

# FROM DUMP TO GLORY

By ROBERT MOSES

*Below, You See the Dump, and, Still Lower, the Glory. Only a Few Months After Trucks Went to Work on Flushing's Great Meadow of Ashes, the Airplane Shot of the Blooming World's Fair Site Was Made*

BEFORE the depression, when there were two chickens in every pot, twin cars in each garage and silk socks and stockings for mill hands as well as millionaires, F. Scott Fitzgerald, the chronicler of the Jazz Age, wrote a story called *The Great Gatsby*. It was a gaudy tale about a racketeer who tried to break into North Shore Long Island society in order to be near a woman with whom he had enjoyed a fleeting romance. The main scenes of action were on an estate where *Gatsby's* prodigal hospitality was enjoyed by hundreds who did not even know his name, and at a filling station in the Corona dumps, through which the Long Island trains passed on their way to greener pastures.

Fitzgerald's description of the dump as it was then cannot be improved on even by those of us who knew not only its threatening and depressing outward appearance but even its exact chemical and physical properties, its unsavory history and the mountainous labors required to take it away.

Says Fitzgerald:

About halfway between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and



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chimneys and rising smoke, and finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-gray men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight. . . .

The valley of ashes is bounded on one side by a small foul river, and, when the drawbridge is up to let barges through, the passengers on waiting trains can stare at the dismal scene for as long as half an hour.

It is not my object to retell Fitzgerald's story; though it remains a good yarn even after the depression has leveled off the moraine of gold deposited on the North Shore in the delirious 20's. My story is that of how the Corona dump was leveled to make a site for a world's fair and to pave the way for the great Flushing Meadow Park which will replace the fair.

Other expositions in this country have left permanent civic improvements behind them. It has been the rule to dredge waterways, fill in swamps and reclaim land for future park use as well as for the fair itself. Municipal parks have usually been the residuary legatees.

What distinguishes the Flushing-meadow reclamation for the New York World's Fair of 1939 from its predecessors is not only the huge scale of operations but the fact that the





"The Bill . . . Will Reach the Staggering Figure of \$50,000,000. . . In the Meantime, the Directors of the Fair Have Built a Huge Temporary Administration Building and Have Moved In"

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entire permanent civic improvement has been planned in advance, written into law and cemented by a binding contract. Everything, so far as humanly possible, has been anticipated. There will be nothing to fight about when the fair is over. There will be no squabbles about obligations of the fair to the city, no questions as to what the city will inherit and no arguments as to what is temporary and what is permanent. In this respect we have taken the lessons of other American fairs to heart.

The Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876 was held in an undeveloped part of the existing Fairmount Park and involved reclamation and improvement of this area. Horticultural Hall and Memorial Hall are landmarks of Philadelphia today.

The Sesquicentennial Exposition of Philadelphia in 1926 left behind as a permanent civic contribution only a stadium which, unfortunately, has been a white elephant.

The planners of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 brought Athens, Rome and the Renaissance to Chicago, and from there the gospel spread like wildfire over the surrounding towns and prairies. Modernists today scoff at this evangelism, but it was a great contribution. Much that was fine and enduring grew out of it. The Chicago fair also left substantial civic improvements, because it filled and reclaimed the water front at Jackson Park and left the Field Museum as a heritage for future generations. Forty years later, the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition of 1933 carried on this waterfront development still further.

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis in 1904, commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase, was held on the westerly half of the existing Forest Park, to which additional land was added. At the end of the fair, the Palace of Art and the equestrian statue of Saint Louis in front of it remain as valuable mementos, not to speak of a completely restored and beautified park, and thousands of trees and shrubs salvaged from the fair.

#### Long Island's Ugly Duckling

NEW YORK, therefore, had precedents for combining the making of a fair and a park, but no other community had tackled anything as formidable as the Corona dump. There are plenty of people in New York, far from the age of decrepitude, who can remember when Flushing meadow was a typical unspoiled bit of Long Island landscape—a tidal marsh covered with salt hay through which a stream flowed into an unpolluted bay, its waters as salty as the Long Island Sound at high tide and brackish at

the ebb. There was plenty of boating and safe swimming in the bay, lots of animal life in and around the meadow. The colonial village of Flushing, east of the meadow and fronting on the bay, ran up into higher land and had some of the finest residences, trees and gardens on Long Island. President Washington was particularly interested in the Prince Nurseries, one of the cradles of American horticulture, which stood in the very center of the village.

