

Urban Renewal Narratives in Twentieth-Century American Cities: Between Propaganda and Critique

*Rita Gagliardi**

By the mid-twentieth century, public discourse in the United States increasingly framed the regeneration of inner cities as both necessary and inevitable, giving rise to the complex phenomenon of urban renewal. Several documentaries, such as *The Living City* (1952), vividly illustrate this condition: older neighborhoods are shown in such severe decay that their demolition appears unavoidable, with residents consisting primarily of impoverished Black and immigrant communities. Beyond conventional textual sources, audiovisual materials provide a critical lens for examining the contradictions of this transformative period of American urban history. Films and interviews produced by advocates of urban renewal often reinforced a rhetoric of progress at the expense of urban heritage and communities, while independent multimedia projects and later visual studies record the displacement of residents. This essay aims to offer a critical reading of these media narratives, emphasizing the interpretive potential of heterogeneous sources, with particular attention to the audiovisual archive associated with Robert Moses' speculative and transformative programs in New York City.

Keywords: Urban Renewal, American Cities, Audiovisual Sources, Historic Neighborhoods, Historic Preservation.

Introduction: Framing Urban Renewal through Audiovisual Narratives

During the first half of the Twentieth century, and even more rapidly in the postwar period, cities across the United States underwent extensive transformations driven by federal urban renewal policies¹. Through these

* Rita Gagliardi, Dottoranda presso il Dipartimento di Architettura dell'Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II.

I am grateful to Lynn Woods for granting permission to use the photographs by Gene Dauner from the film *Lost Rondout: A Story of Urban Removal*, and to Mary Paley for granting permission to use the poster of *The Neighborhood That Disappeared*. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, which contributed to improving the article.

1. Among the extensive literature on the subject, the following studies are particularly

Storia urbana, n. 182 2025 Supplemento ISSN 0391-2248, ISSN e 1972-5523, DOI 10.3280/su2025-Aisu23226

initiatives, local authorities implemented interventions aimed at revitalizing urban areas deemed degraded or obsolete, replacing them with new residential complexes and infrastructure designed to support economic growth and automobile traffic. Official discourse framed these operations as symbols of progress, rationalization, and the city's alignment with modernity. However, their impact on historic neighborhoods and local communities was often traumatic. Entire urban fabrics were demolished, tens of thousands of residents – mostly from minority backgrounds – were displaced, and a deeply rooted cultural and social heritage was erased.

The short television series *The Changing Face of Great American Cities* (1963)², with episodes set in Chicago, Houston and San Francisco, provides an invaluable visual record of this process in the early 1960s, while also capturing the pervasive optimism in the ideals of growth and modernization closely tied to construction activity. Yet a more critical viewing reveals the distortions inherent in these representations: wrecking balls demolishing old buildings, or late-nineteenth-century row-houses juxtaposed with anonymous, newly built multi-story residential complexes that, rather than heralding the future, appear as symbols of alienation. In fact, although preservation-oriented planning tools were tested as early as the 1930s³, American cultural discourse came to fully acknowledge the significance of built heritage only in the postwar period, in the context of extensive urban and social transformations shaped by a profit- and consumption-driven economy. A study of urban history and preservation in the United States must therefore consider the

noteworthy: M. Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1964; J.Q. Wilson (ed.), *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1966; W.J. Michael, *Urban Renewal and the Changing Residential Structure of the City*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980; J.C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1990; J.E. Michael, *The Slaughter of Cities: Urban Renewal as Ethnic Cleansing*, St. Augustine Press, South Bend 2004; R. Biles, *The Fate of Cities: Urban America and the Federal Government, 1945-2000*, University of Kansas Press, Lawrence 2011; F. Russello Ammon, *Bulldozer. Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2016. These works adopt a critical approach and go beyond mere documentation, providing valuable insights for this study, particularly on issues of critique and social commentary.

2. *The Changing Face of Great American Cities*, television series, 1963. Available at British Pathé digital archive: <https://www.britishpathe.com/search/?searchQuery=The+Changing+Face+of+Great+American+Cities> (last accessed on 20 September 2025).

3. Although historic preservation in the United States legally formalized in the 1960s, it early experimented zoning ordinances for historic neighborhoods. Charleston, South Carolina, provides a prime example: in response to threats from automobile-driven urban changes, the city established a Planning and Zoning Commission in 1929, leading to South Carolina's first historic district law in 1931 and making Charleston's Old and Historic District the first legislatively protected historic neighborhood in the country. Cf. C.B. Hosmer, *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York 1965; N. Weinberg, *Preservation in American Towns and Cities*, Westview Press, Boulder 1979.

sociopolitical and economic value of rehabilitation and redevelopment and their dominant role in molding the character and morphology of twentieth-century cities. From this perspective, the approach adopted toward many old cores – often involving the clearance of existing urban fabrics and resulting in out-of-scale, speculative redevelopments – can be understood as reflecting aspects of consumerist ideology.

Historiography and urban studies have extensively examined these processes⁴. However, the audiovisual domain (documentaries, television reports, and interviews) remains relatively underexplored. These sources are particularly valuable because they do not merely document events or locations, but constitute narratives shaped by specific production logics⁵. Films commissioned by government agencies in the 1940s and 1950s often emphasized the benefits of urban redevelopment, functioning as instruments of legitimation. Television series and interviews more explicitly targeted a broader public and, by exercising an increasingly intrusive form of media power, supported these policies while exploiting the possibilities offered by television as a critical link between industrial society and personal life⁶. By contrast, independent documentaries and videos produced decades later foreground material and social loss.

These resources make visible and audible what official narratives have frequently marginalized or ignored, supporting analyses that account for multiple cultural implications. Recent retrospective documentaries further enable reflection on memory and representation, renegotiating the meaning of the past in the public sphere. Each source, therefore, requires a critical reading attentive to its political, institutional, and cultural context, as well as its intended audience.

While urban planning typically relies on graphic documents, audiovisual media can also convey the lived experience of urban space: residents' faces and voices, neighborhood atmospheres, and emotions tied to displacement or anticipation of a better future. Thus, by leveraging the heuristic potential of these heterogeneous sources – including the wide audiovisual record of Robert Moses' speculative and transformative programs in New York City – this essay proposes a critical reading of the urban renewal era and its narratives. Rather than focusing on the design details of individual projects, it aims to demonstrate how documentaries and interviews can enrich and occasionally

4. In addition to the works cited in note 1, see also: J. Jacobs, *Death and life of Great American Cities*, Random House, New York 1961 and R. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, Random House, New York 1974.

5. For a more comprehensive discussion of U.S. documentaries, see, among others, R.D. MacCann, *The People's Films: A Political History of US Government Motion Pictures*, Hastings House, New York 1973; W. Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1981; B.A. McLane, *A New History Of Documentary Film*, Continuum, New York 2012.

6. See M. Geller, R. Williams (eds.), *From Receiver to Remote Control: The TV Set*, Exhibition Catalog, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York 1990.

challenge conventional understandings of American cities, and to explore their exegetical potential for urban history, revealing the layering of conflicts and memories entwined with transformation.

