THE

New York

APPROACH
Urban Life and Urban Landscape Series
Zane L. Miller and Henry D. Shapiro, General Editors

Cincinnati, Queen City of the West: 1819–1838
Daniel Aaron

Fragments of Cities: The New American Downtowns and Neighborhoods
Larry Bennett

Cincinnati Observed: Architecture and History
John Clubbe

Suburb in the City: Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, 1850–1990
David R. Contosta

Building Chicago: Suburban Developers and the Creation of a Divided Metropolis
Ann Durkin Keating

Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston’s Mount Auburn Cemetery
Blanche Linden-Ward

Plague of Strangers: Social Groups and the Origins of City Services in Cincinnati, 1819–1870
Alan I Marcus

Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago: Workers on the South Side, 1880–1922
Dominic A. Pacyga

Hopedale: From Commune to Company Town, 1840–1920
Edward K. Spann

Washing “The Great Unwashed”: Public Baths in Urban America, 1840–1920
Marilyn Thornton Williams
Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City

Joel Schwartz
This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents,
Murray Schwartz and Rose Meinhardt Schwartz
Contents

List of Illustrations  ix
List of Maps  xi
List of Tables  xiii
Preface  xv

1. Traditions  1
2. Redevelopment and Public Housing  25
3. The Redevelopment Front  61
4. Stuyvesant Town  84
5. The Redevelopment Machine  108
6. Centers and Fringes  144
7. Maneuver and Collaboration  170
8. Room for Modern Medicine  204
9. Blue-Collar Blight  229
10. Full Exposure  261
    The Power Broker and His Clients  295

List of Abbreviations  307
Notes  311
Index  365
Public improvements cut swaths through the tenements of the Lower East Side, 1908 14
Creating the IRT subway and a new Greenwich Village, c. 1914 18
Reclaiming Allen Street on the Lower East Side, 1927 28
Bankers and business socialists start the reclamation of the Lower East Side, 1930 29
The International Style for Chrystie-Forsyth, 1932 30
Knickerbocker Village on the Lower East Side, 1934 35
Reformers launch the New York City Housing Authority, 1934 39
Slum clearance at Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 1935 43
Marking Corlears Hook for slum clearance, 1939 44
Stuyvesant Town unveiled by the architects, 1943 95
Holden, McLaughlin & Associates’ proposed redevelopment of East Harlem, 1943 102
The liberal coalition that built Cooperative Village on the Lower East Side, 1953 136
Corlears Hook redeveloped, c. 1954 178
Opening-day ceremonies of the Morningside Gardens Title I, June 20, 1957 197
Medicine for the modern city, c. 1949 217
Washington Square Southeast, 1954 265
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Manhattantown site partly cleared, c. 1955</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Harlem slum clearance, 1957</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposed Lincoln Square Title I, 1955</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The force behind Moses’s last Title I victory on the Lower East Side, 1957</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Maps

The City Beautiful’s “Engineer’s Routes,” 1899 .......................................................... 10
The liberal city’s redevelopment potential, 1940 ......................................................... 76
Redevelopment of the Lower East Side, 1934–1958 ...................................................... 114
Redevelopment of upper Manhattan, 1937–1958 ......................................................... 116
Redevelopment of northern Brooklyn, 1937–1958 ...................................................... 118
Attempts to modernize Greenwich Village, 1949–1953 ............................................. 140
Plans for postwar Greenwich Village, 1946 ............................................................... 148
Morningside Heights, Inc., 1957 .................................................................................. 154
Downtown Brooklyn: From jungle to civic center ....................................................... 240
The transformation of Lincoln Square ....................................................................... 284
# Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York City Housing Authority members, the La Guardia years, 1934–1942</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City Housing Authority projects, the La Guardia years, 1935–1942</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City Housing Authority members, the Moses years, 1942–1958</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Title I Program, 1949–1957: Projects proposed, realized, and rejected</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job clearance along the East River, 1945–1955</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
New York differs markedly from most other American cities in having a liberal intelligentsia that has periodically aligned itself with popular demands. The city has a strong union tradition, and it has been virtually unique in the extent to which residential renters as an interest group have influenced public policy.

