford and returned to the United States in 1912 with idealistic views of government and social justice. He saw massive inefficiency and corruption in the governance of NYC and wanted major reforms.

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This was the "Tammany Hall" era of massive corruption and patronage in which city bosses doled out jobs to 50,000 workers. There was no transparency in city budgeting - sleazy dealing were the norm. Moses found it repugnant.

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Moses was put in charge of an effort to reform the civil service. He attempted to put in place job performance standards and implement a pure meritocracy. He produced reports. He had plans. Every plan he proposed failed. Miserably.

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Moses had no understanding of incentives or human nature. By 1917, his patrons in government were ousted by Tammany Hall interests and Moses was cast into the political wilderness.

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Moses learned a lesson he would never forget: Idealism without raw power was useless. The rest of his life was a pursuit of raw power.

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"If the ends don't justify the means, then what does?"

— Robert Moses

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Moses grew close to Governor Al Smith in the early 1920s. From his association with Smith, Moses began building a base of political support. Moses turned his attention to Long Island and proposed building a massive park system. This would be an obsession for decades.

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Moses was not a conservationist. He wanted to develop and build parks and highways to allow for recreation for people who lived in NYC.

But he had initial trouble with land acquisition and obtaining rights of way.

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Moses eventually reached agreement with "Robber Barrons" who controlled much of Long Island at the time. He made efforts to bypass their estates but at the expense of plowing through small farms, in many cases ruining livelihoods. The end justified the means in his mind.

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Moses eventually tried to win elected office but utterly failed as a politician. He had already transformed from an idealist to a ruthless pragmatist. By the early 1930s, he was becoming a misanthrope.

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“I raise my stein to the builder who can remove ghettos without removing people as I hail the chef who can make omelets without breaking eggs.”

— Robert Moses

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Although he was too rough around the edges to win political office, Moses was collecting bureaucratic power -- by the early 1930s, he effectively controlled Long Island's park system and parkways and was put in charge of NYC's park system.

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And not only that ... he became the Chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority and eventually would build over 600 miles of roads and highways in and around NYC.

He was widely admired as a man who "got things done". The media loved him.

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But "progress" came at a high cost. He destroyed local communities for his road projects, park construction favored wealthy areas, he had racist attitudes, and had disdain for the people he was supposedly serving. Moses was not accountable to the democratic process.

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Moses got things done. He built infrastructure in timeframes that today are unimaginable. But it came at a cost. Particularly true in the destruction of the East Tremont neighborhood in the 1950s.

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Moses was not driven by money. He was driven by power. He started off as an idealist but allowed the corruption of the system to corrupt himself. He basically lost the plot over long lifetime, not instantly but gradually. A slippery slope to corruption.

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I highly recommend "The Power Broker". I was intimidated but committed to 25 pages per day. I was soon reading more than that and finished in about a month.

My review of the book goes into much more detail than this thread:



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Despite the enormous flaws of Robert Moses, I admit that sometimes I wish we had people like him today who would just "get things done".

But at what cost?

Can we harness the talents of a man like Moses without things getting out of control?  
Probably not.

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