



Andreas Georgoulas

Ali Khawaja

Lower Manhattan Expressway

Jane Jacobs was exhausted. It was 1962 and she had just prevented New York's West Village from being bulldozed and redeveloped. During this struggle she also penned *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which sharply criticized the rising trend of urban renewal and stressed the importance of preserving a city's "spontaneous and untidy"¹ historic fabric. She was settling down after her summer speaking tours, when Father La Mountain, pastor of the Church of the Most Sacred Heart on Broome Street sought her advice about the city's plans to run an expressway through Lower Manhattan and destroy his church, along with the homes of his parishioners. He seemed to have accepted the expressway as inevitable, and was concerned that relocation plans were inadequate.

Jacobs' hesitated to enter another struggle, but this expressway was going to be in her own backyard and she had experience quashing the city's increasingly persistent redevelopment schemes. Together with Father La Mountain, she formed the Joint Committee to Stop the Lower Manhattan Expressway and united the racially, culturally and politically diverse population of Villagers and Lower East Siders to save their own homes and the city's most cultural neighborhood. "Everybody knew that the city blocks anywhere near the roaring, elevated structure would quickly deteriorate."² Jacobs and Assemblyman Louis DeSalvio, an old ally from her struggle to save the West Village became co-chairs and began laying out a strategy that would mobilize "merchants, artists, liberals and conservatives" into a grassroots movement.

¹ <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0DE4D61231F936A1575AC0A9619C8B63>

² Flint, Anthony. *Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took on New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City*. New York: Random House, 2009, 181.

Ali Khawaja, M.Arch. '10, wrote this case study under the supervision of Dr. Andreas Georgoulas, Lecturer in Architecture, as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

Lower Manhattan Expressway

On August 2, she was on her way to attend a protest organized by the Action Group for Better Architecture in New York (AGBANY) against the demolition of Pennsylvania Station – a separate battle in the war being waged over New York's urban renewal. As she walked from her apartment on Hudson Street to the subway, she wondered what it would take to preserve the charming nineteenth-century tenements and town houses that characterized her beloved neighborhood. She knew that her fight against Lomex was only part of the larger struggle to preserve New York's architectural and cultural history.

Development schemes were popping up all over the city and she worried New York's rich urban fabric would vanish within years, replaced by a drab and generic modernist plan. She was able to prevent the West Village from being bulldozed, and she might be able to stop an expressway from being built across lower Manhattan if she could mobilize the community and form the right alliances. But she wondered what it would take to change the top-down mindset of the City Planning Commission and end its urban renewal binge that was wrecking the city, ruthlessly led by Robert Moses.

The Lower Manhattan Expressway (Lomex)

Lomex was proposed to relieve mounting traffic congestion in Lower Manhattan, specifically on Canal and Broome Streets – both overburdened as the only routes for transporting freight in and out of Manhattan. It was part of a larger plan to make

Manhattan more accessible by car with a sprawling road system that included at least three elevated expressways across the island, and was being planned by the Board of Estimate and the City Planning Commission. It would link the Holland Tunnel to the Manhattan and Williamsburg Bridges, running along Broome Street, cutting right through what is now SoHo and continue across Mulberry and Mott Streets, tearing through Little Italy and Chinatown before crossing the Bowery into the Lower East Side (Exhibit 1-3).

It would displace almost 2000 families and 800 businesses in Greenwich Village that employed up to 10,000 people.³ A handful of architectural relics also lay in its path of destruction:

Lomex would have doomed the gargantuan domed Italianate Police Department headquarters on Cleveland Place off Broome Street, eight churches, including the beautiful little rococo Church of San Salvatore, and Engine Company Number Fifty-five, a little gem of a firehouse built in Renaissance Revival style. Lomex would have wiped out the pastry shops and restaurants of Little Italy, and then eaten up the lighting and restaurant supply stores clustered in and around the Bowery. Finally it would cut across Chrystie Street, wiping out the shady park in the street's center...⁴