1. Selling the Need for Renewal: Blight and the Origins of Urban Redevelopment

Following the economic and housing crises intensified by the Depression, the historic cores of major American cities – termed “inner cities” due to their central location relative to expanding suburbs – were in a state of pervasive decay. The old built environment, including wooden buildings of limited historic value but also poorly maintained nineteenth-century dwellings, was so dilapidated that it resembled extensive slum areas. Sanitary conditions were incompatible with standards in more prosperous districts, and residents were predominantly impoverished Black Americans and European and Asian immigrants. Urban blight – the widespread physical and social deterioration across downtown areas – therefore became a central concern in welfare policy and in contemporary urban planning discourse, described as «an unmitigated evil and a blemish on our fair civilization»⁷. While the idiom “blighted area” applied broadly to older districts, “slums” specifically referred to degraded residential sections where «the houses and conditions of life are of a squalid and wretched character, and which hence has become a social liability to the community»⁸.

The notion of slums as socially burdensome found visual expression in the short documentary *A Place to Live* (1941), co-produced by the Philadelphia Housing Association and nominated for an Academy Award in the newly

7. P.V.I. Darling, *Some Notes on Blighted Areas*, in «The Planners’ Journal», 9 (January 1943), 1, p. 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944364308979041>. In the American urban lexicon, “blighted areas” and “blighted districts” began to spread during the 1910s to designate specific sections of cities, triggering a vast multitude of definitions. The concept of blight ranges from strictly architectural perspectives, according to which in such areas buildings appear old or obsolete, show a general aspect of decay and deterioration and lack potential for reuse, to purely economic perspectives, whereby blighted districts were identified as areas in which land values after a period of increase are stationary or falling. Cf. R.M. Fogelson, *Downtown: its rise and fall, 1880-1950*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2001, pp. 317-380.

8. J.M. Gries, J. Ford (eds.), *Slums, large-scale housing and decentralization: Reports of the committees on blighted areas and slums*, in *The President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership*, Washington 1932, p. 1. Key studies among the vast literature on the subject include: E. Elmer Wood, *Slums and blighted areas in the United States*, United States Government Printing Office, Washington 1935; H. Wright, *Rehousing Urban America*, Columbia University Press, New York 1935; J. Ford, *Slums and Housing with Special Reference to New York City*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1936; M.L. Walker, *Urban Blight and Slums: Economic and Legal Factors in Their Origin, Reclamation, and Prevention*, Russell & Russell, New York 1938; R.M. Fogelson, *Downtown: its rise and fall...*, cit.

established documentary category⁹. Following a teenager through the city's slums, the film presents a vivid portrait of widespread poverty in one of the oldest neighborhoods of the United States. The documentary's depiction of human and cultural hardship is enhanced by alternating shots of dilapidated streets, rat-infested alleys, and squalid homes with footage of historic or monumental structures, such as sections of Old City and the imposing City Hall. This contrast frames a narrative juxtaposing the grandeur of the American nation with the severity of social and housing problems on the eve of the 1940s. Beyond portraying the bleak and alienating conditions of the neighborhood, the film also depicts entire blocks cleared to construct the Richard Allen Homes, one of Pennsylvania's first subsidized housing projects¹⁰. Intended to accommodate poor families displaced from the very neighborhoods that had been demolished, the project proved insufficient, failing to deliver the promised relief for expelled residents. With expressive intensity surpassing that of traditional textual or bibliographic sources, the film reveals the contradictions of post-New Deal urban policies, oscillating between failed modernization ambitions, widespread demolition, and displacement, and serves as a national critique of urban governance extending far beyond Philadelphia.

Approximately a decade later, the documentary *And Ten Thousand More* (1951)¹¹, sponsored by the Housing Authority of Los Angeles, offered a similarly compelling portrayal of dwellings deemed unsuitable for a civilized society, echoing the conditions depicted in *A Place to Live*. Both these audiovisual productions reflect a strong social advocacy, amplified by housing associations aiming to communicate the urgent need for intervention in old neighborhoods. The deliberately dramatic tone highlights the intellectual rationale of urban planning and participates, knowingly or not, in a broader effort to "sell" the necessity of clearing older urban fabrics.

9. *A Place to Live*, directed by Irving Lerner, produced by Documentary Film Productions for the Philadelphia Housing Association, 1941. See also: *Housing Problems Shown in TCA Movie*, in «The Tech», 3 April 1942, pp. 1, 4. *A Place to Live* originated from a survey promoted by the Philadelphia Housing Association, founded in 1909 to address poor sanitary and housing conditions of the city. Through research, campaigns, and political advocacy, the association achieved concrete reforms, contributing to the adoption of the 1915 Building Code and supporting the introduction of Zoning in 1933. Even during the Great Depression, it continued to play an active role in promoting housing reforms, and in 1937 helped launch the city's public housing program. Cf. J.F. Bauman, *Public housing, race, and renewal: urban planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1987.

10. See J.F. Bauman *et al.*, *Public Housing, Isolation, and the Urban Underclass: Philadelphia's Richard Allen Homes, 1941-1965*, in «Journal of Urban History», 17 (May 1991), 3, pp. 264-292, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009614429101700302>.

11. *And Ten Thousand More*, directed by Algernon G. Walker and Gene Petersen, sponsored by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, produced by the Department of Cinema, University of Southern California, 1951. Available at National Film Preservation Foundation: <https://www.filmpreservation.org/preserved-films/screening-room/and-ten-thousand-more-1951> (last accessed on 20 September 2025). See also *Antidote for Housing Propaganda*, in «Los Angeles Times», 23 January 1952, p. A4.



Fig. 1 – Still images from *A Place to Live*, directed by Irving Lerner, produced by Documentary Film Productions for the Philadelphia Housing Association, 1941.

However, although the producing organizations had a social mission, at this stage residents' perspectives were not treated as central. The primary purpose of these films was guided more by ideological considerations than by an intent to represent the perspectives of those living in the affected areas.

In this context, urban planning and politics were intensely focused on identifying the physical and economic causes of blight and housing crises – occasionally implying moral or racial judgments¹² – and, crucially, on devising remedies to counter suburban decentralization and middle-class flight¹³.

12. «Almost all cases of obsolescence may be laid at the door of exploitation. Only occasionally can it be attributed to the faulty form of the city. It may be due to a faulty social structure [...] we speak of certain races as being inferior, and when these races move into a district they depreciate it in the minds of many», G.H. Herrold, *Obsolescence in Cities*, in «The Planners' Journal», 4 (1935), 1, p. 75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363508978650>. Among the numerous studies examining the relationship between residential decay and moral deterioration, see the section «Morals: a) Delinquency studies; b) Crime; c) Immorality», in E. Elmer Wood, *Slums and blighted areas in the United States...*, cit., pp. 9-14.

