In the Path of the Wreckers: *Maeve Brennan and the Afterlife of Urban Renewal*

Edward O'Rourke
University of Edinburgh

Introduction

In the summer of 1955, the *New Yorker* published a piece entitled "The Last Days of New York City." It was written by Maeve Brennan, a young Irish staff writer at the magazine. The short, somewhat disjointed story is a snapshot of 1950s Manhattan in the teeth of urban renewal. Regretting the loss of one home, one hotel, one terrace of houses after another, it foreshadows a major theme of her later writing, and indeed of New York City itself, in the decades that would follow. Through the prism of Brennan's exact narration, this paper looks at the large-scale urban regeneration, typified by "master builder" Robert Moses, which shaped and reshaped New York over much of the twentieth century. It further examines the impact of the reconfigured cityscape on the lives of women, particularly single women, and the expressions of dissent with which they responded to these changes. Women were amongst the most antithetical of Moses' opponents, many of them writers like Brennan, and

Journal of Languages, Texts, and Society, Vol. 4 (2020), 37–59.

many more mothers concerned for the safety of their families, their neighbourhoods, and their children, ranged in serried rows before the bulldozers, a formidable phalanx of perambulators (Peters 4; Caro 984-992).

According to Catalina Neculai, writers in the 1950s and '60s, "took overt interest in the literary articulation of spatial knowledge: short stories, novels and poems alike, became the writers' own responses to the changes that were taking place in their neighbourhoods and in their city" (10-11). Indeed, she might well have been describing Brennan here, as a writer who "[documented,] and disseminated [her] urban annotations and reflections […] via literary magazines […] for the simple reason that consciousness-raising was part of the community's infrastructure of resistance and contestation" (*ibid.*). Following the example of such women as Jane Jacobs and Dawn Powell, Brennan took note of the changes happening around her and documented their effects, spatial and social, using the subversive power of the word. She further resisted the conventions of domesticity and motherhood, exposing herself to the hazards of a reconfigured environment hostile to her very existence. In this paper, I contend that Brennan went on to experience homelessness, fragmentation, and even a kind of historical erasure, as a consequence of the disintegrative cycles of renewal in twentieth-century New York City (Neculai 34).

Robert Moses

All cities change, modernise, adapt, and for a megalopolis like New York, change is something of a permanent quality. Yet according to Ann Peters, "the fifties and sixties were a particularly traumatic moment in [New York's] history" (5). The Housing Act of 1949 – a part of Harry Truman's Fair Deal – led to massive urban renewal efforts. Its Title I provision for slum clearances was to pave the way for decades of urban upheaval, as dozens of square blocks of Manhattan's low-income housing were levelled to make way for roadways, vast monolithic office blocks, and upmarket apartments.

The decade that followed the Second World War witnessed a flight of capital and labour forces away from cities, as returned war veterans and middle-class families migrated in their millions to new mass-

produced suburban neighbourhoods (Siegal 3; Spiegel 186). Yet in those same years, "New York's paradigmatic exceptionality would only grow in intensity" (Neculai 32), managing by dint of "a phenomenal postwar building boom" (Peters 5) to baulk the trend that defied even its harshest critics (Spiegel 186-189). The visionary architect of much of that change was Robert Moses, City Parks Commissioner, Chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, and powerhouse of New York's urban development and regeneration for more than half a century. Moses believed that, "Man is the creature of his environment. His outlook on life is conditioned by what he sees from his windows" (Moses 133). Indeed, his own vision was as absolute as it was deeply flawed. With Machiavellian abandon, he tore through whole sections of poor and slum neighbourhoods, ostensibly driven to improve the living conditions of white, middle-class New Yorkers. Though, as his biographer Robert Caro contends, this in no small way satisfied his own insatiable greed for power (Caro 849; Walker 305).

If Moses' racial prejudice were not already obvious in the implementation of many of his civic developments, there is little doubt that his grander urbanist vision deliberately excluded the city's poor, African-American and immigrant communities beyond that of their dismantlement and dispersal (Walker 305). In the case of at least two of the ten enormous city swimming pools, construction of which he oversaw in the 1930s, Moses sought to forestall racial integration by employing "only white lifeguards and attendants" (Caro 514), and maintaining a water temperature well below the "comfortable" (*ibid.*) seventy degrees Fahrenheit, in the belief that African Americans were less tolerant of cold conditions than their Caucasian compatriots (*ibid.*). Indeed, Caro went as far as to write that Moses had not, "the slightest interest in building anything for the poor" (610).

