

ROBERT MOSES AND URBAN RENEWAL

THE TITLE I PROGRAM

HILARY BALLON

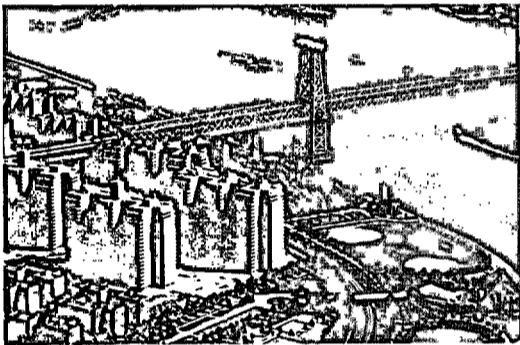
Robert Moses led the nation's largest slum clearance program in the 1950s. As in the 1930s, when he built a dazzling web of recreational facilities with New Deal dollars, so too his work in urban renewal was made possible by a federal program, Title I of the U.S. Housing Act of 1949. Title I provided deep federal subsidies for clearance of slum areas in order to stimulate their reconstruction by private developers.¹ Scores of cities, even in Alaska and Hawaii, joined the program. Although slow to take off, by 1960 Title I funding had set 838 projects in motion. Moses was the pacesetter and experimenter-in-chief.

As chairman of the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance, the entity through which he ran Title I from 1949 to 1960, Moses demonstrated his characteristic skill at capturing federal funds and expediting public works. He began planning early, in December 1948, and put in place enabling legislation so that when Title I became law, in July 1949, New York alone was primed for action. In January 1951, while other cities were still dumbstruck by the innovative legislation, Moses announced seven slum clearance projects, and he maintained that hectic pace to the end, as a tally of his work confirms. Moses obtained planning grants for thirty-two urban renewal projects, moved seventeen redevelopments into execution (another four were carried out by his successors) (fig. E-24). Due to his efforts, New York won more Title I aid than any other city. During his twelve-year reign over Title I, the city received \$65.8 million; Chicago, the second biggest spender, received less than half that amount, \$30.8 million.²

A productive record, yet it has long been considered a disaster, both for the city and for Moses, since Title I brought him down. In March 1960, when Moses was forced to resign as chairman of the Committee on Slum