Norman I. Fainstein and Susan S. Fainstein, "The Politics of Urban Development: New York Since 1945"

Urban redevelopment was the most important public policy undertaken by New York after World War II. It transformed the city, physically and morally. With local subsidies, backed by millions in federal funds from Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, the city leveled huge sections of Manhattan and Brooklyn to make room for middle-income housing. By 1959, sixteen Title I projects, built or near completion, had replaced tenements occupied by 100,000 low-income people, nearly 40 percent of them black and Hispanic. Bold towers on broad plazas housed the professionals who worked in the city’s skyscrapers, medical centers, and universities. They were middle-class outposts in the struggle to make districts such as the Upper West Side white and secure. They bore the hopes of a generation of liberals, who believed they could save New York. With Title I, the city that led the nation in racial decency would lead it in the fine art of “Negro removal.”

For years, New Yorkers refused to face the moral paradox of liberal policy that left social wounds. Redevelopment’s supporters claimed that New York’s special problems, its miles of tenement slums and daunting property costs, required ruthless measures and some inconvenience. They said that New York’s liberalism, the tradition of government responsibility for the downtrodden, guaranteed that redevelopment would not work hardship on the poor. When it
became clear that redevelopment proceeded on the backs of the poor and produced a city more divided than before by income and race, the casuistry took more sophisticated turns. Policy experts pinned redevelopment’s adverse effects on forces they said that no one could have foreseen. They blamed Title I’s excesses on Robert Moses, the man who decreed the projects that destroyed neighborhoods. And they blamed Title I’s inequities on structural forces of global magnitude that brought economic change to New York, along with other “world cities.” Those troubled by Negro removal could point to Moses or to modern society.

I have no illusions about Moses’s impact on the city. Growing up in Queens, near empty fields that filled with Moses’s housing projects, parks, and expressways, I saw Moses transform New York long before I read Robert A. Caro’s The Power Broker (1974). According to Caro, Moses was the brilliant public servant appointed by Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia to expedite public works during the depression. By the time La Guardia retired in 1945, Moses controlled enough resources as chief planner, highway builder, and city construction coordinator to dictate the city’s postwar reconstruction. With a loyal claque of construction firms, building tradesmen, and Tammany stalwarts, he wielded incredible power.

When Moses extended his fiat to Title I, the consequences included the wanton destruction of neighborhoods, notably at Manhattantown on the Upper West Side. Title I of the Housing Act of 1949 earmarked federal money for local redevelopment authorities that made public decisions in conformity with established city plans. Congress particularly expected local authorities to condemn blighted districts and relocate tenants before sites were auctioned to private sponsors. But, as Caro revealed, Moses did Title I his way. Behind closed doors, he handed choice locations to redevelopers, allowed them to occupy sites at their leisure, and encouraged them to build luxury high-rises without regard for city plans. At Manhattantown, Moses allowed redevelopers with Tammany ties to squeeze rent from the black occupants of condemned tenements. Manhattantown showed Moses’s consort with the powerful, his contempt for the helpless, and his racism.

Caro accompanied the story of Moses’s tyranny with an account of liberalism’s innocence and redemption. Hearing rumors of tenant despair on the Manhattantown site, liberals investigated the shocking facts and tried to expose them in the newspapers. But editors refused to believe that Moses could do wrong. Manhattantown left liberals wondering how slum clearance had gone awry, and with
a distaste for Title I. Some stuck by redevelopment, found decent Title I projects, and applauded efforts at humane relocation. Most, however, broke from Moses, claiming that he had betrayed their trust. Caro depicted liberals as being ignorant of Moses’s tyranny, yet courageous and dogged once light dawned. Nevertheless, they were anguished bystanders during the most crucial time in the city’s history.

Caro’s account left unanswered questions. How could a consummate villain have had his measures adopted in the first place or tolerated for so long by the city that worshiped Fiorello La Guardia? How could a city celebrated for vibrant neighborhoods allow their ravaging? Where was the powerful left wing? Where were the strong unions? And where was the city’s intelligentsia? The Fainsteins pointed to these liberal elements to explain why the city foreclosed on Moses-style redevelopment in the 1960s. But where were these feisty people in the 1930s or, for that matter, in 1943, when Moses fashioned the prototype for bulldozer redevelopment—middle-income Stuyvesant Town? Supporters of this Metropolitan Life Insurance Company project included corporate interests, real estate boosters, and a good many civic reformers, who welcomed the company’s reconstruction of a tenement district along modern lines. But decisive support also came from the city’s left wing, who chose to ignore the destruction of a blue-collar neighborhood.

