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### Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs: A question of power

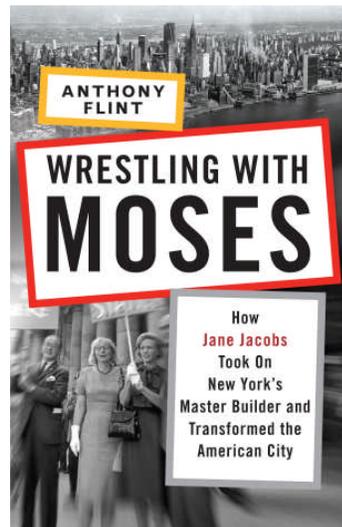
By Patrick T. Reardon on Wed., 09/09/2009 – 7:44 am.

*Second of three*

Anthony Flint's new book "Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took on New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City" (Random House) seems to be about urban planning.

Certainly, it's about the battles of two titans of the field.

On the one side --- Robert Moses, a virtual pharaoh of massive construction projects in New York City and its region for more than 30 years, a man who reveled in the beauty and joy of drawing sharp, straight lines across the urban-suburban landscape, and then making those lines into multi-lane roads and bridges, parks and beaches.



On the other side --- Jane Jacobs, a self-trained urban expert and activist who saw the hodge-podge character of neighborhoods, particularly her own Greenwich Village, as the epitome of vibrant city life and who was savvy in the ways of the news media, guerilla theater (before it was called that) and publicity politics.

In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, those two grappled toe-to-toe like two larger-than-life champions, fighting club and hammer over the future of Lower Manhattan.

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This blog is about history, planning and the future. It's rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)

For decades, Moses and his Big Plans had routinely won such clashes, usually with ease. But in these fights near the end of his career, he lost to a “housewife” whose idea of planning for city communities was not to plan at all.

Yet, Flint’s book really isn’t about planning. It’s about power. Pure and simple.

It isn’t about the right or wrong way of planning a city or metropolitan region, even though Jacobs’ victory over the tyrannical Moses can seem to be an endorsement from heaven on her ideas about the organic growth of neighborhoods.

It’s about winning...and losing.

### **His own dictator**

No question, Moses was a bully. But so, in her way, was Jacobs.

Moses was a fan of Baron Georges-Eugenie Haussmann who remade Paris in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by ramming grand boulevards through that city’s neighborhoods and strictly controlling development. Haussmann’s “dictatorial talents,” Moses wrote, “enabled him to accomplish a vast amount in a very short time, but they also made him many enemies, for he was in the habit of riding roughshod over all opposition.”

It was a lesson the American planner learned well. Flint notes that, in the U.S. democracy, “Moses did not have a dictator to back him, and thus developed strategies designed to make his projects inevitable, protecting them from democratic resistance. Along with writing his own legislation and running aggressive public-relations campaigns, one of his principal tactics in defeating opposition was simple: act fast.”



Moses became his own dictator. He convinced elected officials to appoint him to head boards, authorities, departments and commissions --- at one time, he held 12 such posts simultaneously --- and worked the system brilliantly to make it next to impossible for those same officials or their successors to oust him.



Yet, if Moses was convinced that huge public works were needed to improve the lives of New Yorkers and those in the hinterland, Jacobs believed as deeply in a much different vision, outlined in her 1961 book “The Death and Life of Great American Cities.”

Planners like Moses were ruining cities, Jacobs argued. They were arrogantly attempting to bring order where order wasn’t needed. Indeed, where the lack of order was what gave neighborhoods their liveliness and distinctiveness.

“Perhaps the most radical aspect of ‘Death and Life,’ ” writes Flint, “was the notion that planning a successful downtown redevelopment, or housing and parks and a successful neighborhood, wasn’t possible at all --- that cities and city neighborhoods had an organic structure of their own that couldn’t be produced at a drafting table. Jacobs was suggesting not only that planners were doing their work badly but that it was pointless for them to be doing their work at all.”

### **“This phony, fink hearing”**

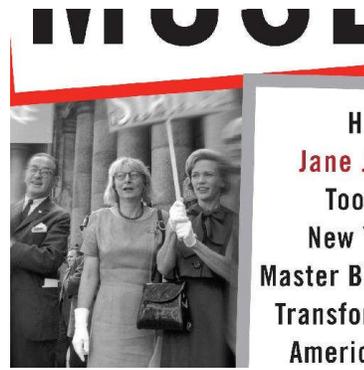
In battling those planners, Jacobs could be as heavy-handed in her own way as Moses. Consider the key strategy in her crusade to save Greenwich Village and Lower Manhattan: Make no compromises. It was a smart approach that reflected a sophisticated understanding of how things work in the real world.

But it wasn’t about consensus. It was about power.

Moses used sham public hearings to meet legal and political requirements for public input, so, in 1968, Jacobs led a protest at one such meeting at which the rolls of paper containing the stenographic record were crushed underfoot and destroyed.

“Listen to this!” Jacobs told the crowd. “There is no record! There is no hearing! We’re through with this phony, fink hearing!”

She won the battle with Moses not so much through force of ideas but through tactics that included public protest, insider information, political alliances and the skillful manipulation of the media.



In the 40-plus years since then, many in the planning community have come to embrace Jacobs' ideas regarding the benefits of mixed-use neighborhoods and the need to involve community residents in any development initiatives.

Yet, as Flint points out, this has enabled community groups, seeking to preserve their neighborhoods from change, to block projects of wider interest and need. NIMBY, it's called --- "Not in my backyard."

And then there's gentrification.

As much as Jacobs worked to save her neighborhood from Moses, she and those who followed couldn't save it from itself. Its location, its history as a center for beat poets, folk singers and other bohemians, its attractive housing --- all have priced Greenwich Village out of the reach of virtually everyone except the rich, including such celebrities as Uma Thurman and Leontyne Price.

#### **"Both perspectives"**

In recent years, some civic leaders, finding it difficult to develop the political will for major public works, have looked back at the Moses era with longing.

Following Jacobs' death in 2006, New York Times architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff wrote that Moses represented "an America that still believed a healthy government would provide the infrastructure --- roads, parks, bridges --- that binds us into a nation. Ms. Jacobs, at her best, was fighting to preserve the more delicate bonds that tie us to a community. A city, to survive and flourish, needs both perspectives."

Consensus is the way to balance such different views. But, today, as in the days of Moses and Jacobs, it is difficult to gain power through consensus.

Flint writes that Moses was a product of his time --- a time that saw the auto as central to the nation's future.

“The environmental and energy challenges of the twenty-first century are very different,” he notes. “Had Moses been in charge of building the world’s greatest transit system, he would be cheered today no matter how many people he had uprooted.”

*Next: Daniel Burnham and Jane Addams*