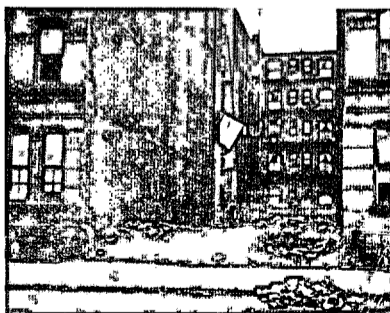
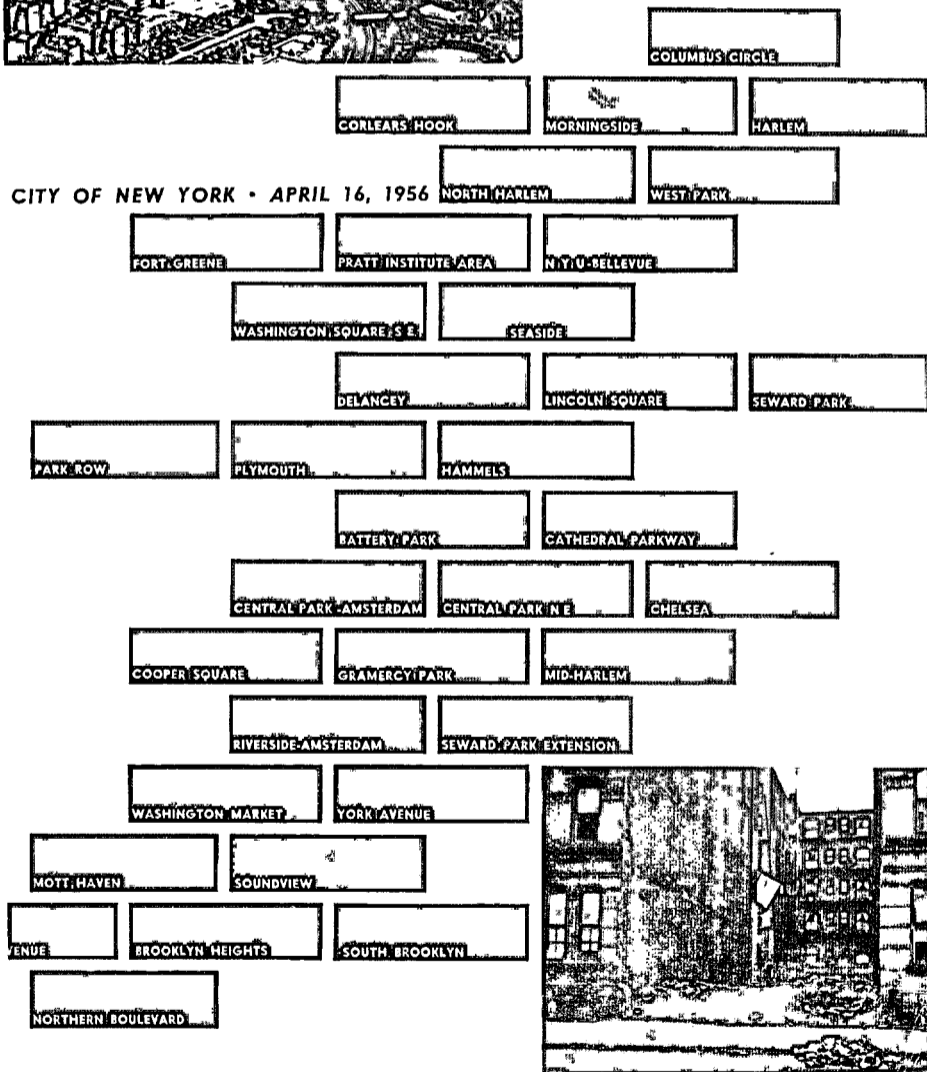
Clearance, his approach to urban renewal was publicly rejected and his reputation was in tatters. Mayor Robert Wagner disbanded the committee and installed a new system designed to correct Moses's errant ways: his secretive selection of sites and sponsors, privatization of relocation, and opposition to preservation. His antidemocratic methods and indifference to community values had incited a citizen planning movement that he did not comprehend and could not accommodate. "The democratic way is to allow the people of the community to have a voice in its projected use," a citizen wrote the general. "We urge you to schedule public hearings in which we may participate before you proceed. We cherish the right to participate in the planning of our community." To which the uncomprehending general replied, "It must be obvious that this [planning issue] cannot be settled by a mass meeting."³ Moses trusted the wisdom of professional expertise over the local concerns of residents, and he put the interests of the city over those of a neighborhood.

Our historical distance and experience of a thriving, resurgent city inevitably cast the Title I work in a new light. When Robert Caro published *The Power Broker* in 1974, the city was failing, the wounds of large-scale clearance were fresh, and urban renewal was still under way. Caro highlighted the sponsor scandals and Moses's Olympian blindness to the misery he caused. What we see fifty years later is rather different: the Moses projects have been absorbed into the fabric of the city; problems that he identified, such as the vulnerable stake of the middle class in the city, remain a challenge; and solutions that he devised remain valid, in particular, the potential of art centers and universities to serve as engines of redevelopment. It is time to reassess Moses's urban renewal program and its impact on the growth of New York City.



TITLE I

SLUM CLEARANCE PROGRESS



E-24. Brochure cover showing 35 slum clearance projects, some under way and others in planning but never built, 1956

This reappraisal is built on two main points. First, the New York Title I work should be understood in relation to Moses's attempt to negotiate between public and private claims on land use. The dominant Moses narrative plays up the myth of his unbounded power; in this story line, the Title I work demonstrates his gross abuse of power. Of course, Moses fostered the idea of his omnipotence to intimidate rivals, even as he battled the myriad

forces—political, bureaucratic, financial, democratic, journalistic—that hedged his power. This essay makes a point of reinserting his Title I work into the context of a national program in order to underscore the constraints Moses faced as well as his aggressive responses, particularly to federal rules that failed, in his view, to acknowledge the unique demands of building in New York City. Moreover, the national policy framework more sharply

defines the basic job Moses faced: managing the difficult and ill-defined partnership between the federal government, the city, and private developers in urban renewal.

"The federal bulldozer" was Martin Anderson's moniker for Title I in his 1964 critique of the program. True, the funding was mostly federal, but in other respects urban renewal was a local program.⁴ The U.S. Housing Act of 1949 gave responsibility for planning to local authorities, who structured their own urban renewal programs and determined the sites, plans, mixture of uses, developers, and methods of execution and relocation—albeit subject to federal approval. The local authority was also reliant on private investors to buy the land and redevelop it. The blinding effect of Moses—his larger-than-life persona, autocratic methods, astounding productivity, and publicity machine—obscures all but his role as decision maker, yet in truth he functioned as an intermediary between the government and private investors. He had to induce reluctant developers to enter the risky business of urban renewal while restraining counterproductive federal actions that undermined Title I. Moses may have had the personality of a commanding general, but in reality he was a middleman, negotiating between public and private interests in land use.