Then came so-called development. Land around the meadow was subdivided. Farms and country residences rapidly disappeared. A combination of contractors, politicians and the Long Island Railroad conceived the bright idea of filling up the meadow by dumping on it the ashes and refuse of most of the borough of Brooklyn. Year after year the pile grew higher; the accumulation of ashes, dust, discarded junk of all kinds, and even with a certain amount of garbage mixed in, always exceeding the settlement of the huge mass into the meadow mat. During twenty-six years 50,000,000 cubic yards of refuse material were piled on the dump. The ash company was in constant hot water with the neighboring communities, which kept starting lawsuits to stop dumping. The company always claimed that there were no disease-breeding germs present. In order to meet local opposition, the company established a golf course in one corner of the dump which had all the pathetic beauty and frailty of a single rose in a dung heap. This did not stop public complaints. In 1934 the dump was ninety feet high. In the meantime, poor types of houses cropped up along the north and west border; the creek and the cemetery bounded the other side. Just below the cemetery, the local borough government built an asphalt plant almost at the head of tidewater—an obtrusive and ugly development eating into the meadow. To the north, on high land, one of the great foundations planned model houses for mechanics and white-collar people of small means. The standards were high and the treasury deep. When the builders finished, the cheapest residence was beyond the means of the humble people for whom the development was intended. Middle-class folk of comfortable income moved in.

Meanwhile, the village of Flushing grew, commerce developed a little along the Flushing River and the east shore of the bay; on the west shore, pleasant houses were built, with lawns running down to the water. Soon the problem of sewage disposal was temporarily solved, with characteristic American carelessness, by running more and larger sewers into the bay. Its waters were quickly polluted. Its bottom was covered with an increasingly high mountain of raw sewage, leaving foul flats above low tide. To the

north, at the head of the bay, an airport had been established, with inadequate acreage and runways, and with a dangerous hill in back of it—a sort of promontory surrounded by mud, and without bulkheading, riprap or other protection, so that a considerable part of it simply disappeared. A small beacon at the very point was found thirty feet under water.

#### Rising From the Ashes

JUST beyond Flushing Bay, blocking the entrance to it, was Riker's Island, a spot which exercised an irresistible charm over the sanitary authorities. For many years barges swarmed to it with ashes and refuse which could not be dropped at sea in bad weather. The mountain range on the island overtopped the one on the Flushing meadows. Riker's Island was truly a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. Fires broke out continuously all over the vast heap and an inadequate water supply no sooner put out one than another began raging elsewhere, filling the air with columns of smoke and smell. This usually drifted over the Flushing meadow, mingled with the smoke and smell of the Corona dump and the miasmic odors which at low tide arose from Flushing Bay.

Flushing meadow itself was bisected by ill-constructed causeways. Bridges became more inadequate as traffic increased. At least two bridges on the main causeway collapsed in the days when it was a plank toll road. Finally, subway yards were planted at the northern and southern ends. Such was the history of the Flushing meadow before Fitzgerald.

In 1932 a new era began. Some enthusiasts, who had for years been planning park and parkway improvements in the metropolitan area, got around to locating a connection between the new Triborough Bridge and the parkway system of Eastern Long Island. The route led inevitably along Flushing Bay, through the Flushing meadow and the middle of the Corona dump. This was the logical place for it, but only on the assumption that there was to be a general reclamation of the entire surrounding area. The state was to build the parkway and the city to acquire the land. It was found that the city already owned patches of the meadow where water-supply wells had been sunk and sealed for future use. Negotiations had been started to end dumping and to buy out the Brooklyn ash-disposal company. It was necessary to conclude complicated negotiations to buy the dump, pay for disposal plants which the company had put up for the city, and to settle for equipment.

An agreement was made. Construction on the parkway began. But the (Continued on Page 72)



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"You want to stay around here?"  
"Yes. I want to stay right around this place; I want to build a hogahn near here and make it a good place to live in."

He didn't know how he got to be holding her hand, nor just how long they stood looking into each other's eyes. Someone snickered, and they stepped apart. When he turned around, the man was already walking away, his

expression blank; one would not want to anger a young man like horse tamer. Jenny went into the hogahn.

With his thumbs in his belt again, swaggering just a little and listening to the jingle of his spurs, he walked through the crowd. Presently he came upon Naslini Nez standing with his hands full of winnings, his own and horse tamer's.

"I have some cash for you, nephew," he said.

## FROM DUMP TO GLORY

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state work was limited strictly to work within an ordinary parkway right of way. The artery was, therefore, driven through the dump in the form of a chute, with great mountains of ash and refuse on each side. As the official primarily responsible for this work, both to the city and state, I never liked the idea of attempting to landscape these two mountains, nor was there anything very reassuring about some of the other prospects along this parkway. Obviously, the only answer was to acquire all the meadow and to clean up the bay and establish a great city park in this area. The arguments for such action were impressive. The Flushing meadow was almost the exact geographical and population center of the city. The opportunity to restore 1200 acres of land and an immense bay in the very heart of the metropolis was something to strike the imagination. The trouble was that there was no sign of the money in the offing. There were more pressing projects making demands on the taxpayers.