13. The urbanization of peripheral areas, coupled with middle-class migration, began in the early twentieth century and accelerated during the New Deal. Agencies such as the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (1933) and the Federal Housing Administration (1934) promoted credit access for single-family suburban homes, considered safer investments than central districts. Redlining practices devalued urban areas, indirectly encouraging decentralization. Cities attempted to counteract middle-class erosion through federally supported programs, such as the Housing Act of 1937, which financed local public housing. The decay of downtowns and the concentration of poor immigrants both reflected and reinforced this socio-territorial imbalance. Efforts to reverse these trends – attracting

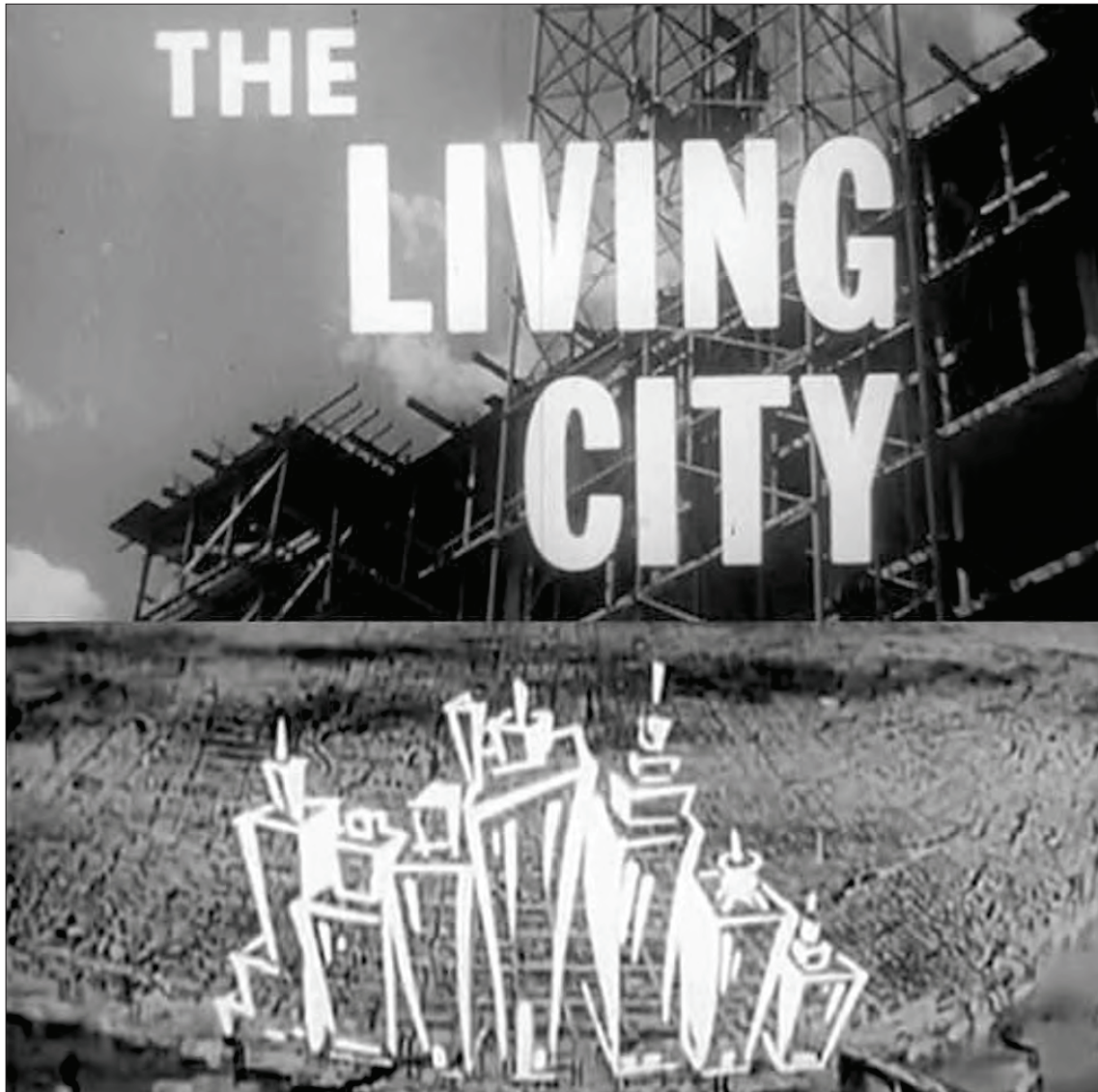


Fig. 2 – Still images from *The Living City*, directed by John Barnes, sponsored by the Twentieth Century Fund, produced by Encyclopædia Britannica Films, 1953 © 1953 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

This perspective is exemplified in *The Living City* (1953)¹⁴, set largely in Chicago. The film portrays suburban expansion as a primary cause of inner-city

middle- and upper-class residents to city centers while displacing poorer groups – were driven by social concerns and mostly fiscal objectives, including restoring municipal income, increasing central-area taxpayers, and creating new commercial opportunities. M.L. Walker, *Urban blight and slums...*, cit., pp. 116-117. On this topic, see also: K.T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, Oxford University Press, New York 1985; D. Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*, Random House, New York 2003.

14. *The Living City*, directed by John Barnes, sponsored by the Twentieth Century Fund, produced by Encyclopædia Britannica Films, 1953. The film is partly inspired by the book *Renewing Our Cities* (1953) by M.L. Colean and received a nomination for the Academy Award for Best Short Documentary.

decline and urges the middle-class community to support the revitalization of struggling old neighborhoods. Using a less dramatic but more didactic approach, the film serves as a concise urban planning lesson, aimed at convincing viewers of the need to intervene in central districts. The narrative traces the evolution of the «living American city, never complete, never finished», focusing on urban actors, rather than residents: a white middle-class citizen who moved to the suburbs but commutes daily to the downtown; a local planning commissioner explaining the necessity of inner-city demolition and sanitation, advocating social and urban reasons obstructed by builders' – who profit from suburban construction – and landlords' – who withhold price reductions in anticipation of future appreciation – interests. Once again, poor's perspective is relegated to the margins and overshadowed by a narrative crafted for middle-class and elite audiences.

Looking back, a similar comparative storyline had already appeared in *The City* (1939)¹⁵, which predates *The Living City* and differs in cultural aims. Directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, with a script by Lewis Mumford, the film serves as a cinematic manifesto for structural and social rethinking of urban life, drawing on European Garden City theories and early American experiments such as Radburn and Greenbelt, developed by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright under the Regional Planning Association of America¹⁶. The documentary thus aims to promote a dynamic literally opposite to *The Living City*, which sought to encourage a return to the city; yet it also shares a logic of rejecting existing neighborhoods deemed irreparably compromised. Sponsored by the American Institute of Planners, it depicts the evolution of the American urban environment and residents' living conditions, from New England's bucolic villages to the physical and psychological alienation of New York and Pittsburgh neighborhoods transformed into industrial districts. The prophetic declaration «The age of rebuilding is here. We must remold our old cities and build new communities, better suited to our needs» presents Howardian-inspired new garden neighborhoods as a panacea for unhealthy dwellings and the alienation produced by capitalist urban decay¹⁷. While the film critiques consumerism's social impact, its exclusive

15. *The City*, directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, sponsored by the American Documentary Films Inc., produced by the American Institute of Planners, 1939. See also J.S. Zuker, *Ralph Steiner, Filmmaker and Still Photographer*, Arno Press, New York 1978; J.L. Enyeart, *Willard Van Dyke: Changing The World Through Photography and Film*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque 2008.