Throughout his life, Moses was devoted to both the public realm and the private market, two values that were at times in conflict. Indeed, the arc of his career and his evolving approach to public works take on greater meaning when seen in light of this historical American dilemma: how to balance private property rights and the public good. The intractable problem of the slums—a city killer—posed the conflict between public and private control of land in an acute form. Slums were the dark side of the private property regime: the cost of city services exceeded tax revenues, yet slumlords extracted profits from impoverished residents. As Moses saw it, he was on "a middle course between the leftwingers who want government to do everything . . . and the old-fashioned tycoons who still demand that the State give away its basic, legally inalienable, national resources."⁵ His work on Title I can be seen as a culminating chapter of a career-long attempt to shape the processes of the market through planning.

The second major claim of this essay can be put simply: Moses had a coherent and intelligent plan. Whereas the standard view holds that he was subservient to real estate interests and proceeded opportunistically without a larger purpose, I argue that Moses had a strategic vision. His aim was to strengthen the center city in an age of decentralization, suburban drift, and urban decay. Toward this end, he pursued a three-part strategy: build housing for the middle class, expand higher education, and promote the city's cultural preeminence. Admittedly, this redevelopment agenda did not benefit all alike. The losers were those displaced from tenement districts: the poor, Puerto Ricans and blacks, and small-business owners, often banished to other slums. The beneficiaries were middle- and upper-class residents; universities, college students, and an economy propelled by brainpower; and cultural institutions, suburbanites, and tourists who saw New York as a cultural magnet.

What stands behind the Title I work is an idea of New York as an irresistible center of gravity. "I am not much of an evangelist," Moses allowed,

"but I share the latent American idealism which lurks under the hairiest chest and the hardest crust."⁶ The lurking idealism in that most pragmatic of men stemmed from a driving faith in the city. He said:

For youth of any age, aware, observant, impressionable, the city is endlessly fascinating, and that is why so many families gravitate to population centers, why suburbs continue to be suburbs and satellites, why the vast hinterland may talk against the big town, deprecate and deplore it, minimize its attractions, but somehow can't keep away from it, why our domestic critics carp, groan, crouch, vent their spleen but are unable to tear themselves away . . . why, in spite of analogies with Babylon and Babel, traffic and other congestion, it will never be dispersed, decentralized and abandoned.⁷

It is unfamiliar to hear Moses speak in this lyrical mode, but his remarks convey something that was part and parcel of the expediter, master builder, and power broker: a commitment to the survival of New York City, which motivated his urban renewal work.

THE FRAMEWORK OF TITLE I

In retrospect, Title I seems a reckless assault on the urban fabric, both its physical and social order, but the willingness to shred and reshape the city at midcentury grew out of a broad consensus on the slum problem. It had been forged during the previous thirty to forty years and had become as widely accepted as our regnant street-centered model is today. Precisely because a countertheory of urbanism is now supreme and it is difficult to fathom how what we see as misguided was once idealized, we should begin by recouping the convictions that shaped national policy and Moses's actions.

The three elements of Title I—large-scale clearance, replanning, and private redevelopment—emerged from a long-established view of the slum problem. According to that view, improvement of slum conditions required large-scale operations. The slums were a "cancer" endangering the future of the city, which if not excised would spread and destroy it. Rehabilitation of individual buildings or clearance of a single block was not enough to change the character of a neighborhood. Indeed, as a Title I manual explained, "Patching up hopelessly worn-out buildings on a temporary or minimum basis presents the possible result of slum preservation rather than slum clearance."⁸ To achieve areawide change, the solution was to aggregate large properties, clear them, and rebuild on a large scale.

