

Seeing beyond Moses

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Concurrent exhibits at the Museum of the City of New York, Columbia University and the Queens Museum of Art featuring Robert Moses have many New Yorkers focusing on the life of the master builder.

Moses left a legacy in concrete, steel and sand - parkways, beaches, bridges, expressways, housing developments, playgrounds, Lincoln Center, Shea Stadium - that no New Yorker can escape. His name surfaces often these days because the city seems poised to enter a new era of major construction. Tunnels, subway extensions, massive development at the Atlantic Yards, a new Penn Station - projects delayed for decades are ready to take off.

The subtext to this theme is that very little happened between the day in 1968 when Moses lost power and the present. Nothing could be further from the truth. The city is not poised for a second era of major construction, but for a third spurt.

It's the missing - almost invisible - second phase that merits more attention. Without it, the very nature and scale of the city would have become radically reduced, and the coming era of major development would still be gathering dust in the offices of planners and architects.

From 1982 to the present, New York City experienced the most extensive reconstruction of its housing stock of any American city in the modern era. At the start of this period, the city itself was the owner-of-last-resort of more than 100,000 apartments.

In addition to the 100,000 units owned by the city, another 100,000 units or so in private buildings were in deplorable condition. And hundreds of acres of prime city property were filled with rubble, discarded supermarket carts and thousands of tires.

The city's population plummeted, from a high of more than 8 million to 7.2 million.

Since that day, almost every vacant building has been rehabilitated. The city has returned the dying housing stock - which it never wanted to own or manage - to private owners or not-for-profits. More than 253,000 units of housing have been rehabilitated, reconstructed or built from scratch on formerly vacant city land. The million New Yorkers who fled have all returned, plus some.

There is almost no vacant land left in the city, no empty buildings and no decals over the boarded-up windows of the apartments along the Cross Bronx Expressway.

The city reached a version of the promised land, but had no single Moses to lead it. This housing boom has no parallels and no charismatic leader.

Certainly former Mayor Ed Koch played a pivotal role when he launched his 10-year housing plan in 1986. But the rebuilding of Brownsville, East New York and Washington Heights had already begun.

Mayor Bloomberg deserves credit as well, for understanding that this housing boom must become a permanent campaign to keep the city thriving.

But the leaders of this effort remain largely anonymous - pastors like the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood in Brooklyn and Father Bert Bennett in the Bronx, housing commissioners and deputies like Felice Michetti and Kathleen Dunne. To mention four is to leave out another 25 or more.

This building boom set the stage for the era that may be poised to begin. The results of the past 25 years should not be forgotten - nor the leaders that delivered them - in a rush to reduce history to just one charismatic figure and a series of triumphal eras.