### The Battle of the Meadow

At just about this time, a group of prominent citizens became interested in the holding of a world's fair in New York City in 1939. Led by Mr. George McAneny, a former city official and head of the Regional Plan Association, they came to me to discuss a location for the fair, and said that several people had suggested the Flushing meadow as one possibility. I welcomed them with open arms. The fair was the obvious bait for the reclamation of the meadow. I told the fair enthusiasts that the Flushing meadow was the only place in New York where they could get any co-operation from the Park Department while I was its head.

There were, of course, those who were unimpressed by the arguments for locating the fair in the Flushing meadow. Some were actuated by neighborhood pride or more intimate personal considerations. Others, constituting a more formidable opposition, were honestly appalled by the selection of a site which had been so despoiled by a city apparently bent on dumping most of its offscourings and leavings there. These critics talked also about the depth of mud in the meadows, lengths of piles which would have to be used to insure safe foundations even for temporary buildings, the immense cost of permanent structures and of the other improvements which would have to be made to make the site usable and attractive. They raised questions as to transportation by subway, railroad, motorcar, bus and the air.

The proponents of the Flushing meadow site, however, talked them down. The fair idea took hold. A corporation was formed to finance it. City and state agreed to co-operate.

Flushing meadow was picked as the location.

There have been fairs since the mists of antiquity lifted. The early ones were glorified markets to which people came to show their wares, to barter and to trade. Amusements were a natural addition, a pleasant relief from the main business and an excuse for bringing the family along. Finally somebody introduced the idea of culture, and then the real fun began. Even since, there has been an irrepressible conflict among three sets of people—those who are for business first; those who are for attracting people to the site and city by means of amusements and ballyhoo; and, finally, those who see in the fair an opportunity to spread the gospel of beauty and enhance what they call the amenities of civilization. When a world's fair is first projected, the sponsors get up into the stratosphere, where the average person has difficulty in breathing, but eventually they settle down to a sensible division of their money, space and energy among the three contending groups. There may be no public announcement of it, but the shows, the entertainments, the amusements, fun, food, drink, and everything else that goes with a gigantic circus, are going to come out first. It should not be forgotten that Phineas T. Barnum called his circus a world's fair. Business will run a close second. Culture, which is somehow associated with long walks and aching feet, will be third.

The convention of the American Legion in New York City last September proved that when strangers come to a city like New York from distant parts, they are more interested in entertainment, fun and even practical jokes than they are in the city's culture. The buildings around Times Square were almost pushed over backward by the crowds of Legionnaires and their friends and admirers. There was no crowding at the museums. The Legion is a pretty good cross-section of American life, and the crowds which will come to the fair are likely to be more interested in sight-seeing and entertainment than they will be in figuring out the symbolism of The World of Tomorrow.

### Selling New York

I have not even mentioned the patriotic background of the New York World's Fair of 1939—that is, the 150th Anniversary of the Constitution and of the inauguration of Washington in New York—because that was the excuse and not the reason for the fair.

Let no one suppose that I am a lukewarm supporter of this exposition. I honestly believe that New York is an ideal place to hold a fair which emphasizes the conditions under which people will live in the next century,

"Hold onto it. I want to talk to you about something, and perhaps you will be keeping that cash anyhow, if we agree."

The older Indian looked grave, then smiled.

"Let us walk over this way." As they went together, he said, "So many schoolboys just drift around, not belonging anywhere, but you are the kind of man that one wants to have in his district."

and which brings business to the city and helps to overcome the latent feeling against New York shared, for no very good reason, by so many people in other parts of the country.

It was, I believe, Thomas B. (Czar) Reed, the late speaker of the House of Representatives, who, in answer to a question about this antipathy toward New York, remarked that when he looked at the miles of imposing brownstone and brick fronts, he could not help sharing this feeling himself, and added that he guessed, after all, it was just plain high-minded envy. Few visitors investigate what is back of all this substantial construction. Our city poverty is so intimate and cozy and on such a truly magnificent scale that its implications are lost on those who come for a good time.

Whatever may be the prejudices of visitors who come to the metropolis for the first time, a properly conducted fair will do more to overcome provincial dislike than all the arguments in the world.

