

In Review

New York's Moynihan

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By Phillip Lopate



Moynihan's Reliquary

How do we as a society honor our noble leaders and achievers who have recently passed away? The short answer is: awkwardly.

As you enter the exhibit memorializing the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, you pass the model of the new Pennsylvania Station (renamed Moynihan Station) on the first floor of the Museum of the City of New York and ascend the grand staircase. There, in that hushed high-ceilinged neoclassical space of the second-floor gallery—not far in feeling from Washington's public architecture—you encounter several round columns that carry words and objects associated with the man. His Irish rain hat, that familiar bit of synecdoche, has been set into a niche like a reliquary. (The Byzantine art show at the Metropolitan Museum, 20 blocks south, uses similar display techniques.) Against the far wall, Moynihan's desk—with its well-used typewriter and paraphernalia—lacks only the man himself, and that loss is brought home by a tan cardigan sweater poignantly thrown over a chair.

The show has been handsomely designed by Michael Gericke of Pentagram, with a bold red-and-black color scheme; documents, photographs, and personal objects are displayed on the walls in cases and on laminated squares hung from wires. You could quibble about why some of the laminated squares containing pictures are at eye level,

while those holding correspondence are set so low that you have to kneel to read them, but perhaps kneeling is part of the intention.

Reverential, stately, and understated, Gericke's design does a good job of finessing the show's lack of objects. This is not one of your curatorial bazaars jam-packed with afterthoughts, but a monument to restraint and good taste. Still it raises uncomfortable questions about the nature and purpose of such eulogistic museum exhibits. What point is the visitor supposed to take away? Is it just meant to be preaching to the converted? What if you were not a Moynihan fan going into the show? What would be the best way to conjure up the spirit of a human being? Perhaps by drawing us more dramatically into the contentious shades of gray, not in the cautious manner of a Festschrift, where any disagreement with the memorialized is delicately broached.

The overall effect here is to present him as infallible. (A letter from Henry Kissinger acknowledges his presence, regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union: “Your crystal ball was better than mine.”) You read a wall quote that calls him “the nation's best thinker among politicians since

The centerpiece of *New York's Moynihan*—an exhibit dedicated to Daniel Patrick Moynihan currently running at the Museum of the City of New York—is this desk from his upstate home, installed as if he had just stepped away from it.

Lincoln and its best politician among thinkers since Jefferson.” It may be true, but the urge to resist such syrupy encomia rises unbidden. Moynihan's Renaissance man accomplishments—divided into sections (the social scientist and author, the public servant advising presidents, the ambassador to India and the United Nations, the United States Senator, the foreign policy expert, the champion of architecture and public space)—are cleanly set forth and remarkable by any standard. Is it only your own petty resentment that holds you back from worship?

You wander into a little media gallery with video clips from his speeches and television appearances. Here at last the full flavor of the man comes across: the ebullient round-checked schoolmaster, so charmed by his own intellectual fluency and common sense that you cannot help but smile in appreciation. An elderly couple sits watching the large screen, the man entranced, **continued on page 146**

Moynihan's Reliquary

continued from page 144

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the woman obviously not. The man asks the woman (His wife? No, it must be a date—he seems too deferential.), "What didn't you like about him?" "Oh," she says, considering a moment, "pretty conservative and rather a blowhard." There's something in that. If not a blowhard, certainly a know-it-all. But Moynihan did know it all, or nearly all, so didn't he have the right to dispense that knowledge on every occasion? You're having a Tocquevillean moment, meditating on the anti-intellectual leveling effects of American democracy. Suddenly you want to take his side against this unbeliever. Deep down you feel guilty, wondering why you did not love him more when he was alive.

Why didn't you? It was partly that business with his 1965 report on the Negro family, the whole idea of the culture of poverty. But in retrospect he was right, as many African-American sociologists now agree. Moynihan was trying to alert the country to a broken-home, dysfunctional-family cycle, rooted in unemployment and poverty, that perpetuated social misery and had to be faced—and your knee-jerk PC friends were wrong to think he had been blaming the victim. The man spent decades afterward introducing legislation to help better the lot of poor families. True, but then he wrote that memo to Nixon urging "benign neglect" toward blacks. Yes, but who knows whether that wasn't justified on a pragmatic, interim-strategic basis, if we accept the viewpoint of the exhibit, which says Moynihan advocated "a cooling off of racial rhetoric"? Okay, but you didn't feel he came out strongly enough against the Vietnam War. And then he became so palsy-walsy with the neoconservatives. Well, a man has a right to his friendships; and Moynihan parted from the neocons often enough, on health care and welfare reform. He was basically a centrist with a strong social conscience.

So it goes, back and forth. Moynihan remains a complicated man to pin down with any political label. My own faction, the Left, is always screwing up by demanding ideological purity and refusing to practice, as Moynihan did, "the art of the possible." The question for the moment is not how the Left, or History, will ultimately judge him, totting up his pluses and minuses, but what exactly our interest in Daniel Patrick Moynihan says about us now? This is the second show about him in recent months: the first was organized last year by the Municipal Art Society. So what gives? What is he being used as a symbol for?

Moynihan has become a hero to the world of architecture and urbanism—rightly so. The "Senator of Design," as this magazine dubbed him some years back (December 2000, p. 78), came up with a savvy mixed-use plan for Pennsylvania Avenue; fought to preserve Louis Sullivan's Guaranty Building, in Buffalo, Cass Gilbert's U.S. Custom House, in New York, and other treasures of the past while arguing that new public architecture must be built to the highest aesthetic standards—risky and innovative, not neo-classical and stuffy; steered monies away from highways and toward mass transit; championed coordinated regional planning for **continued on page 148**

Moynihan's Reliquary

continued from page 146

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public works; spearheaded a reinvestment in cities, infrastructure, and environmental cleanup projects; and stressed the connections between the quality of the public realm and a functioning democracy. "The point about public space is that it is public," he once said. "And people who own nothing much in their own right have a part of that [space]. The notion of *civitas*, of a citizen, of a person with a right and a responsibility to be there and participate in a public space: that is what it means to be a republic."

Is it because Moynihan defended architecture and municipal art that this world of museums and good-government groups is now returning the favor by allowing him to mirror their narcissistic self-regard? Or does that sound too mean-spirited? Is he meant to be the Last Good Man? The Last Public Man? The Last Public Intellectual? Is he being held up as a subtle reproach to the pygmy senators from New York who followed him, Chuck Schumer and Hilary Clinton, or as a model for the new Realpolitik-leaning Left that is trying to learn how to embrace patriotism, compromise, and national defense?

The museum has titled its show *New York's Moynihan*, emphatically claiming him as a local hero. It makes much of the fact that he went to Benjamin Franklin High School, and worked in his mother's tavern in Hell's Kitchen and on the West Side docks. In a sense Moynihan embodies the white ethnic groups (Irish, Italian, Jewish) who seized the opportunities the city offered and ran with them—just as he also embodies, and had often nostalgically recalled in speeches, that vanished New York where children felt safe to play in the streets and there were plenty of manufacturing and port jobs. Thus Moynihan can be used by both conservatives—as a symbol of the old Democratic Party consensus that held between the outer borough, blue-collar wards, and the Manhattan social elites—and progressives—as the avatar of a more enlightened effort to engage the problems of poverty, urban policy (or lack of it), and a public realm in retreat. Perhaps Pat Moynihan the scholar-senator is our contemporary fantasy of the philosopher-king, who would surely save us if he were still among the living. □