

the informative introduction and detailed bibliography accompanying *Seventeen Syllables*, Hisaye Yamamoto has a considerable body of work awaiting publication in book form. Perhaps we can look forward to a second collection from her too.

In recent years Asian-American women's lives have grown more visible through fiction by Willyce Kim, Maxine Hong Kingston, Roxanne Lum McCunn, Yoshiko Uchida and others. This year Calyx Books in Corvallis, Oregon, has published a remarkable Asian-American women's anthology, *The Forbidden Stitch*, edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Mayumi Tsutakawa, which celebrates the rich variety of emerging work. As Lim observes, "If we form a thread, the thread is a multi-colored, many-layered, complexly knotted stitch." □

## ARCHITECTURE.

JANE HOLTZ KAY

### Robert Moses: The Master Builder

Whatever else you may say about New York's master builder—the man who commandeered the bridges and tunnels, the roads, housing, parks and public structures of the four middle decades of the twentieth-century city—the Power Broker who left a legacy of fifteen bridges and a half-dozen beaches (among them Jones Beach), not to mention Lincoln Center, the United Nations and two World's Fairs; the planter of more than two million trees and the displacer of more than 500,000 tenants—one fact remains: Neither the good nor the evil that Robert Moses did has been interred with his bones.

In the past few months of celebrating—observing would be a more neutral word—the centennial of the birth of the man who made the major mark on New York's landscape, it has been clear from the way architects and planners discuss him that the titan is still embattled, not to say alive. At a two-day conference on "Robert Moses' New York" at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation in February, several hundred neighborhood advocates, bureaucrats and scholars talked with passion about "Bob," "R.M." and "Mr. Moses."

Small wonder. "You can draw any kind of picture you like on a clean slate

and indulge your every whim in the wilderness in laying out a New Delhi, Canberra or Brasilia," Moses once said, "but when you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax." Meat ax. The words alone are enough to elicit outrage.

But given the current power of community advocacy, the neglected state of the civic realm and the failure to erect or maintain public works from affordable housing to battered bridges, outrage was not the only emotion expressed by his heirs. At the least, some of the officials at the conference looked back in envy. "I sorely miss that boldness," said planning professor Elliott Sclar. A foursome of New York City officials—Sylvia Deutsch, chair of the City Planning Commission; Thomas Downs, president of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority; Ross Sandler, Transportation Commissioner; and Henry Stern, Parks Commissioner—was loath to condemn the evil outright. They pined for "the ability to get things done" and admired Moses' "governmental genius," in Sandler's words. "Broken waterlines; broken sewers, falling-down bridges, falling-down schools, taking care of an environment that is beyond any one man to control," Downs said ruefully.

"Do we wish Robert Moses had never happened to New York?" architect Hugh Hardy asked in the catalogue to an anniversary exhibition titled "Master Builder or Macho Bully" held at the Municipal Art Society in December. "It's hard to say, when what New York City really needs today is not a master builder but a czar of maintenance powerful enough to rescue its crumbling infrastructure," he wrote.

Some other architectural scorekeepers at the conference tallied the achievement of a "public landscape of enduring utility and visual appeal," in the words of architect Robert A.M. Stern—bathhouses, water towers, bridges. Stern excused Moses' slab-style public housing ("this was not Moses' idea") and indeed the architect's slides showed the quality of the early designs. "He may not quite have been God," Stern went on, "but he was seen everywhere in the details." Nautical wastebaskets, rolling parkways, elegant bridges dominated the slides. The comparisons of Moses' public works with the monuments of English architect Sir Edwin Lutyens and the descriptions of his flair for swimming pools made one long for the second Moses, the Good Moses.

Alas, Moses the Bad, the arrogant, the ruthless, went with the package and, in the two days of panels and audience re-

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sponse, he was most often present. Taped interviews with Moses—a 1975 “CBS Reports” shown at the conference and a fall episode of PBS’s *The American Experience*—refreshed memories of the petulant and brutal autocrat.

