



REMARKS OF ROBERT MOSES
PRESIDENT OF THE NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR
AT THE DEDICATION OF A
SCULPTURE OF FIORELLO H. LA GUARDIA
LA GUARDIA AIRPORT - TERMINAL BUILDING
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 1964

Each age, Emerson said, revises all reputations. Dorothy Parker, in a somewhat different vein but to the same end, remarked humorously that time wounds all heels. In politics the idol of today who proves to have had clay feet is discarded or forgotten, and men of substance, when the acerbities of the day are forgotten and a true estimate of achievement is possible, rise in public esteem and in their old age or posthumously come into their own.

To be sure, a tragic end met in the field of honor or statesmanship, constituting bravery above and beyond the call of duty, hastens the verdict and helps to make it favorable, but in high office men sometimes die from overwork, strain and the less heroic penalties of responsibility. Fiorello LaGuardia, affectionately yclept The Little Flower, has added cubits to his stature and confirmed another generation in the conviction that he was not only an exciting, picturesque character, but a farsighted executive entitled to the gratitude of posterity. His motto was "patience and fortitude". He was not equipped with patience by inheritance, temperament or experience, and perhaps he had a premonition that he would not be around long enough to finish everything. As to intestinal fortitude, known in the good American vernacular as "guts", he had far more than his share.

The Little Flower invited caricature but never ridicule. He belonged to the fortiter in re, but not to the suaviter in modo school. He was no striped pants diplomat, but small, fierce and Napoleonic and full of charm and childlike grin as the presses gave out and he read the funnies to the kids over the radio. LaGuardia lacked the truculence of Judge Gaynor, who fancied he was the reincarnation of Epictetus, the Hidalgo arrogance of John Purroy Mitchell, the impish wit, the cultivation, élan, cool detachment and humor of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. I suppose what was missing was a touch of the Irish which you can get by osmosis, if it is not by inheritance. He was a gallant little man, fiercely proud of his town and of our common humanity, and it

is a fine thing to reflect that our two great municipal airports are named after him and President Kennedy.

When LaGuardia was first elected a Representative, an old Tammany leader remarked darkly, "They say he's a barber," but when he brewed beer on the floor of Congress they had to acknowledge that he was a broth of a boy. Old Law Tenement born, Fiorello LaGuardia was slum conscious before it became fashionable to chatter about urban renewal. At the end of his second term, by dint of much groundbreaking, inspecting, running to fires and even hobnobbing with tycoons, he began to know the whole town, but he never stopped wisecracking about the shrines of luxury and pride whose sensitive owners shuddered when the Persian cat stamped on the deep oriental rugs.

He was the complete antithesis and classic refutation of the theory of the high priests of political science that what a big city needs and wants is a mayor in the image of a career German bürgermeister—one who is as colorless as a bank teller, wears thick glasses and rubbers, carries an umbrella and adds on an abacus.

City Hall heaved and shuddered as if struck by an earthquake when he entered in the morning, trembled and vibrated throughout the day and settled down at night only after he had left in a car equipped with revolvers, typewriters and a two-way phone. The reports of the press in Room Nine wrote themselves. "Every day," as one of our Yale professors remarked about the late President Hadley, "he became more like his imitators." Under LaGuardia, reform, which had been merely respectable, became popular. "Ladies and gentlemen, your attention, please! On the mound Savonarola in place of Jimmie Walker."

I worked with The Little Flower on airports, among other public undertakings. I was on the muddy fringes of North Beach, later LaGuardia Field, and headed his committee which acquired, filled and established Idlewild, now Kennedy, and turned it over to the Port of New York Authority. Having flown