The advent of Title I shifted Moses' focus away from freeways and urban parks to slum clearances and large-scale public housing. Most slum communities were easily subdued, inordinately composed of poor immigrants living well below the poverty line. Their mass eviction and consequent destitution is well documented by later critics. The building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, for example,

took fifteen years and required "seven miles of people […] to be removed […] from homes which in a time of terrible housing crises in New York were simply irreplaceable" (Caro 848; Sedensky 8). Moreover, the building of Manhattantown, one of Moses' most ambitious housing projects, provides a clear example of the extraordinary abuses of power of which he was capable. Caro offers a detailed account of the corruption and mismanagement, which saw the eviction of over 3,600 families from the slum site, its subsequent sale at a fraction of its value to a developer who proceeded to partly-demolish the site, continue taking rents from sitting, or in some cases rehoused tenants, while refraining from undertaking any maintenance or new building work, until a Senate hearing, six years after evictions began, forced its sale to a new contractor (962-965, 971-977). Less obvious, however, are the insidious ways in which Moses' designs transmogrified the urban environment for women, particularly single women, seriously threatening their existence within the city. Indeed, there is a strong argument to be made that women suffered more from the kind of swingeing urban reforms spearheaded by Moses than many other groups.

Post-war deindustrialisation as part of the shift from a Fordist to a Post-Fordist economy, led to a gradual eradication of central, affordable, and safe accommodations for women in the city, consistent with patterns of creative destruction (Neculai 22-25, 52-53).[1] These patterns of urban disintegration – both a response to and an imitation of cycles of growth and decline in the capitalist regime – would later contribute to New York's "steady and sure journey on the slope of decline and despair," which followed from the 1960s (*ibid.* 32).

Yet the early 1940s witnessed an unprecedented demand for women's labour, as the United States entered the Second World War in December 1941. Its mass mobilization of manpower left many vacancies in occupations traditionally off-limits to women. Recent scholarship has

[1] Neculai employs the Schumpeterian concept of "creative destruction" – the process by which the socio-spatial environment responds to the ever-evolving needs of capitalism – to define the relentless cycles of degeneration and regeneration in the urban sphere (Metcalfe; Neculai 24, 25).

challenged the conventional belief that the Rosie the Riveters – the millions of working women who supported the war effort – "gave up their jobs to returning veterans and returned to the home […] Immediately after World War II" (585). Women's expansive entrance into the labour market during the years of the Second World War led to "a large and persistent increase in [their] participation […] in the labor market" (Bellou & Cardia 136) after 1945. Yet despite the fact that, both during and after the war, the city became less inimical to women's presence, there was nevertheless a significant push towards the reinstallation of women in the home in the years immediately following the war. The millions of working women who found themselves suddenly redundant were dispatched to the suburbs, "to build up [an] infrastructure that would house the millions of children [they] were busy making" (Traister 64). Now, as "Mrs. Consumer," women would play as "significant [a] role in the restructuring of the postwar economy" (Spain 586) as they had done in the preservation of the wartime economy. Rebranded as "guardians of taste" (Wilson 112), suburban housewives were expected to uphold traditional family values, and to forego personal fulfilment in favour of an "'everyday life'" (*ibid.* 114), which consisted in consuming "commodities intended to symbolise happiness" (*ibid.*). Yet the mass-produced suburbia that emerged in the 1940s and '50s was intended to "reproduce patterns of nuclear family life" (Spiegal 189); this suburban space by its very nature excluded the old, the homeless, and crucially the unmarried, who were all, writes Spiegel, simply "written out of these community spaces [and] relegated back to the cities" (*ibid.*) – the same cities, she might have added, which were already so hostile to their presence.

Maeve Brennan

At seventeen, Maeve Brennan left Ireland in 1934, when her father was appointed the first Free State ambassador to Washington. In her early-twenties, she moved to New York City to pursue a career in writing,

penning her first novella within only a few short years of the move.[2] Brennan wrote for the *New Yorker* magazine for over twenty years. It was to be the home of all but a handful of her fiction, and a channel for her creativity for what were arguably the most prodigious and productive years of her life. She published dozens of short stories, in addition to a series of epistles, journalistic in style, later published as her *Notes from The New Yorker* (1969.) As the pseudonymous Long-Winded Lady, she meditated upon the lives of her fellow New Yorkers – glimpsed at a bar, on the street, or through a restaurant window – and chronicled the many faces of the mercurial metropolis itself.[3] The entire oeuvre left by Brennan is small. In her lifetime, she published only three books. Her final publication, *Christmas Eve* (1972), was released in the springtime – hinting, as Angela Bourke puts it, "at the author's [confused] condition" (267). Indeed, Brennan's mental health struggles, and the subsequent breakdowns she suffered, are well documented in Bourke's biography.

