

New York: How the Proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway Aroused the Public Voice, 1938-1969.

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ABSTRACT

Manhattan Island's insular position prevented unrestricted growth of the city. The economic crisis of the 1930's put an end to the free rein given to developers and entrepreneurs in the absence of a defined system of US-American urban development. During the periode spanning the Great Depression and the end of World War II various institutions changed the direction of US history of architecture and promoted the leitmotivs of modern architecture and city planning. They created a new awareness in architecture and urban values, e.g. parks, recreational facilities and fluent traffic. In the 1950's civic movement against government and business decisions regarding the changing face of cities and towns is rooted in the unmindful demolition of historical structures and neighborhoods across the country. People would no longer remain indifferent to the architectural changes of their city. The citizen's right to architecture rallies in the early 1960's was refected in fierce public debates in town halls and daily papers, and demonstrations.

Introduction

On August 2, 1962, more than 150 architects and critics demonstrated in front of Pennsylvania Station in an attempt to save the Beaux-Art masterpiece from the wrecking ball. The local newspapers called it "the best-dressed picket line in New York history," but the action was in to be vain - unlike the march right on the night of August 9, 1962 to

stop the proposed construction of the Lower Manhattan Expressway. A group of nearly 100 demonstrators, among who were politicians, urban critics and residents, started the march on Sullivan Street in Greenwich Village at 7:30 and wound their way down to Broome Street. In contrast to the self-defeatist argument that "you can't fight Big Money," which doomed the Penn Station action, this group hand-delivered a letter to Mayor Robert Wagner at Gracie Mansion with hope: hope that the building of the expressway would be canceled and hope that the neighborhoods and architecture of downtown Manhattan would be preserved.

Advance of Urbanism

Until the 19th century the district called SoHo today was pastoral fields and meadows dotted with the occasional farmhouse. By the middle of the 19th century the wooden structures had been torn down to make way for multistoried stone and cast-iron buildings. Private residences gave way to shops, minstrel halls and theaters. Between 1840s and the 1860s the area became Manhattan's pulsing center of commercial life. The city's most luxurious hotel, the St. Nicholas (1853), opened its doors at Broadway and Spring Street; the first passenger safety elevator created by Elisha Graves Otis was installed in the Haughwout Building (1857); and cast-iron buildings, after which the district would later be named, proliferated. The city's commercial center eventually migrated uptown leaving SoHo to slide into obscurity. Toward the end of the 19th century the city authorities were worried about two urban trends: the so-called "Black-and-Tan dives" where white women (mainly prostitutes) drank and danced with black men, and the horrendous working conditions in the fire prone cast-iron buildings, as documented in photographs by Lewis W. Hine and Jacob Riis. They showed factory floors crammed with hundreds of women and young children toiling away at sewing machines. The district was the heart of the printer and textile industries at the beginning of the 20th century. It provided jobs to thousands of low-skilled laborers; until the Great Depression light industry represented 28% of the labour market in the city. After World War II the industry declined from an all-time high of 324,753 workers to 177,198 in 1970.

Highway Obsessed

Manhattan's urban growth was restricted by the street grid plan laid down in 1807 and zoning regulations (1916). Developers, on the other hand, were given preferential treatment so much so that Manhattan might have been the prototype of what the historian and town sociologist Sam Bass Warner Jr. called a "private city." From the moment the financial crisis of the 1930s halted individual and collective advancement, Manhattanites familiarized themselves with the advantages offered up by planned urban development.

On June 19, 1938, the New York Times published what was deemed the "master plan" for the future of the city's traffic system. The Regional Plan Association developed a long-range program to unify the major highways, parks, suburban rapid transit and railroads. The express routes of the major highway system designed to facilitate traffic flow was given urgent consideration. One of these would link up New Jersey, Manhattan and Brooklyn by the way of the Holland Tunnel, Canal Street, the Manhattan Bridge, Flatbush Avenue and Atlantic Avenue to Sunrise Highway - called the Lower Manhattan Crosstown Expressway. Robert Moses began to campaign in the 1940s for what would later be nicknamed "Lomex".

On May 16, 1944, the New York Times published a detail view of the proposed connection between the Manhattan Bridge and planned Expressway. It showed ramps and elevated rolling multi-lane roads which rose above buildings and sidewalks. Furthermore the article reported "that the Manhattan Borough President (Edgar J. Nathan Jr.) recommended a double-decked elevated express highway along Beach Street to Varick Street and thence bordering White Street to the Manhattan Bridge. The plan provides for convenient access to the Holland Tunnel and the Williamsburg Bridge."

