

The 1939 New York World's Fair Bench: An Object of Complicated Simplicity

Objects ordinarily regarded as minimal, uncomplicated or mundane can be remarkably saturated with intentionality and significance. Though seemingly innocent, utilitarian or practical on the outside, a simple object can come alive when the objectives or aspirations that have been embedded within it are explored and revealed. While designers are often told that users define the objects or spaces they create, their work may already have intended definitions or purposes built in that reflexively guide user experience. The 1939 New York World's Fair Bench may appear to be an ordinary park bench--at first glance, it sits within Central Park as do the other benches scattered throughout providing spaces to rest or chat. Nevertheless, there are two perspectives in which this bench can, and must, be contextualized--through the biography of its designer, Robert Moses, and through the context of the site in which it was first displayed, the 1939 New York World's Fair. Through tracing this park bench alongside these two conditions, it becomes an object with a social life--traveling through space and time, carrying the ideologies and symbols underlying its construction to those it encounters.

To understand the 1939 New York World's Fair Bench is to first acknowledge and situate its designer, Robert Moses, within New York City's political, social and environmental circumstances. Though a political scientist by training, Moses held many different bureaucratic positions in New York City--at one point holding twelve simultaneously--but predominantly served as the New York City's Park Commissioner. In 1939, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia appointed Moses to this position with the instruction to better the city's atmosphere "through

urban renewal”.¹ While Moses was devoted to transforming New York City into an embodiment of “the American dream of the open road,” ordering the construction of a large number of highways, freeways, and bridges in and around New York City, he simultaneously dedicated significant energy to the development of recreational areas and parks.² It is within this field of his work that the 1939 New York World’s Fair Bench was envisioned and created. While it may seem as though a park bench is incomparable to the physical, and racially motivated, segregation that the freeways and highways that Moses built caused, there are consistencies between each of Moses’s projects that illuminate how something as seemingly minor as a park bench can symbolize much larger ideologies and perspectives which in turn, can impact the spaces they are placed in and how individuals may feel amidst them.

Locating sites for park development, and overseeing their landscape design, was a key component of Moses’s career as NYC Park Commissioner--he had clear criteria, desiring “elegant architectural features similar to those found in the European parks and gardens originally built by kings and nobles.”³ Prior to planning their specific layouts, Moses was deliberate in selecting which spaces would transform into public parks, highways, freeways or bridges and, as a result, which communities would be displaced in order to do so. Throughout the entirety of his forty-four year career, Robert Moses displaced “an estimated minimum of quarter of a million New Yorkers.”⁴ Moses’s criteria for these clearance projects was calculated and “neighborhood-specific”; he ensured that the developments he enacted and sites he selected

¹ Paul Goldberger, “Robert Moses, Master Builder, is Dead at 92.” *New York Times* (New York, New York), July 30, 1981.

² *Ibid.*

³ Adrian Benepe, “From Playground Tot to Parks Commissioner: My Life with Robert Moses.” *SiteLINES: A Journal of Place* 3, no. 1 (2007).

⁴ “Repeal Robert Moses,” *TransAlt*. July 30, 2020.
<https://transalt.medium.com/repeal-robert-moses-fc9318cfefb4>.

maintained racial segregation through their intentional placement either in proximity to, or distanced from, communities of color, depending upon the project.⁵ While the 1939 World's Fair park bench may just *seem* like a park bench, it is a park bench using Moses's definition and vision of a park--exclusive, elegant and segregated.

Understanding who designed an object enlivens it to a certain extent; suddenly, its existence has suggestable, underlying motivations that may be otherwise undetectable. The biographical context of this bench, in that it was designed by controversial New York City Park Commissioner, Robert Moses, is related to its social origination within the 1939 New York World's Fair. Due to the authority and legitimacy he was granted through his job position, Moses was involved with the development of the site for the New York World's Fair, which was planned in order to "boost tourism, revenue and overall morale" following the difficult and troublesome economic and social circumstances of the 1930s, post Great Depression.⁶ Moses believed that a 1,200-acre "dumping ground" located in Flushing, Queens "offered the perfect opportunity for urban renewal" later making it "the biggest land reclamation project undertaken in New York" while also sending a symbolic message that New York's desperate times could be solved through clearance, beautification and commercialization.⁷ This ideology runs through and stains the majority, if not all, of Moses's work in New York City, indicating how intensely beautification and renewal projects were believed to alleviate mass struggle and poverty, at the expense of the displacement and neglect of those actually living within these circumstances.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "World's Fair of 1939/1940." *History of New York City*.
<https://blogs.shu.edu/nyc-history/2016/11/14/worlds-fair-of-1939/>.

⁷ "World's Fair of 1939/1940." *History of New York City*.
<https://blogs.shu.edu/nyc-history/2016/11/14/worlds-fair-of-1939/>.



Figure 1: Flushing Meadows Park, Queens in 1936, during the beginning stages of its construction for the New York World's Fair.



Figure 2: Flushing Meadow Park, Queens in 1938, one year before the New York World's Fair.

The World's Fair themes, prior to 1939, were focused predominantly on international trade, inventiveness and the global market; the 1939 New York World's Fair marked a shift within the history of World's Fairs in which the theme focused, instead, on social culture and progress--the theme being, "The World of Tomorrow."⁸ Seven months before the fair was meant to open, World War II began, making its slogan "Dawn of a New Day" even more weighty. The 1939 New York World's Fair was meant to be an overall "look to the future...where everyone would be able to see what could be attained for himself and his community" amidst a difficult period.⁹ These themes and messages were embodied throughout the site--the exhibitions, layout and resources were chosen deliberately in order to plant and amplify a sense of optimism, support and success throughout New York City. For example, four hundred drinking fountains "notably absent in previous endeavors, sprouted up everywhere" and over seventy dressing rooms were situated in multiple locations with mirrors, tables and accessories to grant momentary relaxation and refreshment for ten cents per room.¹⁰ In discussing how one would have experienced the 1939 New York World's Fair, historian David Cope references Moses's 1939 World's Fair Benches as "newly-designed benches" which "allowed for a few minutes respite" for those with "fair feet."¹¹ Evidently, this bench was interwoven with the World's Fair's broader attempts at conveying a message of community care, optimism and progress to guests.