'The Long-Winded Lady'

One such communication, "The Solitude of Their Expression," appeared in 1969. In this brief evocation, Brennan – here, the Long-Winded Lady – marvels at the whimsical behaviour of her tower-dwelling neighbour, who carelessly tosses sheets of paper from a letter she has just finished reading out her tenth-floor window. Earlier in the story, the narrator watches an old man shuffle along past a garish, glitzy Broadway nightclub, indifferent to everything around him, carried along, she writes, almost "by the solitude of his expression" alone (*Lady* 10). Yet in and between these seemingly trivial vignettes is a wealth of detail,

[2] *The Visitor*, Brennan's only-known novella, was likely written around 1944-'45. It was posthumously published in 2000, a few short years after its discovery at the library of the University of Notre Dame (Bourke 150).

[3] Brennan adopted the nom de plume for her literary dispatches in "The Talk of the Town" section of *The New Yorker*, later gathered together for publication as, *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from* The New Yorker (1969/2016) (hereafter *Lady.*). A rather ironic choice of name, given most of the 'notes' were brief, pithy, what the author herself describes as "snapshots." (*Lady* 1). Brennan published forty-seven of them intermittently over a period of fifteen years or so, from the mid-50s until 1969, after which point little more than a handful were printed over more than a decade. (*ibid.*).

equally trivial, but shamelessly, consciously, almost provocatively so. From her eleventh-story vantage point, it is as though the narrator is impatient to describe everything she sees; for everything she sees is of equal import, from the fit of the old man's trousers at the waist, to the "square of white cloth" which the old lady sometimes dries beneath her geranium pots, that comes to life "with little flutters" (*ibid.* 13).

Brennan universalises the trivial and trivialises the monumental, so that a sudden shift in the evening light deprives the "ugly length" (*ibid.* 12) of the Empire State Building of "its air of self-satisfaction" (*ibid.* 13), and nothing in all she surveys is "really certain anymore" (*ibid.*) but the row of motionless pigeons by her balcony. This power to invert, to perceive the virtue of the commonplace and the exigency of the passing moment, recalls the everyday practices of Michel de Certeau. De Certeau's description of such actions as "talking, reading, [and] moving about," (xix) as "tactical in character" (*ibid.* 91), and victories of the "'weak' over the 'strong'" (*ibid.*), are typified by the exactitude of Brennan's prose, and the suggestion that the words on the page connote their substantial obverse and a great deal more besides. De Certeau himself, viewing New York from the 110th floor of the ill-fated World Trade Center, observes its mutation "into a texturology" (*ibid.*). Surveyed from above, the city becomes singularly comprehensible, afforded what Kevin Lynch describes as "legibility" (3), something simply not practicable at street level. Looking down, de Certeau notes the "contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space" (91). He continues:

> Unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future (ibid.).

This image of intrinsic obsolescence in the city's architecture is apposite. Yet, where de Certeau sees in it a certain virtue, Neculai relates it to the pernicious cycles of capitalism, a symptom of its parasitic impetus. These cycles of creative destruction are, she argues, "the essential fact about capitalism" (Neculai 25). Indeed, much of what the

Long-Winded Lady sees is framed by an awareness of the incessant shaping and reshaping of her environment. In the same story, she mentions "a narrow shaft of light" (*Lady* 11*)* that shines through a small gap where the behemothic towers, "do not quite meet, or are prevented from meeting by some small stubborn survivor like the old five-story Forty-eighth Street houses down here at my feet" (*ibid*. 11-12). Implicit in this image is both the promise of looming change and the quiet acknowledgement of defeat. Survival for these houses will be short-lived, just as the old man who shuffles along the riotous sidewalk is little more than a stubborn anachronism. Although he walks the busy Broadway thoroughfare "as though it did not exist" (*ibid.* 10), it is really his existence that is in question, as transient as the "shaft of light" (*ibid*. 11) that slips between the "big buildings" (*ibid.*), as fleeting as the fluttering descent of a sheaf of paper tossed from the old woman's window.

Brennan's 'notes' may be read as a kind of resistance, or the sort of subversive "consciousness-raising" (11) identified by Neculai, penned with a deftness that allowed her to drive the subtle knife even deeper, right from the heart of the middlebrow magazine culture then at the height of its powers. She concludes with the observation: "A good many of the ordinary ways of living go when people begin to live up in the air" (*Lady* 14). A subtle denunciation, it expresses the same concern for the preservation of an urban way of life as those held by Jane Jacobs, journalist, activist, and one of Moses' fiercest opponents. Indeed, Brennan may well have been aware of Jacobs' seminal treatise on urban planning when she wrote those words. Jacobs inveighed against the flawed ideology of contemporary urban planners, most of them raised on the Le Corbusier model, and eager, she said, "to build slum towers in the sky, towers that bred crime and isolated people from the street life below" (Peters 8). Her monograph on the patriarchal folly of urban planning, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), was considered revolutionary from the moment of its publication. Jacobs' approach to urban planning was often as innovative as it was practical. It included such expressions as "eyes on the street," a simple but effective approach to neighbourhood watch that regarded those with a vested interest in the street as those best suited to keeping a watch over it. She further criticised the "sameness" in the city's built environment, which she

regarded as being "always the byproduct of renewal projects" (Rowan 604). Her fears for the homogenising effects of urban renewal are reiterated by Brennan's Long-Winded Lady, whose sentiments in turn echo those of preservationist Morris L. Ernst: "People cannot take root when they live more than six or eight stories off the ground," he said (Ernst *quoted in* Peters 72). In fact, Brennan had begun to document these changes from her eighth-floor apartment years before Ernst's pronouncement, before Jacobs' notoriety, even at the high-point of the dystopian machinations inextricably linked to Moses's urbanist vision (Caro 984-1004).

