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Legacies

Whose City is it Anyway? Jane Jacobs vs. Robert Moses and Contemporary Redevelopment Politics in New York City

By Scott Larson

Abstract

For decades the legacies of the Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs have loomed over redevelopment politics in New York City, serving as ideological opposites in ongoing struggles to influence the form of the urban built environment. In truth, the narrowness of this prevailing logic obscures the fact that both Jacobs and Moses represent a distinctly class-based strategy for remaking the city, one that fits neatly within the Bloomberg administration's ambitious plans for redeveloping neighborhoods from Manhattan's Far West Side to Willet's Point in Queens.

When Jane Jacobs died on April 25, 2006, at the age of 89, nearly half a century had passed since her ascension to saint-like status among opponents of Robert Moses-style urban development. Yet just nine months after *The New York Times* celebrated her "ingenious insight" and the *Washington Post* memorialized her as an urban "visionary," news of Jacobs' passing was replaced on the pages of newspapers and planning journals by the resurrection of none other than Moses himself – the prophet of the automobile, not the Old Testament. In early 2007, the first of three concurrent exhibits promising "a fresh look" (Pogrebin 2007) at Moses' legacy opened in New York, once again throwing his and Jacobs' legacies in opposition and securing, it seems, the divergent trajectories of their conjoined destinies.

As Paul Goldberger wrote in the *New York Times* less than a week after the Moses exhibitions opened, "The notion of Moses as the evil genius of mid-twentieth-century urban design got a boost last spring in obituaries of and tributes to Jane Jacobs, a longtime antagonist" (Goldberger 2007).

Not to be outdone, Jacobs' supporters subsequently gave her legacy its own shot in the arm with the Sept. 2007 opening of *Jane Jacobs and the Future of New York*, a three-month exhibit at the Municipal Art Society of New York conceived, as the show's literature explained, to "inspire citizens to support and fight for the health of their own neighborhoods,"

and to encourage “city officials, developers, planners and architects to embrace and implement Jane Jacobs’ teachings” (Municipal Art Society 2007).

For the record, public perceptions of Moses and Jacobs first became intertwined at a time of capitalism in crisis, when cities were battlegrounds between powerful forces each struggling to influence the form and direction of economic restructuring at the dawn of the post-war boom years (Brenner and Theodore 2002). Yet from such conflicts – which David Harvey conceives as struggles “over the appropriation and domination of particular spaces and times” – concurrent battles “over the social meaning and social definition” of space and time emerge (Harvey 1990).

It hardly seems surprising, then, that perceptions of Jacobs and Moses would be forged within a seismic and often rancorous debate. But if anything, legacies, like the memories and social perspectives upon which they are built, are inherently fluid, open to re-interpretation and even reconstruction within a process whereby “History” becomes a privileged and far from objective or comprehensive recording of events and the very acts of remembering and writing become supremely subjective, informed – or deformed, as Walter Benjamin (1969) might contend – by the temporal and spatial positionality of whoever is doing the work.

Indeed, resulting representations of figures as polarizing as Moses and Jacobs tend to emerge as narratives that are constantly being reconstituted and materialized from the ongoing spatial and temporal transformations of the city itself. Or as Columbia University professors Hilary Ballon and Kenneth Jackson, the authors of this most recent round of Moses revisionism insist, “Each generation writes its own history” (Ballon and Jackson 2007).

At the heart of Ballon’s and Jackson’s argument, as detailed in the Moses exhibits and the accompanying collection of essays, *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, is the suggestion that Moses was a man of his times – a product of a specific and in many ways unique moment in history – and that his legacy needs to be understood within that singular context. According to this interpretation, Moses becomes less the driver of a “Federal Bulldozer” (Anderson 1964) and more a mere chauffeur following a route dictated by others. And that regardless of where that road might have led, he ultimately saved New York. As Ballon contends in a 2007 interview with *The New York Times*, “Were it not for Moses’ public infrastructure and his resolve to carve out more space...New York might not have been able to recover from the blight and flight of the 1970s and ‘80s and become the economic magnet it is today” (Pogrebin 2007).

