

# Robert Moses and Immoderation (Extremism) Anticipate Activity

## New York City before Robert Moses

**Directions:** Analyze the photographs of New York City before Robert Moses began working on public works projects in the city. Use the questions below the photographs to help you observe, reflect, and question. After analyzing the photographs, read the description of New York City at the time.



Union Square in New York City, 1919. The USS Recruit is on display in the public park with a sign reading, “Men wanted for the U.S. Navy. Apply here.” Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

- Observe: What do you notice in this image (people, clothing, buildings, signs, technology, or activities)?
- Reflect: What can these details tell us about life in New York City during the 1920s?
- Question: What questions does this image raise about that time period, and what other sources would help you find answers?



Children cooling off by licking a block of ice outside a grocery store on a hot day in New York City in the summer of 1912. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

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A New York City street scene depicting daily life on the Lower East Side in 1915. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

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# Read Description of New York City

New York in the 1920s was a vibrant, modernizing city. The growing, diverse population of six million included recent immigrant arrivals from Europe, Black southerners who had come north during the Great Migration, and other Americans from the countryside in search of jobs and opportunity. A rich tapestry of different groups of people gave shape to neighborhoods with their distinct traditions, culture, and languages.

The city was thriving financially as a capital of manufacturing, a busy seaport, and a center of international finance on Wall Street. The city enjoyed prosperity and a great building boom. Skyscrapers made of steel and glass reached toward the sky, and tenements were torn down in favor of modern housing with indoor plumbing and electricity. Cars such as Ford Model T's filled paved roads, and the subway carried people through the city underground. Tunnels and bridges were built to connect the residents of the boroughs of the city for work and pleasure.

New York was known globally for its culture with its world-class museums and theaters. The Harlem Renaissance attracted the country's best Black artists, writers, and jazz musicians including Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, and Ella Fitzgerald. Mass culture set national trends in the city as it broadcast popular shows on the new medium of radio and was a center of newspaper, magazine, and book publishing.

New Yorkers spent leisure time and disposable income at Coney Island, various sporting events, and Central Park. Tens of thousands attended baseball games at the new Yankee Stadium or the Polo Grounds and boxing matches at Madison Square Garden. Weekends might find them enjoying rides or a day at the beach.

However, many problems persisted such as overcrowded tenement housing, great disparities of wealth between the mansions of millionaires and large slums, traffic and crowded streets, pressing mass transit needs, and crime among others. Leaders in neighborhoods and civil society, local government, and the state government in Albany all worked, and sometimes contended with each other, to address the issues associated with growth and lead New York into what seemed a bright and dynamic future.