

# *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City*—Documentary on the life and times of urban activist Jane Jacobs

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Matt Tyrnauer’s *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City* is a documentary film about journalist and activist Jane Jacobs (1916-2006). Author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1960), Jacobs is also known for her crusades against several large-scale infrastructure projects in New York City in the 1960s.

Not an urban planner by training, Jacobs enjoyed her role as an iconoclastic journalist writing on urban affairs for *Architectural Forum* and then *Fortune Magazine* beginning in the 1950s. Basing herself on direct observation, particularly of her beloved Greenwich Village, in her *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she drew far-ranging conclusions about what made for successful neighborhoods. Contrary to the conceptions advanced by urban planners and architects, she believed these were characterized above all by what she called a lively “sidewalk culture,” in which neighbors watch each other’s children as they play in the spray of fire-hydrants and otherwise live in an urban environment as they would in a close-knit village.

Still influential among urban planners, the book is most important for its emphasis on the human element of cities. Citing the example of grandly conceived civic centers that become wastelands, Jacobs argues that the best-laid plans of architects and planners come to naught if people are unable to satisfy the requirements of daily life within a given built environment, and that sometimes less well-“planned” environments prove better able to offer a diversity of housing, shopping, employment and recreation.

*Citizen Jane* mainly focuses on Jacobs’s role in the late 1950s and 1960s as an opponent of a proposal to build a four-lane highway through historic Washington Square Park in downtown Manhattan to connect traffic flow north and south of the park. The plan, first proposed in the 1940s by then-Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, had gone through several iterations but was still fiercely opposed by local Greenwich Village residents.

Jacobs, the prototype middle class grassroots activist with

a flair for publicity, mobilized housewives and neighborhood kids, elicited support from former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and eminent city planner Lewis Mumford, and bombarded city officials with petitions until the plan was finally scrapped.

The victory of Jacobs and her supporters in the campaign against the Washington Square highway proposal came at the tail end of a series of large-scale public works projects in New York, many of them under Moses’s direction. Serving first as parks commissioner in the 1930s and then as head of municipal authorities under Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, Moses organized projects that included the construction of numerous major bridges together with the city’s network of expressways, highways and parkways.

Moses’s earlier focus on public works that benefited broad layers of the population in their neighborhoods gave way, in the post-World War II period, to “slum clearance,” with often devastating consequences for many communities. The construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, finally completed in 1972 after 25 years, involved the razing of entire working class neighborhoods. This was the type of project that Jacobs opposed most vehemently.

The central conceit of *Citizen Jane* (and much of the media coverage of Jacobs’s life and work) is that its heroine and Moses were locked in a titanic struggle for the “soul” of the city, a conflict pitting the populist Jacobs, with her vision of “cozy, scrambled” urban areas, against a grandiose, utilitarian and sterile bureaucracy. This vast over-simplification ignores the historical and class questions involved in the transformation of New York over the course of half a century from a patchwork of self-contained neighborhoods into a modern, integrated metropolitan area.

That Moses’s infrastructure projects connected the city by a network of highways—not surprisingly much of it federally funded—and gave pride of place to the automobile instead of public transportation was bound up with the exigencies and peculiarities of American capitalism in the post-World War

II period. Moses's ego and overbearing personality had little to do with it.

Jacobs took for granted, every bit as much as Moses did, the existing social order. Her criticisms, in the end, reflected the concerns of petty bourgeois layers who desired to make life as comfortable for themselves, and for as many others as possible, while accepting the overall domination of big business over American (and Canadian) life. Frankly, as long as neighborhoods like Greenwich Village and the Annex in Toronto (where Jacobs lived from 1971 until her death) could be preserved, neighborhoods that became more and more expensive to live in as time passed, a good many of her political and urban planning goals were met.

The fate of the urban working class population was not a central issue for Jacobs, nor is it for Tyrnauer in *Citizen Jane*.

The film does admit, however, that overcrowding and the generally miserable conditions in stifling tenements, famously documented by photographer/reformer Jacob Riis (1849-1914) in his *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), might have been a reason people hung out communally on their stoops.

The interviews conducted with contemporary city planners and urbanists make up the weakest portion of Tyrnauer's film. Prominent among those interviewed is architecture critic Paul Goldberger, who has written on the rebuilding of the World Trade Center in *Up From Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York* (2004).

The overarching thrust of the various comments is that "livable" cities develop "organically" and that attempts at overall planning are well-intentioned and utopian at best, but authoritarian at heart. Moreover, such attempts, according to the commentators, are often misinterpretations of the principles elaborated by pioneers of modernism, such as Swiss-French architect, designer and urban planner Le Corbusier (1887-1965).

The latter designed projects like the Radiant City in Marseilles, first elaborated in 1930 in connection with the French syndicalist movement, which was as much a plan for social reform as urban design. The planned city, integrating housing, industry, civic and municipal buildings in networks of tall towers, connected by paths and multi-tiered walkways instead of streets with major traffic routed underground, was never built. It did, however, become the general model for innumerable public housing projects in Europe and the United States, as well as being the basis for the layout of newly developed megacities such as Brasilia in Brazil and Chandigarh, India.

The film recycles the notion that housing projects for the working class were doomed to become blighted areas of concentrated poverty, leaving out one small fact—that

modernist architects like Le Corbusier (who visited and worked in the Soviet Union between 1928 and 1934) envisaged their projects as part of the overall transformation of society and the elimination of poverty and social inequality. There are examples of successful high-rise building projects that are home to thousands of working class families, indicating that the urban blight that is often associated with modernism is rather a consequence of poverty.

Ultimately, with its unqualified admiration for "Citizen Jane's" outlook, Tyrnauer's film fails to draw out the implications of "organic" development under capitalism, which in effect means that corporate interests have free rein to develop real estate—be it high-rise towers or brownstones—for the wealthy, while anything rationally "planned," i.e., designed for the working class, is unprofitable and, especially in recent decades, deemed a waste of resources.

There is obviously a crying need for vast, complex, publicly organized projects to provide the high-quality housing, transportation, employment and public space, along with the power and technology grids, required by populations living in urban areas, including mega-cities such as Tokyo, Shanghai, Jakarta, Delhi, New York and Mexico City.

This will not arise spontaneously out of the existing conditions of the profit system, but will require the planned, rational mobilization of society's resources by the working class under socialism to meet the needs of globalized mass society in the twenty-first century.

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