16. C.S. Stein, *Towards New Towns for America*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1951; P.K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1959; G. Ciucci et al., *La città americana: dalla Guerra Civile al New Deal*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1973; P. Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design In the Twentieth Century*, Blackwell, Oxford 1988.

17. In fact, the final sequences were filmed in Greenbelt, MD, one of the new satellite towns built during the New Deal era, and one of the most controversial cases due to the social choices made, providing housing exclusively for the white community while excluding the share of Black residents for whom several units had originally been intended.

emphasis on new planning reflects a limited perspective: older neighborhoods are reduced to mere antiheroes in the polished reality of new satellite cities, revealing substantial indifference to preservation or rehabilitation initiatives.

Considering the broader cultural and operational context, it is unsurprising that such efforts were overlooked by institutions and planning circles, even outside the ideological experiments of the Regional Planning Association. Nevertheless, alongside calls for demolition, rehabilitation was addressed in rare, largely theoretical reflections, without any practical realization. These ideas, aimed at restoring some existing structures, were sporadically visible in publications from the late 1930s and early 1940s, opening a dual critical reflection: on one hand, preservation represented an unusual, counter-narrative perspective opposing the prevailing notion that urban decline justified large-scale demolition; on the other, these references partially challenge the prevalent view of an uneasy relationship between planning and preservation¹⁸, revealing that early conservationist ideas had begun to surface within urban planning, though they remained limited and were largely neglected in subsequent twentieth-century American developments¹⁹.

2. Federal Policies and the Postwar Rhetoric of Urban Renewal

Following 1940s debates, the Truman administration formalized congressional intervention to support major urban and housing initiatives, including the enactment of the Housing Act of 1949²⁰. The law provided

Cf. J.L. Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1954*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus 1972; L. Ciacci, *The City, U.S.A. 1939*, in «Planum. The Journal of Urbanism», <http://www.planum.net/the-city-2> (last accessed on 20 September 2025).

18. E.L. Birch, D. Roby, *The Planner and the Preservationist: An Uneasy Alliance*, in «Journal of the American Planning Association», 50 (April 1984), 2, pp. 194-207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944368408977175>.

19. The following observations clarify this issue: «There are still old-time residence districts in the city which could be reclaimed and, in some cases, still take on some of the aspect of the pleasanter earlier days. In some of these districts there are fine old houses which are worthy of preservation for themselves alone», G.D. Hall *et al.*, *Monotony in Cities: Concluding Discussion*, in «The Planners' Journal», 6 (1936), 2, pp. 160-161, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363608978708>; «In the less wholly blighted neighborhoods of a community (...) we advocate a method of conservation, which may involve partial redevelopment but consists principally of protective measures rather than reconstruction», R.C. Weinberg, *A Technique for Urban Rehabilitation*, in «Journal of the American Institute of Planners», 10 (1944), 1, p. 24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944364408979408>.

20. During the presidency of Harry S. Truman (1945-1953), Congress reshaped its agenda to support building and urban renewal through the *Improving the Physical, Social, and Economic Health of Cities* program, aiming to contribute to the development and rehabilitation of housing and the built environment. The Housing Act of 1937 had already allocated federal funds for the demolition of slums and blighted areas, but before WWII, contractors' profits were largely limited to the sale of debris and salvaged materials; after

federal funds to local public authorities for the expropriation and demolition of deteriorated historic neighborhoods, intended for urban development projects to be assigned to private developers²¹. Though arising from identified needs, the building replacement authorized by this legislation followed two contradictory dynamics: on one hand, older districts were demolished and replaced with public housing complexes, which tended to reinforce segregation based on income and ethnicity; on the other, vulnerable social groups were often expelled to make way for new construction opportunities that attracted real estate interests under the guise of urban revitalization. This program gave rise to the so-called “culture of clearance”, characterized by the leveling of entire urban areas and the forced displacement of residents. Old districts labeled as blighted automatically became preferred sites for federal programs, praised by government leaders, media, and headlines in major American cities proclaiming: «Urban Renewal Only Way to Slow Decline of Cities», «The Busy Bulldozers», «Fighting Blight», «Council Criticizes, Passes Blight Plan», «Your Rights in Face of Urban Renewers», and «City Eyes Huge Urban Bonanza»²².

In a 1956 television interview, Arch N. Booth, Executive Vice President of the United States Chamber of Commerce, hosted real estate consultant Frederick J. Bashaw to enthusiastically present the documentary *The Dynamic American City*²³. Commissioned the same year by the Chamber of Commerce, the documentary exemplifies postwar American urban renewal rhetoric and imagery, adopting a strongly optimistic perspective on modernization and economic growth associated with the demolition of existing structures. Following the format of earlier media productions, the film’s technocratic message relies on visual contrasts, alternating the celebration of new urban demolitions and reconstructions – framed as inevitable stages of progress – with images of older buildings portrayed as obsolete and dilapidated.

the war, firms were paid directly with federal funds, encouraging speculative operations driven by economic interests in demolition. This aspect therefore contributed to incentivizing speculative operations, supported by greater economic interests derived from the demolitions. Cf. F. Russello Ammon, *Bulldozer...*, cit.; A.L. Palazzo, *Orizzonti dell’America Urbana. Scenari, politiche, progetti*, Edizioni RomaTrePress, Roma 2022.

21. The 1949 Act required that contracts for loans or capital grants include several provisions: the redevelopment plan had to be formally approved by local authorities; the plan had to conform to the broader community development framework; purchasers or lessees of the property were legally bound to follow the plan and commence construction within a reasonable time; and arrangements had to ensure the temporary relocation of displaced families, along with the permanent provision of adequate, safe, and sanitary housing. Housing Act of 1949, Pub. L. No. 81-171, 63 Stat. 413, 1949. Cf. also J.Q. Wilson, *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy...*, cit.

22. M. Anderson, *The Federal bulldozer...*, cit., p. 12.

23. *The Dynamic American City*, directed by Frederick J. Baskaw, sponsored by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, produced by the University of Southern California, 1956.



Fig. 3 – Still images from The Dynamic American City, directed by Frederick J. Baskaw, sponsored by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, produced by the University of Southern California, 1956. An example of building obsolescence in the film.

Yet the buildings deemed obstacles to urban dynamism were not limited to slums condemned by prior urban ideologies; they also included nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architecture, such as Victorian residences in neo-Romanesque and neo-Gothic styles (fig. 3), depicted in the film being demolished and

replaced with shopping centers and multi-story garages. In fact, road infrastructure and transport-related facilities play a central role in the narrative. The primacy of the automobile, elevated as a symbol of modernity and a prerequisite for contemporary urban life, implicitly underscores the need to adapt historic American cities to car mobility, a theme previously staged in *The American Road* (1953), sponsored by the Ford Motor Company²⁴. On one hand, Ford nurtures the myth of the American road as the nation's backbone; on the other, the Chamber of Commerce promotes urban reorganization that inevitably places the automobile at the center of city life. The voice-over stresses the ideological nature of the film, addressing political and real estate elites in an assertive, unhesitating tone that normalizes ongoing transformations. Furthermore, it calls for actions ranked as essential to projecting the city and society into the future, including the removal of interferences embodied by historic buildings. By envisioning technological and market logic through the dystopian abandonment of past forms and objects, the film moves beyond documenting the meaning of urban development practices and becomes an instrument of narrative pedagogy. It is striking that the video entirely overlooks the human dimension, presenting the city's dynamism as if it were entirely disconnected from the daily lives and diverse needs of its residents.

