

## What would Jane do? – Marianne Richards

This article was first printed in *Planning News*, Volume 43, No. 7, August 2017, pp16-17 and is reproduced with the permission of the Planning Institute of Australia, Victoria Division.



Jane Jacobs. Source: <http://www.ifcfilms.com/films/citizen-jane-battle-for-the-city>

*"Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody"*

*Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Jane Jacobs, a journalist, author and activist, is remembered as an advocate for "the intricate qualities of the city". Arguably, no one did more to shape understanding of the modern American city than Jane Jacobs. She championed a fresh and community-based approach to city building and openly challenged established beliefs within architecture, planning and government circles.

Until August 2017, [Open House Melbourne](#) is presenting a city-wide program called [What Would Jane Do?](#) which celebrates Jane Jacob's writing, insights and sheer guts, and uses her ideas as a catalyst for conversations about Melbourne's future, including screening the 2017 documentary, *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City*<sup>1</sup>, directed by Matt Tyrnauer.

The documentary is a study of how cities are made (and sometimes destroyed) and of urban planning in New York during the 1950s and 1960s. The film deals with a fundamental clash in philosophies about cities – those of Jane Jacobs and of a powerful New York City bureaucrat, Robert Moses.



Robert Moses, circa 1960. Source: <https://www.inspiringquotes.us/data/image/2012/10/y/7033-robert-moses.jpg>

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<sup>1</sup> *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City* is screening in Melbourne at ACMI until 3 August 2017. It also screened in Sydney during June as part of the Sydney Film Festival.

Robert Moses has been variously described as an urban planner, powerbroker and master builder. Moses' vision of improving cities centred around freeways, skyscrapers and parks and in brutalist architectural forms.

He likened impoverished neighbourhoods to "cancerous growths that needed to be cut out" and spoke of a "war on the slums". He also believed in the supremacy of the car and planned a series of urban freeways crossing Manhattan. In his pursuit of progress, Moses didn't stop to consider the communities and traditional neighbourhoods his schemes destroyed or the fact that the self-enclosed high rise apartments he advocated building could quickly turn into ghettos themselves.

Moses was a great political talent who demonstrated great skill when constructing his roads, bridges, playground, parks, and house projects. During 1920s and 1930s Moses undertook a number large scale public commissions that he carried out extraordinarily well, such as the development of Jones Beach State Park. During the Depression, Moses was one of the few local or state officials who had New York City projects shovel-ready for federal funding under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

By the 1960s, Moses's reputation began to fade. His political acumen began to fail him, as he unwisely picked several controversial political battles he could not possibly win. For example, his effort to destroy a shaded playground in Central Park to make way for a parking lot for the expensive Tavern-on-the-Green restaurant earned him many enemies among the middle-class voters of the Upper West Side.

The opposition reached a climax over the demolition of one of New York's greatest architectural landmarks, Pennsylvania Station, which many attributed to the "development scheme" mentality cultivated by Moses. This helped prompt many city residents to turn against Moses' 1955 plans to build a Lower Manhattan Expressway, which would have gone through Greenwich Village and what is now SoHo.



Moses' Lower Manhattan expressway proposal. Source: <http://www.nycroads.com/roads/lower-manhattan/img9.gif>

Pitted against Moses was Jane Jacobs. Her 1960 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, is a rebuke to Moses' modernist vision for New York.

Jacobs, a Greenwich Village resident, raised community opposition to his planned urban freeways in Lower Manhattan with letter writing campaigns, government lobbying and acts of civil disobedience. Moses dismissed her as a mere "housewife" and sneered at the protests that she helped orchestrate. Nonetheless, her grass roots campaigns stymied some of his grander plans and

eventually helped topple him from power. This battle for the city became the first of many for Jane, setting her on the path to become one of the world's leading thinkers on urbanism and community.

She believed the city was not about buildings but was about people. Jacobs celebrated the seething, chaotic and contradictory nature of city life. One of her key arguments was that a perfect and beautiful city was a "dying city". For her, cities were always works in progress. Their citizens themselves negotiated how best to use them. Solutions imposed from above, Moses-style, didn't work.

Some of her observations were simple common sense. For example, she realised that busy streets tended to be far safer than deserted ones. If you keep a community alive and everyone, regardless of their background, class or religion, shares the same facilities, a city is likely to function far better than if you simply put motorways through it, Moses-style.

*The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was certainly on the town planning and transport planning academic reading lists from the 1970s, if not earlier. However, it seems that today's urban planners and infrastructure engineers may have forgotten or, worse still, not been aware of her legacy. What resonates is how Moses' philosophy endures in Australia today.

Tyrnauer's film should be compulsory viewing for urban planners, infrastructure planners, engineers and government decision-makers. It uses archive footage in highly inventive fashion, throwing in footage of New York street life at its most dynamic and colourful and contrasting this with the cold formalism of Moses' blueprints. The film also puts the arguments about urban planning in context, explaining how ideas that emerged in a post-WW2 Europe, especially the modernism of Le Corbusier, mutated and became corrupted as they crossed the Atlantic. They became the pretext for urban planning that made property developers very rich indeed.

The final part of the documentary is a little chilling, suggesting that China is repeating the same mistakes that Moses made in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, throwing up skyscrapers and creating big new cities with no concern for the communities who actually live in them. Top-down solutions didn't work before and there is no reason why they should work now.



Dubbed the "Dubai of Northern China", the new city of Kangbashi rose from the outskirts of Ordos in central Mongolia in 2003. Source: <https://www.qizmodo.com.au/2013/10/chinas-building-cities-so-fast-people-dont-have-time-to-move-in/>

On the face of it, a feature documentary on the subject of town planning in New York doesn't seem an alluring proposition at all. I was seated near a gentleman and two boys (aged roughly 11 or 12), each armed with a choc-top. I thought they would leave shortly after the beginning – after all, *“Wallace and Gromit”* was also showing at the same time!! But, to my surprise, all three sat through the whole film, totally transfixed – as did the rest of the cinema.

At the end the father asked the two boys whether they enjoyed the film. Both said they did, to which one added *“Dad, did that man really think children would want to live in those towers?”*

Marianne Richards

Marianne Richards is a retired planner with extensive experience in port, airport and freight network planning and land use planning. She sits on the Executive Committee of the Town & Country Planning Association Inc. (TCPA <http://tcpa.org.au/>) The TCPA hosted one of its events at a screening of *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City*.