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### Review: Citizen Jane: Battle for the City

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# Multimedia

Matt Tyrnauer, director

## **Citizen Jane: Battle for the City**

Altimeter Films, Los Angeles, 2017, 92 min.,  
<http://www.altimeterfilms.com/citizen-jane-battle-for-the-city>

The current political climate in the United States, wherein government officials with an authoritarian bent attempt to implement “reforms” in the face of popular resistance and disapproval, bears a strong resemblance to the story of Robert Moses’s efforts to reconfigure housing and transit systems in New York City in the 1950s–60s and the grassroots opposition to them led by Jane Jacobs. The saltiness of the language with which some might denigrate Donald Trump’s presidential administration echoes, no doubt, the same sort of diction one could use to describe Moses, the de facto director of all municipal construction and associated programs of urban renewal in New York City for much of the two decades after World War II. Meanwhile, the now-familiar mantra “Nevertheless, she persisted” could be applied retroactively to Jacobs, whose unflagging determination united her neighbors in Greenwich Village. In the end, Jacobs and her cohort scuttled Moses’s plans for an elevated Lower Manhattan Expressway—projected to destroy much of the vibrant district and its trademark collection of historic cast-iron buildings—along with his

political career. Indeed, while these comparisons are warranted, Matt Tyrnauer’s documentary *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City* spares us any discussion of the political events of the recent past in favor of a focus on those of nearly sixty years ago.

For seasoned students of the history of urban planning in postwar America, *Citizen Jane* offers few new insights. It is, for all intents and purposes, a recounting of Jacobs’s well-known struggle against Moses’s destruction of the “slums” he identified as “cancerous areas” to be excised from the urban fabric of New York City. Documentary, in this case, is not scholarship, nor is it necessarily meant to be. But in its exceptionally rich visual presentation, which includes resurrected film footage of once-bustling Manhattan neighborhoods juxtaposed with shocking stills of the massive empty blocks to which Moses—with bomber-like precision—reduced them, *Citizen Jane* emerges as a gripping reminder of what went wrong between 1945 and 1975 in large American cities and the often troubled legacy of the International Style and modernist architecture. In this respect, one of the most useful aspects of the film is the way in which it contextualizes Jacobs’s work, placing it within both the long-term development of Progressivism in the United States and the shorter-term activism of the 1960s, as well as ultimately showing the work’s importance in the face of contemporary global population growth.

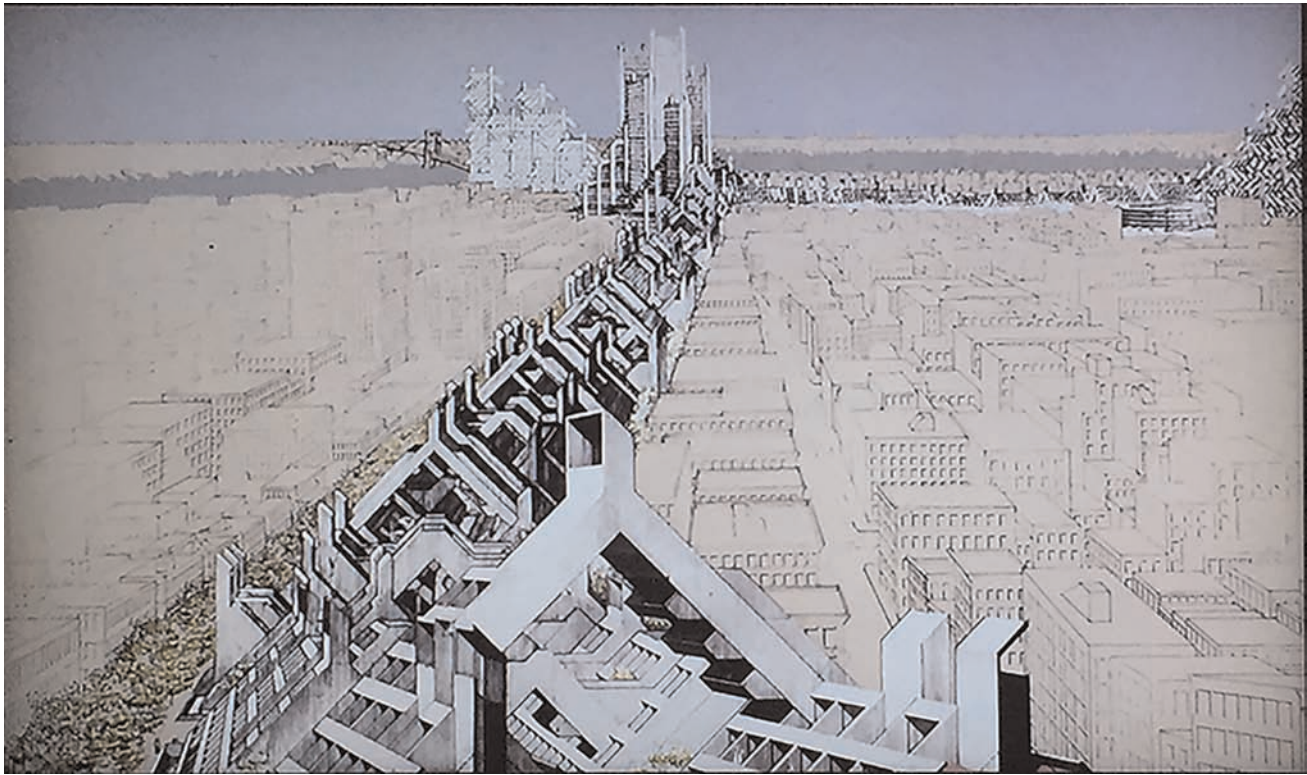
Tyrnauer structures *Citizen Jane* around clips of interviews with a wide variety of experts in the fields of architectural and urban studies (some of whom worked closely with Jacobs) as well as with politicians and others. Interviewees include Mary Rowe, Mindy Fullilove, Alexander Garvin, Alex Alexiou, former New York mayor Ed Koch, Robert A. M. Stern, and the ubiquitous Paul Goldberger. These