Although clearing became a defining practice of the mid-twentieth-century American urban attitude, the following Housing Act of 1954 represented a partial shift. The terminological change from "development" to "renewal" in the legislation was intended to convey the idea of more sensitive approaches to regenerating urban and building fabrics. This meant that funding interventions directly targeting buildings within districts slated for rehabilitation were intended to replace indiscriminate demolition, though results remained controversial²⁵. The transformation of old neighborhoods under the new legal framework typically resulted in two recurring scenarios: speculative programs aimed at maximizing profits through building replacement or large-scale infrastructure projects²⁶, and federal funding opportunities for urban restoration projects, which nonetheless pursued the myth of historical and stylistic uniformity of the district – reflecting the nationalist character rooted in architectural preservation in the United States²⁷.

24. *The American Road*, directed by George Stoney, sponsored by the Ford Motor Company, produced by MPO Productions, 1953.

25. It is estimated that between the 1950s and 1980s, the urban renewal programs initiated under President Eisenhower resulted in the demolition of 7.5 million housing units, approximately 27,000 of which were removed during the 1960s alone. Cf. F. Russello Ammon, *Bulldozer...*, cit.

26. In addition to the emblematic projects in New York City promoted by Robert Moses – whose role is discussed in the following pages – this category also encompasses areas targeted for demolition through funds allocated under the Federal-Aid Highway Act (1956), enacted by President Dwight D. Eisenhower to finance the American highway network.

27. The origins of historic preservation in the United States, specifically in the eastern states, are situated by historiography in fragmentary operations, aimed exclusively at protecting colonial buildings and sites evocative of the identity values of the young American nation. This

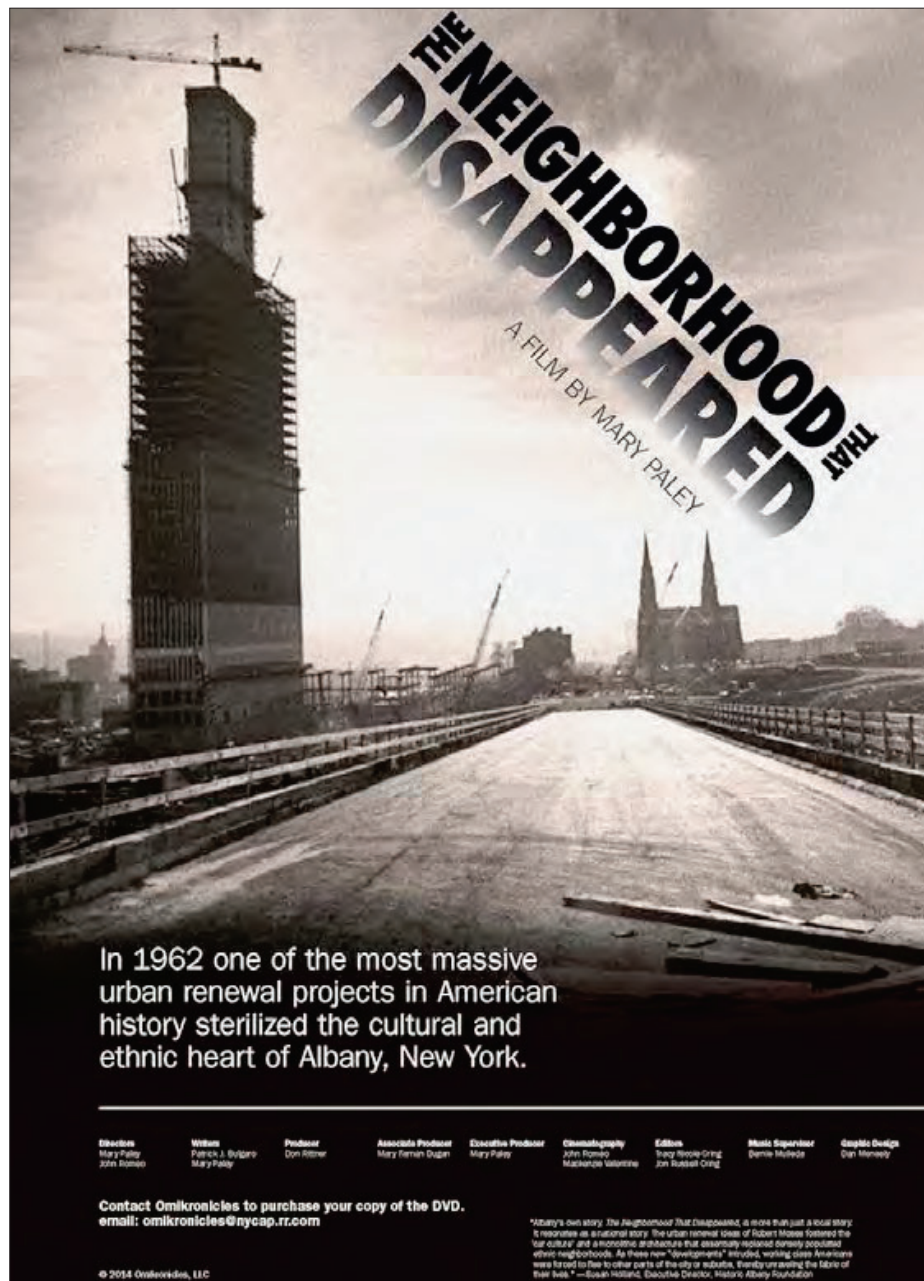


Fig. 4 – *The Neighborhood That Disappeared*, directed by Mary Paley and John Romeo, written by Patrick J. Bulgaro and Mary Paley, produced by Don Rittner, 2014. DVD Jacket Photo by Newsman Bob Paley, DVD Jacket Design by Dan Meneely.

As with Truman-era programs, the social fragility of old neighborhoods was exploited to legitimize federal interventions in historic districts. Whether in speculative operations or in cases where urban renewal was framed as a tool

approach reveals that, while the recognition of patriotic features is used as a criterion to select the properties to be conserved, this very selection also assumes an instrumental role in the broader objective of constructing a shared historical identity. C.B. Hosmer, *Presence of the Past...*, cit.; W.J. Murtagh, *Keeping Time. The History and Theory of Preservation in America*, Wiley, New York City 1988; R.F. Mason, M. Page (eds.), *Giving Preservation a History. Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*, Routledge, New York 2020.

for historic district rehabilitation, the imbalance between decision-making elites and local communities did not necessarily prevent the latter's expulsion. The resulting displacements also led to widespread gentrification, with effects that remain visible today in the social homogeneity of historic districts once targeted for regeneration, typically inhabited by wealthier residents.

