



Peer Reviewed

Title:

Parkway, Beach and Promenade: Robert Moses' Regional Vision [Dispatches]

Journal Issue:

[Places, 6\(2\)](#)

Author:

[Bressi, Todd W](#)

Publication Date:

1990

Publication Info:

Places

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9bj282tp>

Acknowledgements:

This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information, contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:

places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, parkway, beach, promenade, Robert Moses, Todd Bressi

Copyright Information:

All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author or original publisher for any necessary permissions. eScholarship is not the copyright owner for deposited works. Learn more at http://www.escholarship.org/help_copyright.html#reuse



eScholarship
University of California

eScholarship provides open access, scholarly publishing services to the University of California and delivers a dynamic research platform to scholars worldwide.

PARKWAY, BEACH AND PROMENADE: ROBERT MOSES' REGIONAL VISION



Traffic on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway ducks onto two decks cantilevered from a cliff and covered by the Brooklyn Heights Promenade. When engineers proposed the freeway structure, Moses added the promenade.

Photo by Todd W. Bressi.

New York—This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Robert Moses, one of the most prolific builders of public works the region, or the country, has seen.

Moses' parks, parkways, bridges and urban renewal projects made him many enemies—Robert Caro's voluminous yet popular (and Pulitzer-Prize winning) vilification of Moses, *The Power Broker*, is still the departure point for debates about Moses' accomplishments—still, he has legions of admirers. Many are frustrated planners and builders who adulate Moses because he got things done. But others realize that Moses articulated a rare vision—one that not only took in the open space, housing and transportation needs of the region but also lavished upon even the smallest projects an attention for detail that invested them with great significance.

A good way to understand the scope of Moses' work is to travel the network of highways he built throughout the region. Although they are now popular commuter routes, they were built to connect New York City and its northern suburbs with the parks he scattered liberally throughout Long Island. Moses wanted Long Island's open spaces to be a recreational escape valve for the crowded city, and he knew it was crucial to act before inevitable suburban development occurred.

The highways were more than connections; they were parks themselves, setting a standard for a new genre of road: the parkway. They were built for

fast-moving traffic, but their gentle curves and carefully maintained landscaping to this day evoke the mood of recreational motoring they were intended to promote. Moses was adamant that every detail reflect his romantic visions of motoring and of the natural landscape. Bridges were faced with locally hewn rock, not left as unconsidered, utilitarian concrete and steel post-and-beam viaducts. Gas stations and a state police barracks were carefully designed, albeit in a Cape Cod style. A unique icon identifies each parkway, not the standard interstate shield.

The task of the Meadowbrook Parkway is to carry traffic to Jones Beach State Park; for that reason alone it would be a route of special anticipation and excitement. Moses wanted his parkway design to heighten that.

Wheeling off the Southern State you notice the lighting standards change from typical metal poles to wooden posts with decorative carvings at the top, a signal that nature is to be encountered here, even if only in the most carefully controlled way. Several miles before you arrive at Jones Beach, you see the obelisk that serves as the focal landmark for the park wavering through the haze on the horizon, cleverly proportioned so it always seems far away, beckoning one onward. To reach the barrier island on which the beach is located, one must cross a bridge whose silhouette mimics the lines of a ship.

At Jones Beach, in a meeting room on the upper floor of the West Bathhouse, is another testament to the breadth of Moses' vision. Covering most of one wall, reaching almost from floor to ceiling, is a photograph depicting an aerial view of the park shortly after it was finished. The mural shows the painstaking formality of the landscape: boardwalk, parking fields,