Flâneuse

While her 'Long-Winded Lady' missives, written over more than twenty-five years, do in a sense chart the author's own history of fragmentation, they are moreover a form of "dynamic mapping," a cartography of the order of urban decay that hastened it (Manolescu 3). In addition to "actual geographical maps" (*ibid.* 6), Manolescu's definition of cartographies encompasses "walking and other forms of urban mapping that have an ironic and subversive component" (*ibid.* 2). For Brennan, walking, in addition to and as a means of observing the urban environment and recording its manifold changes, was both a subversive and defiant act. Elkin's recent study seeks to reclaim the arcane practice of strolling, or *flânerie*, wresting the early image of the woman in public away from the department store and the tea shop, and returning her to the streets and avenues of London, Paris and New York. It cleaves a separate image for women from that of the familiar portrait of the male *flâneur*. Brennan's strolling, loitering, and observation as the Long-Winded Lady aligns her with those of the neglected coterie of nineteenth- and early-twentieth century *flâneuses,* or female strollers, that included George Sand and Virginia Woolf (Elkin). Elkin avers: "[T]he flâneuse is not merely a female flâneur, but a figure to be reckoned with, and inspired by, all on her own" (22).

Both Hessels and Simmels recognised the disruptive, and "politically charged" (Frisby 36-37) activities of strolling and observation. The flâneuse revels in the urban environment, while simultaneously resisting its false urgency. She refuses to be hurried, nay harried, by the

"industrial social controls" (Buck-Morss, 'The Flaneur' 136) of the city. Brennan's *flâneuserie* was, in itself, a defiant act, as New York's urban reconfiguration privileged roads over sidewalks. Indeed, Moses's urban vision actively excluded the pedestrian, favouring the car-owning middle-class family time and again, evidenced by his attempts (unsuccessful) to drive a freeway through Greenwich Village and Washington Square Park, and in one infamous instance to bulldoze a cherished Central Park playground to build a one-acre car park for the local tavern.[4] Nature and recreational areas were places to be accessed outside the city, in the conveyance of the motor car, for which a network of arterial parkways and highways, extending to hundreds of miles, was constructed, causing irrevocable change and in some cases outright destruction to many urban communities, mostly poor ones (Caro; Nonko). "[T]he detached stranger's view," writes Frisby, "'contains dangerous possibilities'" (36-37*)*. By walking the streets and avenues of Manhattan, Brennan engaged in the dissident acts of recording and observing. Like Charles Meyron's sketches of Paris pre-Haussmannisation, Brennan's "snapshots" (*Lady* 1) were composed as a way of capturing "the essentially fleeting character of modern history, and commemorating the suffering of the living by recording its traces" (Buck-Morss, 'Dialectics' 96).

The Last Days of New York City

In "The Last Days of New York City" (*published in July '55*), Brennan sits in her two-roomed apartment, musing on the perversity of a house of cards – an impulse purchase from earlier that day – that is bound to outlive the bricks-and-mortar home it occupies:

> All my life I'll be scurrying out of buildings just ahead of the wreckers, and I can't afford to start wondering, every time I have the place painted, if the walls will speak up after the room has been laid open (Lady 219).

[4] The 'Tavern on the Green' incident saw Moses oppose a cohort of upper-middle-class, white women, some of them writers and artists, many more besides the wives of celebrated artists. His persistent, and in the end successful, attempts to tear down the small wooded playground, despite the private and public obloquy it engendered, signalled the end of his puissance (Caro 984-999).

What might have prompted a woman in her thirties, successful, talented, and desirable though she was, to look to the future with such foreboding eyes may be explained by an indirect reference in the preceding passages.

With something of the familiar, confidential tone of an intimate in which she was wont to address the reader, Brennan writes that, recently, she has heard "talk of cutting an underpass through Washington Square" (*ibid.* 216). "It is only a rumor" (*ibid.*), she tepidly concedes, adding with more than a hint of the elegiac quality that pervades the rest of the story, "It will hardly look the same after that" (*ibid.*). With the subversive force of an oblique assault, Brennan is here addressing a number of rumoured proposals, which were in fact part of official efforts to completely overhaul Manhattan's transport system – including the construction of the Lower-Manhattan and Cross-Brooklyn Expressways (B. Sagalyn; Peters 72). Amongst the more ambitious proposals conceived by Moses, these projects are notable for their failed implementation, thanks in no small part to the activism of women like Jane Jacobs. Peters avers that it was often middle-class women who issued the clarion call for reform. Indeed, Jacobs herself, in her *Death and Life,* credited local activist Shirley Hayes, mother and Washington Square resident, as having sustained the battle over many years (Jacobs 471), while fellow resident and former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was also a vocal opponent (New York City Department of Parks & Recreation).