To be fair, these are arguments that Jackson began making two decades earlier, at a 1988 conference at Hofstra University in observation of the centennial of Moses' birth (Jackson 1989). But 20 years on, this ongoing effort at the Power Broker's rehabilitation seems to have raised as many questions as it has answered. For instance, what times, exactly, was Moses a man of, and in what ways have the intervening years worked to influence our view of them? Can, and do, we really want to turn a blind eye on the very real ramifications of the very real material realities that this man of those times left past, present and future generations to endure? Finally, why are all of these issues being raised yet again? Did Jacobs' passing somehow awaken old ghosts? Or is something else at work? Indeed, why has this revisionist turn gained purchase now when it could not before?

One could argue that in certain ways Moses' times have returned. Consider the current fit of redevelopment activity washing over New York City and the rhetoric that surrounds it, loaded with references to both Jacobs and Moses and their perpetual participation in this battle of legacies. As Amanda Burden, chair of the New York City Planning Commission and director of the Department of City Planning, put it at an October 2006 public forum entitled *Jane Jacobs vs. Robert Moses: How Stands the Debate Today?*:

It is to the great credit of the Mayor that we are building and rezoning today once again like Moses on an unprecedented scale but with Jane Jacobs firmly in mind, invigorated by the belief that the process matters and that great things can be built through a focus on the details, on the street, for the people who live in this great city (Burden 2006).

What exactly that might mean – to build like Moses with the Jacobs' principles in mind – seems like something worth thinking about.

Harvey, among others, conceives of urbanization – through the establishment and promotion of private property rights and real estate markets – as one of the ways in which capitalism contends with crisis by “playing a crucial role in the absorption of capital surpluses” (Harvey 2008). As Harvey argues, Moses, in his time, engaged in what would become the predominant strategy for absorbing the surplus capital being produced during the post-War period, mainly through road-building and the subsequent motorization and suburbanization of American society. The degree to which he led or followed, it seems, has little meaningful impact on the outcome.

Following that thread, Moses' times have returned in the sense that contemporary New York City is facing its own crisis of surplus absorption,

one in which until very recently a rampaging real estate market left developers, realtors and mortgage lenders – or what some have dubbed the “growth coalition” – flush with excess capital and anxious for open spaces and new projects in which to put it to work.

At the same time, officials in the Bloomberg administration have begun warning that a mature, densely built and bureaucratically hamstrung New York City faces two distinctly 21st-century threats to its long-term survival. The first is that the city is under siege in the high-stakes battle for prominence in the hyper-competitive global economic environment. In his 2008 state of the city address, Bloomberg framed the issue like this:

Over the past year, I've seen cities from London to Paris to Shanghai, pushing the frontiers of progress. They are doing everything they can to attract the best and the brightest in every field: medicine; engineering; construction and more. These cities are not putting up barriers; they're not looking inward or blaming someone else. They're not afraid of the new or the different, and we shouldn't be either. If we are, we won't have a future (Bloomberg 2008).

The second threat stems from questions about the city's sustainability given projections that its population will swell by 1 million by 2030 and “an increasingly unpredictable [natural] environment” (Bloomberg).

As Burden's earlier comments make clear, the city's intended resolution to these threats is to plan and build its way out of this latest crisis of consumption – much as Moses presumably would have – while preserving the fine-grain, block-by-block diversity that Jacobs argued gives the city its dynamism. At some point, then, the Bloomberg administration is confronted with the seemingly daunting task of reconciling these two figures, almost as if through a reworking of their legacies to the purposes of the present, those in city government can bury the Moses/Jacobs hatchet once and for all and provide us with a clear blueprint for – to incorporate a Jacobsean phrase – a truly successful city.

In fact, that very much seems to be the administration's mission.

Prior to Michael Bloomberg being elected mayor, the city's department of planning was overseen by the same office responsible for culture and schools, exiled there, in part, because of the lingering bad taste from Moses' imperious days. But in 2002 – or not long after the Mayor took the oath of office – the Department of City Planning was reinvigorated and placed under the direction of then-Deputy Mayor of economic development, Daniel Doctoroff, marking an important shift in its role within city government.

In the words of Doctoroff, a former investment banker and founder of NYC2012, the organization established to try and bring the 2012 Summer Olympic Games to New York:

We are in a period of time when we have finally overcome a fear of over development that was in part the result of Moses' excesses. Part of the reason we haven't been able to do much is because people over interpreted the lessons from that period of time. (Pogrebin 2007)

Doctoroff officially stepped down in December 2008, though he remains intimately involved in many of the bigger development projects begun on his watch. But under his tenure one of City Planning's primary charges was to produce a long-term strategic plan for the city. The resulting blueprint represents a mix of the "git'r-done" modernism of Moses along with the more capital-friendly elements of Jacobs' enduring appeal.

