THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

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THE QUESTION

More than 30 years after Robert Caro published *The Powerbroker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author was asked to look back on his controversial subject. It was 2007, and Caro was to speak at an event being held in conjunction with a vast retrospective detailing Moses' impact on the Big Apple, organized by NYU's Hilary Ballon and Columbia's Kenneth Jackson.

The associated exhibits painted Moses in a comparatively sympathetic light. So Caro decided to use his remarks to remind the audience of the trauma Moses had wrought on the City. With that in mind, he retold the story of East Tremont, the neighborhood in the Bronx that had been a vibrant and comfortable home for generations of working class New Yorkers—at least until Moses had haphazardly destroyed it during construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway.

It was a horrific story, by Caro's telling. Before Moses, the neighborhood had been nearly idyllic, if not wealthy. But while planning the massive new expressway, Moses had blithely refused to shift the route to a less destructive alternative two blocks to the south. Once the plans were revealed, the community's leaders had fought against the master builder at every turn—but to no avail. In the wake of the highway's construction, the surrounding area had deteriorated into a vast and dangerous wasteland.

At the very moment Caro was delivering his speech, something else was also happening in New York—or, more to the point, wasn't happening.

More than a decade earlier—and two decades after the release of *The Powerbroker*—a movement had emerged to remake the embarrassment that is New York's Pennsylvania Station. In the early 1990s, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan had become a champion for rebuilding North America's most heavily trafficked transit hub. It was (and still is) a pit, situated beneath Madison Square Garden. Confusing, dirty, dangerous, and outmoded, it needed (and still needs) to be replaced.

The Clinton Administration had already put up hundreds of millions of federal dollars toward the project's completion. Private developers had pledged hundreds of millions of dollars of their own. Preservationists and business groups had championed the project as a strike for municipal improvement. And yet very little, if any progress had been made.

The contrast was stark: in one case from the 1950s, detailed by Caro, a project moved steadily ahead despite widespread opposition. In the other, ongoing a half-century later, little to no progress was made despite the near absence of any resistance. Today, a bird's eye view reveals a broader, more troubling trend. Since the opening of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge in the 1960s, no major new piece of public infrastructure (with certain minor exceptions like the 7-line extension) have been completed in the five boroughs of New York City. The question is: why?

THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

In his 2007 speech, Caro disclosed that, all too frequently, when he attended a cocktail party, someone who had read *The Powerbroker*—often someone who, in Caro's words, "was of the real estate persuasion"—would complain to him that it had become too difficult to build in New York. They would ask him, quite simply, "Isn't it time that we had another Robert Moses?" And Caro, thinking each time of the story of East Tremont, but choosing not to engage in an argument amid polite company, would simply answer, "No."

It's no mystery why so many of the City's boosters were eager to usher in a second coming. The finale of the master builder's long tenure—an end which followed briefly after the opening of the Verrazano Bridge—is thought to have marked the end of the era where big projects could be completed within the Big Apple. In the absence of Moses' genius, tenacity, wisdom, arrogance, and most of all, power, it had become impossible to "get things done."

And so a simple diagnosis emerged as the conventional wisdom—an assumption that persists to this day: the absence of leadership has wrought an end to progress. Ideas (Westway, ARC, Moynihan Station) have come and gone. But even when they have won broad public acclaim, in the absence of a modern-day Moses, none have gotten across the finish line.

DEVELOPING A NEW THEORY

Unfortunately, the idea that no New Yorker has emerged to wield a cudgel like Moses is not sufficient to explain why big projects rarely reach completion. Moses may, by Caro's description, have been a megalomaniac, combining big dreams with an enormous ego. But others fitting the same description have filled positions of considerable authority since Nelson Rockefeller pushed the master builder off the public stage in the late 1960s.

It's time that we investigate whether something else has happened. Could it be that, in reaction to Moses and a whole set of other circumstances, New York has built up a system designed explicitly to protect against Moses' second coming? For fifty years, if not longer, various steps have been taken to change the way power is structured within the five boroughs, with an eye explicitly toward preventing another East Tremont. Has the pendulum swung too far in that direction?

Admittedly, the current reality wasn't wrought by some master plan. It wasn't created in one fell swoop. But we need to think thoroughly about whether New York has created a bureaucracy so good at preventing another neighborhood from being heedlessly bulldozed that even projects enjoying near universal support—like the construction of a new Penn Station—can't be accomplished.

This won't be a story about any individual person or any single reform. It likely will not be about the absence of leadership. The challenge isn't in understanding any one element of what frustrates efforts to get projects like Penn Station off the ground. It's about understanding the totality of how, and why, the process has evolved.

THE ONGOING RELEVANCE

Penn Station is, on its face, an outrage. But it's more than that. It's an emblem of what is fast becoming the City's Achilles heel. As the region's population grows and as the existing infrastructure continues to deteriorate, it may soon become impossible to maintain New York's exalted place on the global stage. If people can't get from one point to another with some degree of alacrity, business and residents will eventually migrate away. The challenge isn't just that the City (and surrounding region) needs to maintain the roads and subways and bridges and terminals it currently has. It's about planning for growth.

Big ideas are in the air. New airports. New subway lines. New tunnels. New stations. But without a real understanding of why so little has been accomplished, there's no reason to believe that the next good idea won't also die on the vine. For all the press conferences and news releases announcing the "new" Penn Station since the mid-1990s, very little progress has been made. The fundamentals that have stood in that project's way—and have held back other projects—continue to frustrate the public interest.

Some of this is about money. Federal funding is not what it was. The gas tax has not been indexed to keep up with the demands on the Highway Trust Fund. But we should be clear that this is not entirely about funding. In Penn Station's case, there's a great deal of money on hand, both public and, more importantly, private. But the process of getting from the germ of a good idea to the grand opening of a new or re-built public gem has become much too fraught. And the process of striking a better balance against the trauma of Robert Moses is to understand the totality of the existing system.