The creation of Stuyvesant Town, the first example of Moses-style redevelopment, rested on broad consensus about the lengths the city had to go to rebuild itself. This included agreement on the removal of low-income groups to make room for the valued middle class; acceptance of confidential arrangements for redevelopment sites, whether sponsors were Tammany stalwarts or social reformers; elaborate subsidies for sponsors, including the expectation that they would profit from the rents of condemned tenements; and sponsor responsibility for tenant relocation. The last element linked slum clearance with the projects of the New York City Housing Authority, because municipal officials understood that although private sponsors were responsible for relocation, they could call upon the city’s public housing to absorb the refugees. Redevelopment gave legal authority and large public subsidies to private realtors to uproot low-income people. The policy had profound implications for a city that instinctively sided with the less fortunate. Proponents expected that public agencies would somewhere, somehow, right the inequities. With a faith that decent people would implement decent plans, New York liberals embraced redevelopment. Because Title I drew upon
the full resources of the liberal city, it made sense to call the process that Moses headed the “New York approach.”

This book traces the origins of the New York approach back to the Progressive Era, when municipal reformers first recognized the need for inner-city renewal and the related question of rehousing the poor. That recognition pitted municipal priorities against the residential needs of the working class, a weighing of values that struck a blow against the tenements of the poor. Chapter 1 follows the struggle of reformers, from Jacob Riis to Mary K. Simkhovitch, for low-rent housing that often swept low-income tenants aside in favor of the reliably employed. This flagrant mistargeting soon became calculated policy. It explains why the first attempts at public housing on the Lower East Side in the 1920s resembled middle-income redevelopments and were seized upon by local realtors for that reason. With boosters beating the drums for improvements, it was not difficult for Robert Moses, by the late 1930s, to shape the La Guardia administration’s confidential understandings with private investors in order to clear slums.

On the eve of World War II, urban liberals had put redevelopment high on the municipal agenda, but political opinion, turned rancorous by the left wing, rejected the subsidies that private investors said they needed to make it work. The war made New York the world capital, the cynosure of all that was progressive and cosmopolitan. The city would need an appropriate backdrop for this political role, and Moses stood ready to clear tenements. But the war, which opened vast possibilities for government initiatives in urban redevelopment, entrenched 1930s ideas about government controls, people’s rights, and racial equality. Private investors, led by bankers and insurance executives with impeccable ties to such institutions as the Riverside Church and the Urban League, were unnerved by the grass-roots power. As much as they sought to welcome the United Nations to the sidewalks of New York, they would not risk their money on social ventures. But the war had stiffened the liberal city’s resolve against public subsidy to reconstruction unless projects were “nondiscriminatory.”

The moral dilemma that was peculiarly New York’s forced Moses to search for redevelopment partners of a different sort. He found them not only among Tammany stalwarts, but also among reform Democrats, who upheld the New Deal and still spoke about the homeless “third of a nation.” Staunch support came from the progressive needle unions, whose Jewish socialists yearned to build decent lives for their brethren and to domesticate Communist
troublemakers. Moses found others among university and hospital administrators, who guided institutions of reason and healing, hired people on merit, and pledged to create a city open to all. No one as yet had reason to label their internal barriers institutional racism. But everyone recognized that with this choice of Title I sponsorship, public subsidies meant to enlarge the city’s middle-class housing supply were earmarked for the homes of the well-instituted few.