Overall, the Power Broker who built New York sometimes seemed as much metaphor as public entrepreneur in these sessions. “I never saw Moses able to hold a grudge for more than five minutes,” transportation expert Arnold Vollmer said reverentially of his erstwhile colleague. Sure, a half-million tenants were displaced by the master builder, but 800,000 were relocated, Vollmer insisted in a testy speech on “Robert Moses: Working for Democracy.” This title sounded like a March of Time makeover, and had its polemical opposite in architecture critic Kenneth Frampton’s lofty, Oxonian-accented speech linking Moses to

fascism. (“Bob would roll over in his grave,” Moses’ cousin stage-whispered at this point, in tones loud enough to reach not only the audience but the indefatigable archangel at his new post dismantling the pearly gates.)

“What he did,” argued Marshall Berman, professor of political science at the City University of New York, “was to change long-range entropy into immediate catastrophe.” Parks Commissioner Henry Stern took Moses’ neighborhood destruction in the Bronx as testimony to his anti-Semitism, his “endless virulent scorn for Jews.” On the other hand, a Parsons School of Design student rose to endorse progress, early-century style. “I don’t want to be here in New York because it’s cute and charming,” he observed. “I want to be here because it’s the center of the world.” Moses indeed lives.

The intensity of feelings evoked by Robert Moses was first codified fourteen years ago in Robert Caro’s *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. Moses the road builder met his literary match in Caro the demolition expert, and his book was the bible that more than half the conference speakers cited, though sometimes with reservations. Caro had been scheduled to give the keynote speech, but he was detained by an accident in Washington, D.C., according to the conference organizers. His absence was not necessarily bad. Caro might have fueled the debate, but he would also certainly have added to the parochial and bookish quality of the conference’s evaluation. For while the polemical fervor of the Moses era was present, distance and perspective were not, and Manhattan, the tight little island, dominated the discourse.

This parochialism often undermined the search for the meaning of Robert Moses and his times. For all his megalomania and the scale of his deeds, Moses and New York were not singular. Other, lesser czars of the auto age also ruled America—Edmund Logue in New Haven, William Callahan in Boston. So did the unremembered czars responsible for the interstate highway system. The bulldozer that swept aside America’s urban environments was, as the well-known label puts it, “the Federal bulldozer.” Even in terms of pure politics, Moses is only one example of the semiprivate, semipublic authority figure, as Eugene Lewis describes him in *Public Entrepreneurship*, a study of Moses along with J. Edgar Hoover and Admiral Hyman Rickover.

If understanding Moses is essential to

examining the way we build, understanding more than Moses is even more essential if we are to learn a more democratic way of doing the job he did so ruthlessly. Blame Moses for the ravishment of the South Bronx and for the highways that blitzed New York City, but also look across the country and ask why New York remains our most urban, most pedestrian-oriented place. (One-third of the nation’s public transit riders are New Yorkers.) Blame Moses for building the cookie-cutter public housing slab, but not for Le Corbusier’s original model. Finally, blame Moses for accepting the suburban ideal and the notion that the highway is an end in itself, but also blame the rest of us for accepting it then—and accepting it now. Moses was “the great expediter,” but he expedited our cravings—for cars, for escaping urban neighborhoods and the urban poor. Long after the true golden age of highway building in the 1930s, we predicate our plans on the automobile and let its growth surpass that of the population in some places. Why?

“As I saw one of the loveliest of these buildings being wrecked for the road, I felt a grief that, I can see now, is endemic to modern life,” Marshall Berman recalls in *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, setting the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway during his childhood into a larger context. “So often the price of ongoing and expanding modernity is the destruction not merely of ‘traditional’ and ‘pre-modern’ institutions and environments but—and here is the real tragedy—of everything most vital and beautiful in the modern world itself. Here in the Bronx, thanks to Robert Moses, the modernity of the urban boulevard was being condemned as obsolete, and blown to pieces, by the modernity of the interstate highways. *Sic transit!* To be modern turned out to be far more problematical, and more perilous, than I had been taught.”

