What Is Surrealism?

How the Surrealist Movement Shaped the Course of Art History

By Jon MannSep 23rd, 2016 6:31 pm

During the 1936 International Surrealist Exposition, held in London, guest speaker Salvador Dalí addressed his audience costumed head-to-toe in an old-fashioned scuba suit, with two dogs on leashes in one hand and a billiard cue in the other. Mid-lecture, constrained by the scuba mask, the Spanish artist began to suffocate and flailed his arms for help. The audience, unfazed, assumed his gesticulations were all part of the performance. As art legend has it, the Surrealist poet David Gascoyne eventually rescued Dalí, who upon recovery remarked, “I just wanted to show that I was plunging deeply into the human mind.” Dalí then finished his speech—and his accompanying slides, to

no one's surprise, were all presented upside down.

This anecdote underscores the most absurdist, even clownish, elements of the Surrealist movement, epitomized by Dalí—who was considered something of a joke figure by the early 20th-century art establishment. But the art movement was actually far more diverse than is widely known, spanning various disciplines, styles, and geographies from 1924 until its end in 1966.

Founded by the poet André Breton in Paris in 1924, Surrealism was an artistic and literary movement. It proposed that the Enlightenment—the influential 17th- and 18th-century intellectual movement that championed reason and individualism—had suppressed the superior qualities of the irrational, unconscious mind. Surrealism's goal was to liberate thought, language, and human experience from the oppressive boundaries of rationalism.

Breton had studied medicine and psychiatry and was well-versed in the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud. He was particularly interested in the idea that the unconscious mind—which produced dreams—was the source of artistic creativity. A devoted Marxist, Breton also intended Surrealism to be a revolutionary movement capable of unleashing the minds of the masses from the rational order of society. But how could they achieve this liberation of the human mind?

Automatism, a practice that is akin to free association or a stream of consciousness, gave the Surrealists the means to produce unconscious artwork. Surrealist artist André Masson's mixed-media canvas *Battle of Fishes* (1926) is an early example of automatic painting. To begin, Masson took gesso—a tacky substance typically used to prime supports for painting—and let it freely fall across the surface of his canvas. He then threw sand over it, letting the grains stick to the adhesive at random, and doodled and painted around the resulting forms. Artists employing automatic methods embraced the element of chance, often to surprising results. Masson's end product features two prehistoric fish, jaws dripping with blood, fighting it out in the primordial ooze: an unconscious demonstration of the inherent violence of

nature.

Not every Surrealist chose to create such abstract works, however. Many Surrealists recognized that the representation of a thing's actual appearance in the physical world might more effectively conjure associations for the viewer wherein a deeper, unconscious reality revealed itself. Artists like Dalí and the Belgian painter René Magritte created hyper-realistic, dreamlike visions that are windows into a strange world beyond waking life. Magritte's *La Clairvoyance* (1936), for instance, in which an artist paints a bird in flight while he looks at an egg sitting atop a table, suggests a dreamscape or a hallucinatory state.

The Icons of Surrealism

Though Surrealism is indeed most associated with such flamboyant and irreverent figures as Dalí, Breton recruited a wide group of artists and intellectuals already active in Paris to write for and exhibit under his banner.

Building on the anti-rational tradition of Dada, Surrealism counted among its members such major Dada figures as Tristan Tzara, Francis Picabia, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, and Marcel Duchamp. By 1924, this group was augmented by other artists and literary figures, including the writers Paul Éluard, Robert Desnos, Georges Bataille, and Antonin Artaud; the painters Joan Miró and Yves Tanguy; the sculptors Alberto Giacometti and Meret Oppenheim; and the filmmakers René Clair, Jean Cocteau, and Luis Buñuel.

But Breton was notoriously fickle about who he admitted to the movement, and he had a habit of excommunicating members who he felt no longer shared his particular view of Surrealism. Desnos and Masson, for example, were tossed out of the group via Breton's "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" in 1930 for their unwillingness to support his political aims. Bataille, whose Surrealist viewpoint differed considerably from Breton's, went on to form his own influential splinter group, the College of Sociology, which published journals and held exhibitions throughout the 1930s.

