


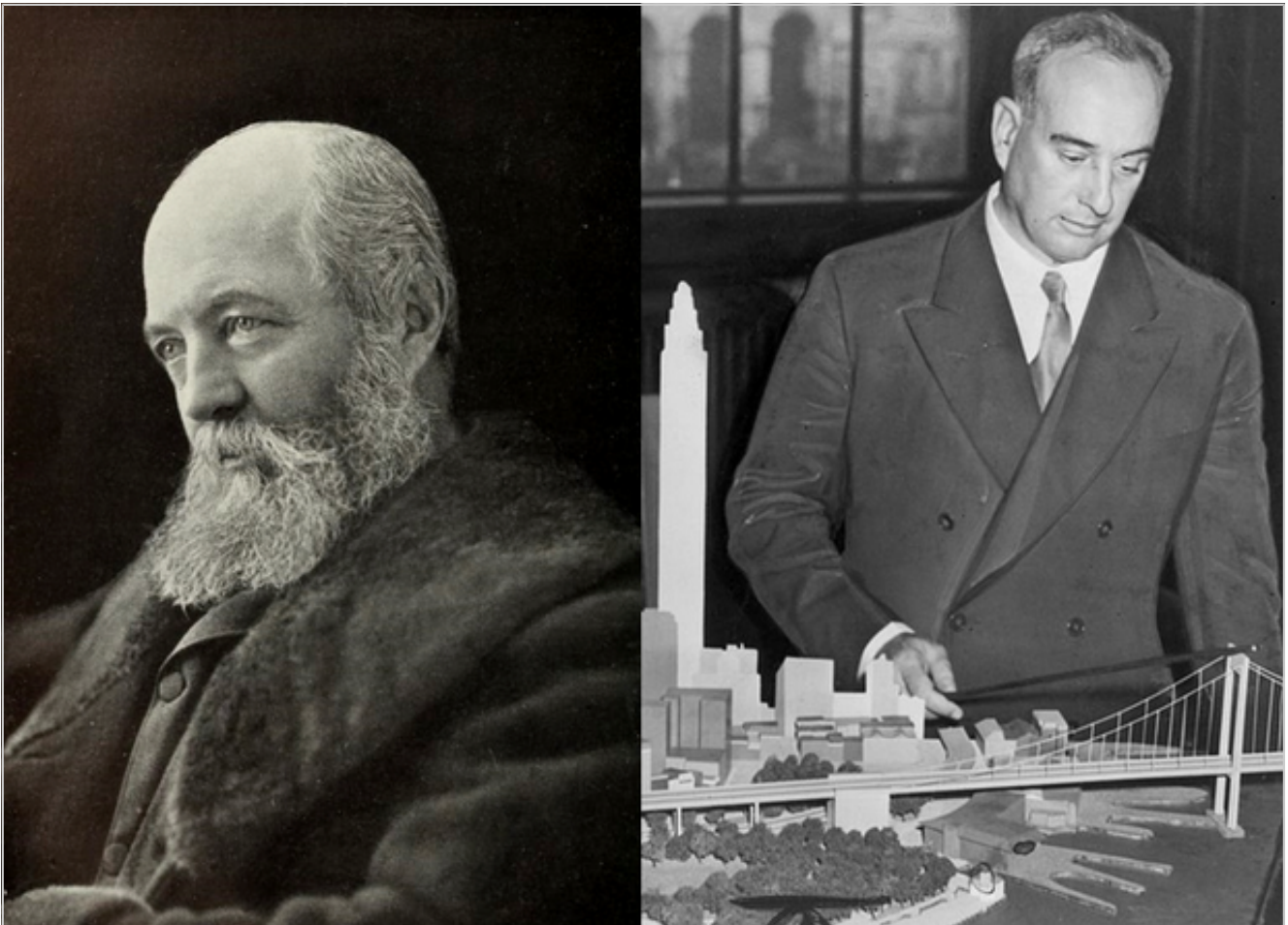
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Olmsted the Hero, Moses the Villain

History views master planners Frederick Law Olmsted and Robert Moses very differently.

ANTHONY FLINT | Jun 20, 2014 |  31 Comments



Left, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Right, planner Robert Moses.
(Archive.org/Library of Congress)

They both were top-down, hard-charging master planners, creatures of authorities and commissions that helped them get things done. Both perturbed by the jarring cacophony of the city, they sought the best for the American people, and produced glorious public recreation facilities known the world over. They both had a fondness for poetry, and both were accepted at Yale.

Yet history views Frederick Law Olmsted and Robert Moses very differently. Olmsted, the father of landscape architecture, is lauded as a visionary, and places he designed, like Boston's Emerald Necklace and New York's Central Park, are cherished treasures. If Moses gets credit for Jones Beach, which he created as his master-builder career was just getting going in the 1920s, it's just as likely he will be vilified for making the parkway bridges too low so buses couldn't get there—a legend that has lived on despite being untrue.

No one would ever talk about dismantling any aspect of Olmsted's work. With Moses, it's all about undoing a legacy.