The preservation of Washington Square Park represented an early example of the successes of civic mobilisation to oppose divisive urban planning. It was the first of a number of major public works Moses envisaged for Manhattan, which would later be shelved indefinitely, or decisively scrapped, during the course of the 1960s. But in the summer of 1955, staring down from her high-rise, two-roomed apartment at an already much-altered Greenwich Village, Brennan would have had little cause for such optimism, prompting her to remark with bitter irony: "The hotel in which I now live is elderly, and last night I wondered, not for the first time, whether its last days might not be approaching" (*Lady* 217).

It is well she might have wondered, for the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, begun in the late-1940s, and lasting well over a decade, had already caused untold damage to significant sections of the

South Bronx, most notably to the East Tremont neighbourhood. Vested with Title-I powers, Moses' bulldozers had already razed extensive tracts of slum settlements to make way for his Manhattantown development, forcefully evicting thousands of families from an impoverished though "stable" community, into ever more marginalised and destitute conditions (Caro 963, 966, 970-971). It is worth noting that the slum communities he evicted for Manhattantown were racially-integrated, something that appealed to most African American residents, both for reasons of communal harmony and because they were aware that public services were "far better in non-segregated areas" of the city. The slum conditions they had been living under were enviable compared to those in Harlem, where many residents feared to go, and where many more of them ultimately finished up (*ibid.* 971).

Residential hotels and SROs (Single Room Occupancy)

"The Last Days of New York City" was published at a curious time both in the city's and the author's life history. Evicted from her "little Ninth-Street apartment" only the year before – it was "torn out from under [her] by the wreckers" (*Lady* 218) – Brennan decided to marry and move in with fellow writer St. Clair McKelway – possibly as a consequence of her eviction (Bourke 180-181). But the marriage was ill-fated. Dogged by their own personal demons, issues of addiction and depression, married life with McKelway arguably exacerbated Brennan's sense of isolation. Ultimately, it failed to insulate her from the challenges of single life faced by countless women across the city, which she experienced with a new intensity following an amicable divorce in 1959, little over five years after the wedding. Another of her 'Long-Winded Lady' missives, penned shortly after the separation, finds her walking alone at dawn, fulminating over Sixth Avenue's failings:[5]

> During those hours, in the silence and the nice clean light [...] anyone walking alone through that ugliness can see without any trouble that Sixth

[5] Bourke writes that *The New Yorker* "kept stories in its 'bank' for years," awaiting the marriage of time and circumstance for publication, meaning that this essay, "Sixth Avenue Shows its True Self," published in November 1961 was likely written in or around the time of Brennan's divorce (194). No 'Long-Winded Lady' essays were published in 1959 (*ibid*.).

> is not a human thoroughfare at all but only a propped-up imitation of a thoroughfare, and that its purpose is not to provide safe or pleasant or beautiful passage for the people of the city but to propitiate, even if it is only for a little while, whatever the force is that feeds on the expectation of chaos. Those blocks, as far as you can see, offer nothing except the threat, or the promise, that they will come tumbling down. The buildings have about them nothing of the past and nothing of the future, no imitation of lives spent or to come, but only a reminder of things that should not have happened and a guarantee of things that should not have come to pass (Lady 123-124).

Gone is the disconsolate tone of "The Last Days of New York City." The invective is as emphatic as the italicised "*things*," signified here by whole blocks of the avenue that "*will*" be demolished. She writes with a sense of desperation and contempt for the disintegration that appears to pursue her, the "chaos" (*ibid.*) that underpins her anxieties, past, present and future, and which sounds a subtle discordance in so much of her urban commentary. Here, the apprehensions expressed five or six years beforehand have become all too real, as an entire avenue becomes little more than an ugly "imitation" (*ibid.*), trapped in a cycle of perpetual transience, a palimpsest of infinite presents, each one worse than the last. The destructive imagery is potent, reinforced by an imagined obliteration of the avenue beneath "tons and tons and tons of snow" (*ibid.*), which she says, "should always be falling there" (*ibid.*) (a subtle homage to Joyce's "The Dead").[6] Brennan imagines the ugliness of the useless buildings suddenly shrouded in an ocean of "desolate" (*ibid.*) snow. As the buildings retreat into nothingness, she concedes:

> Sixth Avenue possesses a quality that some people acquire, sometimes quite suddenly, which dooms it and them to be loved only at the moment when they are being looked at for the very last time (ibid. 126).