Surrealism in the Americas

As an interwar movement beginning in Paris in the 1920s, Surrealism responded to a post-World War I period that saw the slow reconstruction of major French cities, the height of the French colonial empire abroad, and the rise of fascism across Europe.

By 1937, however, most of the major figures in Surrealism had been forced to leave Europe to escape Nazi persecution. Max Ernst's *Europe After the Rain II* (1940–42) reflects this fraught moment with a post-apocalyptic vision created at the height of World War II. A partially abstract work formed by "decalcomania"—a technique that entailed painting on glass, then pressing that painted glass to the canvas to allow chance elements to remain—*Europe After the Rain* suggests bombed-out buildings, the corpses of humans and animals, and eroded geological formations in the aftermath of a great cataclysm.

The emigration of Surrealists to various sites of refuge during World War II did, however, spread the movement's influence across the Atlantic, where it would take firm root in the Americas. As Surrealism gained traction in the 1930s and '40s, it brought automatic practices and an interest in psychology and mythology to a new generation of artists. Jackson Pollock's Surrealist-inspired *Guardians of the Secret* (1943) exists somewhere between his earlier Social Realist works and the later drip paintings that would make him famous: it includes a recumbent jackal, two totemic forms, and a frieze of calligraphic pseudo-script.

In Latin America, Surrealism found its voice in the work of artists like Frida Kahlo, whose highly personal artistic style paralleled aspects of Surrealism without owing it any specific intellectual debt. In *Arbol de la Esperanza* (1946), which translates to "tree of hope," Kahlo doesn't depict an actual tree, but rather a dual self-portrait set in an unfamiliar landscape, a tableau that suggests both the 1925 bus accident that rendered her infertile, and the possibility of renewal. While its depiction of fantastic subject matter

is reminiscent of works by Magritte or Dalí, Kahlo's painting celebrates the everyday artistry of traditional Mexican *ex voto* painting.

The psychological and mythological underpinnings of Surrealism also enabled non-European artists—like Wifredo Lam, a painter of Afro-Cuban and Chinese descent who studied in Madrid and Paris in the 1920s and '30s—to delve into the native traditions of their own countries. Lam's *Les Noces* (1947) intricately weaves the Cubist-Surrealist forms of artists like Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró into a representation of the Afro-Cuban ritual Santería.

Why Does Surrealism Matter?

Surrealism represents a crucible of avant-garde ideas and techniques that contemporary artists are still using today, including the introduction of chance elements into works of art. These methods opened up a new mode of painterly practice pursued by the Abstract Expressionists. The element of chance has also proven integral to performance art, as in the unscripted Happenings of the 1950s, and even to computer art based on randomization. The Surrealist focus on dreams, psychoanalysis, and fantastic imagery has provided fodder for a number of artists working today, such as Glenn Brown, who has also directly appropriated Dalí's art in his own painting.

Surrealism's desire to break free of reason led it to question the most basic foundation of artistic production: the idea that art is the product of a single artist's creative imagination. As an antidote to this, Breton promoted the *cadavre exquis*, or "exquisite corpse," as a technique for collectively creating art, one that is still played as a game widely today. It involves starting a sentence, sketch, or collage, and then giving it to another person to continue—without letting that person see what has already been written, drawn, or placed. The term derived from a simple game of creating collective prose that resulted in the sentence, "The exquisite corpse shall drink the new wine."

Given the method's embrace of chance and tendency to produce humorous, absurd, or unsettling images, it soon became a viable technique for creating exactly the type of unconscious, collective work that the Surrealists sought. *Exquisite Corpse 27* (ca. 2011), a work completed by Ghada Amer, Will Cotton, and Carry Leibowitz, is a contemporary example of the sort of stylistically and thematically disconnected work that can arise from this Surrealist method.

The historian and music critic Greil Marcus has gone so far as to characterize Surrealism as one chapter in a series of revolutionary attempts to liberate thought that stretches from the blasphemies of medieval heretics up to the 1960s and beyond. In this light, Surrealism can be understood as the progenitor of the later, Marx-inspired art movement Situationism, 1960s countercultural protests, and even punk: a project of breaking down the rational order that society imposes on individuals.