Moral self-assurance, along with Moses’s hunger for power, molded the quiet deals that completed the New York approach. With the language of modern city planning, sponsors privately arranged the transformation of neighborhoods, calculated what they regarded as acceptable limits on black and working-class removals, and pressed their schemes on Moses. They believed they could bulldoze and rebuild on progressive terms, only to discover that Moses took their proposals as points of departure for grandiose programs. In Greenwich Village, at Manhattan town, and on Morningside Heights, many swallowed their doubts, closed their eyes to mass removals, and stood by what Moses said was the greater good. They came to regard critics as destructive naysayers or, worse, as Communist agitators who sought to exploit the shortcomings of decent urban programs. By the early 1950s, Title I had become a litmus test for the political mainstream, a way for liberals to identify those who cared about saving the inner city.

The moral complacency was sustained by an elaborate system of denials about relocation. These involved two sorts of assumptions: first, that Title I refugees would “self-relocate,” that they would find their own housing; and, second, that many, perhaps a third, perhaps even half, would find their way into Housing Authority projects. Both assumptions rested on New York’s special qualities: its “open” housing market, its commitment to public housing, and its legal and social practice of pursuing interracial harmony. For each Title I project, Moses concocted Rube Goldberg—like explanations of where site tenants would go; such explanations remained convincing as long as the city’s social engineering was convincing. The circle of believers included many of Moses’s liberal critics, who could not deny what Moses promised without denying what New York stood for.

The New York approach also depended on collaboration with planners whose broad views (and personal gains) coincided with Moses’s agenda. Although his intimidation of the City Planning Commission was whispered about in professional circles, the ready compliance of key members, who supported superblocks, bulldozer
clearance, and arterial highways, was often overlooked. As a matter of course, commissioners failed to disqualify themselves from voting on projects in which they were vitally interested. Moreover, they supported the conventional wisdom that the central city no longer was fit for manufacturing, but was congenial to services and the knowledge sector. To make room for hospitals and universities, they shoved aside lofts and warehouses as well as the tenements that housed their workers. Those sickened by Negro removal had in reality sealed the fate of Negroes’ jobs and, all things considered, their future in the city.

This observation throws light on the academically fashionable view that Title I was an instrument of pervasive structural forces and of “capitalist planning” on a global scale. Conservative, free-market students of international finance and Marxist critics of capitalist regimes were nearly unanimous in agreeing that burgeoning world trade, the advent of multinational corporations, and growth in global credit and monetary flows had led to the postwar restructuring of urban life. With case studies that included ritual mention of the Rockefellers and world trade centers, Marxists argued that New York underwent postindustrial transformation when financial leaders conveyed global capitalism’s requirements to their servants in city government. With the economic forces behind the transformation understood, the details of the process became insignificant. It hardly mattered which liberal programs cleared away tenements and factories, whose removal was inevitable in any case; nor was it worth dwelling on the decisions of municipal bureaucrats or even titans such as Moses, who walked through preordained roles.³

This viewpoint may seem plausible, until the search is made for capitalist blueprints and evidence that grand designs were carried out in specifics. The evidence reveals capitalist timidity and disarray, visions of a transformed city based on airy metaphors rather than on calculated projections, and spotty blueprints that proved little more than booster nonsense. Redevelopers sought space for universities and medical centers without the slightest idea of how many graduates or hospital beds the new urban system required. With few estimates of institutional demand, but eager to build neighborhood bastions, planners leaped into the unknown. A generation later, theoreticians would pontificate about postindustrial change.

What follows is less a history of redevelopment than an account of how it was accepted by liberal New York. Although the roots of redevelopment go back to the Progressive Era, I explain how Moses
took control of public housing and redevelopment with the active support, if not the outright collaboration, of New Yorkers who were otherwise considered his most rabid critics. I focus on a relative handful of projects that were mileposts in that achievement: Stuyvesant Town, which set the pattern for Moses's relationship with sponsors; Manhattan Town, Morningside, Corlears Hook, and Washington Square Southeast, which showed the depths of his dependence on liberal communities; and Lincoln Square, which marked the final triumph of the New York approach. I found it necessary to reach beyond oral history to Title I's paper trail, which proved easier to follow than I expected. Moses regularly filed copies of his correspondence in the Central Park Arsenal, the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, and elsewhere. After Moses's death, his legates worked to cleanse the record, and large gaps bear witness to their loyalty. But they were frustrated by multiple copies and, from scattered locations, the documentary record can be reconstituted. With this record, we can penetrate the amnesia about the more ambiguous details of the period before 1953, when liberals still admired many things Moses did. We can recall liberals' evasions and compromises as well as their dreams and gallant stands. We can remind ourselves of the political environment in which redevelopment was born and without which few tenements would have been cleared. The story is not glorious, but it is about New York.