If Brennan appeared to worry unduly for the future, she may well have had good cause. Without knowing it, she was then facing into her

[6] Brennan would have been very familiar with the final passage of Joyce's extended short story, "The Dead," which begins, "[S]now was general all over Ireland" (Joyce, J., & Brown, T.).

most productive and successful years.[7] Yet according to Bourke, "Maeve's position at The New Yorker had been ambiguous when she was young and spellbindingly attractive" (248). Now, married and divorced in her early forties, the road ahead was littered with uncertainties.[8] A near-ubiquitous theme in her 'Long-Winded Lady' pieces, the question of home and stability was never too far from her mind. Alone once again, she faced the vexing issue of finding affordable, 'decent' housing in the city, an issue that had concerned women for decades, bound by implication to the larger question of women alone living in cities.

As far back as the 1920s, matters of affordability and "virtue" (Byron) were paramount for young, single women hoping to make a success of city life. Historian Rosalind Rosenberg holds that there were no viable alternatives to the string of women-only residences dotted around the city, which housed and fed debutantes and young working girls, safely and inexpensively, until – following a 'logical' progression – they "married and moved out" (*ibid.*). Wage disparities ensured that affordability remained an issue for women, who were forced to compete for an ever-diminishing supply of furnished rooms and SROs with an ever-increasing number of the city's poorest.

The history of the SRO is intimately allied to the housing crises that bedevilled New York over the second half of the twentieth century. Long a staple of unmarried adults and childless couples, the city's supply of residential hotels and SRO buildings was as crucial to women's independent existence in the early decades of the twentieth century, as their wholesale demolition in the fifties and sixties would be to post-war efforts to reinstall women in the home (Peters 70, 79).

After the United States' intercession in the Second World War, major urban centres saw a massive influx of workers looking to fill the

[7] *The New Yorker* published more of Brennan's fiction in the 1960s than in any other decade. Additionally, two collections of her stories were published in book form in 1969, *In and Out of Never-Never Land* and *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from The New Yorker*, while her short story, "The Eldest Child" had been included amongst the *Best American Short Stories* (1968) only the year before (Bourke 248-249).

[8] "For a divorced woman without property or a private income, a sense of lowered consequence was probably inevitable […]" (Bourke 220). Bourke further notes that it was, "no small thing" for her to have abandoned the prospects of marriage, as Maeve did in her forties, "with no prospect of alimony" (*ibid.* 216).

manpower void left behind by drafted servicemen. New York landlords responded to the surge in demand for housing by further subdividing the brownstones and "greystones" from habitable two- and three-family townhouses into what effectively became tenements, sheltering as many as ten families per building (Siegal 3-4). Over time, the rudimentary SRO became a haven for the marginalised: lesbian and gay couples, able-bodied persons with mental health issues, "quasi-familial arrangements of older women, and alcoholic men" (*ibid.* 5).[9] These people were "peripheral to the mainstream of the life of the city" (*ibid.*), alike in their "isolation, loneliness, and tendency to personal disorganisation" (Zorbaugh *quoted in* Siegal 6). Moreover, they were equally peripheral to the emerging phenomenon of suburban space.

Between the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the woman in the hotel made the transition from a disreputable to a respectable figure. Single women of all hues – unmarried, divorced, widowed, young and old – found in the hotel a space to reject the conventions of marriage and domestic servility. Before the emergence of safe houses (literal and figurative), such as the Martha Washington Hotel and The Trowmart Inn, in the first years of the twentieth century, women "who lived on their own in cities, or who roomed with other women" (Traister 90) ran the risk of being taken for prostitutes, which was "one of the greatest risks" (*ibid.*) they faced. Women were, Spain attests, "suspect" (583) when alone out of doors. What institutions like the Trowmart did for women, notably single women, was to enable them to live independently, "free from the suspicion of amoral behaviour" (*ibid.* 87). Opened in the mid-nineteen twenties, The Barbizon quickly became one of the city's most desirable residential, women-only hotels, boasting a veritable who's who of former residents, that would include a future princess and First Lady, dozens of models and movie stars. Boarding houses such as these catered to "respectable" young women, many of them aspiring to a permanent career in the city, many more bolstered by wealthy parents, and – by an overwhelming majority – most of them white (Biondi 16). Writers like Edna Ferber and Dorothy Parker found there a safe and comfortable

[9] No less than seven individuals – at "a minimum" – were expected to share a single bathroom and kitchen (one toilet, one stove, etc.), in each SRO "unit" (Siegal 3-4).

space to work freely, while to author Dawn Powell the hotel was a space for "urban exploration and sexual freedom" (Peters 78).[10] Powell's novel *Angels on Toast* (1940) sees the protagonist experience a sense of being "out in the world" (*ibid.*), simply by taking an elevator down to the hotel lobby, bar or restaurant. In her later fiction, Powell took to eulogising Manhattan's "upper- and middle-class hotels – the Astor, the Brevoort, the Lafayette, [and] the Hotel Imperial" (*ibid.*) – as Brennan would later eulogise the cheap, serviceable hotels of Greenwich Village and the West Village in the fifties and sixties.