—Jon Mann

Header image: Salvador Dalí, The Persistence of Memory*, 1931. © Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2016. Image courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art.*

Photographs of Joan Miró and Max Ernst via Wikimedia Commons.

These 5 Architecture Projects Would Have Changed New York—but Were Never Built

Artsy Editorial

By Isaac Kaplan

Aug 21st, 2017 6:26 pm

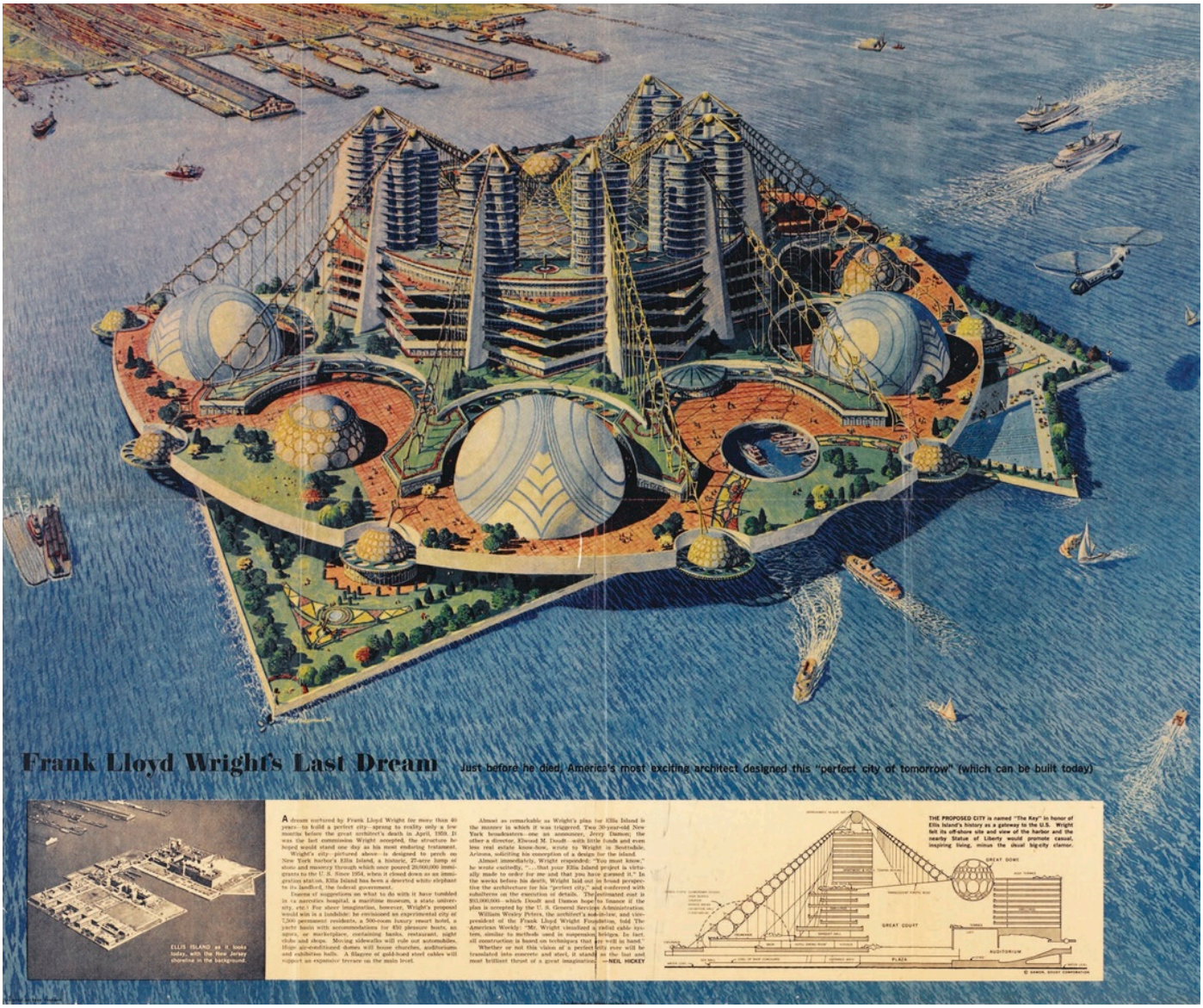
Even for those who have called New York City home for their entire lives, there are infinite perspectives through which to see and understand the

legendary metropolis. There are the sculptures hiding just above you; the beloved diorama at the Queens Museum, showing the city in miniature; and then the myriad buildings that were dreamt up for the city, but never built.

