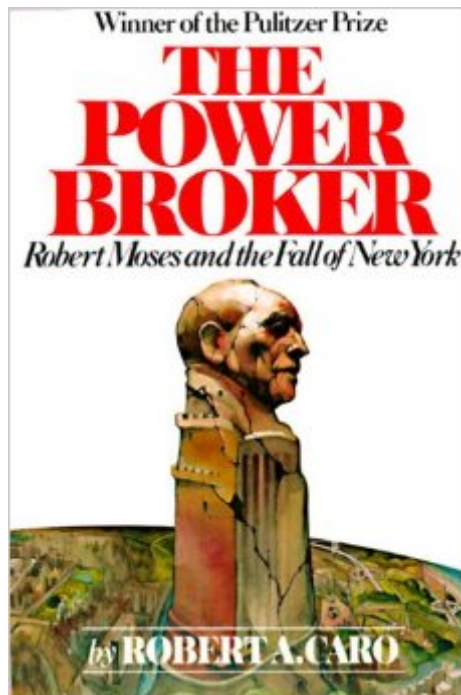


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The Power Broker: Robert Moses And The Fall Of New York



Synopsis

One of the most acclaimed books of our time, winner of both the Pulitzer and the Francis Parkman prizes, *The Power Broker* tells the hidden story behind the shaping (and mis-shaping) of twentieth-century New York (city and state) and makes public what few have known: that Robert Moses was, for almost half a century, the single most powerful man of our time in New York, the shaper not only of the city's politics but of its physical structure and the problems of urban decline that plague us today. In revealing how Moses did it--how he developed his public authorities into a political machine that was virtually a fourth branch of government, one that could bring to their knees Governors and Mayors (from La Guardia to Lindsay) by mobilizing banks, contractors, labor unions, insurance firms, even the press and the Church, into an irresistible economic force--Robert Caro reveals how power works in all the cities of the United States. Moses built an empire and lived like an emperor. He personally conceived and completed public works costing 27 billion dollars--the greatest builder America (and probably the world) has ever known. Without ever having been elected to office, he dominated the men who were--even his most bitter enemy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, could not control him--until he finally encountered, in Nelson Rockefeller, the only man whose power (and ruthlessness in wielding it) equalled his own.

Book Information

Paperback: 1344 pages

Publisher: Vintage; n Later printing edition (July 12, 1975)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0394720245

ISBN-13: 978-0394720241

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.9 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (292 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Everyone knows--or intuitively feels--that American cities had some great opportunities to become enjoyable, livable places during the course of the 20th Century but somehow blew the opportunity.

This book explains a major component of why and how the betrayal occurred by focusing on the man who was both the cause and the victim of the betrayal, a powerful bureaucrat little known outside of metropolitan New York, Robert Moses. The book details Moses' slow rise to power as an idealistic Wilsonian Democrat fighting the entrenched power of corrupt Tammany Hall politics, his novel approach to parks planning (he virtually invented the "parkway," for example), his massive public works (among them the Triborough Bridge and all of New York City's expressways), and his inevitable decline and fall after he refused to relinquish power in old age. As time wore on Moses became less and less the man of the people and more and more the man of the system of his own creation, and that system was the toll-gathering mechanism of New York's bridges and tunnels. He invented that peculiar institution, the "authority" (as in Port "Authority" or Tennessee Valley "Authority") that is neither wholly governmental nor wholly private, and so lacks the restraints of either; Moses' cash cows kept him in power and gave him an antidemocratic arrogance that is truly breathtaking and, one hopes, will never be duplicated. This book isn't just for New Yorkers or for those who wonder why New York's roadways are so confusingly laid out. America's other big cities are New York writ small--they went to New York at the height of Moses' power and emulated his methods!

I first picked up *The Power Broker* when it was published 25 years ago. Since then I've re-read it three or four times over the years. It is a true monument to Caro that this book has remained in print in both hc and pb over these years. This massive work is at the same time a biography of Robert Moses and the metropolitan New York City area. Moses, originally a reformer and a true public servant, somehow became tainted by the power entrusted to him. It was his way or no way -- and once he became firmly entrenched there was no "no way." A typical Moses tactic: design a great public work (bridge, for example) and underestimate the budget. A bargain sure to be approved and funded by the politicians! Then run out of money halfway through construction. The rest of the money will surely be forthcoming because no politician wants to be associated with a half-finished and very visible "failure" -- it's much better to take credit for an "against the odds" success. I grew up in NYC at the tail end of Moses' influence and I remember the 1964 Worlds Fair in NYC vividly, especially a "guidebook" that lionized Moses' construction prowess. In school, Moses' contribution was also taught (always positively) when we had units covering NYC history. If nothing else, Moses understood the power of good publicity, and used tactics later adopted by the current mayor (King Rudy) to control the press and public opinion. This book brings Moses back to human scale and deconstructs (no pun intended) his impact on the city. The book is long, detailed, and compelling.

Great beach reading -- especially at Jones Beach!

This massive work, published in 1975, is unfortunately just as timely today as it was a quarter century ago. It is the story of Robert Moses, arguably one of the most important and influential men of the second half of the 20th century. He, for better or for worse, gave us our models for the modern highway transportation system and wielded enormous power in the city and state of New York -- without ever being elected to a single public office. At 1,162 pages, Caro's work will undoubtedly always face the charge that it needed editing. But to address large themes, a writer needs to expand, and Caro does, brilliantly for the most part. "The Power Broker" takes on the question of whether democracy in America really works. Using Moses' life as a model, the answer is "no." Moses began as a passionate believer in reform, a man who wanted to end favoritism and corruption in New York. Yet early on he concluded that to "get things done," he needed to beat the power-wielders at their own game, and he did. He built an enormous network of influence that included politicians, unions, banks and big business. And he used that power to build the most enormous transportation system in the nation, often over the objections of elected officials. But the book also makes clear the cost of power. For one thing, there were political losers. Moses was ruthless in his attacks on those who opposed him, often lowering himself to attacking character. Mass transportation was a loser during the time Moses wielded power. He considered the automobile the premier mode of transportation, and he steadfastly refused to accommodate plans for subway, bus, and train improvements. And the poor and working class were losers in Moses' power game.

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