



**WRESTLING WITH MOSES:
HOW JANE JACOBS TOOK ON NEW YORK'S
MASTER BUILDER AND TRANSFORMED
THE AMERICAN CITY**

By Anthony Flint
Random House, 2009

If you're intrigued by the epic battles between Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses in 1960s Manhattan, you've probably read both Jacobs' 1961 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and Robert Caro's 1974 *The Power Broker*. But these books address the battles only indirectly. In *Wrestling with Moses*, Anthony Flint supplies the missing piece: a journalistic account of how Jacobs, the improbable underdog, actually fought and won them—and eventually the war, too.

The debate wasn't just about whether to destroy the West Village in order to save it or to blast an elevated highway across Lower Manhattan. It was about competing ideas of city-making, fought between two burning souls who each believed they had the city's welfare at heart.

Moses the master builder, the most powerful public official never elected to office, believed in modernization at any cost. He built parks and affordable housing but not transit; he wanted to make New York safe for cars. He was deft at building momentum and garnering federal funding. He believed you had to start quickly before opposition could mobilize.

Jacobs, an unschooled housewife from Scranton, used observation and common sense to understand cities better than the professional planners and found herself in the vanguard of a movement. She thought cities should be treated the way she renovated her Hudson Street house: carefully, one self-installed bathroom fixture at a time.

Flint tells an absorbing David-and-Goliath tale, describing planning issues engagingly for a wider audience. He tries to be fair toward Moses, but he clearly favors Jacobs—just as history has. An epilogue reviews their legacies lightly and evenhandedly. Moses long ago fell from grace. He made the wrong bet on the automobile. Corrupted by power, his methods became increasingly unsavory. He is only now being cautiously re-appraised as we face more ambitious urban infrastructure needs than public officials can deliver.

In contrast, by the time Jacobs died in 2006, she was lionized in the planning schools she once attacked, the “blighted” streets of Greenwich Village had become precious, and many cities were erasing their expressways and super-blocks, which only accelerated the decline they aimed to arrest. Jacobs has now become a kind of Moses herself, *Death and Life* her stone tablets.

But her legacy of citizen activism unleashed furies that bedevil us today. Inspired by Jacobs, neighbors oppose any change at all, even though her walkable urbanism is now planning orthodoxy. It's become fashionable to credit her with too much. The emerging knowledge economy has validated her insights in ways she perhaps foresaw, but didn't cause.

One only wishes Flint wrestled with Moses—and Jacobs—a bit more. The question he leaves hanging in the air is how we can synthesize their divergent virtues to shape cities for their coming challenges.

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