Those unrealized structures are the subject of *Never Built New York*, a book written by architecture critic Greg Goldin and journalist Sam Lubell, as well as the title of an exhibition the pair curated, which opens at the Queens Museum this September. Both book and exhibition detail hundreds of designs that never came to be, from some of the earliest planned arrangements for the city's grid to the grandest glittering towers proposed for the World Trade Center site.

Some projects were foiled by their architects' wily ambition, while others came tantalizingly close to creation, only to be struck down by politics. Here, we've selected five of our favorite buildings from *Never Built New York*.

Frank Lloyd Wright, *Key Project for Ellis Island* (1959)



Frank Lloyd Wright, *Key Project for Ellis Island*, 1959. Courtesy of ARTBOOK | D.A.P.

Ellis Island ceased to function as an immigration port in 1954. Following what Goldin and Lubell call “an all-American path,” the island was opened up to developers. The highest bid was for $2.1 million (roughly $17 million today) by the Damon Doudt Corporation, which promised to build a “completely self-contained city of the future.”

This vision would be designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who proposed a $93 million design that didn’t lack ambition. The architect described it as promoting “casual, inspired living, minus the usual big-city glamour.” It would house 7,500 residents, boasting seven candlestick-shaped towers, all orbiting around a giant globe in the center. Residents would have

access to all the amenities of a big city, including hospitals, movie theories, restaurants, and more. Eventually, the government put the kibosh on Wright's futurist plan, and ultimately rejected every developer bid tendered for the island in favor of turning it into a national monument.

R. Buckminster Fuller, *Dome Over Manhattan* & *Dodger Dome* (1961 & 1955)

R. Buckminster Fuller, *Dome Over Manhattan*, 1961. Courtesy of ARTBOOK | D.A.P.

Two thoughts cross the mind of every normal New Yorker on a daily basis. One: There should be a 2,000-foot-wide dome over Midtown. Two: The Dodgers should come back from Los Angeles to be housed in a stadium with a massive plastic dome.