Unlike Nathan's ideas which proposed a route south of Canal Street, on October 14, 1946 the New York Times presented the new route, endorsed by Robert Moses and the new Borough President Hugo E. Rogers, to be built north of Canal Street. According to the master plan of 1938 the Moses-Rogers plan picked up the original idea of connecting New Jersey, Manhattan and Brooklyn. The "new facility will carry six lanes of mixed passenger and truck traffic on an elevated

structure linking the West Side Highway and Holland Tunnel with the Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridges."

Construction was set to start in 1948 and end in 1949. The free space under the elevated expressway was to be used for parking while a series of small neighborhood recreational facilities was to be built on excess lands between the Avenue of the Americas and Essex Street. The new plan called for the widening of Broome Street to 150 feet; the Haughwout Building (1857) and the elevated railway structure running along the Bowery were consequently demolished. Furthermore Moses and Rogers praised the state of the arts of the express highway design, proclaimed that Broome Street would become the broadest thoroughfare in Manhattan with the Expressway running down the center and a minimum distance of fifty feet from the buildings on either side.

The Moses-Rogers plan moved the New York Times reader Harold M. Lewis to criticize the expressway route and argued in support for the Nathan plan. Lewis put forward the contentions that the West Side Highway diverted much more traffic to Manhattan than to the Williamsburg Bridge, that the ramps proposed for the Holland Tunnel would cause massive non-tunnel traffic congestion and that the much needed parking areas were not to be found along Broome Street but in the office district south of Canal Street.

In 1948 the projected start of construction of the Expressway was replaced by new traffic restrictions in the Canal Street area. On December 18, 1948, the streets became one-way and all daytime parking was banned. Unlike the \$23.5 million necessary for constructing the Lower Manhattan Crosstown Expressway, the costs for new traffic signs amounted to a mere \$800. For the next decade the future of the Lomex scheme was cloudy.

The Lomex scheme gained fresh impetus in the late 1950s when David Rockefeller entered the fray. Since 1956 he had been a prime mover for the planned 60-storeyed headquarters of the Chase Manhattan Bank in the Wall Street area, which kick started the financial district's urban renewal. To counter the Park Avenue boom and insure his own downtown investments, David Rockefeller created

the Chamber of Commerce Committee on Lower Manhattan Redevelopment in 1956. In 1958 the group was renamed the Downtown Lower Manhattan Association (DLMA), headed by David Rockefeller and John D. Butt. Traffic improvement was identified as one of the area's major problems: "downtown Manhattan's streets are not much wider today than they were when Peter Minuit clumped about them." The association's strategic objectives brought together developers and urban visionary Robert Moses. The consensus was Lomex was an essential element of the DLMA program. It was further supported and substantiated by subcommittees, experts and published reports.

On November 28, 1961, Robert Moses urged Mayor Robert Wagner to step up action on the expressway. Four years later, on May 25, 1965, Mayor Wagner announced his decision to begin construction and set the date of completion in September 1971. Four months later, the case went to Washington, where Representative William F. Ryan asked Congress to block federal funds in the controversial "skyway." At the same time, Manhattan Borough President Constance Baker Motley asked Robert Wagner in a letter not to go ahead with land acquisition for the project. Contrary to the news on March 7, 1966, that the Lower Manhattan Expressway "is out, as far as the Lindsay administration is concerned," the Lindsay committee issued a new engineering plan at the end of March 1967. The expressway would be no longer be entirely elevated; instead the new route was to be built below ground of Broome Street and a tunnel stretching from Bowery to the Manhattan Bridge, which was first drafted in June 1964.

The design for the buildings by the architect Paul Rudolph in 1967 to accompany the proposed expressway drew the urban future even closer. In 1967, the Ford Foundation commissioned Rudolph to produce a design for a structure to be built over the expressway. Rudolph proposed a megastructure of gigantic pylons forming a base frame for hooked-in trapezoidal residential units as well as lower lying, linear buildings situated directly above the roadways, whose cross-sections show a characteristic A shape. Rudolph employed the idea of using pillars as a basic frame for hooking modular apartment boxes into his contemporaneous design for the Graphic Arts Center on

the Hudson River. Schmertz wrote "he has hoped to erect a genuine megastructure, inserted with factory-built apartment modules, which he called `twentieth-century bricks.`"

The battle continued with debates on air pollution and came to a halt in July 1969 with the official announcement that the expressway is dead "for all time." A month later on August 20, 1969, the City Planning Commission revoked the Lower Manhattan Expressway project.

Downtown's Defense

In the early 1960s the Lower Manhattan Expressway provoked massive opposition on the local political level with residents up in arms and from urban and architectural critics. First, there were the politicians. District Assemblyman Louis DeSalvio was one of the expressway's most vocal critics. His contention was not against the expressway itself but its location and the negative impact on residents and small businesses. Paul Douglas Jr., president of the Citywide Organization Against the Lower Manhattan Expressway also protested against the location of the traffic artery.