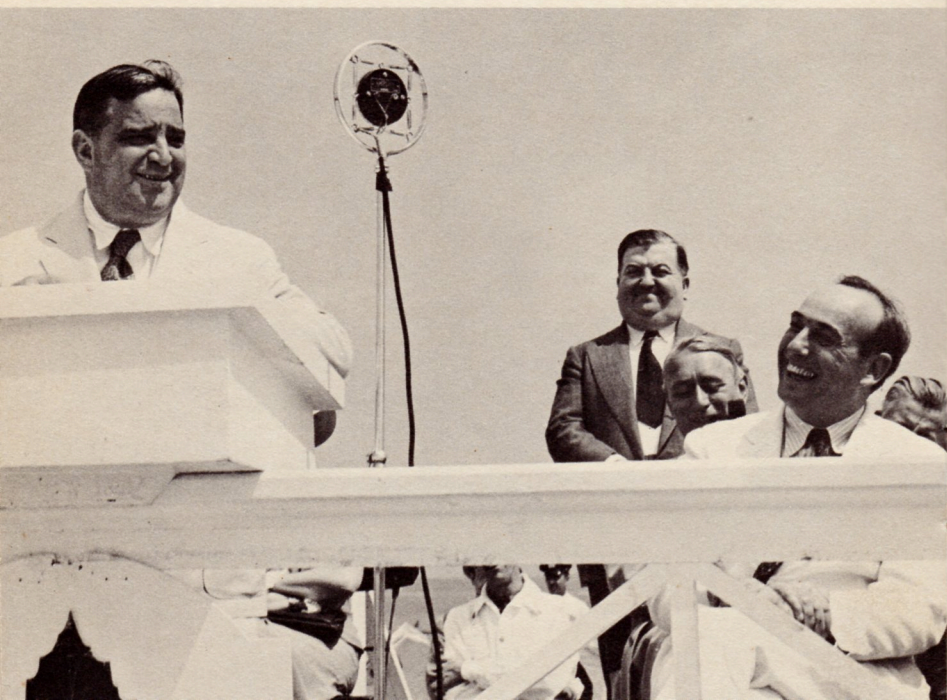


The reconstructed LaGuardia Airport and the
1964-1965 World's Fair.



crates in World War One, he foresaw the demands of air travel and sought to meet them. He anticipated jets. He was a smart man when few had his vision and daring. He was up in the stratosphere figuratively a good deal of the time and the new world of space would have entertained him endlessly.

The Mayor expounded the quaint notion that an airport should be planned by a pilots' association and designed by a talented, cloistered, Chateau Beaux Arts architect on lines faintly reminiscent of Leonardo, the Renaissance and the Loire. A touch of this tradition persists. The original airport settled alarmingly, was jacked up, contained and rebuilt, but the major credit still belongs to the intrepid entrepreneur, LaGuardia, and the Port of New York Authority generously and appreciatively recognizes it today.



The Mayor loved big operations, such as levelling the great garbage and ash dumps at Corona, Riker's Island and North Beach, later LaGuardia, and pumping millions of yards of sand on what is now Kennedy, and howled about the cost of all but relief labor. The comedy in reclamation was as entrancing as its fragrance. I guess the Mayor caught a whiff of this. When we landed on Riker's at the start of levelling, there used to be a long military line of a special mangy breed of garbage dogs waiting for a handout. I couldn't figure the manoeuvre until someone explained that they were sitting on a nice, warm drainage pipe which carried the silo juice to the River. Waterfront reclamation, for whatever public purpose and notably for marginal parks, parkways, playgrounds and beaches, made a special appeal to him, and in these areas my boys and I found common ground with him and reliable support at City Hall.

The Little Flower loved to lead the municipal orchestra, or should I say philharmonic band. Leaping to the podium, he would exhort his strangely assorted players, giving special attention to sour notes and to the brasses and percussion instruments. Those of us who made up his somewhat heterogenous crew held this unpredictable leader in high esteem, and if it is left to our vote, not to speak of Marie who knew him best, he will not be forgotten.

Pause at this bust, traveler, as you hurry from the accelerated pace of the City to a thousand miles an hour in the air. Keep your shirt on. You still have time. Pause and reflect on The Little Flower. Give him a thought. He deserves well of the City. He was quite a man.

LaGuardia in a happy frame of mind — reclaiming land and opening new beaches — at Orchard Beach in the Bronx 1936.