

The Assassination of New York

Review by Pauline Jukes

When we think of Henry George, we are inspired by his passion for social justice. Reading Robert Fitch's work, *The Assassination of New York*, I was similarly inspired, sensing that he had pursued his goal of sharing his findings with us in a flurry of feverish haste, as if having unlocked the forbidden casket and discovered an answer to the unanswerable, no time could be lost in bringing the news to us.

Many of us have arrived in New York, fresh from another coast or community. Have we not asked ourselves the age-old questions: why are the streets potholed and garbage-strewn? Why are the subways tired and decrepit? Why poverty, crime and homelessness in a land of wealth and plenty?

Henry George, walking the streets of Manhattan in 1870, asked himself these questions, and answered them in the treatise we know as *Progress and Poverty*. More recently a string of books is again questioning the status quo in New York City and attempting to isolate, once and for all, the ultimate cause of our modern-day woes. Robert Caro's exposition of Robert Moses in *The Power Broker* accused him of grandiose manipulation of physical structures and merciless indifference to a helpless populace; Jane Jacob's *Life and Death of American Cities* brought new visions of neighborhood and interactive community life, showing how over-reaching plans could be thwarted at the grass-roots level. Robert Fitch has taken a step further, drawing back a curtain to reveal those who made the original sweeping blueprints, and why.

Robert Fitch has executed a masterful treatise, painstakingly going behind the scenes to examine original documents, and expanding our vision by bringing to life the players in the grand scheme of shaping our metropolis. Have you ever wondered, for instance, why 6th Avenue, or the Avenue of the Americas, has become a canyon faced with towering blocks of offices and hotels, between 49th and 57th Streets? Or why the Port of New York now resides in Elizabeth, New Jersey - and the many small manufacturers have disappeared? Why there is little left of the flower market area on lower 6th Avenue, and its music district has been all but destroyed? Why actors and dancers no longer have space to rehearse? Why once-vibrant neighborhoods are now prime examples of urban blight?

Why subway riders cannot ride a convenient loop from borough to borough, as in most of the coherently-planned cities of the world? Why the waterfront, despite all efforts and entreaties, belongs to automobiles and proposed office blocks and is not available for public recreation?

Answers to all these questions spring from Robert Fitch's book in surprised indignation, as if he were asking us how this could possibly have been allowed to happen. At one point he compares this city to Babylon, noting caustically that it too was a remarkable city in its day. Readers who seek clarity in unravelling the power structure behind New York's ineffectual city bureaucracy need only to read this book.

Fitch quotes Saul D. Alinsky, who wrote in the 1950s: "New York... has the least citizen participation, the least effective local democracy, and the individual has the least degree of... self-determination that is to be found in any major city in the United States."

Interestingly, although he lays much blame for New York's distorted growth at the feet of the Rockefeller family, one senses the hand of the landowner when he illuminates the control held by Columbia University, owners of the land beneath Rockefeller Center, and their refusal to hand over title or even negotiate a manageable lease.

This dilemma forced the Rockefeller family to scheme and manoeuvre incessantly during their almost 70 years of owning Rockefeller Center, in order to maintain land values under, and in the immediate vicinity of the structures - even to the extent of

controlling mass transit. In the tortured course of this saga, one begins to glimpse the answers to the irrational growth in this area.

Joshua B. Freeman reviewed this book in the Nov. 22 issue of *The Nation*, stating:

All but ignoring the issues that have dominated recent New York elections - race, crime, corruption and administrative incompetence - Fitch insists that the main problem the city faces is a disastrous lack of jobs. With an unemployment rate stuck near the double digits, New York has one of the lowest labor force participation rates of any city in the country. The cause, Fitch argues, is not the national recession, economic globalization, high taxes or any of the usual explanations. (continued on back page)

The Assassination of New York by Robert Fitch, New York, Verso Press, 1993

Pauline Jukes, C.S.W. is a psychoanalyst/social worker, and a writer. She is currently at work on a book, *Twenty-two Square Miles of the Most Valuable Real Estate on Earth*, charting the growth of New York City from its earliest beginnings to the present day, and the impact of land speculation throughout the city's history.

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Rather, it is the way large landowners have shaped the destiny of the city to serve their own interests."

Although Freeman hails Fitch for his moral zeal, "...in the tradition of George," in bringing planners, politicians, foundation officials and landowners to task for serving themselves in the name of the public, he finds elements in both George and Fitch to criticize. According to Freeman, George's greatness was not his analysis of landownership, or his remedy, but merely his articulation of the "popular moral revulsion" of gross inequality.

As far as Fitch's contention that the RPA (Regional Plan Association) was responsible for the transfer of the Port to New Jersey, Freeman contends that this only happened when air travel and containership weakened the Port's viability - which could just as easily illustrate the impotence of real estate interests. In response I would direct Mr. Freeman's attention to the fact that planners and real estate magnates bide their time and choose their moment to strike, and what better time than when their quarry is in a weakened condition?

Mr. Fitch points out that the Port had become prey to organized crime, that there was no reason why it could not have been refurbished, renewed and cleansed of criminal tendencies - and continued to play a vital role in the life of New York, providing jobs, and bringing all-important "mixed usage" to the neighborhood.

In other instances, Mr. Freeman is equally mis-informed. For instance, he attacks Fitch for maintaining that "a lack of space is contributing to the ongoing decline of industrial employment," asking that this point be proved. Fitch points out that changing FARs, or floor-to-area ratios, manipulated at whim by the RPA, transform areas allotted to manufacturing into highrises and office blocks, in order to maximize land values.

Robert Fitch's final chapter is devoted to a number of suggested solutions. One suggestion is to allow the government to take over the land, a system which operates in Hong Kong and Singapore. Although Georgists would prefer to see a simple shift of taxes onto the land, Freeman's castigation of this proposal as producing an "authoritarian state" can hardly be reconciled with the reality of these thriving cities.

As Fitch argues:

When free enterprise conservative economists point out how low the personal and corporate income taxes are in Hong Kong,

they somehow ignore the reason - the government owns the land and leases it to business for its use. More than a third of all government revenue is earned in this way.

It would be equally hard to find fault with Robert Fitch's overall vision for a rejuvenated city. He would like to see an end to the cycles of "boom and bust real estate values" and their hand-maiden, corruption. He would like to open the gates of opportunity and allow the "gritty ingenuity" of New Yorkers full expression. Finally:

The challenge of New York is to play out for the twenty-first century - as it did in the nineteenth and twentieth - the full meaning of diversity. That is not nostalgia; it is destiny." ❧