Critical perspectives on the social consequences are effectively documented in alternative sources, such as independent documentaries, which focus primarily on collective perceptions of urban change. While during the demolition plans the films often served as rhetorical instruments – as exemplified by *The Baltimore Plan* (1953)²⁸ – recent decades have seen documentaries emphasizing communities' accounts of history. *The Hidden Cities of San Francisco: The Fillmore* (1999)²⁹ recounts the devastation of the Fillmore District, once known as the “Harlem of the West”, where the exodus of thousands of African American residents caused profound cultural trauma. Similarly, both *The neighborhood that disappeared* (2014)³⁰ and *Lost Rondout: A Story of Urban Removal* (2016)³¹ retrace the destruction of the South End of Albany, NY and Kingston, New York's waterfront district, highlighting the loss of vibrant, multiethnic communities and the experiences of those affected. *What Happened to Jackson Avenue* (2023)³² and *Taken Away: Urban Renewal and Boston's West End* (2024)³³ extend this narrative, revealing the emotional and social scars left in Nyack (New York) and Boston's West End, where the demolition of homes and businesses in the 1960s erased long-established urban fabrics.

28. *The Baltimore Plan*, directed by Selma Weisenborn and John Barnes, sponsored by the Baltimore Redevelopment Commission and the Fight Blight Fund Inc., produced by Encyclopaedia Britannica Films, 1953. Available at National Film Preservation Foundation: <https://www.filmpreservation.org/sponsored-films/screening-room/the-baltimore-plan> (last accessed on 20 September 2025). The documentary acts as urban propaganda, highlighting housing decay in East Baltimore's Black neighborhoods to legitimize renewal plans for a white, middle-class audience. Its paternalistic narration emphasizes successes, downplays contradictions, and conceals the real estate interests behind the projects. B. Leclair-Paquet, *The 'Baltimore Plan': Case-Study from the Prehistory of Urban Rehabilitation*, in «Urban History», 44 (2017), 3, pp. 516-43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0963926817000219>.

29. *The Hidden Cities of San Francisco: The Fillmore*, directed by Rick Butler, written and produced by Peter L. Stein, narrated by Ossie Davis, 1999. Available at PBS: <https://www.pbs.org/show/neighborhoods-the-hidden-cities-of-san-francisco-the-fillmore/> (last accessed on 20 September 2025).

30. *The Neighborhood That Disappeared*, directed by Mary Paley and John Romeo, written by Patrick J. Bulgaro and Mary Paley, produced by Don Rittner, 2014.

31. *Lost Rondout: A Story of Urban Removal*, directed and produced by Stephen Blauweiss and Lynn Woods, 2016.

32. *What Happened to Jackson Avenue: A Story of Urban Renewal*, directed by Rudi Gohl and Hakima Alem, produced by Phoenix Theatre Ensemble and RG Films Productions, 2023.

33. *Taken Away: Urban Renewal and Boston's West End*, directed by Christopher Brown, produced for UMASS Boston in partnership with The West End Museum, 2024.



Fig. 5 – Lost Rondout: A Story of Urban Removal, directed and produced by Stephen Blauweiss and Lynn Woods, 2016. Photograph by Gene Dauner.

All these films feature interviews with residents, either directly involved in these processes or recalling them through family memories. In every case, residents resisted leaving their neighborhoods, not only because the buildings were often in conditions that did not justify demolition, but also because they

sought to avoid losing their communities. The theme of community destruction is vividly conveyed through such personal accounts, which describe both the social fabric that was disrupted – including local routines, churches, and recreational centers – and the affective attachment to buildings and personal property. Residents also report that the disorientation following removal was intensified by the frequent lack of available housing: public or subsidized housing developed elsewhere was often insufficient or not provided, forcing them to find alternative accommodations on their own, typically at costs far exceeding the compensation received for the demolition of their homes. Thus, these documentaries not only record the loss of architectural heritage but also give residents' stories a space previously marginalized, fostering a new line of inquiry into the social effects of displacing established communities, thereby enriching urban studies and public history research.



Fig. 6 – Still image from *Lost Rondout: A Story of Urban Removal*, directed and produced by Stephen Blauweiss and Lynn Woods, 2016. Photograph by Gene Dauner.

3. *Robert Moses in New York City: A Case Study of Media and Power to validate Urban Transformation*

Within the broader American context of urban renewal, and particularly in the urban history of New York City, Robert Moses (1888–1981) stands out as one of the most influential and controversial figures³⁴. His authority in

34. In one of the most well-known obituaries in the editorial history of *The New York Times*, Paul Goldberger reports Lewis Mumford's words: «In the 20th century, the influence of Robert Moses on the cities of America was greater than that of any other person» (P. Goldberger, *Obituary: Robert Moses, Master Builder, is Dead at 92*, in «The New York Times», 30 July 1981, p. 1). An extensive scholarship has examined the figure

transforming New York's built environment spanned approximately three decades, beginning with his appointment as the first city-wide Commissioner of Parks in 1934 and subsequently through additional key positions, including Chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (1934-1968) and Commissioner of the New York City Planning Commission (1942-1960).

In the mid-twentieth century, Moses promoted the construction of large-scale infrastructural and recreational projects while simultaneously leading the nation's largest slum clearance program, which entailed extensive demolitions of buildings and historic districts and profoundly reshaped the city's urban landscape³⁵.

Moses conceived his urban renewal program to strengthen the center of New York during a period of suburban flight and urban decay. His strategy followed three main directions: attracting the middle class back to the city through the construction of modern and luxurious housing; consolidating New York as a hub of higher education by providing space for the expansion of prestigious and elite universities; and enhancing the city's media prominence through iconic institutions such as the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and the Coliseum, designed as an exhibition and international representation center. However, this agenda produced highly unequal effects, privileging upper-middle classes and large cultural institutions while sacrificing the needs of poorer families, ethnic minorities, and small business owners, who were expelled from districts slated for reconstruction and relegated to more peripheral slums. The geographical distribution of Moses's program reflects this interventionist logic: of the seventeen projects undertaken, thirteen were

of Moses, including studies that explore his work from various perspectives. Key studies include: C. Rodgers, *Robert Moses, builder for democracy*, Holt, New York 1952; J. Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus 1993; H. Ballon, K.T. Jackson (eds.), *Robert Moses and the modern city: the transformation of New York*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York 2007; R. Brandes Gratz, *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs*, Nation Books, New York 2010. For the most renowned critical study, see: R. Caro, *The Power Broker...*, cit.

35. Notable infrastructural projects include the Triborough Bridge, Queens Midtown Tunnel, Bronx Whitestone Bridge, Henry Hudson Bridge, Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, Westside Highway, Jones Beach State Park, Robert Moses State Park, the Robert Moses Power Plant on the Saint Lawrence River, and the Robert Moses Power Dam on the Niagara River. Among the most emblematic slum clearance projects were Stuyvesant Town-Peter Cooper Village (1947), built by MetLife on 18 blocks of the Gas House District with 110 buildings covering 25% of the land and a density of 302 residents per acre, and the Lincoln Square Renewal Project (1955-1969), which replaced San Juan Hill on the Upper West Side, displacing 7,000 families and 800 businesses across 18 blocks. In both cases, most former residents could not afford the new apartments, and racial restrictions and inadequate relocation assistance exacerbated social inequalities. Cf. S. Zipp, *The battle of Lincoln Square: Neighbourhood culture and the rise of resistance to urban renewal*, in «Planning Perspectives», 24 (October 2009), 4, pp. 409-433, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665430903145655>; S. Zipp, *Manhattan projects: The rise and fall of urban renewal in cold war New York*, Oxford University Press, New York 2010.

in Manhattan, with two in Brooklyn and two in Queens³⁶. Consequently, unlike other cities that used the fiscal instruments of Title I of the Housing Act of 1949 to revitalize commerce and restore declining downtown areas, Moses's New York focused on projects aimed at showcasing the city, as exemplified by the Coliseum.