Writers such as Parker, Powell and Brennan, who celebrated the hotel as an instrument of independent living – what Peters calls their "voluntary homelessness" (*ibid.* 79) – recognised in its destruction something that went beyond mere physical demolishment, to a greater obscuration of the hotel "as architectural space and cultural idea" (*ibid.* 75). As the grand old hotels and the mid-range hotels came tumbling down, the city's SROs and furnished rooms gained a newfound importance, not just for women but for the vast numbers of the poor and underprivileged from the slums, evicted by Moses' bulldozers and rendered homeless by the monolithic office blocks and upscale apartments that supplanted them.[11] On the essence of urban renewal, Charles Abrams wrote, "[It] tears down slums to make way for higher rental projects while the slum dweller is relegated to the residual supply and forced to pay higher rents" (24). Certainly, Moses bore this out with many of his housing developments, not least of all his magnum opus the Lincoln Center, the construction of which saw him demolish 7,000 low-income homes over eighteen square blocks, to be replaced by 4,400 new homes, more than nine-tenths of which were "luxury apartments" (Caro 1013, 1014).

Yet to the extent that, even in the 1950s and '60s, the SRO could be seen as a viable option for those of limited means to maintain a home in

[10] Edna Ferber was a Pulitzer Prize-winning author. Born 1887; died 1968. Ferber' novels included *Show Boat* (1926) and *Giant* (1952), both of which were made into blockbuster Hollywood films.

[11] The remaining section of The Brevoort was demolished the same year as "The Last Days of New York City" was published (1955), and The Holly Hotel had been demolished the year before.

the city, it would not prove to be a long-term solution.[12] By the mid-1960s, the SRO was considered by some in state governance to be a new kind of slum dwelling. In 1965, the Deputy Mayor of New York wondered whether the SRO could even be considered "lawful housing," and broached the possibility of "phasing [it] out of existence" (Crystal & Beck 684). In the ten-year period, 1972 to 1982, "100,000 SRO units disappeared" (Peters 14). By the time the New York City Council saw fit to address the issue, "by imposing a moratorium on conversions, alterations and demolitions of single-room occupancy dwellings" (Crystal & Beck 685), the city was contending not merely with a housing crisis, but also with a homelessness crisis of calamitous proportions.

Brennan spent years regretting the destruction and reconfiguration of her adopted city. From the Whitney Museum to the Holly Hotel, the Brevoort to Wannamaker's department store, she traced a pattern of loss that was at once private and indiscriminate, observing and recording the wholesale destruction of landmark buildings scattered around the city.[13] Stepping out for lunch one afternoon, the narrator remarks upon the sudden disappearance of an entire block of Sixth Avenue: "It is very disconcerting to have a gap suddenly appear in a spot where you can't remember ever having seen a wall" (*Lady* 218). Brennan's awareness of her environment was absolute, her sorrow for its ceaseless mutation habitual. Her experience of this progressive loss is manifested in feelings of disorientation, illustrating what Lynch saw as, "the [crucial] need to recognize and pattern our surroundings" (4).

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[12] A study carried out in the 1980s by Crystal and Beck surveyed almost 500* residents of New York City's rooming houses, residential hotels and SRO buildings. Their findings indicated that long term, elderly residents were least likely to have experienced psychiatric hospitalisation in the past. Additionally, the same older residents, "by a strong majority" indicated a stronger attachment to, and a greater feeling of safety in, their SRO dwelling (Crystal and Beck 684-685). ** 485 respondents were interviewed; "87% of SRO hotel units in the sample were in Manhattan" (ibid*. 684*).*

[13] Brennan openly professed to having little or no knowledge of vast tracts of the city, tending to find lodgings in the same familiar neighbourhoods time and again. She favoured the cheaper accommodations around Manhattan's Midtown district, as well as some of the more affordable neighbourhoods of the lower-west side. In "The Last Days of New York City", she refers to the smaller hotels clustered around Washington Square, a number of which she had inhabited at one time or another (Bourke 216-219; *Lady* 2, 216-217).

Decline

The history of New York's decline and despair was not merely a history of the poor, the immigrant and African-American communities. For much of the twentieth century, women too – women of immense privilege and none – occupied the margins of society. Women like Brennan, who failed to conform to expectations of motherhood, marriage and domesticity, were overlooked in the onward march of progress, and the "paradoxical narrative of 'disintegrative revival'" (Neculai 34) which came to define late twentieth-century urban renewal in New York.

