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Robert Moses’ Impact on New York Through Roads

New York City has had its great deal of influential and important figures and of these figures, Robert Moses is held in high regard. Opinions on Robert Moses vary differently and drastically; some regard him as a genius, while others see him in a less pleasing light. Moses’ most notable critic, Robert Caro, wrote in his 1974 biography called *The Power Broker,* about how Moses would cut into full neighborhoods to make his new roadways. Growing up on Long Island, the one thing I was told about Robert Moses was that he purposely made the bridges to the beaches too low so that poor people could not get there by bus and thus Moses remains a figure much discussed. Throughout his career in New York, Moses truly created New York City and Long Island, as we know it today.

Robert Moses was born on December 18, 1888 and died on July 29, 1981 at the old age of 92. In Moses’ 92 years of age, he lived a long and fulfilling life. It all started close to the area that he changed forever in New Haven, Connecticut before moving to Manhattan. Moses completed his schooling at Yale and then received a Ph.D. from Columbia University in NYC.

After completing his degree from Columbia, Moses began his career in New York City in politics by working with Governor Al Smith (PBS). He worked diligently on the idea of park conservation and creation. The New York Preservation Archive Project said, “When his tenure as chief of the state park system came to a close, New York had an unprecedented 2,567,256 acres of parkland. He built 658 playgrounds in New York City, 416 miles of parkways, and 13 bridges.” Moses started his career in New York in 1924 as the President of the Long Island State Parks Commission and Chairman of the New York State Council of Parks (NYPAP) and ended his career in 1981 when he resigned from his position as Chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (NYPAP). Moses held several different offices throughout his rewarding career in New York over the span of 50 years.

Moses is most frequently referred to as the “Master Builder” because during his time on top, Moses built 13 bridges, 416 miles of parkways, 658 playgrounds, and 150,000 housing units, spending $150 billion in today’s dollars across the City of New York (PBS).

As Chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, Moses was able to accomplish almost all of his projects of bridges and tunnels. After the completion of the Triborough Bridge, traffic was so high that the revenue from the tolls gave Moses the ability to continue his mission of building. Moses was even able to create the Queens Midtown Tunnel with the toll revenue and change the name of the Triborough Bridge Authority to the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (Ballon, 89).

In 1924, Moses began his work on Jones Beach State Park. In order to create this park, he needed to create a network of roads and highways that would connect the new park to other parts of Long Island that would eventually connect to Manhattan. Moses opened the Southern State Parkway in 1927, followed by the Wantagh State Parkway in 1929, and the Ocean Parkway in 1930. Moses had to make these roadways parkways because highways were “tightly controlled, in keeping with federal mandates, by the engineers at the State Highway Department” (Ballon, 86) so Moses had to create parkways that would go around the cities. In 1930, most of the Northern State Parkway was completed and in 1934, the Meadowbrook State Parkway was completed to finish Moses’ plan of roadways to connect to Jones Beach.

Moses also completed a West Side Improvement project that consisted of the building of Henry Hudson Highway, the Henry Hudson Memorial Bridge. Moses was not the first person to have the idea of building these roads, but he was the one to put the pavement on the ground and complete the projects.

By the end of his reign, Moses had completed construction on some of the most important roads today. Some of these roads are the Major Deegan Expressway, the Cross-Bronx Expressway, the Whitestone Expressway, the Staten-Island Expressway, and the Gowanus Expressway (Ballon, 92). Moses had also completed construction on some of the most important passes to and from New York City such as the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, the Triborough Bridge, the Throg’s Neck Bridge, the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, the Whitestone Bridge, and lastly the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge (NYPAP).

Robert Moses lost most of his power in 1968 under Governor Nelson Rockefeller when Rockefeller merged the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

For over 60 years, Robert Moses fought to help New Yorkers get to other destinations, or helped people from other destinations get to New York City. Although there is always going to be controversy about Robert Moses and how he was able to accomplish what he did, he will forever be remembered for creating some of the most beautiful and beloved state parks in New York, such as Jones Beach State Park and Robert Moses State Park. Moses worked diligently to create roadways, bridges, and parks for New Yorkers, even if my mother tells me he built the Northern State Parkway to be so curvy so that it would not interfere with his friends’ houses. The legacy of Robert Moses will live on every time a person crosses over the Triborough Bridge, or every time a child goes to Jones Beach State Park for the first time, or every time a car drives through the Queens Midtown Tunnel.

Works Cited

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