THE POWER BROKER AND HIS CLIENTS

New York . . . has the least citizen participation, the least effective local democracy, and the individual has the least degree of individual self-determination that is to be found in any major city in the United States.

Saul D. Alinsky

Title I reached full stride in New York at the time that urban analysts developed powerful explanations for the remarkable changes occurring in the postwar metropolis. The redevelopment of hundreds of acres of central-city property coincided with recognition by urban analysts of the population flows and international economic trends sweeping across American cities. Harvard economist Raymond Vernon once remarked that during his New York Metropolitan Region research he rode in helicopters to get a lofty perspective and could not discern Title I projects in the blur of buildings. Vernon's failure confirmed his suspicion that for all the controversy about Title I projects, their impact on New York was negligible. From far enough away, the features of the metropolis could disappear, as could the great men who shaped it.

The detachment of modern social science notwithstanding, Title I's impact proved enormous. Projects removed 100,000 people from Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn, and, with their accompanying public housing, generated a diaspora of at least twice that number. Site clearance forced out at least 5,000 businesses of all sizes, and public housing forced out thousands more. Municipal experts declared that these losses, mostly of mom-and-pop stores, were
negligible. But in Central and East Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and other minority ghettos, these enterprises nurtured a sizable portion of the black and Hispanic middle class. In other neighborhoods, redevelopments wiped out larger businesses or forced their ruinous shift to other quarters. Job loss as a direct result of redevelopment was between 30,000 and 60,000 in the postwar period. By the late 1950s, the number had risen to several hundred thousand.

Title I projects accomplished what their proponents had planned but could never publicly admit. They redefined entire neighborhoods, providing visible redoubts and unmistakable boundaries, enclosing interior villages, and raising blank exterior walls. They uprooted undesirables and held on to the valued middle class. They created anchorages, such as Park West Village (Manhattantown) and Morningside Gardens, that saved the Upper West Side. On the Lower East Side, they earmarked Cooperative Village as a Jewish enclave. Greenwich Village civic leaders used Title I to fulfill long-held ambitions to modernize Washington Square South. Moses may have been disingenuous to claim that industry threatened Stuyvesant Town, but the long-range trend proved just the opposite, that residential redevelopment could drive out industry. With enough agreement among sponsors and municipal officials, redevelopments created a domino effect that transformed the city. Long before New York became postindustrial, the projects created the preconditions for the change. As at Lincoln Square, they turned New York around.

The Title I program was a watershed in the history of New York in the twentieth century. One might say it was the watershed. It reflected all the promises and shortcomings of the liberal era, all the confidence in municipal engineering and the disastrous consequences for those groups who got lost in the relocation shuffle. In channeling the shift of racial and economic groups, in stabilizing the placement of favored elements and scattering others, and in giving moral sanction to these inequitable priorities, the program brought the contours of postwar New York down to our own times. It was the mechanism that connected the policies of La Guardia in the late 1930s to the street protests of the mid-1960s. It tied together grief for lost homes at Corleons Hook with the people’s defiance against civic improvements in Jesse Gray’s Harlem.

The promise and turmoil of Title I had to have been the work of a power broker. Contemporaries knew that Moses was the indispensable man behind the transformation of New York. William Zeckendorf, the flamboyant deal maker who was a major sponsor of Title I projects, was convinced that Moses was the singular reason
for the success of the New York program, and Zeckendorf sported
the bruises to prove it. From bitter experience, housing reformer
Charles Abrams concluded that Moses realized virtually any project
he wanted, and those he disliked never had a chance.2

But the emphasis on the Great Man's willfulness overlooked the
numerous instances where Moses operated within the grooves of
municipal policy. Much of what Moses accomplished rested on forty
years of agreement about the future of the city. Progressive Era
planning set down the notion of the City Efficient that had to be
physically renewed from the inside out with government subsidy.
Among reformers it also was axiomatic that the toiling classes had
no special claim to the inner city, but belonged somewhere else and
would self-relocate along new subway routes. Settlement leaders and
housing proponents continually campaigned for local improvements
that had a stubborn tendency to reach fruition as middle-class apart-
ments on broad boulevards. Pre-World War I hopes to gentrify the
Lower East Side were the basis for the more scientific blueprints of
the Regional Plan of New York to remove the working class for more
desired residents.