On June 18, 1962, a letter from Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt was read out at a hearing convened in City Hall which ran for eleven hours with fifty-nine speakers and an audience of more than 500 people. The letter, dated June 5, 1962, asked the city authorities "to find some solution for the downtown Manhattan traffic problem other than the construction of the Expressway" and criticized "the city's urban renewal program for not finding new homes in the area of the new developments for displaced low-income residents." Furthermore Assemblyman Louis DeSalvio called the road "a mad visionary's dream" and "a pork-barrel grab." Unlike the inconclusiveness of the local government, the protestors organized a march of August 9, 1962. Calling upon New Yorkers to oppose the expressway's construction and led by thirteen speakers including Representative Leonard Farbstein, Senator Joseph Marro and Louis DeSalvio, and Chair of the Joint Committee to Stop the Lower Manhattan Expressway Jane Jacobs, the march began at 7:30 in the evening. A fortnight later on August 23, 1962, a picket line formed by about 100 local residents

young and old marched along Park Row and City Hall carrying signs with skull and crossbones and the slogan "Kill The Expressway Now."

Lewis Mumford, city planning expert, wrote to Mayor Wagner to point that the expressway "would be the first serious step in turning New York into Los Angeles. Since Los Angeles has already discovered the futility of sacrificing its living space to expressway and parking lots, why should New York follow that backward example?" Ahead of the public hearings in December 1964, Harold Harmatz and Anthony Dapolito, co-chairman of the Citywide Organizations against the Lower Manhattan Expressway, wrote in the New York Times that "the indiscriminate handing out of government funds for pie-in-the-sky projects is undermining the moral fiber of too many Americans and too many quasi-public and city agencies. We concur wholeheartedly that we should employ all conceivable methods to discourage the auto from the heart of the city." The next major public hearing scheduled three days before Christmas started at 10:30 a.m. at City Hall with 117 speakers and ended at 1 o'clock the next morning. The New York Times reported "a crowd of more than 250 persons, largely opponents of the project, occupied the Board of Estimate chamber during the day. From time to time it cheered speakers with whom it agreed and booed those of whom it disapproved."

In the early 1960s the opponents of the Lower Manhattan Expressway were bolstered with details and arguments from urban and architectural critics.

Jane Jacobs, writer and activists published *Death and Life of Great American Cities* in October 1961. At this time she was fighting for the preservation of the Greenwich Village. She went on to lend her full support to the struggle against the Lower Manhattan Expressway project. Jacobs' urban values focused on the vitality and variety of lower Manhattan, the neighborhoods and street life unique to each. In her article "The Missing Link in City Redevelopment" (1956) she criticized the urban renewal project that brought on death of the little shops and corners where people daily saw each other and talked. What modern urbanists deemed nostalgic yearning became an urban rallying cry for Jacobs which she followed up with essays like

"Downtown Is for People" (1958). To Jacobs, the results of urban renewal made cities look like a well-kept, dignified cemetery because "they will be spacious, parklike, and uncrowded. They will feature long green vistas. They will be stable and symmetrical and orderly. They will be clean, impressive, and monumental." Jacobs described downtown as a place with a concentration of diverse businesses, a sidewalk with an irresistible sense of intimacy, cheerfulness, and spontaneity and a mixture of old and new buildings. From 1962 on Jane Jacobs would become a familiar face at anti-expressway demonstrations. Jane Jacobs advised architects and urbanists to learn from these neighborhoods and her vision was obliquely supported by architectural historians and critics. While stirring up memories of old New York, the massive demolition of New York's old buildings in the 1950s added fuel and garnered public attention to the preservation movement.

The architectural critic of the New York Times Ada Louise Huxtable, a former member of the department of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, joined in Jane Jacobs' focus on neighborhoods and their charm. Huxtable's essay "City For People" in May 1960 took San Francisco as an example and examined the convivial relationship between architecture and people. Huxtable maintained that "today's architect (was) concerned almost exclusively with abstract design standards and sociologically approved planning, San Francisco is a city that breaks all the rules," and argued that "a city can be good even with bad or anonymous building; and the quality of a city is far more than the quality of its architecture alone." Furthermore she did not sidestep the opportunity to vilify New York's urban development which, in her opinion, eliminated small human-scale structures, local character, and the neighborhood. The task for architects should be to "produce more than correctly sterile housing projects and vacuous master plans" and San Francisco offered a seminal lesson on the awareness and concern of citizens for their towns and cities. Huxtable concluded with San Francisco's chief architectural feature, "the proper and primary relationship of buildings to people. And is that not, after all, what architecture is all about?"

