



The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs

By Roberta Brandes Gratz

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In the 1970s, New York City hit rock bottom. Crime was at its highest, middleclass exodus was in high gear, and bankruptcy loomed. Many people credit New York's “master builder,” Robert Moses, with turning Gotham around, despite his heavy-handed ways. Roberta Brandes Gratz contradicts this conventional view. She argues that New York City recovered precisely because of the waning power of Moses and the growing influence of Jane Jacobs, the pioneer of organic renewal projects.

As American cities face a new economic crisis, Jacobs's philosophy is again vital for metropolitan life. Gratz gives an on-the-ground account of urban renewal and community success. Her writing—at once personal, political, and instructive—breaks down how the impossible was achieved.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The mid-20th-century showdown between New York City planning czar Moses and legendary community urbanist Jacobs reverberates down the decades in this meandering polemic. A journalist and member of New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission, Gratz (*The Living City*) views 50 years of economic and real estate development as a duel between the legacies of Moses, whose pharaonic highway and urban renewal projects obliterated neighborhoods, and Jacobs, who extolled urban diversity and disorderly mixed uses, hated cars, and championed organic, human-scale development. Through this lens, Gratz rehashes Jacobs's defeat of Moses's Manhattan expressway schemes, examines New York's (anti-)industrial policies and historical preservation laws, and attacks what she sees as latter-day boondoggles like Brooklyn's proposed mammoth Atlantic Yards development and Columbia University's expansion. The avowedly partisan author despises Moses as arrogant and racist, and sometimes cedes the book to Jacobs with lengthy excerpts from interviews with the late urbanist. Gratz offers some cogent critiques of contemporary urban planning (while also embracing a few, like urban farming). Alas, her exposition of Jacobs's ideas is larded with unfocused autobiography, and far less tightly argued than Jacobs's own classic writings. B&w photos. (Apr. 1)

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From [Booklist](#)

Former New York Post journalist Gratz (*The Living City*, 1994) is a leading figure in the "urban husbandry" movement, which advocates, among other things, the reuse and adaptation of old buildings in an effort to cultivate dense, lively, and prosperous urban space. She is also a longtime friend and ally in activism of the late Jane Jacobs, whose 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* continues to be relevant to today's urban planning debates. Drawing on her personal and professional experiences, Gratz discusses the urban topography of her native New York City, as defined by the decades-long conflict between large top-down development schemes of the sort advocated by city planning magnate Robert Moses, and the organic, preservationist approach favored by Jacobs. Though Gratz covers a number of key battlegrounds—SoHo, Washington Square Park, the proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway—her account is less a blow-by-blow of such confrontations than it is a study of competing philosophies of urbanism, and a reminder that the legacies of Moses and Jacobs persist in today's fights over tax abatements, public transit funding, and expensive new stadiums. --Brendan Driscoll

Review

New York Times

"[A] profoundly personal account of Moses's bulldozer diplomacy and its consequences for today...[Gratz] writes eloquently of her childhood in Greenwich Village, and then proves her point...Readers might not share her conclusions, but can't help being impressed with her reporting."

Boston Review

Users Review

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Carl Yeates:

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