conversations, largely, conducted for the film, complement excerpts of recorded interviews with Jacobs, Moses, and activists such as James Baldwin. Particularly effective is the way these clips are interspersed with archival footage of the precise subject matter being discussed on the sound track. For instance, as an interviewee recounts how Jacobs’s activism was subject to misogyny within the architectural and urban planning communities, on-screen we see period publicity photographs of the planners of Detroit’s Lafayette Park and New York’s Lincoln Center. The latter consists of an ominous, high-contrast view of nine men in suits interspersed among the structures in a model of the performing arts complex, gazing impassively and unsympathetically out at us in a manner that only underscores the ruthlessness of their motives and the clarity of their maquettes. In retrospect, the arcade of the Metropolitan Opera House bears an eerie similarity to Giovanni Guerrini, Ernesto Bruno La Padula, and Mario Romano’s Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, built for Benito Mussolini’s regime in Rome in 1938–43. If this does not convince us of the ingrained social bias against Jacobs because of her gender, we are reminded later that *New Yorker* critic Lewis Mumford—whose own book *The City in History*, published the same year as Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), also sharply criticized many of the developments of modern urban planning, most notably suburban sprawl—dismissed *Death and Life* soon after its publication in a lengthy critique titled “Mother Jacobs’ Home Remedies,” indicating with little subtlety that Jacobs was poking her nose into a field where women clearly were not welcome.<sup>1</sup>

No less effective in the film is the music that swells with every mention of Moses or his grand urban schemes. One might argue

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**Figure 1** Detail of a perspective drawing for the Lower Manhattan Expressway, ca. 1967, as seen in *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City* (Library of Congress).

that such embellishment is gratuitous for an audience already sensitive to the problems of Moses and his legacy, but it is worth underscoring how deceptive and seductive the ideas of modernist urban planning are—particularly for a generation of university students who have experienced firsthand only post-Moses urban environments. Indeed, the footage of Futurama from the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair, the drawings of Le Corbusier’s Ville Contemporaine of 1922, and even the 1967 perspective schemes for the Lower Manhattan Expressway that are shown in *Citizen Jane* still look inviting, peaceful, and imaginative when unyoked from the film’s sound track (Figure 1). As economist Sanford Ikeda explains on camera, it is precisely this order that makes “dead cities” attractive in a purely platonic visual sense. Conversely, we are reminded, it is the systematic chaos and messiness of everyday urban life that allows cities to function effectively. Jacobs figured all this out when she conducted her extensive anthropological fieldwork for *Death and Life*. In contrast, Moses, who practiced “armchair history” from the backs of limousines and the protected zones of municipal offices, could not understand why