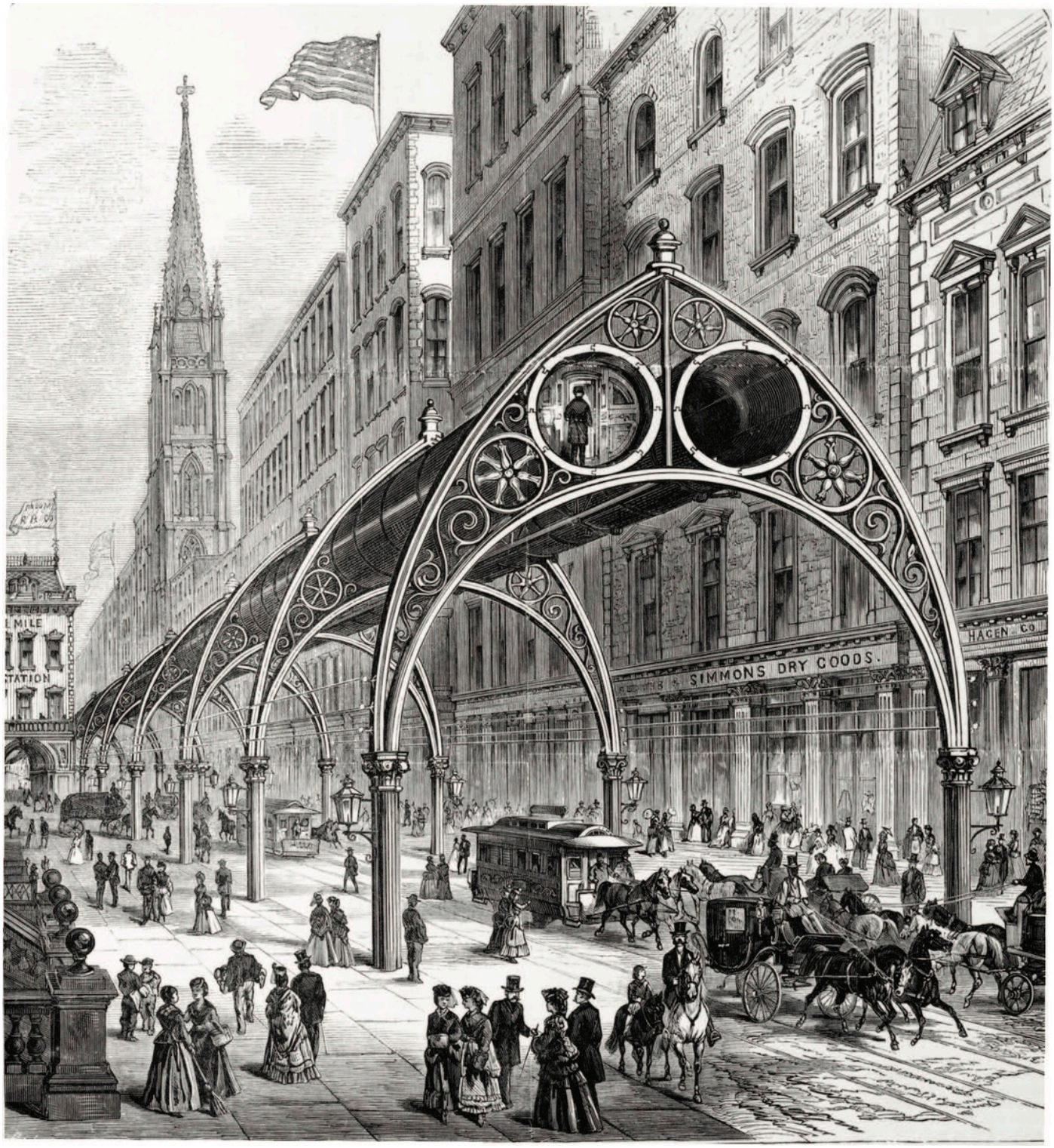
Okay, no one actually thinks either of these things. But in the 1950s and early

’60s, the legendary architect and theorist R. Buckminster Fuller did propose building two domes, one over Manhattan and one over a new stadium for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

The Manhattan dome—a larger version of the geodesic domes Fuller promoted throughout his life—never came to be, but that doesn’t mean it was without value or importance. As the authors of *Never Built* write, the “Dome Over Manhattan was speculative but prescient, if one accepts that humanity is now determined to ruin the natural biosphere.”

The *Dodger Dome*, however, made significant strides and had it been built, it could have helped to prevent the exodus of the team to L.A. in 1958. The team’s owners had recruited Fuller to work with architect Norman Bel Geddes, who submitted plans for a massive stadium—replete with a dome, of course—that could seat 55,000 people and would cost $2 million to construct. The plan was approved by the mayor and the state, but ultimately, the relatively inexpensive land in L.A. was too good an opportunity for the Dodgers’s owner to pass up. He relocated the team there, to a stadium that doesn’t have a dome. Alas, despite a news story for Fuller’s project with the headline “A Dome Grows In Brooklyn,” this particular idea never took root.

Rufus Henry Gilbert, *Gilbert’s Elevated Railway* (1870)



Rufus Henry Gilbert, *Gilbert's Elevated Railway*, 1870. Courtesy of ARTBOOK | D.A.P.

New Yorkers forced to endure ever-more infuriating subway delays have the right to complain—but perhaps not as much as Rufus Henry Gilbert. One of the earliest proponents of mass transit, Gilbert was swindled out of the profits from the elevated train line of his dreams.

A surgeon during the civil war, Gilbert believed that overcrowded slums were at the root of illness and disease. He endeavored to create a way for people to live outside overcrowded metropolitan spaces. Part of this larger mission was his plan for an Elevated Railway, a series of elevated tubes some 24 feet above the ground, which he patented in 1870. The original proposal was foiled by the stock crash of 1873.