⁸ "History," *World's Fair*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World%27s_fair#History.

⁹ "Home," *1939 New York World's Fair*, <https://www.1939nyworldsfair.com/index.htm>.

¹⁰ "Experiencing the World of Tomorrow," *1939 New York World's Fair*; https://www.1939nyworldsfair.com/Ponderings/Experience_The_Fair.htm.

¹¹ *Ibid.*



Figure 3: Two women look at the map for the fair upon a 1939 New York World's Fair Bench.

Manufactured by Kenneth Lynch, of Kenneth Lynch & Sons, this bench innately referenced America's advanced and expeditious manufacturing abilities, further signaled by the 8,000 models installed throughout the 1939 New York World's Fair, blatantly showcasing the abilities of American product design.¹² While intending to signify New York City's attentiveness to guests' safety and well-being, the large quantity of water fountains, dressing rooms and these park benches clearly also served as references to and symbols of U.S. industrial success--a reminder of the country's unwavering commitment to securing capitalist power and control

¹² "1939 World's Fair Bench," *Kenneth Lynch & Sons*, <https://klynchandsons.com/1939-worlds-fair-bench/>, (accessed 20 February 2021).

through their access to production techniques of maximum productivity, speed and capability. Despite the fair's planning committee's attempts at impressing and assuring its New York visitors, many reported disappointment--with the price of admission, the quality of the exhibits, and the treatment of construction workers.¹³



Figure 4: 1939 New York World's Fair Bench in front of the Coca Cola Building within the Fair's Food District.

Regarding its physical design, the 1939 New York World's Fair Bench's armrests and legs were built from cast iron, though bent and curved in a unique and identifiable manner, illustrating America's adoption of turn-of-the-century design styles and Art-Deco aesthetics, a style that was just beginning to develop more widely in the West during the 1930s. Similarly, the

¹³ "World's Fair of 1939/40". *History of New York City*, <https://blogs.shu.edu/nyc-history/2016/11/14/worlds-fair-of-1939/>.

wooden panels composing the seat of the bench form a subtle “U-Shape,” with a slight dip at the center, suggesting an effort to ensure maximum comfort for users. The overall curviness of the benches’ design may, also, have been meant to reference the shape of a slumped, relaxed body as opposed to a rigid and linear one. Though it appears simple and minimalist, the minor details and curves were innovative for the time period, especially considering how its somewhat craft-like, elegant appearance was mass produced by an industrial manufacturer.



Figure 5: 1939 World’s Fair
Bench.

Placed within the 1939 World’s Fair site, this bench signified, to local guests and international tourists, that New York City’s definition of comfort was simultaneously

tasteful. This signification has outlived the 1939 World's Fair--today, this bench can be found in Central Park, but only throughout The Great Lawn. The history of both Central Park, and The Great Lawn, are significant; prior to becoming one of New York City's most well-developed parks, this area was a low-income neighborhood housing German and Irish immigrant communities, as well as being the site of Seneca Village, a residential community of predominantly African Americans with an established school, church and cemetery.¹⁴ Disregarding the established residents' livelihoods in favor of the requests of upper class New Yorkers for "recreation to escape to a taste of rural life," the land was purchased by the City in the 1850s and over sixteen hundred residents were evicted and displaced.¹⁵ Evidently, all of the historical, social and environment components provoking the creation of 1939 New York World's Fair Bench prioritize the comfort of the upper classes at the expense of lower class, established residents.

The Great Lawn is one of the most well-known aspects of Central Park. Originally a reservoir sourcing fresh water to New York City residents, in 1937, a man-made lawn was created to provide a space for outdoor events and public congregation.¹⁶ From here, the number of concerts, events and gatherings hosted upon and across the Great Lawn has continued to increase--of course, one must ask who these events are meant for when considering the history of this site and, more directly, these events' [ticket prices](#). Situating Moses's World's Fair bench, almost a hundred years later, within its current site, suggests

¹⁴ "Central Park," *History of New York City*. Nov 16, 2016, <https://blogs.shu.edu/nyc-history/2016/11/14/central-park/>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "The Great Lawn," *Bike Rental Central Park*. <https://bikerentalcentralpark.com/nyc-central-park-attractions/great-lawn#:~:text=The%20History%20of%20the%20Great%20Lawn&text=Central%20Park%2C%20NYC%2C%20used%20to,indispensable%20part%20of%20city%20life>.

that the same ideologies of beautification and commercialization at the expense of another's displacement or exclusion persist.



Figure 6: Moses's 1939 New York World's Fair Bench within Central Park, amidst trimmed bushes and shrubs.

Examining the social life of a seemingly simple object requires an analysis of its many components and actors and their own individual histories--as a result, the various definitions and symbols that they carry with them are made evident. While a visual analysis of an object is important for understanding the stylistic and aesthetic choices its designer made, there are often other forms of analyses--such as historical and sociological analyses--that can assist in exploring an object's social life. Further, visually analyzing an object through the *lens* of its historical and biographical circumstances illuminates aesthetic decisions that may otherwise seem unmotivated.

While there is no way to know for sure that Robert Moses intended to create a bench that stood as an everlasting monument to classist, racist and inequitable beliefs, under the mask of beautification and elegance, understanding where this object has lived and currently continues to live makes this a suggestable argument.

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