A second, related conviction concerned the configuration of the built environment. Urbanists and housing reformers as varied as Frederick Law Olmsted, Jacob Riis, Lewis Mumford, and Le Corbusier agreed on one thing: the traditional pattern of street-oriented, gridiron urbanism created unhealthy living conditions. It produced damaging population density and high land coverage that deprived people of basic human needs: open space, light, and air. Disinclined to attribute these problems to property relations and economic forces, American urbanists put their faith in changing the physical order of the city. Create a tabula rasa, enlarge the dimension of the grid by merging several blocks into one, and replace street walls with free-

standing towers on superblocks. This reform recipe had been promoted by modern architects since the 1920s and ultimately was rendered official doctrine by Title I. A Title I manual summed it up: "Bad housing is only one manifestation of slum conditions and fixing up substandard houses will neither cure nor even seriously alter the factors that make slums—unwise mixture of residential and commercial uses of land, overcrowding and bad planning of the land, lack of recreational facilities, frozen patterns of street layouts and traffic congestion."⁹ Comprehensive replanning was needed.

The third premise of Title I was that housing construction and redevelopment were private-market activities. An exception was made in the circumscribed field of low-income housing, which did not interest the private sector, but even in that area there was considerable resistance to government intervention. In order to appease the home-building industry and allies opposed to public housing, the sponsors of the U.S. Housing Act of 1949 choked funding for low-income housing while more generously subsidizing private redevelopment of slums. Acknowledging the anxiety about government intervention in the field of housing, Moses positioned Title I work as a middle path between the free hand of the market, which on its own would not cure the slums (slumlords made money), and a federal takeover of housing. "The size of New York's problem can be measured by the 9,000 acres of recognized slums which cannot be eradicated by ordinary private, speculative building. . . . [But] obviously, private capital must be brought into the picture on a large scale if we hope to escape a tremendously enlarged public housing program with all the implications which go with it."¹⁰ As in other areas of federal policy, the idea of public subsidy was more readily accepted when the beneficiaries were not only the poor.

Although reflecting a consensus view of the slum problem, Title I came without a road map. Moses truthfully stated at the beginning of each slum clearance plan that the field of urban renewal was "new, untried and experimental" and that progress was therefore likely to be "slow and cumbersome." Title I proposed an unfamiliar model of public-private partnership. Such partnerships, now the norm in urban redevelopment, have become sophisticated instruments for shifting public responsibilities to private management, but Title I launched the first wide-scale use of this model of development. At that time, there was virtually no empirical experience to call upon in defining public and private roles, only the knowledge that previous efforts to interest private capital in the slum problem had largely failed.

Moses's approach to Title I was informed by his efforts in the 1940s to involve private capital in slum clearance. In 1942, New York State passed the Redevelopment Companies Law, an important step in expanding the powers of eminent domain and the definition of a public purpose to facilitate slum clearance. Taking advantage of the powers granted by this law, Moses assisted the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in assembling the sites for three slum clearance-redevelopment projects in Manhattan: Stuyvesant Town, Riverton Houses, and Peter Cooper Village. The Redevelopment Companies Law solved the problem of site assemblage but did not provide sufficient incentives to motivate private investors; Met Life stood alone. In an effort to appease Met Life and to attract other private investment, Moses sweetened the terms of the deal. The state law as amended in 1943 retained

rent controls but relieved private sponsors of rehousing obligations and extended tax exemptions. Moreover, Moses acquiesced to housing segregation in order to accommodate prevailing market conditions. The development of Stuyvesant Town embroiled Met Life in damaging controversies over tenant relocation, racial segregation, and rent controls—more reasons for private investors to avoid the messy business of slum clearance.¹¹

Despite the Met Life experience, Moses remained committed to private slum clearance, and this bias shaped his attitude to the postwar program of the New York City Housing Authority. In 1946, it advanced a plan to build moderate-income units on undeveloped sites, where land costs were lower than those on developed sites. Although Moses was seen to dictate NYCHA policy and site selection, he initially opposed what was called the "no-cash subsidy program" for two reasons: he regarded the construction of middle-class housing as a private-sector activity, and he favored redevelopment in inner-city slums over construction on undeveloped land.¹² Moses ultimately backed the program, which had Mayor William O'Dwyer's support, but he disapproved of the approach. In drawing the line between public and private action, Moses firmly believed that the private sector could adequately meet the housing needs of the middle class. Put in the context of housing programs in the 1940s, in particular the failure of state laws to induce private investment and the expansion of NYCHA into middle-class housing, Moses's Title I work can be seen as a more aggressive effort to enlist private capital in urban redevelopment.