Undeterred, Gilbert developed a new plan for the railway in 1874, this time with steam-powered carriages rather than tubes, and prefabricated parts that could be made in a factory, then shipped to New York for relatively easy assembly. Gilbert eventually found backers, and construction began for a train line on Sixth Avenue in 1876. But just a day after the elevated train took its inaugural run in 1878, Gilbert's business partners pushed him out. He was left without any stock in the enterprise and died of stomach ailments in 1885. He was only 53.

Robert Moses and Othmar Ammann, *Brooklyn-Battery Bridge* (1939)

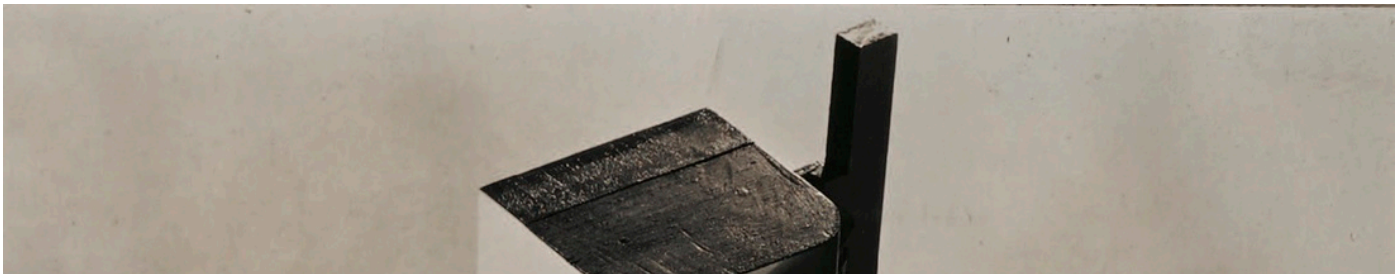
Robert Moses and Othmar Ammann, *Brooklyn-Battery Bridge*, 1919. Courtesy of ARTBOOK | D.A.P.

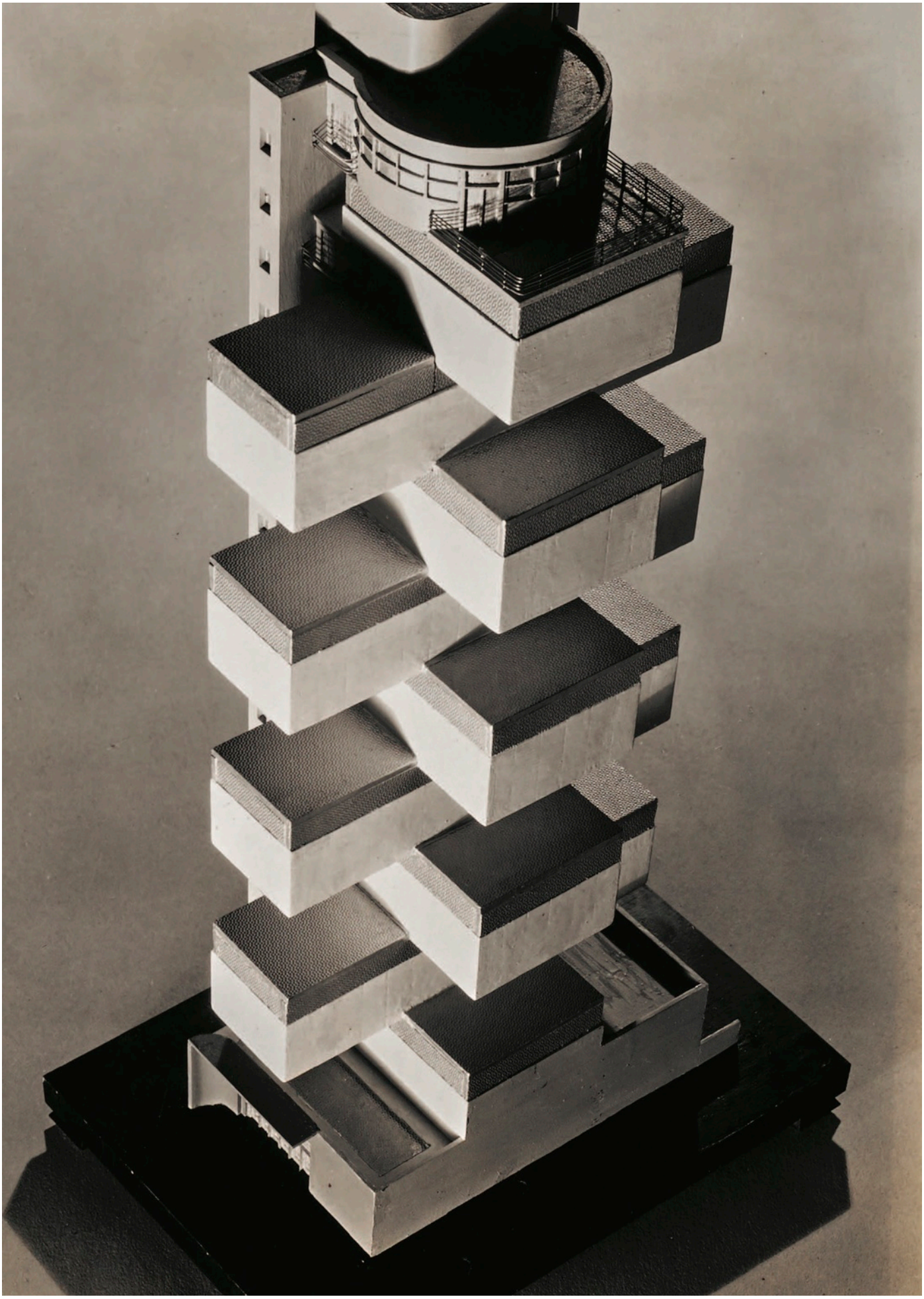
Though Robert Moses altered New York City forever—displacing thousands, while constructing his vision of interconnected highways—he is perhaps best remembered today for his failures. Notable among them was his proposal for a massive road-building project that was thwarted by Jane Jacobs and Greenwich Village community groups. A lesser-known but deeply painful failure for Moses involved the *Brooklyn Battery Bridge*—a 6,500-foot-long speedway that would connect Brooklyn to Manhattan at the island's southern tip. The bridge would stand as a testament to Moses's vision and ability, reasons why he preferred the size and scale of a bridge to proposals for a tunnel connecting the boroughs.