By and large, Moses was the loyal instrument of this legacy.
The arterial network Moses helped fashion in the 1930s and 1940s
closely coincided with the radiating and circumferential routes en-
visioned by the Regional Plan of New York a generation before.
Inner-city business interests, including East Side boosters, pushed
for the highways that girdled Lower Manhattan along the East and
Hudson rivers and proposed city-busting routes through the ten-
ements. Although there is a great deal of controversy about the ori-
gins of the six-lane monstrosities that tore the fabric of urban life—
and inclination to blame them on Moses and his protégés in federal
highway agencies—there was no shortage of earlier and equally dis-
ruptive schemes by New Yorkers who professed loyalty to the Lower
East Side. Moses, moreover, based his redevelopment stratagems
on assumptions, going back to the Progressive Era, about realizing
highest and best use of the inner city's expensive square footage.
Slumlords absorbed $10 land by cramming 500 people to the acre
at $4 per room. Progressive planners, pursuing more functional and
humane goals, would pile 400 in high-rises around well-designed
interior spaces and charge them $12 to $20 per room. During the
1920s and the early years of the depression, East Side reformers and
businessmen alike favored this pathway to social progress.

Moses went along, too, until he realized that private-sector inves-
tors would not risk their money on their conceptions. He relentlessly
strove to plant middle-income redevelopments along the East River Drive, to give the outmoded gridiron a machine age functional- ism. Stuyvesant Town commemorates his perseverance. Yet Moses broke with the regional planners on placement of public housing, a demarche that piled irony on irony. That great proponent of public responsibility to the housing movement, Governor Alfred E. Smith, exhorted Moses to clinch the deal with New York Life Insurance that would have made it (not Metropolitan Life) the pioneer in renewal on the Lower East Side. Moses and Smith warmly agreed that their legacy should be an upper-middle-class community, not another refuge for the working poor. Only when New York Life withdrew did Moses, enraged by corporate shortsightedness, proceed with the low-rent projects that honored Lillian Wald and Governor Smith. In the process, Moses bucked the wisdom about highest and best use. Determined to nail down a public works agenda in 1943, Moses would clear and reclaim the Lower East Side whether or not the private sector would go along. The end result—the row of low-rent projects between the Brooklyn Bridge and 14th Street—remains as much his legacy as that of any of the housers whose names are chiseled into the cornerstones.

Urban experts have understandably paused over Moses's achievement in public housing. Policy critic Peter Marcuse has called attention to the extraordinary success of the New York City Housing Authority when it was under Moses's influence. Between 1947 and 1957, the authority built units at an annual rate that was four times that of the years immediately before or after. No housing liberal could take more credit for this vast increase in the system. Yet Moses barely hid his contempt for public housing and regarded the projects as welfare units filled with society's rejects. This paradox is explained by the casual distinction Moses made between clearance and reconstruction. Indifferent to the projects, he had a Victorian obsession with clearing the slums he reviled as scabby sores. Public housing was the most expedient way to "clean up" the remnant, but he would just as soon accept a mixed assemblage, a plaza or park or highway, anything that, like spreading inkblots, would cover the ground. Moses's public housing achievement has also figured in critics' appreciation that he overrode private interests to enlarge the scope of public action. Roger Starr expressed grudging respect for Moses the public doer, who kept an "unwavering commitment to the idea of the public realm." Although Starr had no illusions about Moses's willingness or ability to distinguish between his and the city's dominion, he admired Moses's readiness to promote municipal business
and realize the extraordinary expansion of public space regardless of the interest groups that got in his way. Under Robert Moses’s direction, the city had the will to do great things.4 Moses’s utter confidence rested on several factors, including the capital budgets of a city with an enormous manufacturing and mercantile base, the political demands for unemployment relief during the depression, and the people’s faith in public works, which was largely shaped by Moses’s efficiency as park commissioner and highway builder. But the investment in public housing also depended on popular approval of the state’s ultimate intrusion on private property. Article XVIII of the New York State Constitution opened the floodgates of public action and, more specifically, authorized local bodies such as the Board of Estimate and Rexford Tugwell’s City Planning Commission to indicate wide areas for slum clearance, replanning, and low-rent housing. Article XVIII was the high tide of the 1930s’ attack on property. Not surprisingly, Moses vied with liberal Democratic and American Labor party delegates at the 1938 constitutional convention to write a succinct, sweeping grant of power. In the city, however, Moses rarely wielded that power. Instead he kept to his old habit of sidling up to real estate interests, picking out odd lots, and using Park Department holdings to leverage large projects. Property interests regarded Tugwell as a menace and sighed in relief when men such as Moses pulled back on the City Planning Commission’s collectivist assault. Thanks to Moses, Tugwell’s master plans were dead, and the last great lunge at public controls on property receded into memory. More than anyone realized at the time, the planning initiative passed to private groups and to Moses, their chief patron.