The essence of Title I was a land subsidy known as the write-down. The cost to the city of assembling and clearing a redevelopment site was greater than the market value of the cleared land. The federal government covered two-thirds of the loss or write-down, with the city absorbing the other third. It was expected that the city would recoup this loss through higher tax revenues as the value of the redeveloped property rose over time. The explicit purpose of the program was to stimulate private investors to build market-rate housing in slum areas. But while the Title I write-down discounted the cost of land, it did not diminish other expenses—construction, debt service, and taxes—that raised housing costs beyond the reach of the middle class. Congress had assumed that lowering the cost of land would be sufficient to decrease the cost of housing, but as Jeanne Lowe put it in her groundbreaking early study of Title I, "Congress was unsophisticated in its housing economics."¹³ In an expensive city like New York, the framework of Title I yielded luxury housing. To obtain moderate-priced housing, government would need to provide other subsidies.

THE MOSES RULES

As king of Title I, Moses had more concentrated power over the physical development of New York than any man had ever had or is ever likely to have again. Slum clearance involved all aspects of urbanism—not just roads and recreation, the domain Moses had commanded in the 1930s; not just housing, which was added to his portfolio in the 1940s; but every aspect of city growth—site selection, streets, circulation, sanitation, community facilities, social use, and design. Renewal projects were crafted by the Mayor's

**SLUM CLEARANCE PLAN
UNDER TITLE I OF THE
HOUSING ACT OF 1949**

*washington square
southeast*

location..... 6
 redevelopment plan..... 8
 typical development. . . 13
 relocation plan..... 31
 effect on area..... 34
 demonstration of blight.... 41
 appendices..... 55

AUGUST 1953



SLUM CLEARANCE PLAN



E-25. Pages from *Washington Square Southeast: Slum Clearance Plan under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949*, August 1953

Committee on Slum Clearance, which included leaders of relevant municipal departments: the New York City Housing Authority, City Planning Commission, Board of Estimate, Department of Buildings, Comptroller, and Corporation Counsel. But it was a committee in name only.¹¹

Concentrating power in a redevelopment czar was not unusual. Most cities with robust Title I programs had powerful leaders: Louis Danzig in Newark, Edward Logue in New Haven and then Boston, Edmund Bacon in Philadelphia. Conversely, where power was dispersed, redevelopment often lagged, as in Boston until Logue arrived. Redevelopment intersected most parts of city government; to cut through the thicket of bureaucratic obstacles and compel coordinated action required concentrated power and fierce leaders like Moses and Logue.

But while wielding giant power at home, the redevelopment czars had relatively little power with the federal government. In a local context, Moses looked like Goliath; in dealings with the federal government, he sometimes came closer to David. Moses challenged federal rules that he thought obstructed the Title I program in three particular areas: sponsor selection, appraisal standards, and clearance procedures. The nitty-gritty information about operational intricacies presented here explains how Moses made a rough-hewn federal program work in a real estate market as expensive as Manhattan's.

RULE 1: Prenegotiated Sales. The federal guidelines neatly divided the public and private parts of the redevelopment process in prescribing the fol-

lowing sequence of events. The city selects a renewal site, buys it, relocates tenants, and demolishes the buildings; then and only then does the city sell the vacant land to a redeveloper who subsequently takes over. Moses upended the sequence so that city and sponsor interacted before the sale; selection of sponsor and site coincided at the outset of the process and preceded the city's acquisition of the site. In the federal model, competitive land auctions established fair market values on which the write-down was based; the higher the sale price, the smaller the write-down. In New York, the land auction was a ceremonial occasion with one party bidding on a prenegotiated sale. In theory, the auctions were open to other bidders, as Moses would inform prospective sponsors, but in practice, the advanced state of planning and customized terms at auction precluded other parties—only one groom comes to the altar.

Moses argued that cities could not afford to purchase and clear a multi-acre site only to discover afterward that no one would buy it. "If you are looking for private capital, you can't in a City like this persuade elected officers, the press and public to condemn and clear slums first and then look around for sponsors. You must snare them first," Moses explained to the Urban Renewal Agency. "Is there anyone dumb enough to think any Committee on Slum Clearance could persuade the governing body of New York (the Board of Estimate), with its shortage of capital funds, to condemn 50 odd acres of congested land in the center of Manhattan, like the Lincoln Square area, put out the tenants and raze the buildings, in the hope that in a year or so spon-