To absolve Moses of the charge that his work is satanic is not to pardon the excesses or the man. (In fact, the tendency to praise Moses’ lack of personal profit is appalling evidence of the acceptance of the norm of greed in this Age of Trump.) Rather, the centennial reappraisers need to explore the parallels to Moses’ projects and the persistence of his vision to this day. The question is: Can the good that was Moses fit into a participatory process? Can we retool Moses’ building capacity to do the work

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of the next quarter-century? "Robert Moses did not know when to stop," the PBS documentary concluded. The real issue for this centennial is whether we can empower his remarkable if demonic engine of enterprise to serve a more humane, more intelligent treatment of the landscape. □

## MUSIC.

### GENE SANTORO

**The Bobs**  
**The Neville Brothers**

**P**olitics has been making a comeback in music. Nominating Tracy Chapman for the number of Grammys she was up for may be seen as a largely symbolic gesture (she was nominated for six, won three), but it also means she's sold too many albums to be ignored. As the record industry's ongoing attempt to co-opt the street-wise rage that fueled early rap music shows, it knows which side its vinyl is buttered on. This may yet mean that the Bush years, lacking Reagan's unifying presence, will be a time when things around Culture Alley can crack wide open again.

With credits that include a 1985 Grammy nomination of their own and commissioned work for National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* news show, the Bobs may be swinging nine-pound hammers. Based appropriately enough in Berkeley, California, the Bobs—Gunnar Bob Madsen, Matthew Bob Stull, Richard Bob Greene and Janie Bob Scott—are an a cappella quartet whose third album, *Songs for Tomorrow Morning* (Great American Music Hall), runs the musical gamut from gospel and doo-wop to Lambert, Hendricks & Ross vocalese to the Beatles and reggae.

As rock and roll vaudevillians, the Bobs deploy all the weapons of satire—parody, irony, sarcasm, humor and a willingness to fall flat on your face. Best of all, they're good at it, which means that when they're on—which is most of the time on *Songs*—they're scathingly funny rather than sanctimoniously correct.

They touch a lot of social bases. There's a straightforward parody of Tin Pan Alley's Moon-June legacy called "Boy Around the Corner" ("better than the boy next door," explains the lyric). There are sly subversions of yuppie life, like "(First I Was a Hippie, Then I Was a Stockbroker

Now I Am a Hippie Again." "Corn Dogs" laments in nostalgic 3/4 time the glory days before the fitness craze, when "we once ate ice cream and french fries/Now you say that every bit of fat goes straight to your thighs/If you would just enjoy food I'd love you at any size."

There's "Food to Rent," which proposes a novel approach to the worsening problem of hunger: "Even though I may look poor/I rent my food/I'm not a common thief/Oh no/The roast I got is A.O.K./Its former owner had no teeth." There's "Killer Bees": "Insects need no green cards/They fly too low to be picked up on radar/How can you just say 'no' to bugs?/And as they spread their Marxist pollen from flower to flower/They corrupt our pure, All-American bees." There's "Plastic or Paper," about bags and ecology, and "Golly, Ollie!" about a family brought together by North's Congressional hearings: "A brand new form of democracy. . . at least the kids are asking good questions/Like 'What's the dif between right and wrong?'/I tell them that I still don't know/But isn't it great that we are getting along?"

Clever as they are, the Bobs can sometimes be *too* clever—there's a fine thread of cuteness and apparently unconscious racism that runs through their otherwise winning "The Laundry Cycle," for instance. But with their stunning voices, thoughtful and intricate arrangements and topical sensitivity, the Bobs are the perfect antidote to their fellow a cappella artist and fan Bobby McFerrin's inadvertent anthem for Young Republicans, "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

The Neville Brothers have been sharpening the political and social edges on their party-down funk for years. *Yellow Moon* demonstrates for the umpteenth time that they can take any emotion from happiness to heartbreak to rage and transform it into sounds that force your feet to move. In fact, the album's first single, "Sister Rosa," combines rap and its cousin, Jamaican toasting, with the underlying New Orleans rhythms that have made the Nevilles famous, in order to tell how Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat for Jim Crow became a milestone in the civil rights movement in this country.

Longtime heroes in their native Big Easy, the Nevilles illustrate both the rich confluence of sounds in the United States' only truly Caribbean city and the isolation of their town and its music—partly because of racism that has mas-

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