For Moses, slums and older neighborhoods were akin to «Dresden after the bombings»³⁷: dead bodies to be razed to the ground, a physical problem to be addressed with new roads and buildings rather than a social issue to be resolved. This partial view of the urban ecosystem coincided with a limited attention to urban and architectural design. Moses directed the allocation of land uses and the general planning frameworks within which interventions were situated, but he delegated project design decisions to private sponsors, as if urban design were a matter of individual taste rather than public policy. Whether aiming at expanding automobile infrastructure or directly concerning with building replacement, his projects were guided by the ideal of the city's economic and social growth, using federal funds while excluding lower-income communities from the notion of “social”³⁸. A 1953 interview on *Longines Chronoscope*³⁹, in which Moses conversed with William Bradford Huie and Hardy Burt, clearly illustrates this perspective, which influenced urban renewal practices in many other American cities of the era. In the footage, Moses defends centralized decision-making and a technocratic approach, explaining that planning should prioritize efficiency over popular pressure. Justifying demolitions as necessary for progress and safety while minimizing or ignoring their human impact, this source demonstrates his rhetorical confidence but also highlights the informational limitation of interview-based materials, which tend to present projects unilaterally, concealing the economic interests of urban elites.

Moses's figure and experience in New York therefore provide a particularly compelling case for understanding the complexity of urban renewal and its narrative dimensions. This includes both the use of media to justify interventions and the insights offered by critical sources highlighting

36. For a detailed discussion of projects sponsored by Moses, which lie beyond the scope of this essay, see the bibliography cited in note 34.

37. H. Ballon, K.T. Jackson (eds.), *Robert Moses and the modern city...*, cit., p. 108.

38. *Ivi*, pp. 94-115. As President of the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance, Moses quickly acted on Title I, launching 17 of 32 planned projects and securing \$65.8 million in federal aid for New York – more than double Chicago's \$30.8 million. For a detailed analysis of the use of federal funds within urban renewal projects, see also H. Kaplan, *Urban Renewal Politics. Slum Clearance in Newark*, Columbia University Press, New York 1963; M.I. Gelfand, *Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965*, Oxford University Press, New York 1975.

39. *William Bradford Huie and Hardy Burt talk with Robert Moses, city planner, on urban renewal and problems in public planning of traffic, housing and parkways*, *Longines Chronoscope* TV series, 2 November 1953, 14:35 min. Available at Taft School Digital Archive: <https://taftschoollibguides.com/c.php?g=1280853&p=9406115> (last accessed on 20 September 2025).

the detrimental effects on heritage and local populations. As his television interviews show, Moses was adept at shaping his image through journalistic and audiovisual media. A key example is the 1959 interview with Gilmore D. Clarke⁴⁰, in which he is shown through carefully controlled shots: a reassuring face under uniform lighting and an official setting with plans and models in the background, conveying a sense of competence. His language is deliberately calm, tone measured, and every gesture reinforces the image of a disinterested, expert planner looking toward the future. This use of television, combined with press releases and radio addresses, contributed to a narrative portraying him as a «selfless servant of the people»⁴¹. Newspaper citations, such as the *New York Times* calling him «one of the greatest public servants of our time»⁴², were not mere praise but part of a broader political strategy of self-legitimation. On television and in public footage, Moses was acutely aware of the persuasive power of images: highways cutting through the city, towering bridges, and lush parks served as visual proof of progress. The 1959 interview amplifies this rhetoric to demonstrate that urban renewal succeeds in achieving tangible results. A substantial audiovisual archive further supports this strategy. Consulting audio material from the Robert Moses Collection at WNYC⁴³, or listening to interviews such as *A Conversation with Robert Moses* (1977)⁴⁴, reveal a carefully calibrated use of language, with general appeals to collective interest and few concessions to actual controversies.

However, Moses's famous motto, «Those who can, build. Those who can't, criticize»⁴⁵, contrasts with a reality gradually uncovered in documentaries produced after his tenure in New York. *The World that Moses Built* (1989)⁴⁶, narrated by historian David McCullough and produced as part

40. *A Conversation with Robert Moses and Gilmore D. Clarke*, NBC interview, 1959, 30:24 min. Available at Taft School Digital Archive: <https://taftschoollibguides.com/c.php?g=1280853&p=9406115> (last accessed on 20 September 2025).

41. The quotation, originally published on the «Tribune», is cited in D. Perrell, *Mastering the Media: The Secrets of Robert Moses*, <https://perell.com/essay/robert-moses/> (last accessed on 20 September 2025).

42. W. D. Ogdon, *Reflections of a Public Servant*, «The New York Times», 11 March 1956, p. 259.

43. The Robert Moses Municipal Archives Collection of WNYC recordings consists of audio sourced from transcription discs and open-reel tapes. The materials span several decades, from the 1940s to the mid-1960s, with the majority dating from the early 1950s to the early 1960s. The collection includes recordings of public works openings – highways, monuments, and parks – as well as meetings and luncheons, both in Moses's honor and for others. It also features instances where he publicly advocated for many of his controversial projects. <https://www.wnyc.org/series/robert-moses/stories> (last accessed on 20 September 2025).

44. *A Conversation with Robert Moses*, *WNET Reports*, sponsored by Ford Foundation and Members of Channel 13, 1977.

45. Moses' saying is frequently mentioned in several of the documentaries cited in this essay.

46. *The World that Moses Built*, written by Mark Obenhaus and Edward Gray, produced by Obenhaus Films in association with WGBH Boston, WNET New York, KCET Los Angeles for PBS Video, 1988. Aired on American Experience, 10 January 1989.

of PBS's *The American Experience*, revisits Moses's programs and impact through archival footage and interviews. Despite the adoption of an analytical approach, the documentary concludes simplistically: although thousands were harmed by Moses's projects, «millions will benefit». Similarly, Moses is portrayed as a genius who may have struggled with democracy, but whose excesses were those of a visionary. By contrast, the more recent *Robert Moses: In the Name of Urban Renewal* (2001)⁴⁷, part of PBS's *New York: A Documentary Film*, featuring critic Robert Caro, employs archival footage and photographs to highlight clearly the social controversy surrounding his interventions in a city that was «not an empty canvas, but the most crowded canvas in the world»⁴⁸. Caro is also featured in *Robert Moses: The Man Who Rebuilt New York* (2022), a CBS News production that combines archival material from the CBS documentary *The Man Who Built New York* (1963), contemporary interviews with witnesses and scholars, and segments of the play *Straight Line Crazy*, with Ralph Fiennes as Moses⁴⁹. Over the decades, audiovisual narratives have become increasingly objective and data-rich. Scholars highlight the compromise of real estate interests, while witnesses recount neighborhood life, demonstrating pre-demolition conditions that show both the unnecessary nature of interventions and the damage inflicted on urban heritage.