DEMONSTRATION OF BLIGHT

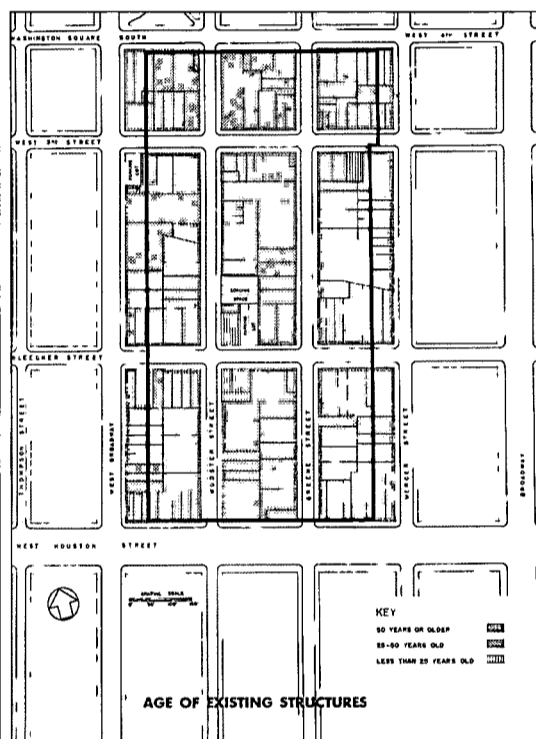
- I land use
- II condition of existing structures
- III age of existing structures
- IV land coverage
- V existing zoning
- VI commercial obsolescence
- VII residential obsolescence & tenant data

III AGE OF EXISTING STRUCTURES

The existing buildings are old and 80% have been in use at least 50 years. Many are considerably older; some commercial structures date from the 1870's and 1880's and several residential structures evince the early development of this section of the city.

The balance of the buildings, or the relatively recent construction, consists of the New York University School of Commerce, 3 apartment buildings and the garages and other automotive buildings, but these were all in existence by the late 1920's.

Age contributes to obsolescence in these commercial structures because it prevents their adaptability to the requirements of present-day business.



sors of music, education, housing and what not would turn up eager to pay any old price to bail the City out?"¹⁵

Detroit and Newark learned this lesson the hard way. In Detroit, officials spent several years planning the redevelopment of the Gratiot area before testing the interest of the private sector. There were no bidders at the first auction, in 1952, and only two bidders at a second auction, in 1953. The land was sold and cleared, but when the buyer's renewal scheme proved unacceptable, the city canceled the sale and was stuck for a time with a desolate site.¹⁶ After a similar experience, the Newark Housing Authority, the local redevelopment agency, changed procedures and gave precedence to developers. "We took an awful chance in the North Ward . . . by guessing at what redevelopers wanted," an official reflected. "Then we had to go around peddling vacant land. Now we let redevelopers tell us where they want to build." The new rule: "find a redeveloper first, and then see what interests him."¹⁷ As Harold Kaplan explains in his study of the Newark Title I program, site feasibility forced the city to bypass the hard-core slums. The Title I requirement to attract private capital dictated a quest for the "right blight" with investment potential. In due course, the federal government accepted the procedure of prenegotiated sale, which became standard operating practice.

Site feasibility involved more than site selection; it included the development of a business plan to make the deal economically feasible for the investor. The Slum Clearance Committee was conceived as "a negotiating group of city officials," the corporation counsel explained, with Moses as the

negotiator.¹⁸ Upon matching a sponsor with a site, he shaped a viable deal, determining the land resale price, the number of dwelling units in residential projects, and tax abatements, if any. Thus, by the time a project was introduced to the public, it was a fully packaged deal.

Moses presented the redevelopment projects to the public in stunning brochures designed by Richard C. Guthridge. Their bold graphics, potent images, detailed plans, construction schedules, and financial calculations made untested experiments in urbanism look like irrefutable, routine projects (fig. E-25). The brochures constructed a powerful visual argument and demonstrated Moses's sophisticated use of images, charts, and other visual material to shape perceptions. "I don't want the texts to be long," Moses instructed his staffer. "It's the schedules themselves, the plans and pictures that count with the statement that we mean business, that the procedure will be entirely fair and orderly and that hardships will be, so far as humanly possible, avoided."¹⁹ The brochures also demonstrated Moses's commitment to professional expertise. The materials were prepared by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), whom Moses appointed as coordinating architects for the Title I program, and by two reputable real estate firms, Charles F. Noyes Company and Wood, Dolson Company. Deaf to the citizen's voice, Moses relied on experts in real estate and finance, architecture and engineering to translate the public good into specific renewal plans.

The brochures were organized in three parts: the redevelopment plan, demonstration of slum conditions, and appendices. The redevelopment plan