Brennan's later life was marred by a kind of fragmentation, which in many respects mirrored that of the city itself, her life's predicament and inspiration. The itinerant trail of her final years is incomplete, obfuscated by long stretches of homelessness. Her chronicles of the social and spatial disintegration of New York in the 1950s and '60s failed to protect her from the fate she shared with thousands of other New Yorkers, un-homed by the cycles of urban decay, cast adrift and left to disappear. In one of her final dispatches as the ever-prescient Long-Winded Lady, Brennan records an encounter with a "respectably dressed middle-aged woman" (*Lady* 258), singing and dancing on a traffic island in the heart of rush-hour Broadway.[14] She waves her umbrella of beige silk – "to match her gloves" (*ibid.*) – slamming it down onto the roof of a passing taxi, gaily bellowing the words of Bei Mir Bist Du Schön to "an audience she alone could see" (*ibid.*). Yet the effect of her burlesque is tragic, not comic. Her antic behaviour infects the onlooker with fear, not laughter. Somehow, the mask has slipped from her face, taking with it all semblance of dignity and sanity. And in its place, a glimmer of madness sends the Long-Winded Lady scurrying into the nearest bookshop, leaving the woman stranded out on the flimsy isthmus of reason. All her finery will not alter the fact that she is drunk, broken, alone, little more than the "shrubbery wither" (*ibid.* 260) at her feet, amidst a "wasteland of tin cans and wine bottles and dirty scraps of cloth and paper" (*ibid.*). The woman's fate is a two-way mirror, reflecting the

[14] Published in January 1970, "On the Island" would be followed by just three more 'The Long-Winded Lady' pieces over an eleven-year period (*Lady* 258-262).

city's history of urban disintegration, and the author's own shadowy fate in the years ahead.

"I wonder," writes Brennan, delivered at last from the apparition, "how she came to be helpless like that in public. I wonder at the power of her nightmare – that it could wait for years and then trap her when she was finding her way home" (*ibid.* 262). Little wonder that she might have been haunted by this woman, or that she might have looked away from her so fearfully. Now in her late middle-age, alone and vulnerable, tormented by her past, and uncertain of her future, she understood this woman perhaps more than she cared to admit. In spite of its countless beauties, its vast concessions to freedom, Brennan understood the city's ruthless indifference to her plight, as she understood its hostility to women who lacked the basic securities of family and home. Walking home to her furnished rooms, Brennan comforts herself with the thought that, "Kind memory will fail her, to save her" (*ibid.*). It is little enough consolation, but one she was no doubt grateful for when the mask finally slipped from her own face.

Conclusion

The life cycles of urban renewal raised a path of devastation through urban communities for much of the twentieth century. The brand of bogus regeneration espoused by Robert Moses wrought a homogenising influence over the social and architectural order of New York for more than forty years. It privileged the car over the pedestrian, the wealthy over the poor, the office block over the family home, and raw, functionalist design over what Jane Jacobs called "the cheerful hurly-burly" (Jacobs & Epstein xv) of city streets. Jacobs saw New York as "a cornucopia of possibility and improvisation" (*ibid.* ix), and in this she shared a vision with fellow writer Maeve Brennan. Like Jacobs, Brennan mounted her own resistance in "the act of documentation" (Neculai 11), recording the streets and avenues she knew, moment by moment, precisely, at times even fastidiously. These "moments of kindness, moments of recognition" (*Lady* 3), have about them a frantic, almost frenetic quality, capturing a way of life through snatches of overheard conversation, the glossary of a person's clothing, the minutiae of place

and circumstance, and the buildings which were in some instances disappearing beneath her very feet.

The history of creative destruction in New York City is intricately linked to post-war deindustrialisation and the rise of the service economy. Answering the unprecedented need for office space, Moses gaily swung his axe, demolishing slums, rooming houses, and indeed entire blocks of the city's low-income housing. In the decades that would follow, New York became increasingly inimical to those who lacked the conventional securities of family and property. In the foreword to her collected 'Long-Winded Lady' essays, Brennan likens New York to a "capsized city. Half-capsized, anyway, with the inhabitants hanging on […] to the island that is their life's predicament" (*Lady* 1). By the time of its publication in 1969, Robert Moses was over eighty years of age. His power was decidedly on the wane, and many of his most ambitious plans for Manhattan had been permanently scrapped. But change came too late for Brennan, and many women like her. She was to become a waif, ever more dependent on the city's dwindling supply of residential hotels, and SROs – the few viable accommodations left for single women in the city. In the midst of the demolition – often in the very path of the wrecking ball – Brennan documented and publicly denounced the wisdom of ersatz urban renewal, the effects of which have persisted in many parts of New York to this day. Her fate is one of innumerable afterlives of the city's transmogrification, and a salient reminder of the very real human damage that may persist long after the event has left off.

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