In 1962, Huxtable continued this chain of reasoning linking Manhattan's downtown cast-iron buildings with the term "street architecture." Huxtable had observed on Spring, Broome, Greene and Mercer Street "cast-iron fronted structures of virtually the same vintage and similar handsome colonnaded design as the better-preserved examples on Worth Street. This rare, isolated stand of the superior commercial "street architecture" of the Eighteen Seventies and Eighties is now a fire-prone slum." Furthermore Huxtable motivated artists to turn the commercial lofts into studios and appealed for a creative kind of rehabilitation and preservation.

Up until the early 1960s Manhattan's cast-iron architecture of the 19th century was largely forgotten and neglected. This was to be changed radically. In the New York Times on July 22, 1965, Huxtable presented a map of cast-iron structures on Broome Street destined to be torn down in preparation for the Lower Manhattan Expressway. Huxtable argued that the cast-iron structures with their oversized glass windows and metal frameworks were forerunners of the city's modern skyscrapers. Furthermore she cited the Landmarks Commission which called the Haughwout Building "the Parthenon of New York's Iron Age." The Landmark Commission would soon hold hearings on the preservation of cast-iron buildings. In 1970 the Friends of Cast-Iron Architecture opened an information office where they sold a booklet for 25 cents each outlining to visitors where the best restored examples were to be found. By the 1960s none other than Nikolaus Pevsner, the preeminent architectural historian, added his voice to the cause. He stated explicitly "there is a veritable museum of cast iron architecture in downtown New York, a greater concentration than anywhere else in the world."

In the 1950's New York City became capital of the art world with abstract expressionism, pop-art and minimalism. In Manhattan, the post-war prosperity boosted a brisk demand for affordable living space while the transition from a manufacturing society to a service oriented one gave way to an increasing number of abandoned factory buildings. As a result of the glut of abandoned loft spaces and the Lomex impasse artists began making use, albeit illegally, of light-industrial buildings as living and work quarters. It was also at this time that artists took on a nomadic lifestyle.

In the early 1960s, the artists in Manhattan token on the developers and city authorities to press for the amendment of regulations that prohibit the use of factory buildings for living. As a result of their protests, Mayor Wagner implemented a citywide, artist-in-residence (AIR) program that permitted artists to take over the top two floors of a commercial or factory building. In 1964 Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller signed into a law that permitted artists to live on all the floors of a loft building, but the stringent fire and building safety codes meant that many artists illegally occupying these spaces fced eviction.

One of the prominent artists fighting against the Lower Manhattan Expressway was Julie Judd, dancer and wife of sculptor Donald Judd, and a member of a committee called Artists Against the Expressway. Judd emphasized their serious intent "they're not just a flubby, night camp of gypsies - many own buildings individually or co-ops.

The expressway would kill the last suitable place in the city for lofts. There'd be scarcer space and higher rents. And we don't want to be urban-renewed." On June 19, 1969, Artists Against the Expressway called a meeting at the Whitney Museum and invited prominent speakers, including Barnett Newman, Richard Feigen, and James Marston Fitch of Columbia University. Originally the meeting was to be held at the Museum of Modern Art's auditorium until "several persons at the meeting said that when the museum received word that some of its trustees were to be attacked." The meeting was attended by nearly 250 artists and members of civic organizations. Mr. Newman said "let us not overlook that the strongest forces against artists are the art lovers." He added that David Rockefeller was "the most vocal advocate for the Expressway" and asked him "to declare to us personally where his loyalty lies."

Ten years after her article "City For People," Huxtable pointed out that "as values rise, (SoHo) is starting to look very good to the speculators. Here we go again."

Conclusion

From 1938 to 1969 plans for the expressway remained, in one form or another on the urban agenda, until Mayor John Lindsay officially laid

them to rest. Robert Moses, David Rockefeller, the Ford Foundation and the Automobile Club of New York sought ways and explored different strategies to turn the plan into reality. Their efforts however were thwarted every step of the way by the often spontaneous and ingenious actions of a public up-in-arms. Manhattanites, predominately women, deployed human, professional and intellectual resources to slay the project, all the while fighting for the preservation of local neighborhoods and their architecture. And they triumphed. They defiantly stood down developers and their plans. They courageously stood between the wrecking ball and the houses that they had taken under their wings. The death of the Lower Manhattan Expressway also meant the loss of \$2 million in state and federal funds. Residents nevertheless rolled up their sleeves to convert the old industrial buildings, which had been labeled "worthless architecture," into a key element of the post-industrial city. Today SoHo stands for the modern metropolis that unites the historical and the community it serves.

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