With Tugwell replaced by Moses and the amenable Edwin Salmon, the City Planning Commission became a spiritless hulk that provided a parody of the public weal. Giving lip service to centralized, citywide goals, the members indulged private efforts or pursued private redevelopments all their own. Moses loyalists and liberal dissidents alike gave the commission’s stamp of approval to redevelopments of dubious merit. All the process required was the right language—seemingly any language—that mentioned urban blight and world capital. Although devoid of serious meaning, comprehensive planning remained alive among those groups that wielded public authorization for private interests.

The litmus test of Moses’s concern for public authority was not the triumph of public housing in neighborhoods that had been written off by private owners, but redevelopment where property interests had a visceral concern for what the public would subsidize.
Redevelopment revealed the degree of Moses's accommodation to private power, which was very different from what Roger Starr said was the man's "unwavering commitment to . . . the public realm." What Moses accomplished with Title I came from the unique partnership of public and private efforts, beginning with the prototype, Stuyvesant Town. Desperate to engage private investors in inner-city renewal, Moses offered them virtually every public subsidy that his legal draftsmen could lay their hands on. Forty years of political struggle to justify the state's right to intervene against private property were thrown at Metropolitan Life. Mayor La Guardia added the final suggestion to Frederick Ecker that his company could maintain cash flow from condemned slums until it was convenient to rebuild. Responsibility for relocation was saddled on Metropolitan Life, although its rehousing experience equaled that of any city agency and, in any case, James Felt's Tenant Relocation Bureau could finesse the task. Nevertheless, East 14th Street clearance could not have been accomplished without the illusion of relocation units offered by the Housing Authority. Again, public authority provided a crucial rescue of the private process. From the start, redevelopment meant public boons thrown at private interests by a public czar who tolerated private advantages wheeled from public agencies.

The melding of public spirit and private gain resembled traditional urban boosterism, except that never before did boosters find so much public domain up for grabs or, thanks to postwar politics and social science, so many rationales for their operations. Marxists looking for evidence of capitalist planning or even half-coherent blueprints by a corporate elite would only find vague pronouncements about the city's postwar needs. Investors may have insisted on solid projections for business, but when it came to the city's business they acted on dreamy metaphors and self-fulfilling prophecies. One looks in vain among the redevelopment schemes for estimates of business needs, floor-space requirements, labor-force size and composition. Instead planners conjured visions of medical centers, entertainment complexes, and the city of tomorrow. Moses was much to blame for this, for he hounded Tugwell's commission into becoming a routinized agency busy with zoning variances; the commission never reclaimed the high ground of master plans. But even in Tugwell's heyday there was a weakness for cavalier gestures: 1940 master planning, which was little more than an imperious wave of the hand.

Moses's penchant for shopping around for public housing sites evolved with new carelessness in the redevelopment program. Moses
actually had in mind purposeful realctions for mixed uses, but under the studied indifference of investors adopted the opportunist approach. The resulting Title I's had no central purpose other than to improve isolated areas, fill the city's write-down quotas, and preserve the prerogatives of the construction coordinator. The Committee on Slum Clearance met regularly to jog along the list of individual projects. The sprawling ones, such as the vast Brooklyn Civic Center, were given special attention to keep their disparate components together. But there was no interrelationship among Title I projects, except with the horse trading on the Board of Estimate. Even the Rockefellers pursued fragmented goals. David's pet project was Morningside, although he could join with Laurence on Rockefeller Institute housing on York Avenue. Winthrop gave his attention to NYU-Bellevue. John's objective was high culture at Lincoln Center. Whatever coordination existed among them never showed on the record. The task fell to hired professionals, such as family architect Wallace Harrison, the lawyers at Debevoise & Plimpton and Milbank Tweed, and public relations assistants at 30 Rockefeller Plaza. The assistants were put on the job because they were handy and could exchange tips about what relocation devices worked here or who obstructed progress there. But they never perceived the big picture, much less determined it.