Plans for Lomex began as early as 1929 as an integral part of the tri-state network of expressways and parkways.⁵ It was officially approved in 1941 as the Lower Manhattan Crosstown Highway, and Moses, then the city's arterial coordinator, recommended expediting its construction to relieve

³ Alexiou, Alice Sparberg. *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2006. Print. 108.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://www.nycroads.com/roads/lower-manhattan/>

Lower Manhattan Expressway

congestion. It was going to cost \$23 million.⁶ However, the plans were revised and then postponed until the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel,

East River Drive and Harlem River Drive projects were completed. The plans became known as the Lower Manhattan Expressway in 1946 with a price tag of \$72 million, of which \$28 million would be needed for land acquisition. The final cost in 1960 rose about \$100 million, with 90 per cent covered by federal funds.⁷ It would handle 120,000 vehicles a day and would be constructed between a right-of-way 250 to 350 feet wide, requiring a clearance of 50 to 60 feet between the edge of the expressway and the nearest building. Existing streets would pass underneath the expressway and share the underside of the structure with a parking mall that would hold 1400 cars.⁸

By 1955, Lomex had federal funding, yet the Board of Estimate kept delaying its approval because Moses lacked a substantial relocation plan for displaced residents. Moses warned that federal funding could be withdrawn if the Board lingered on taking action. By fall of 1960, the city approved the route for Lomex and was about to authorize Moses to make condemnations and property purchases needed for the expressway's right-of-way. He circulated pamphlets to highlight the economic benefits of constructing Lomex:

Construction of the expressway will relieve traffic on these streets and allow this locality to develop in a normal manner that will encourage improved housing, increased business activity, higher property values, a general rise in the prosperity of the area, and an increase in the real estate tax revenues therefrom ... Most of the buildings in this area are at least sixty years old, are in poor condition and have numerous violations against them, the owners repeatedly paying the relatively small fines to escape spending substantial sums to meet the legal standards.⁹

Positioning Lomex as “not just a roadway, but economic salvation”¹⁰ attracted big business interests dependent on the movement of goods in and out of Manhattan – including David Rockefeller – and brought the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, onto Moses' side. This alliance would serve well in countering resistance from smaller, local businesses.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Hunt, Richard P. "EXPRESSWAY VOTE DELAYED BY CITY; Final Decision Is Postponed After 6-Hour Hearing", *The New York Times*, December 7, 1962. Access December 17, 2010.

⁸ <http://www.nycroads.com/roads/lower-manhattan/>

⁹ http://www.basilisk.com/L/lowrr_NYC_exprssway_347.html

¹⁰ Flint, 177

The Unstoppable Robert Moses

The audacity of the Lomex proposal reveals the top-down mentality instilled in the City Planning Commission by its chief, Robert Moses, for whom Lomex had become an “obsession”¹¹: “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,” he said, “but when you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax.”¹² Moses strove to thoroughly reorganize the city, attempting to undo its tangled zoning and ultimately achieve a complete separation of live and work environments in New York.

He was a rational and modern thinker. His vision followed popular wisdom at the time: “American cities were in a state of crisis. Downtowns were dying while people were fleeing in droves to the suburbs. Those left behind were increasingly poor, and people of color. Public transportation systems were starved, as federal highways were being built.”¹³ Moses thought his plan for Lomex was a step towards ushering in the modern era for New York and preparing it for the rising popularity of private cars. For Moses, Lomex “was the one chance to prove that crosstown routes would be the city's salvation.”¹⁴

Jacobs obviously disagreed, but her conflict with Moses was a tale of David and Goliath. He typified “planners across the country, who were dedicated to the economic salvation of American cities; challenging them was misguided, even unpatriotic.”¹⁵ Furthermore, “He was the most public figure in New York who had never been elected to anything, at one time holding twelve different city and state positions simultaneously, all of which were appointments.”¹⁶ Needless to say, Moses was a master of power and influence and could bypass the city's bureaucracy to get things done the way he wanted. One writer eloquently provides a description of Moses' incredible body of work, which he relentlessly executed during his career:

He had built bridges, highways, parks, and housing towers with astonishing speed, and his works had transformed New York. He was responsible for thirteen bridges, two tunnels, 637 miles of highways, 658 playgrounds, ten giant public swimming pools, seventeen state parks and dozens of new or renovated city parks... He built Lincoln Center, the United Nations, Shea Stadium, Jones Beach, and the Central park Zoo. He built the Triborough and Verrazano-Narrows bridges, the Long Island and Cross Bronx Expressways, parkways down the side of Manhattan and north and east of the city avenues, overpasses, causeways, and viaducts. Any New Yorker or visitor

¹¹ Ibid, 115

¹² Ibid

¹³ Alexiou, 5

¹⁴ Flint, 195

¹⁵ Ibid, 35

¹⁶ Ibid, 16

*to the city has at one time or another driven down, walked through, sat in, or sailed into something that Moses created ... He had mingled with the Queen, the pope, world leaders, presidents, governors, and mayors. It had been a great run, and Moses longed to finish it off with the Lower Manhattan Expressway.*¹⁷

Moses had surrounded Manhattan with expressways and wanted to pierce its formidable fabric with Lomex, bringing cars into the heart of New York and forever changing the city's unique characteristic that Jacobs was fighting to maintain: walkability. But Moses did not find “walkability” a rational concept during a time when every American family was supposed to own at least one car. The neighborhoods he wanted to replace with Lomex – Greenwich Village, the Lower East Side and what is now SoHo – were not rationally planned. They were anti-modern and without zoning: homes located above laundromats or pastry shops down the road from factories. Yet they were home to history, culture and residents who lived happily there and Jacobs' prescription was to not get in the way of this “spontaneous and untidy” urban fabric. Throughout his career, Moses had battled neighborhood opposition and eventually won, but Jacobs was determined to keep Moses and his expressways out of her beloved neighborhood by stressing the central idea in her book *Death and Life*: the city is for people, not cars.¹⁸

Neighborhood Community Opposition

As a grassroots movement, the Joint Committee to Stop the Lower Manhattan Expressway found allies in other grassroots organizations like the New York Society of Architects, the Artists Against the Expressway and the Downtown Independent Democrats. The Lower East Side Businessmen's Association also joined, as their “unofficial headquarters”¹⁹ was Ratner's dairy, a restaurant threatened by the Lomex plans. Bob Dylan wrote a song against it, while Jacobs approached Lewis Mumford, the architecture critic for the *New Yorker* who harshly criticized her book, *Death and Life*. Despite their differences, Jacobs and Mumford had a common enemy in Moses. Mumford believed Moses' network of expressways “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 expressways and parking lots, why should New York follow that backward example?”²⁰ Jacobs was quick to turn Mumford's argument into a soundbite for an increasingly intrigued media: “The expressway would Los Angelize New York.”²¹

Jacobs masterminded an opposition from several angles that attracted media attention to raise awareness. With the help of local artists, she established themes like pollution and death for protests: a funeral march down Broome Street replete with tombstones, skulls and bones and gas masks made for great media fodder.

¹⁷ Ibid, 15

¹⁸ Ibid, 187

¹⁹ Ibid, 185

²⁰ Ibid, 186

²¹ Ibid

Lower Manhattan Expressway

When about a hundred²² residents marched up to City Hall, the mayor and the Board of Estimate delayed a vote of condemnation proceedings until a full report with a specific timetable for relocations was released. When the report was released, the Joint Committee to Stop the Lower Manhattan Expressway dismissed it: “the report cannot bail out this scandal-ridden expressway proposal that Robert Moses has been trying to bulldoze through this city since the 1940s.”²³ Jacobs was not ready to negotiate relocation – that would imply that the Committee had accepted the inevitability of Lomex. She was directing her opposition to question the necessity of Lomex: why do the residents need it and will it benefit them? This hardline attitude by bottom-up activists was necessary to resist Moses' top-down authority.