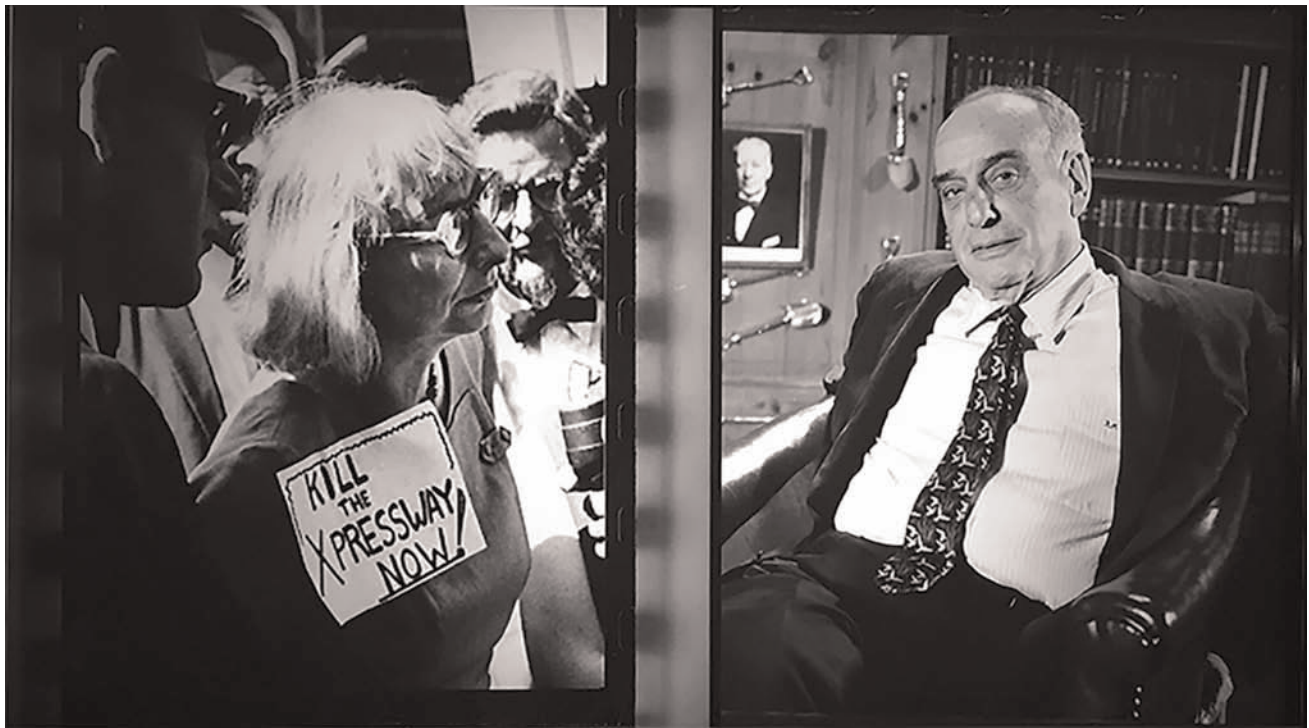
ordinary people’s daily activities would not simply conform to his architectural order.

The film is as much about Moses as it is about Jacobs. Teachers of Jacobs’s theories of how urban environments function and flourish will welcome the background that *Citizen Jane* provides for the emergence of Moses and the forces against which Jacobs fought and on which she honed her theory of the city. Much of the first part of the film is devoted to the origins of Moses’s ideas during the Progressive Era, particularly the period 1900–1920. It explains how he drank deeply from the well of Progressive thought, convincing himself that the sinecure of public office could afford him the authority to forcibly reconfigure entire urban districts, which, once physically altered, would witness the eradication of poverty, disease, and overcrowding. In other words, the film recounts a story of how the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Moses launched his career in public service at the dawn of the aviation age and the seductive bird’s-eye view of the city it afforded. This aerial perspective on the city, exploited by Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller, Hugh Ferriss, and Norman Bel Geddes, among others, encouraged the

notion of the urban “master builder” as an omniscient—and often anonymous—godlike figure, able to reconfigure vast urban spaces at will and removed from having to live personally with the consequences of his decisions should they go awry.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to overemphasize the extent to which Moses in reality approximated this imagined figure, since virtually all of the offices that he held were appointments, subject to little oversight from elected officials. As a result, he controlled vast amounts of funding from the federal government and toll revenues, among other sources—powers that make Jacobs’s victory all the more impressive. To the filmmaker’s credit, *Citizen Jane* resists any hyperbole of direct comparisons between Moses and the leaders of the totalitarian regimes of the 1930s and 1940s, whose embrace of control and the persona afforded by the aerial view resembled Moses’s viewpoint taken to its logical extreme.