Sponsors shaped Title I with an indifference to large urban responsibilities. The Committee on Slum Clearance looked for a boundary street to make the social cordon, along with a large enough range of tenements to clear with a public purpose. Moses preferred blocks of Old Law tenements, but stands of New Laws might do if they were blighted, overcrowded, below modern standards, threatened the neighborhood with deterioration, or some such formulation. The sponsors' focus, of course, remained upper-middle-income redevelopment until political pressures, mixed with twinges of conscience, forced them to seek community balance and an acceptable number of relocation units. Tactical requirements for Title I approval by the Board of Estimate drove a good portion of the public housing system. Nearly all of the Title I's necessitated tenant displacement, some to an unconscionable degree. Yet the program's logic, the primacy given to subsidizing apartments of New Yorkers who could pay $25 (and upward) per room in rent, made neighborhood sponsors full partners in the social upheavals that followed.

The opportunism of redevelopment, the lack of planning vision despite Committee on Slum Clearance brochures that stated otherwise, explains the surprising number of projects that Moses never
got off the drawing boards. They included, among others, vital links of his arterial highway system, the Houston Street and 30th Street crosstown expressways. Half of the initial projects recommended by the CSC in 1949 never reached fruition. Only the Harlem projects, driven by Urban League benevolence, went through with little trouble. Washington Square South, South Village, and Delancey Street were dead on arrival, while the others dragged out in controversy for three or four years. Their success required all the brokerage skills Moses could command and all the self-serving vocabulary his neighborhood allies could muster. Even with all this, he had to call on the Housing Authority for pledges of relocation aid. He could not deliver public help to the Rockefeller Institute housing project in 1956, nor could he apply Title I write-downs to the second Bellevue housing project. He could not avoid revisions at Lincoln Square that were made to placate Borough President Hulan Jack.

Local enthusiasm explains another aspect of Moses’s unique role in redevelopment. Moses the power broker was also the brakeman, who had to pull back on improbable, extravagant schemes, the only man who knew the limits of federal largesse. How much the caustic lectures to sponsors reflected Moses’s ego or his obsessive need to control redevelopment remains uncertain. But only Moses could have ridiculed the Morningside sponsors for thinking of sprawling Chicago-style clearance. Only Moses could say no, to the claims of Winthrop Rockefeller and Edwin Salmon over the entire Bellevue district. Consistently favoring discrete, step-by-step development, Moses demanded limited, carefully planned projects with regard to location and financing. He was indifferent to the havoc of demolitions, except where they affected the political climate. But Moses was no more callous about the clearance of minorities than any of his clients in the liberal camp. The first-round projects, Concourse, Manhattan town, and Morningside, featured large-scale removal of blacks and Puerto Ricans and their replacement by small numbers of middle-class minorities. The justification depended on claims of self-relocation and projected acceptance into public housing. The promises were as dreary as the public housing projects that liberals attacked in a far different context. No more cold-blooded calculation of removals by Robert Moses was exhibited by the sponsors of South Village, who could clear out 1,700 low-income families to implant 60 or 70 families of color.

Moses’s brokerage was made possible by the political and social reality of the La Guardia years, for urban redevelopment was unimaginable outside the context of total war and postwar anxieties.
National defense priorities have been cited by historians as throttling urban initiatives, but total war also provided the force that sustained public housing and urban redevelopment. The depression, of course, was the major catalyst for urban programs, which were proposed as points of social justice but were, in fact, bulwarks of commercial real estate. By the late 1930s, however, even these initiatives showed signs of exhaustion with the exhaustion of the New Deal. World War II revived federal concerns for the city, and the urban dimension of national security sustained urban programs over the next twenty years. The war cast a global perspective on cities that proved impossible to ignore. None of the cities that harbored ambitions to be world capitals—Washington, New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco—could accept the dingy ambience and embarrassing race relations that passed for urbanism-as-usual. The metropolitan environment demanded modernization. World cities in a global economy needed sleek corporate headquarters, first-class universities and hospitals, modern arterial highways, and convenient, downtown housing. Organized labor, business groups, the medical establishment, and city planners agreed.