New Yorkers Awaken

Jacobs walked into the subway station that August evening, still wondering what it would take to stop the “renewal” that was destroying her city's architectural treasure once and for all. She knew the answer when she arrived at Pennsylvania Station to join AGBANY's protest against its demolition. Despite the protest, she sadly knew the station's destruction was inevitable: the Pennsylvania Railroad was bankrupt and could not afford to maintain the old structure. The building was one of the most beautiful in the city, designed in 1910 by McKim, Meade and White and inspired by the Roman Baths of Caracalla (Exhibit 4-6). It was a glorious gateway for the city and was loved by all New Yorkers.

Although Moses had nothing to do with its impending demolition, Jacobs knew the station's destruction would awaken New Yorkers to the scourge of urban renewal that he had unleashed on the city. An advertisement AGBANY published in the *New York Times* that day read, “It may be too late to save Penn Station ... But it is not yet too late to save New York. We, the undersigned – architects, artists, architectural historians, and citizens of New York – serve notice upon present and future would-be vandals that we will fight them every step of the way.”²⁴

The destruction of Pennsylvania Station had the affect on New Yorkers that AGBANY sadly hoped it would. Editorials lashed out against the demolition and questioned the trend of urban renewal, calling for, “the newly appointed Landmarks Preservation Commission to take clear and immediate positions on threatened buildings of historic or artistic value ... The city's investors and planners have aesthetic as well as economic responsibilities,” adding that “if AGBANY springs to the barricades the public will not be far behind.”²⁵

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Byles, Jeff. *Rubble: Unearthing the History of Demolition*. New York: Three Rivers, 2006. Print. 142.

²⁵ Saving Fine Architecture, *New York Times*, August 11, 1962

Lomex Defeated

Jacobs knew that mobilizing neighborhood residents could only win struggles over local redevelopments like Lomex, but the loss of Pennsylvania Station awakened all New Yorkers to the specter of urban renewal that haunted their city. Public opinion was now galvanized against Lomex and its threat to historic neighborhoods. The struggle against it was finally won during a dramatic, six hour meeting on December 11, where city officials voted unanimously to halt the plans after forty four testimonials, including one delivered Assemblyman DeSalvio: “Except for one old man, I have been unable to find anyone of technical competence who truly is for this so-called expressway. This cantankerous and stubborn old man should realize that too many of his technicians' dreams turn into a nightmare for the city.”²⁶