The plan was introduced on January 22, 1939, and after a few months of bitter resistance from opponents who both hated its design and Moses, the bridge was approved by the city and state. All that remained was a nod from the Federal Government and the War Department. Despite the expected approval, the War Department nixed the plan for security reasons.

Moses attempted to have the White House intercede, but to no avail. Then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt had been waiting on an opportunity to exact revenge on Moses. While Roosevelt was governor of New York in the late 1920s, the urban planner had cut off funding for his parks commission. So instead of Moses's bridge, plans moved forward for a tunnel. "On October 28th, 1940, construction began on the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, which Moses had so adamantly tried to scuttle," reads *Never Built*. "President Roosevelt led the groundbreaking." Sweet, sweet revenge.

Howe and Lescaze, *The Museum of Modern Art* (1930)





Howe and Lescaze, *The Museum of Modern Art*, 1930. Courtesy of ARTBOOK | D.A.P.

In 2019, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) will finish a massive expansion and redesign of its Midtown Manhattan home, significantly increasing gallery space. But innovative architecture has always been a part of the museum's history. In 1930, after the MoMA's trustees approached architects William Howe and George Lescaze to design the institution's inaugural home, they submitted six schemes—blocky and modernist creations not normally ascribed to museums.

"A far cry from the neoclassical museums rising across the world at the time, the stacked buildings were indicative of not only the industrial ethos of modernist architecture, but also the rearranged abstractions of cubism," write Goldin and Lubell.

The most "ambitious" of the designs, according to the duo, was number four, which featured cantilevered galleries taking the form of a jenga tower about to topple. In the end, Howe and Lescaze didn't get the job. Some have chalked this up to the plot of land that had been selected for the institution (too small for the designs); others say that the museum's board "objected to commissioning Lescaze because he was a foreigner," according to a note written by Lescaze, left in his archives. Regardless, the museum did reject formalism in its final design, commissioning Edward Durell Stone and Philip Goodwin to create the modernist building that opened in 1939.

—Isaac Kaplan