Planning, numerous commentators and theorists have suggested, can be considered the creation of a master narrative about the future, and for the past two years New York City officials have regularly taken to the streets, giving speeches at forums and urban policy discussions to argue for their very specific version of what this future should look like. It is based on six core principles (Burden, 2008):

1. That New York City do what is necessary to compete with Paris, London, Tokyo, Singapore, Shanghai and other "global cities" in a rapidly evolving, hyper-competitive global economy.
2. That New York City grow in a sustainable, environmentally conscious manner – whatever that means - which has given rise to a second plan-within-a-plan: PlaNYC 2030, which very symbolically was announced to much fanfare on Earth Day 2007.
3. That New York City is a city of neighborhoods, 188 distinct neighborhoods whose unique characters are "to be protected," in keeping with broadly accepted wisdom of Jane Jacobs.
4. That within its densely built environment, New York City should strive to create "signature sites" in order to "make great places." Not piecemeal development of individual, isolated projects, but comprehensive, iconic places conceived of through master plans.

5. That the city “recapture” its vast waterfront – which historically has been given over to industrial uses – and “revitalize the street” through the development of public space – another very Jacobsean notion.
6. And finally, to quote Burden again, that “Architectural excellence is *good economic development*.”

Now that all sounds wonderful, a dream vision of the New York City of the future, two strategic, long-term initiatives designed to provide complimentary programs for remaking the city on a scale not seen since the heyday of Robert Moses’ slum clearance and road building. Of course, unlike in the Moses era, such grand notions largely transcend the city’s ability to dictate the course of that future. After all, it is not the city that is building big again, but private developers, who through tax incentives, subsidies and favorable zoning changes largely have been handed the reigns to New York’s redevelopment.

In fact, the only concrete mechanisms the city has for pursuing any of its goals are the creation of specific master plans (which Burden describes as “drawing what we want [spaces] to look like) and the power to dictate land use by, in the language of its master narrative, providing “the armature for development” through rezoning, a tactic the city has pursued with a vengeance, undertaking 78 separate rezoning initiatives, representing 1/6 of the city, or 6,000 blocks in 88 neighborhoods.

As Burden admits, “All we can really do is zone for the right height and for the right use and then let the market come.”

And therein lies the rub.

By setting up Jacobs as an ideological counterpoint to Moses, and then attempting to absolve the pair’s differences, administration figures and redevelopment promoters free themselves to interpret and simultaneously mobilize elements of both legacies in ways that are conducive to the pursuit of a particular development agenda, an agenda where gentrification has become a generalized policy prescription and global urban strategy (Smith 2002). Indeed, members of the Bloomberg administration appear intent on fostering the sense that in order to survive in the 21st century, New York City must confront and ultimately contend with the long-held negative connotations associated with Moses while making its own bent toward creative destruction amenable to Jacobs’ notions of what constitutes a livable city

In truth, the narrowness of the prevailing logic that holds that Moses and Jacobs to be ideological opposites intentionally and artificially constrains the debate over redevelopment. In certain ways, revisionist apologizing

on behalf of Moses and simplistic cherry-picking of Jacobs' ideals have already begun to dissolve this false binary. While Moses' modernism might appear to stand in stark contrast to Jacobs' localism, both appeal to a certain kind of populism, representing "separate wings of the middle class concerning how to build and rebuild the city for people of greater rather than lesser class privilege" (Smith and Larson 2007).

From this vantage point, one can ask whether the argument between today's Moses resurrectionists and Jacobsean defenders actually turns on a question of scale, not ideology. Where the two sides would meet is in the politics of gentrification – both would be for it, just by radically different means (Smith and Larson 2007). As Walter Benjamin eloquently suggests, "[H]istory is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now." As a result, efforts at revisiting the past inevitably produce revelations "blasted out of the continuum of history," set "in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands" (Benjamin 1969)

To Harvey, such temporal positionality has the power to "conceal" (Harvey 1990). But ultimately one could argue the re-packaging of Moses and Jacobs from the distance of more than 40 years might do more than conceal; in many ways it threatens to erase – the hope of a more just social landscape, the memory of the people whose homes and businesses have been plowed under and paved over to make way for the future and the possibility of a city where gentrification and other forms of what Harvey calls capitalism's penchant for "accumulation by dispossession" are no longer justified in the name of progress (Harvey 2008)

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