One of the pleasures of finishing a book is the chance to thank many friends who helped along the way. My research and writing was made possible by grants of Released Time awarded by the Committee on Separately Budgeted Research of Montclair State College and a research grant from the Rockefeller Archive Center. I also want to express appreciation to the University Seminars at Columbia University for assistance in the preparation of the manuscript for publication. Material drawn from this work was first presented to the University Seminar on the City.

Colleagues in urban history and planning were patient with my arguments and offered helpful suggestions. They include Eugenie Ladner Birch, Madeline L. Cohen, Deborah S. Gardner, Arnold Hirsch, Peter Marcuse, John T. Metzger, Deborah Dash Moore, Don Parson, Jon A. Peterson, Elliott Sclar, and Marc A. Weiss. Charles W. Bourne gave generous access to the housing files at the Field Foundation. Kenneth Wray, executive director of the United Housing Foundation, and Allen L. Thurgood, executive director of Coordi-
nated Housing Services, opened materials relating to the history of the cooperative movement. Thomas Kessner shared the results of his work on Mayor La Guardia.

I owe a special debt to Commissioner Idelio Gracia-Peña, Kenneth Cobb, and Evelyn Gonzalez of the Municipal Archives and Records Center; to Laura Rosen and Robert Bernstein of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority; and to Richard K. Lieberman, director of the La Guardia and Wagner Archives of La Guardia Community College. I was also aided by the professionalism of the following archivists and librarians: Darwin H. Stapleton, Harold Oakhill, and Thomas E. Rosenbaum of the Rockefeller Archive Center; Janet S. Parks of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University; Judith Johnson of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts; Beverly Robertson of Empire Blue Cross–Blue Shield; Tom Frusciano and Terry Taylor of the New York University Archives; Dorothy Swanson of the Tamiment Collections, New York University; Corinne H. Rieder, Secretary of Columbia University, and Sara Vos of the President’s Office; Barbara Chartin of the Downtown Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University; Elizabeth White of the Brooklyn Public Library; Michael Rissinger and Eric Meyerhoff of the New York University Medical Center; Barbara J. Niss of the Mount Sinai Medical Center; Patricia Proscino Lusk of the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia; Diane Stoker of the Barnard College Library; Monica Blank of the La Guardia and Wagner Archives; David Ment and Bette Weneck of Teachers College Library; Paul A. Byrnes of the Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary; Marek Web of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; Robert B. Colasacco of the Ford Foundation; Peter L. Steere of the University of Arizona; and Kevin Prendergast of Montclair State College. I remain responsible for any errors of fact and interpretation.

I want to take the opportunity to thank old friends from the University of Chicago: John E. Hopper and Thomas L. Philpott, who aided my progress as a graduate student; Kenneth T. Jackson, who made the Columbia University Seminar on the City a second intellectual home; and Richard C. Wade, who introduced the excitement of urban history in a seminar many summers ago.

Susan C. Goscinski provided indispensable help at Montclair State College.

Cartographer Thomas Nast produced a splendid series of maps. Alex Holzman and Lynne M. Bonenberger of the Ohio State University Press were encouraging and patient at every turn. William
Issel gave the manuscript helpful criticism that reflected his comparable work on San Francisco. Anita Samen watched my syntax and untangled my sentences, while preserving my voice. This book would never have materialized, however, had Zane L. Miller and his colleague, Henry D. Shapiro, not taken a chance on an idea and given it every possible support. I know that Zane Miller has not agreed with all of my arguments—far from it; but he has used his editorial gifts to provide them a decent hearing. For that I am deeply grateful.

I owe my greatest debt to my family. My daughter, Marjorie, and my son, David, have lived with redevelopment and nodded at my impromptu lectures about “projects” during our trips around Manhattan. Bonnie Fox Schwartz was patient with all this and more; she is my chief editor and remains my wife.