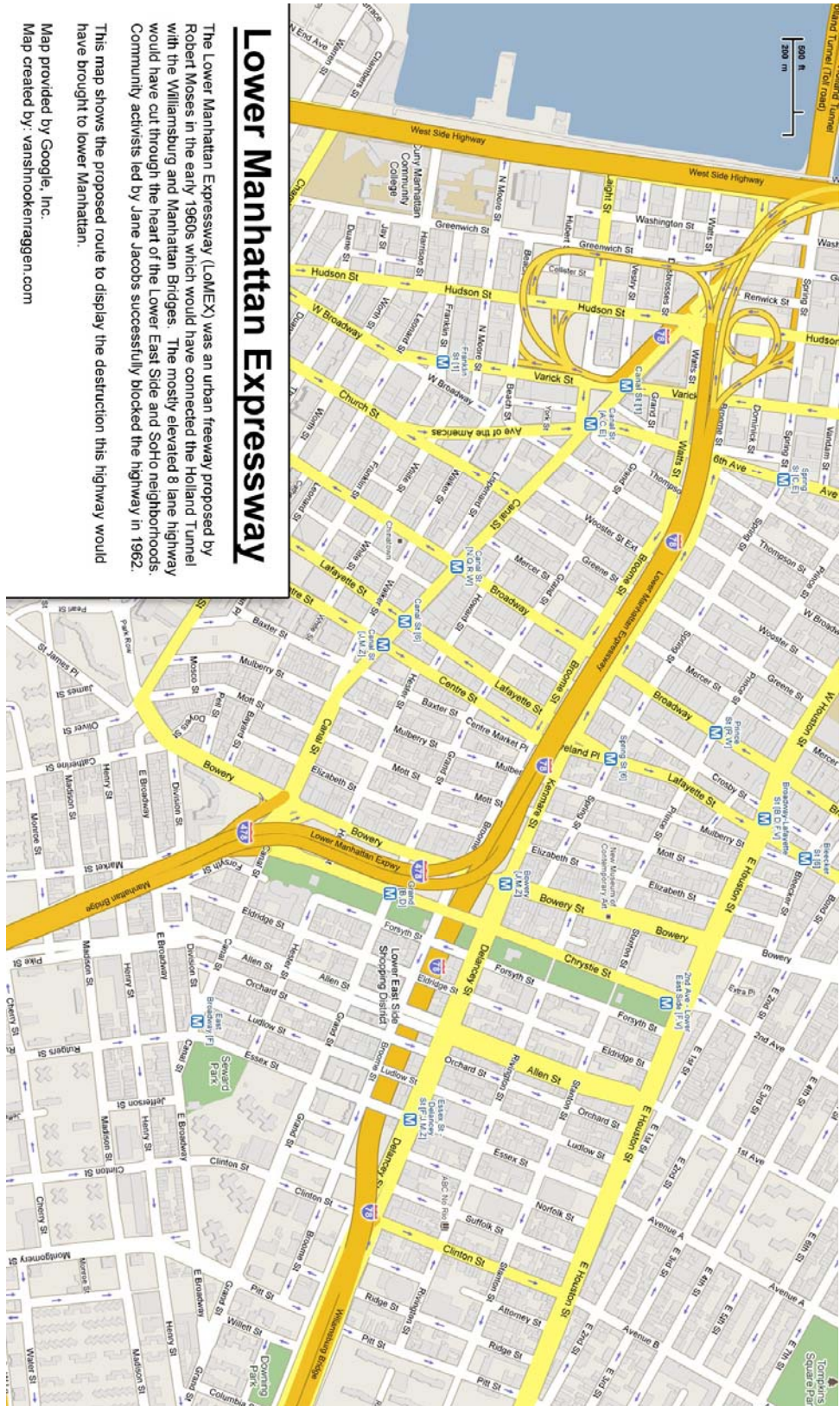
Moses would revive Lomex in coming years, but his efforts would be futile. The loss of Pennsylvania Station transformed a toothless and fledgling Landmarks Preservation Commission into a powerful agency that would serve as a literal roadblock in Moses' path.

Conclusion

At the time, New York was the proving grounds for innovative urban design. The organic charm of its “spontaneous and untidy” Village neighborhoods did not surrender to rational thinking and the tentacles of expressways. Although a hero in her neighborhood, Jacobs is arguably as controversial a leader as Moses was. Some may argue Moses' plans were like quickly removing a bandage: a necessary, yet painful adjustment to modern times. On the other hand, Jacobs perhaps put too much faith in the natural evolution of urban environments, as all cities are born with some element of planning. As a direct result of Pennsylvania Station's demolition, a consequently strong preservation movement froze the Village fabric in time to continue the dialogue that Jacobs and Moses began for generations to come.

²⁶ Flint, 186

Lower Manhattan Expressway



Lower Manhattan Expressway



Exhibit 2: An artist's conception of the Lower Manhattan Expressway looking East (~1955).



Exhibit 3: The Lower Manhattan Expressway from street level (1959).

Lower Manhattan Expressway



Exhibits 4-6: Pennsylvania Station before it was demolished in 1962.