

Essay on differing visions of new york city

Countries, United States



New York City has inspired numerous individuals to try to describe and define what makes it unique. Some of those individuals have developed very different visions of New York City. Author Anthony Flint examines some of those differing visions in his book, *Wrestling With Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took On New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City*. Walt Whitman, Robert Moses, and Jane Jacobs each regarded the city as a wonderful and uniquely American city. Their differing visions of the city reflect their personal perspective of what makes New York City desirable, whether it be the bustle of the city, the efficiency and cold beauty of its buildings and infrastructure, or the residents who create unique neighborhoods.

The poet Walt Whitman drew inspiration from New York City. One of his poems, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", captures his feelings about New York. In the first stanza, Whitman refers to "Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes! How curious you are to me! / On the ferry-boats, the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home are more curious to me than you suppose" (Whitman, 1900, lines 3-4). He refers to others who will "see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of / Brooklyn to the south and east" (Whitman, 1900, 14-15), but throughout the poem he emphasizes the people who make up the city. He takes pleasure in both the people and the natural beauties of the city, such as the river. As he states, "Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd; / Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd" (Whitman, 1900, 24-25). To Whitman, what makes New York City a great city is the presence of so many people full of dreams and

ambitions, who come together in a place that has natural beauty as well as manmade wonders.

Robert Moses, on the other hand, viewed New York City as a landscape on which to create incredible buildings and to build transportation infrastructure. In theory, those buildings and highways would have been used by people, but Moses seemed somewhat oblivious to how people actually want to live. From reading his plans for parts of New York City, he apparently visualized the city as only its physical structures. Efficiency and beauty of design and transportation were critical; unique residential neighborhoods were inconsequential. He had no qualms about demolishing parks or other gathering places to erect buildings or highways. As noted by Garner, Moses had a “ plan to build a four-lane highway through the middle of Washington Square Park. Another project would have razed 14 blocks in the heart of Greenwich Village under the guise of urban renewal. There was also a plan to plunge a 10-lane elevated superhighway, to be called the Lower Manhattan Expressway, through SoHo, Little Italy, Chinatown and the Lower East Side” (Garner, 2009, para. 6). He did create places that could be used by people, and he had a lasting impact on New York City: “ He was responsible for 13 bridges, 2 tunnels, 637 miles of highways, 658 playgrounds, 10 giant public swimming pools, 17 state parks and dozens of new or renovated city parks” (Flint, 2009, p. xv). However, while Moses seemed to recognize on an intellectual basis that humans inhabited New York City, to him the needs of the population as a whole outweighed any desire for neighborhoods with their own flavor.

Jane Jacobs was a journalist who became horrified at the plans Moses had for

building a highway through Washington Square Park. It was for her a personal issue, because it was a park she and her family used. To Jacobs, New York City was a place to raise a family, in neighborhoods with extreme cultural, ethnic and architectural diversity. She did not want the entire city to consist of huge buildings designed only for efficiency; she wanted New York to retain places where families could go play in a park close to them. She saw New York as consisting of people who needed houses, apartments, office buildings, and shops; the idea of New York as buildings and highways more important than its residents was anathema. This vision of New York as a place for families to live was so important to her that she organized a campaign to stop Moses from implementing some of his plans, such as the highway through Washington Square Park. Typical of her attitude toward so-called “urban renewal” was when she was shown a before-and-after plan for a particular street, and the “after” sketch showed only one person on the street. As Flint states, “She turned to him and asked, ‘Where are the people?’” (Flint, 2009, p. 20). Her vision of New York City was of a city whose vibrancy came from its residents.

All three individuals regarded New York City as an incredible place to live and work. Whitman recognized the appeal of both the city’s buildings and its crowds. Moses envisioned a city of efficient buildings and transportation. Jacobs valued the city as a collection of intriguing individuals. Although their visions of the city differed, they valued the city for its uniqueness.

Works Cited

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