Nevertheless, by the late 1950s, the loss of material heritage, together with growing social critiques, helped spark a modern awareness of preservation, fostering a cultural climate that saw urban renewal as a major threat to urban America's conservation⁵⁰. In New York, within the framework shaped by Moses's transformations, the early 1960s witnessed the demolition of Pennsylvania Station to make way for Madison Square Garden. It is unsurprising that Moses, then President of the New York World's Fair 1964-

47. *Robert Moses: In the Name of Urban Renewal*, *New York: A Documentary Film*, directed by Ric Burns, produced by Steeplechase Films Production for The American Experience in Association with WGBH Boston, Thirteen/WNET in New York and The New York Historical Society, 2001. Available at PBS LearningMedia: <https://whyy.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/robert-moses-urban-renewal-video-gallery/new-york-documentary-film/> (last accessed on 20 September 2025).

48. In his detailed biography of Moses, Caro points out that the construction of the highways promoted by Moses alone caused the displacement of 250,000 residents. An additional 10,000 were displaced for projects such as the Lincoln Center, the United Nations complex, and the campuses of Fordham, Pratt, and Long Island Universities, bringing the total to approximately 320,000 displaced persons in the decade between 1946 and 1956. R. Caro, *The Power Broker...*, cit.

49. *Robert Moses: The Man Who Rebuilt New York*, CBS News, 2022. Available at CBS News: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/robert-moses-the-man-who-rebuilt-new-york/> (last accessed on 20 September 2025). See also: *Straight Line Crazy*, written by David Hare, directed by Nicholas Hytner, premiered on 16 March 2022 at the Bridge Theatre, London.

50. N. Brown, *The fight to save the Nation's Landmarks*, in «The New York Times», 28 September 1958, p. 37.

1965 Corporation, expressed approval of the station's demolition in 1963. In promoting the city's exhibition, he stated: «The whole station was inconvenient. The big shed was, and is, a monstrosity. No doubt the Grand Central Station is not as fine a monument, but it is a hell of a lot better station»⁵¹. While the scale of demolitions he championed had already heightened awareness of the fragility of urban and architectural heritage, the Penn Station episode further inflamed public opinion, exemplifying the intense conflict between new preservation aspirations and the bulldozer economy⁵².

Final Remarks: Heritage and Collective Memory in the Wake of Transformation

While the cultural discourse of the country echoed the protests in New York through authoritative voices such as Jane Jacobs', as documented in *Jane Jacobs and the Fight Against Urban Renewal*⁵³, there were also instances in which citizens, supported by local Preservation Societies, successfully resisted urban renewal. Between 1963 and 1964, however, the election of Lyndon B. Johnson contributed to a shift in direction by the institutional establishment, which initiated a task force to update federal preservation legislation⁵⁴. The outcome of this intense period was the

51. Letter, Robert Moses, President, New York World's Fair 1964-1965 Corporation, to Department of Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris, 2 April 1962. Department of Parks General Files. NYC Municipal Archives. Quoted in K. Cobb, *Re-discovering the Old Pennsylvania Station*, 7th June 2024, <https://www.archives.nyc/blog/2024/6/7/re-discovering-the-old-pennsylvania-station> (last accessed on 20 September 2025).

52. For discussions of the movements that arose to prevent the demolition of Penn Station and their impact on American society, see A.C. Wood, *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks*, Routledge, New York 2008.

53. *Jane Jacobs and the Fight Against Urban Renewal, New York: A Documentary Film*, directed by Ric Burns, produced by Steeplechase Films Production for The American Experience in Association with WGBH Boston, Thirteen/WNET in New York and The New York Historical Society, 2001. Available at: <https://why.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/jane-jacobs-against-urban-renewal-video-gallery/new-york-documentary-film/> (last accessed on 20 September 2025).

54. At this stage, the Special Committee on Historic Preservation, or Rains Committee, was established as a non-partisan delegation tasked with visiting Europe and examining the state of legislation and restoration practices to guide the updating of United States regulations. The outcome of this initiative was the publication of the report *With Heritage So Rich* (1966), which influenced the political debate so decisively that it became the fundamental antecedent of the three axes of action leading to the new Congressional law: the administration of President Lyndon Johnson approved a funding plan for the acquisition and protection of privately owned historic properties, drawing from the Special Committee's report the idea of entrusting the Secretary of the Interior with the national register of sites and buildings expressing American culture; the National Park Service consolidated its role by defining the criteria for managing the national register and federal grants; finally, members of the same Rains Committee ensured that the recommendations

approval, in October 1966, of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). For the first time, the law introduced the notion of the historic district within the national heritage, thus requiring a prior assessment of the impacts of potential interventions – albeit limited to projects executed with federal funding. The NHPA therefore inaugurated an era of “New Preservation”, based on an increasing awareness of the significance of urban and traditional environments, as well as recognizing the intangible value of heritage⁵⁵.

Although the enactment of the law marked a milestone in the history of American preservation, it did not erase the social trauma experienced by communities displaced from their traditional environments. Growing scholarly work within the field of urban history has sought to recover these previously silenced voices. In this context, an increasing number of audiovisual productions continue to uncover lesser-known stories, deserving attention and remembrance. The authenticity of these accounts, and the insights they provide into the everyday impacts of urban transformations, highlight the contrast with the idealized and abstract representations presented at the time of their implementation.

As illustrated by the examples discussed in this essay, interviews, promotional footage, and statements by influential figures such as Robert Moses conveyed an abstract, polished vision of the city, emphasizing efficiency, modernity, and progress. This contrast reflects a broader twentieth-century process in which urban space became increasingly mediated, especially in American metropolises⁵⁶. In this context, media functioned not merely as channels of information but as environments shaping the perception and organization of urban space, resonating with contemporary theoretical reflections, including Marshall McLuhan’s famous observations on the environmental role of media.

Over the longer term, the trajectory of mediated representations in postwar cities anticipated more radical conceptualizations of urban space as an informational system, exemplified by MVRDV’s *Metacity* (2000), in which the city is rendered entirely legible through data visualization. The legacy of urban renewal and the diverse forms of representation through which it can be studied is thus measured not only by its physical transformations and the dislocations it produced, but also by the ways these changes were narrated and mediated, illuminating both the power and the limitations of visual and informational strategies in shaping civic awareness and collective memory.

of *With Heritage So Rich* were translated into measures against urban renewal and the establishment of an Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. See J.A. Glass, *The Beginnings of a New National Historic Preservation Program, 1957 to 1969*, American Association for State and Local History, Nashville 1990.

55. This latter aspect is evident in the preamble of the law, which states that «the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development» (S. 3035: Public Law 89-665, 15 October 1966).

56. In the postwar era, the expansion of transmission infrastructures, including broadcasting lines, towers, and antennas sponsored and regulated by the Federal Communications Commission, facilitated the circulation of urban images and narratives at regional and national scales. This network, in turn, played a crucial role in shaping urban communication landscapes.