### The Tylon-and-Perisphere Theme

I have no doubt, therefore, that the New York World's Fair will be a success. It has just the kind of showmanship in its president that such an enterprise requires. It has a great deal less crackpot planning than one would suppose from the fair blurbs, with their newly coined words never heard before on sea or land. Not to speak of the Tylon and Perisphere, two enormous gadgets, one in the form of a pyramid and the other in the shape of a globe, which constitute the so-called theme of the fair. Barnum had his sacred white elephant and every fair is entitled to at least one theme tower. If there are two, so much the better.

Having indicated my genuine interest in the fair, I want to get back to the story of the site—more romantic and interesting than anything of a temporary nature, no matter how astonishing or uplifting, which Mr. Grover Whalen and his board can place on it. Because, like the mirage in the desert, the fair will be gone in 1940, and at that time Flushing Meadow Park will come into its own.

Immediately following the incorporation of the fair, all the land not owned by the city in the meadow was condemned. A great program of basic improvements was laid out, and from the very beginning it was insisted upon that in leasing the expanded area to the corporation, everything of a permanent nature must be part of the plan for the ultimate park which was to be completed when the fair was over. The lease between the fair corporation and the city reflects the predominant idea of reclamation. All permanent improvements must be approved by the

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# PLASTIC WOOD

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mayor and the governing body of the city through the Park Commissioner. Water supply will be obtained free by the fair, if the pipes are laid out with reference to the ultimate park plan. The fair sewage will be disposed of by the city on the same basis; lighting conduits and fixtures are to be fitted into the ultimate park plan as far as they can be. Certain stipulated permanent improvements are to be made by the fair in return for other things done by the city. After the fair is over, all temporary buildings must be taken down promptly by the corporation and the holes filled up. When the final accounting is made, the first \$2,000,000 of profit is to go back to the city to complete the park. The city decided that its own exhibit should be housed in a permanent building of stone, glass and brick, so planned as to be an indoor recreation building with an ice-skating rink when the fair departed. The state agreed to build permanent roads and bridges and a boat basin, and to offer a permanent water amphitheater where an exhibit could be held during the fair, but which would be an integral part of the park plan afterward.

### Face Lifting for Flushing

The first step in construction was to level the dump by spreading it over a large part of the meadow, digging out muck for two lakes of 136 acres, and processing this muck so as to make topsoil to spread over the ashes and refuse, and to store in out-of-the-way corners for further landscaping in 1940.

On June 13, 1936, the leveling of the dump and the excavating of the lakes began. This operation was accomplished largely with power scoop shovels, tractors, clamshells, drag-line cranes and trucks. It went on day and night under huge arc lights mounted on towers and stationed along the ground. The schedule was a tough one, because the time was short and everything depended on the basic clearing of the site. For miles around, people on land, on ferries and boats in the Sound and the East River, and over in the Bronx and Manhattan could see the brilliant illumination and knew that the fair was a reality. An immense amount of engineering work was done in studying the foundations for buildings, the action of mud waves generated by the spreading of so much material, and on the details of locating the permanent structures. It was necessary to prepare an entirely new drainage plan for the area surrounding the Flushing meadow. Previously, surface drainage had been into the Flushing River. With the construction of the lakes and of the great tide dam with a road over it, all surface drainage into the lake area had to stop. Storm water had to be run directly into the bay. All the old city plans for drainage were discarded and new ones adopted. The drain along the west shore, now under construction, is as large as a tube of the Holland Tunnel. The city's sewer plans for the area, which were progressing slowly, were speeded up. A huge plant was started at Tallman's Island, on the East River, not far from the fair site, and a smaller screening plant at another location.

Within less than a year after the stopping of this discharge, the decomposition of sludge on the bay bottom will be completed, the generation of gas will stop and the atmosphere of hydrogen sulphide will be only an unpleasant memory.

A great sea wall was started along the bay front and cellular sheet-steel piling was put down seventy feet for a boat basin. Subsurface conditions along the bay were among the worst to be found in the metropolitan district, and no flimsy riprap or cheap half-hearted bulkhead could be depended on to hold back the shore line and support substantial improvements on it. The old borough asphalt plant was scrapped and a new one constructed at the mouth of the Flushing River, away from the fair on a barge canal. Great under and over passes were constructed to carry the main arteries across the fair, so as to separate through traffic from local and to make the meadow safe for pedestrians. A new bridge with three and one half miles of approaches over the East River from Old Ferry Point in the Bronx to Whitestone in Queens, was started by the Triborough Bridge Authority in connection with a complete refinancing of the Triborough and the sale of all Triborough bonds to the public, thus terminating all PWA and RFC connection with the enterprise. Eighteen million dollars was made available for the new artery, which will be completed when the fair opens, and the southerly terminus of this bridge is at the municipal parking field acquired to round out the fair area.