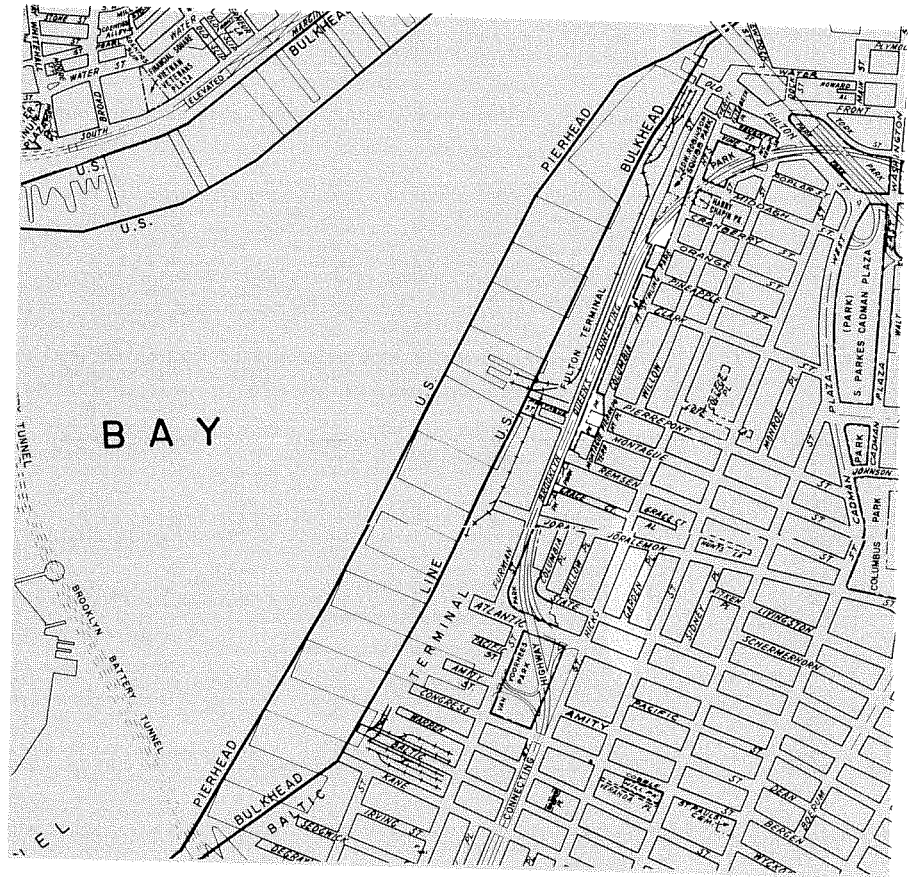
The expressway jogs to the waterfront to avoid the historic Brooklyn Heights neighborhood. Several streets are continued through their right-of-way and provide access to the promenade.

gardens and bath houses laid out with a geometric precision; yet at a scale so large that the effect of that order on the pedestrian is subliminal. What one remembers are the gently swooping walkways and boardwalks, and the untended, shifting fringe of the beach as it succumbs to the ocean's waves.

Meanwhile, all of this is clearly part of a grander scheme. From the obelisk run three divided highways: Ocean Parkway leads east to Robert Moses State Park and the further reaches of Fire Island. Wantagh Parkway leads north to suburban communities. The Meadowbrook leads back west, the most direct route to New York City, via connections with other Moses parkways and expressways. From this photograph, it seems all roads lead to Jones Beach, and there they all meet, peacefully, gracefully after a harrowing voyage, at the grand obelisk.

Moses also left his mark by way of smaller, localized gestures that turned difficult conditions into elegant design solutions. One of them is the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, which sits atop a cliff that rises 40 feet above the East River and affords one of the most spectacular views of Lower Manhattan anywhere.

The problem was fitting the six-lane Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (a major east-west arterial) and a four-lane street in the narrow right-of-way while protecting the brownstone apartments atop the cliff from noise and air pollution. The engineers' solution was to cantilever a double-deck



expressway from the cliff and put the street below that. Moses, reviewing the proposal at a public meeting, off-handedly suggested covering it with a public walk that ran behind the apartments' backyard gardens; the Brooklyn Heights Promenade was born.

The Promenade offers connections to the city that one can experience in very few other places. Imagine wandering through blocks of brownstones, rowhouses and Victorian apartment buildings and seizing upon a shaft of daylight and a fleeting glimpse of water at the end of a street. Intrigued, you follow them past churches, rowhouses and playgrounds and finally burst upon the promenade, where you confront the Manhattan skyline, eerily silent yet almost at hand.

Caro's biography details Moses' accumulation and exercise of power, which enabled him to impose his

vision on the region. It is the debate between Moses' ruthlessness and success at shaping the landscape versus the seeming inability of the public sector to effect large projects today that pre-occupies New Yorkers.

Projects such as these suggest another lesson to be considered—Moses' vision itself. We may contest the details with which Moses articulated his vision. (Would mass transit have been a wiser investment than highways? Do we need Cape Cod gas stations?) But by paying attention to both the details of his projects and their connections to the larger world, Moses showed we can create places that are memorable and inspire much needed respect for and confidence in the common public ground.

—Todd W. Bressi