John Norquist, the former mayor of Milwaukee and outgoing president of the [Congress for the New Urbanism](#), gets the credit for juxtaposing these two towering figures in planning, having organized a session on the subject at CNU22 in Buffalo earlier this month. I had the privilege of moderating the conversation with Robert Fishman from the University of Michigan and Frank Kowsky, architectural historian and art history professor at Buffalo State College. Fishman gave Moses utterly fair consideration and flagged some of the similarities above, but Kowsky, author of [The Best Planned City: Olmsted, Vaux, and the Buffalo Park System](#), drew the applause for celebrating a local hero.

And that's the way it goes with these two men—one is great, the other evil. Olmsted got [Witold Rybczynski's](#) *A Clearing in the Distance*, among several other tributes; Moses got Robert Caro's prosecutorial tome, *The Power Broker*, exactly 40 years ago (and while cut at least a little more slack, unquestionably the Goliath to Jane Jacobs' David in my own book, *Wrestling with Moses*). Olmsted, who was [born 192 years ago](#)* this past April, gets honorary parties and symposia and special exhibits. And he is now the subject of a major documentary series, [Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing America](#), that premieres Friday, June 20 on PBS. When it comes to Olmsted, it's a lovefest.

Moses, meanwhile, can't catch much of a break. His reputation had begun to be rehabilitated with a series of exhibits and lectures by Columbia University, the Museum of the City of New York, and the Queens Museum, resulting in an even-handed volume, [Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York](#) (note the riposte to Caro's subtitle, "Robert Moses and the Fall of New York."). But a trope dies hard. Recently the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation were kind enough to invite me to a work-in-progress screening of the film [A Matter of Death and Life](#), being produced by Matt Tyrnauer and Robert Hammond, the latter the man behind The High Line. Moses, hooded and foreboding, flashed on the screen within minutes, with his heavy-handed tactics and bad ideas. I almost started humming the music that plays when Darth Vader walks into the room.

The filmmakers are exploring how Jane Jacobs's principles might be applied to global urbanization. That's fair enough; as the *hutong* succumb to bulldozers in China, towers in the park and superblocks look pretty bleak. The warning is clear: the rest of the world shouldn't fall into the same old trap and practice the top-down planning that Jacobs rebelled against a half-century ago. But it would be a shame if Moses's excesses have permanently given large-scale planning a bad name, even as conditions on the ground warrant a more regional vision. It's hard to see how West Village-scale settlement is going to accommodate the millions flocking to metropolitan areas worldwide.



Left: Olmsted's Chapin Parkway in Buffalo ([Flickr/Mark Hogan](#)). Right: Moses's FDR Drive in Manhattan ([Flickr/Doug Kerr](#))

Olmsted built beautiful parkways, too, and undeniably looked at public works and city-building at a grand scale. His firm's blueprints were wonderfully

regional. He thought comprehensively, encompassing public health benefits, sanitation, circulation, and increases in property values. And he was every bit as dogged, in his own way, as Moses, willing to get his hands dirty, immersing in necessary politics, and practicing wait-them-out patience with great skill. As I've said myself about Moses, those are qualities we need today—a regional vision, the skill to align bureaucracies—as coastal cities attempt to build resilience and prepare for the inevitable impacts of climate change.

But there's no knocking off the black hat. The CNU session was billed as "Olmsted vs. Moses" in every way—not only a comparison, but those instances where Moses actually messed with Olmsted's work: Olmsted's Humboldt Parkway in Buffalo was denuded and replaced by a classic Moses sunken trench, the Kensington Expressway.

No one would ever talk about dismantling any aspect of Olmsted's work. There are basically no flaws in his portfolio. On the contrary, his parks are preserved and nurtured and lovingly restored, as with the current [Muddy River project](#) in Boston. Meanwhile much of the energy in U.S. planning today centers on dismantling Moses and Moses-era freeways, replacing them with multi-modal boulevards. With Moses, it's all about undoing a legacy.

It might be a bit of a stretch, but another Moses vs. Olmsted story has a different ending. At Olmsted's Central Park in New York, Moses turned a sheepfold structure into the iconic restaurant Tavern on the Green. In the late 1950s Moses sought to add a parking lot, drawing celebrity mothers (though notably, not Jane Jacobs, who was busy at Washington Square Park) to rally against the earth-moving/park-destroying equipment. The restaurant recently [re-opened](#) to favorable reviews, and it's as much as a paragon and gathering place as the Rockefeller Center skating rink. It didn't destroy Olmsted's park; arguably, it continues to enrich the surroundings.

Olmsted was never a villain, and the years keep getting kinder for him. Moses has a much longer way to go. But the more time passes, the less we might see things so utterly black or white.

***CORRECTION:** *An earlier version of this story misstated the year Frederick Law Olmsted was born. He was born in 1822.*

About the Author

Anthony Flint is a fellow at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, a think tank in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is the author of *Modern Man: The Life of Le Corbusier, Architect of Tomorrow* and *Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took On New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City*.

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