City and relief money was set aside to begin the reconstruction of the North Beach airport by moving fill from the dump on Riker's Island over a temporary causeway thrown across a branch of the East River. The hill back of the airport was bought and is being leveled. The European Clipper Ship aviation service will use this airport and will be in full operation at the time of the fair. The airport, of course, will be permanent and it will take only fifteen minutes to drive from an airplane into the heart of the city over the new Grand Central Parkway and Triborough Bridge.

### Faith That Moves Mountains

Practically all dumping was stopped at Riker's Island. Fires were put out, the great mountains of refuse were leveled, and, finally, arrangements were made for planting the border so as to give it a pleasing appearance from the river. The Sanitation Department looked elsewhere throughout the city for holes to fill up and for substitutes for Riker's Island. The piles are just being driven into the ground for a temporary subway spur from the south end of Flushing meadow into the heart of the fair. After the fair, these piles will support a park road. A new station and other improvements were made along another subway-elevated line leading through the fair, with the permanent pedestrian overpass crossing the subway yards into the middle of the fair area. Numerous streets surrounding the fair have been improved and plans and construction begun to improve all arteries leading in and out of it, including an entirely new boulevard leading into Brooklyn. The City Exhibit Building is well under way. The piles are being driven for the foundation of the great State Water Amphitheater. The bill for the permanent city and state work to serve the fair and the future park, including closely related improvements affecting the whole fair district, will reach the staggering figure of \$50,000,000.

In the meantime, the directors of the fair have built a huge temporary administration building and have moved in. Other buildings are springing up.

Huge trees by the thousands have been planted. As permanent improvements near completion, the temporary work of the fair mounts in volume. Soon it will be a problem to keep contractors and workmen from interfering with one another. My work as the official responsible for laying the groundwork for Flushing Meadow Park is nearing an end.

### The Fair—and After

The opening of the fair has already been announced by the theme boys in a rhapsody reminiscent of Dexter Fellows at his purplest. Dexter, however, did not put up his circus billboards in December for a show due in June. The New York World's Fair publicity people may put the English language under such a terrific strain before 1939 that it will simply give out.

Here's a sample:

A shadowless dusk descends on the Theme Plaza. . . . It is the opening day of the Exposition—April 30, 1939. . . . More than 800,000 visitors have stormed the gates. . . .

And then the miracle. . . . A switch describes a swift arc. . . . The Trylon is gone; night closes in with an impact that is almost audible. . . . The Fair bursts into flame, quivers with light, dances to every band in the spectrum. . . . Fountains splash liquid blues and reds and greens. . . .

Dominating this molten sea is the great bulk of the Perisphere. . . . a glowing, almost translucent ball floating lazily on a cluster of fiery fountains. . . .

A Voice breaks the flow of life through the Fair—a super-Voice shot from the shadowy summit of the Trylon on beams of sound: "Parade of Dedication at the Theme Center." . . . Life flows again, but now all eyes, all feet have the Theme Plaza as their goal. . . . The Perisphere has ceased to turn. . . . Poised motionless above the crowd, its refulgence is reflected in a hundred thousand faces. . . .

A bugle sounds. . . . A band strikes up. . . . A vast panorama slips across the surface of the sphere. . . . And down the Helicline, which curves around it from the Trylon to the ground, comes the Parade. . . . In the van, erect on a great white charger, is the familiar blue-and-buff figure of George Washington, whose inauguration just one hundred and fifty years ago the Fair commemorates. . . . Behind, troop the famed of past and present. . . .

Down the Helicline they wind. . . . Wave on wave of applause. . . . And as the last cheers die away, a rocket zooms up, bursts into a shower of stars, bursts again and yet again. . . . Rocket succeeds rocket, until, in one final burst, the entire sky seems hung with fire. . . .

The New York World's Fair of 1939 has opened.

Well, maybe. But I am waiting for another and less dramatic event—the night when the fair closes. Some evening in late September of 1940 they will put out the blazing lights in The World of Tomorrow. The following morning the wrecking crews will arrive to take down the temporary structures. The park forces will move in to supervise the expenditure of the \$2,000,000 in profit which will complete Flushing Meadow Park. In another quarter of a century, old men and women will be telling their grandchildren what the great Corona dump looked like in the days of F. Scott Fitzgerald, how big the rats were that ran out of it, what a volcano there was over on Riker's Island, and how it was all changed overnight. But none of them will get as much of a thrill out of their reminiscences as those who had an active part in the translation of the great meadow from Dump to Glory.



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