In New York this upper-middle-class, professional agenda could not have been realized without a prior shift in political forces. The collapse of Tammany and the fratricidal war on the left wing opened large areas to be claimed by any group who could mount the civic rostrum. How else can one evaluate the rationale expressed by the director of the Citizens Watchdog Committee, which presided over the removal of some 5,100 families from Lincoln Square and justified an even larger dispersal of 6,391 families for the West Side Urban Renewal Project in 1962. “I can tell you flatly and without reservation,” he said, “that this active participation of a volunteer citizens group working with the sponsors and city agencies involved can guarantee humane and equitable treatment for relocates.”

Post–World War II politics sustained redevelopment and silenced groups that were no longer on the liberal bandwagon. The left wing that gave Democrats a free hand with urban redevelopment during the war turned against the program and contested specific projects such as Manhattan town and Morningside. For many dissident Marxists, rallies against redevelopment sites enabled them to attack the whole Truman administration agenda for the cold war. For every dissident group, Moses could find a powerful countervailing ally among liberals and reformers. Because of threats made by these veto groups, allies sought out Moses’s support. On Morningside Heights, at Corlears Hook and Manhattan town, and later at Lincoln Square,
civic groups embraced Title I projects as the way to define their neighborhoods as forward looking and to isolate their opponents as destructive nihilists. Gleaming high-rises symbolized all that was modern and cosmopolitan in the postwar metropolis. No one could denounce the rebuilding unless they had sinister purposes.

The ultimate casualty of the Title I program was the integrity of New York political life. Certainly many thoughtful observers wondered how the city's polity could survive the éminence grise on Randall's Island. Yet Title I required a short-circuiting of the political process expected by ward heelers and reformers alike. Its provenance went back two generations to the Progressive Era's faith in university-trained experts in municipal affairs, which assumed that civic leaders could provide "virtual representation" of lower-class neighborhoods. This phase of reform delegitimized mere politicians in the same way that city planning delegitimized mere manufacturing. By the La Guardia years, the fate of many lower-class neighborhoods fell into the hands of mayoral agencies that were more responsive to debates at the Aldine Club or Columbia University's Fayerweather Hall than to the political associations on East 116th Street or Second Avenue. Detached from local realities, municipal experts could imagine a city unbounded, open to breathtaking shifts of function. From the broad perspective of the urban sciences, relocations of the masses was a minor consideration. This flirtation with New York in the abstract was second nature to Moses and his critics.

Within the general consensus that New York needed remaking by experts, quiet agreements replaced political accommodations, which La Guardia liberalism, neighborhood participation, and federal Title I guidelines demanded. Private interests frequently stepped in to overcome political hurdles, which were regarded as stumbling blocks to progress. When doubt arose that the Board of Estimate would approve advanced-planning funds for NYU-Bellevue, Winthrop Rockefeller and Wallace Harrison came to the rescue. Public monies were unavailable for the neighborhood survey of Morningside Heights, but David Rockefeller told City Planning Commissioner Lawrence Orton to approach the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. When Lincoln Center faced difficult relocations, James Felt offered the services of his former firm at cost. The privatization of public decisions remained casual and pervasive throughout the Title I experience. Jerry Finkelstein might complain of planning decisions handed over to Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, but the practice was habitual on the City Planning Commission, which never resolved the conflicts between aloof decision-making and blatant private ad-
vocacy. High-minded reformers never hesitated to cut private deals with Moses and the City Planning Commission when their projects hung in the balance.

The New York approach depended not only on Moses and his men on the Committee on Slum Clearance, but also on his allies in the liberal city. He could not have succeeded without them and the era of active, interventionist government that they shaped. The Title I program, the product of postwar liberalism, could not have been engineered by the AFL building trades alone or by Tammany, which was battered and in eclipse. It also depended on the ambitions of liberal New Yorkers. Moses could count on a realtor such as William Zeckendorf, a Brooklyn banker such as Thomas Shanahan, and a political fixer such as John McGrath. But redevelopment also needed stalwart liberals such as Samuel Rosenman and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., union housing visionaries such as Abraham Kazan and Maxwell Tretter, ethical realtors such as James Felt and Milton Saslow, inspired capitalists such as David Rockefeller, and inspired planners such as Lawrence Orton. Some were Randalls Island cronies. Others were only limited partners in particular projects. Still others managed to convince themselves that their own decent pursuits were detached from Moses's ruthless deals. But they were all participants in the redevelopment of New York.