The film neatly sets up the ideological distinction between Moses and Jacobs in its opening sequences, most strikingly with a split-screen image of the two of them, a duality that Tyrnauer sustains throughout (Figure 2). Each interview with Jacobs





**Figure 2** Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses, as seen in *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City* (photos by Fred McDarrah, CBS Archive, Getty Images).

reveals her calm, unpretentious, and earnest personality. When discussing the planning of the Lower Manhattan Expressway, her former colleagues praise the way she brilliantly strategized how to upset the planners' appellation, at one point using her own daughter in a ribbon-tying ceremony in New York's Washington Square to protest a southern extension of Fifth Avenue through the park. By contrast, nearly every clip of Moses portrays him as a brooding, misanthropic, misunderstood bureaucrat, brashly aware that his urban plans are going to meet with opposition for destroying ordinary citizens' lives, yet thoroughly devoid of compassion.

More broadly, *Citizen Jane* contextualizes Jacobs's struggle as part of the radical changes of the 1960s, which included challenges to the conventions of social structure. It points out, for example, that *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs's defining work, appeared within two years of the publication of two other pathbreaking books by women, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). In a section devoted to St. Louis's Pruitt-Igoe housing project, the film deftly highlights the ugly racial aspect of urban renewal

during the turbulent days of the Civil Rights Movement. It reminds us that much of such new housing was designed expressly to remove black Americans from areas ripe for redevelopment by whites, often confining them to prison-like high-rise structures.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, *Citizen Jane* is not free of faults. It is uneven in its dating of events, for instance. We are not told precisely when Jacobs began writing *Death and Life* or when she began her campaign against the Lower Manhattan Expressway, only that she undertook the campaign after she finished writing *Death and Life*. Likewise, the film does not make clear that the idea of the expressway was not finally quashed until 1967. (Instead, we are led to believe that it died after Jacobs disrupted a meeting of the city commissioners in December 1962.) Later, Robert A. M. Stern informs us in an interview that Le Corbusier's visions for housing never included "towers in a park" configurations such as those Moses implemented, but we know that several of Le Corbusier's housing schemes from the mid-1920s onward consisted of just that. Perhaps fittingly, Jacobs's organized resistance to Moses mirrored the grassroots opposition that had earlier

doomed Le Corbusier's *unité*-based plans to redevelop war-ravaged areas of France in the mid-1940s, the adoptions of which Le Corbusier attempted to force through using similar top-down authoritarian methods.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the film mentions only in passing Jacobs's work in Toronto opposing the Spadina Expressway, a cause she took up after she moved to Canada in 1968, the success of which is testament to the power of both her ideas and the depths of her personal commitment to them.

The most important part of *Citizen Jane* is saved for last. In its closing sequence, the film directs our attention to China, where entire districts of newly built, uniform apartment towers are creating what promise to be the slums of the future. The film thus reinforces the old cliché that history, when unlearned—or learned too well—too easily repeats itself. Here, there is no resolution to the mess created by Moses in New York and by his followers elsewhere in the United States; we are simply reminded that, once destroyed, the neighborhoods that gave our cities their distinctive architectural and social character can never be re-created or duplicated. The most potent aspects of *Citizen Jane* are thus the questions and challenges the film poses to

architects, planners, developers, real estate owners, and designers in training: For whom and by whom is the world of the future going to be built? And will we all want to live there?

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## Notes

1. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961); Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961); Lewis Mumford, "Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies," *The Sky Line*, *New Yorker*, 1 Dec. 1962, 138–79.
2. On the development of the personification of the master builder during the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the exploits of Fuller, Ferriss, and Bel Geddes, see Adnan Morshed, *Impossible Heights: Skyscrapers, Flight, and the Master Builder* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). Incidentally, Moses secluded himself in a high-rise co-op apartment overlooking the East River on Manhattan's Upper East Side; thus his back was strategically turned toward the borough whose "slums" he had removed with surgical precision. See Tanay Warerkar, "Robert Moses's Former Upper East Side Co-op, on Top of FDR Drive, Hits the Market," *Curbed*, New York, 25 May 2017, <https://ny.curbed.com/2017/5/25/15690344/robert-moses-upper-east-side-apartment-for-sale> (accessed 14 July 2017).
3. The redevelopment of the Hill District of Pittsburgh provides a good example. See Allen Dieterich-Ward, *Beyond Rust: Metropolitan Pittsburgh and the Fate of Industrial America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), esp. 172–98; Laura Grantmyre, "Visual Representations of Redevelopment in Pittsburgh's Hill District, 1943–1968" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2014).
4. This in spite of Le Corbusier's allies at higher levels of the French national government who also tried to force their adoption. See Le Corbusier's *Oeuvre complète*, vol. 4, 1938–46 (Zurich: Éditions Girsberge, 1946); Peter Clericuzio, "Le Corbusier and the Reconstruction of Saint-Dié: The Debate over Modernism in France, 1944–46," *Chicago Art Journal* 20 (2009), 46–71.

## Scalar and Omeka

<https://scalar.me/anvc/>  
<http://omeka.org>

The migration of academic scholarship to digital platforms over the past two decades

has seen its share of ups and downs. Advocates of digitization and online publication have pointed out the lower costs of publishing, the democratizing potential of the Internet, and the increased opportunities for collaboration and iterative work afforded by digital and online tools. At the same time, critics of online publication have pointed to questions of rigor and peer review, along with dilemmas such as how to preserve and cite works that are inherently unstable, how to credit individuals involved in collaborative efforts, and how to assess work that by its nature involves ongoing change and multiple versions.

To address some of the challenges of digital scholarship, scholarly societies have adopted standards for assessment, including the "Guidelines for the Evaluation of Digital Scholarship in Art and Architectural History" developed by the Society of Architectural Historians in partnership with the College Art Association and released in 2016.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, a number of university presses are investing in the development of platforms that reimagine the process of publishing peer-reviewed born-digital work. Take, for instance, the recently released platform Manifold Scholarship, which is being developed by the University of Minnesota Press in collaboration with GC Digital Scholarship Lab at the City University of New York. Like many such platforms, Manifold is open source, meaning the original source code for the software is freely and publicly available for anyone to adopt or modify. In the same spirit, this software departs from the print and even e-book models for textual academic scholarship in that the document remains dynamic, collaborative, and iterative, allowing for commentary from a community of readers as well as revision and expansion of the project by the author beyond its first release.

Even as Manifold and other university press developments promise a rigorous and redefined future for digital scholarship, implementing these platforms for an individual research project outside the institutional support of a team of computer programmers and information technology specialists would likely be rather difficult, if not formidable, for the general scholar. However, platforms are increasingly available that allow nonexperts to engage in electronic self-publishing, whether for the

dissemination of their own research or for use in the classroom. With an eye to the financial crisis faced by many university presses, and in particular the high cost of publishing media-rich scholarship, one of the earliest examples of this new kind of digital publication platform came out of the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, which was formed in 2009 at the University of Southern California. Supported by funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the ANVC proposed Scalar, a platform that breaks from the linear mode of reading inherent in the printed text and allows scholars to reconsider the relationship between the archive (in many cases now digitized), analysis, and publication. Central to the ANVC strategy are partnerships with archival repositories, humanities centers, libraries, and university presses, including the University of Michigan, MIT, the University of California, Open Humanities Press, New York University, and Duke University.

Scalar's flexible interface invites users with a range of technical expertise to create media-rich long-form writing and exhibition-like content, as well as more complex digital humanities projects. An online platform currently hosted by the University of Southern California, Scalar is ideal for architectural and urban history projects, as it is designed to incorporate different types of media, including images, video, and audio. These audiovisual media are treated as autonomous, first-order content that can be annotated with unlimited numbers of unique captions for different parts of an argument and used repeatedly throughout the text. With Scalar, the writer may organize content using one or more "paths" that guide a reader through a series of pages and may connect with other paths of content. Despite their intended effects of indeterminacy and multiplicity, paths in Scalar ultimately encourage a linear reading of the text. However, the author can associate audiovisual media and textual pages with tags that encourage a nonlinear mode of reading. To help, Scalar includes built-in visualizations that the author may use to organize the networks formed by paths and tags in complex text as radial graphs, grids, and tag clouds. These visualizations can add a layer of analysis for the author or provide a reader with additional means of discovering and exploring the