

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Scott Larson, *“Building Like Moses With Jacobs in Mind”*: *Contemporary Planning in New York City*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. ISBN: 1-4399-0969-5 (cloth); ISBN: 1-4399-0970-9 (paper); ISBN: 1-4399-0971-7 (ebook)

The title of Scott Larson’s book *“Building Like Moses With Jacobs in Mind”* is a direct quote from Amanda Burden, who chaired the New York City Planning Commission during the mayoral administration of Michael Bloomberg from 2002-2013. As the organizing theme for a book about the planning and development culture of this remarkable 12-year period, the quote does double duty – both calling out the larger-than-life figures whose legacies haunted New York’s reinvention during the Bloomberg era and exposing the glib ease with which the Bloomberg Administration appropriated both those legacies as it transformed the physical and social nature of the city. Larson’s tracing of this appropriation is an adept piece of discourse archaeology.

The occasion of Burden’s well-remembered remark was a 2006 symposium at the City University of New York’s Gotham Center, bluntly titled ‘Jane Jacobs vs. Robert Moses: How Stands the City Today?’. At the time, a New York urbanist could not throw a pencil without hitting an exhibit, monograph or event in which Moses and Jacobs were relentlessly juxtaposed with one another as surrogates for opposing points of view about city building. This ‘Moses-Jacobs re-match’ was occurring both in the wake of Jacobs’ death at the age of 89 and in the midst of contemporary efforts to overhaul the tarnished image of Moses – who had deftly used multiple city and state administrative positions to build dozens of bridges, highways and real estate projects from the 1930s through the late 60s – by celebrating his political prowess and accomplishments (such as the ten beautiful and elaborate municipal swimming facilities he constructed with WPA money during the Depression). Jacobs – who wrote eloquently about the

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

soul-killing effects of modernist superblocks and car-dominated streets in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, and who successfully organized against Moses' plan to transect her West Village neighborhood with an expressway – seemed a perfect foil for Moses. Despite their differences – she was chiefly a thinker, he a politician and manager – they were easily pressed into service as icons.

Who were these people, really? Moses was, on the one hand, a brutal tyrant whose priapic ambitions destroyed neighborhoods, and, on the other, a canny administrator and resource-marshaler at least some of whose projects had a positive and lasting impact (see Ballon and Jackson 2007). Jacobs was, on one hand, a brilliant activist and writer whose work changed a generation's perceptions of the city and, on the other, an opponent of planning whose invectives against government ultimately left progressive planners vulnerable and market logic ascendant (see Fainstein 2005). People tend to see both sides of the Moses coin more easily than they see the darker side of Jacobs' legacy, however, and in 2006 Moses adherents were still on the defensive. As Larson suggests, Burden's claim that her agency was alloying Moses' daring pragmatism with Jacobs' design sense and appreciation for neighborhoods reflected both the subterfuge of the Bloomberg approach and its public relations genius.

Larson's book deftly lays out the selective fusion of Jacobs and Moses – supposed antagonists – as a strategy to legitimate and rally support for property-led economic development. Planning Commission Chair Burden and other redevelopment officials were tasked with “infusing the Bloomberg redevelopment agenda with just enough human scope to make it amenable to a city still enamored of Jane Jacobs” (p.133). They did this on a rhetorical level by invoking mixed use, diversity, and scale-appropriate design. At a practical level, while they emphasized walkability, urbanity, and quality public space – particularly in Manhattan – they

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

down-zoned middle- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods in the outer boroughs, reinforcing economic segregation. All the while, mega-projects – such as the new Yankee Stadium and giant retail complexes at Bronx Market and Willets Point – destroyed working-class livelihoods and had a deleterious effect on low-income households, much as urban renewal had done. Housing affordability suffered badly, the city’s median income declined, poverty-wage work became more endemic, and more poor people were forced into neighborhoods far from their workplaces and inaccessible by transit. The administration’s redevelopment policies reinforced these phenomena and did little to alleviate their effects. Larson compellingly argues that this agenda triumphed in part by tapping into the Moses vs. Jacobs *zeitgeist* and invoking a synthesis – “building like Moses with Jacobs in mind” – that functioned almost as a sedative.

Curiously, though, Larson himself seems to believe in the synthesis whose use he decries. While acknowledging their differences, he maintains that Moses and Jacobs were functionally similar in their fetishization of the built environment, their faith in markets, their support for gentrification, and their lack of a class analysis of deterioration and urban blight. This is an oversimplification of both legacies. Jacobs, for all of the seminal ideas and values she contributed to city planning practice, mistrusted the state, while Moses spent his career deploying public funding and power in attempts to help the city survive suburbanization. Also, while she did not understand that public policy is necessary to mitigate gentrification, Jacobs passionately believed that her prescriptions would serve as a hedge against it. It is true that neither Moses nor Jacobs read the city at the level of economic structure. In this they are similar to one another, but also to the vast majority of urban policy practitioners. Jacobs’ contributions in particular are belittled in this book, as the author implies the wisdom of rejecting any ideas about city-building that are not explicitly anti-capitalist.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Larson's book also does not do justice to the currents of activism that influenced and moderated the Bloomberg Administration's policies. Larson represents the Administration's embrace of voluntary inclusionary zoning, for example, as part of a "nexus of ideas" linking Bloomberg to the Regional Plan Association's Third Regional Plan. In fact, the Administration adopted this policy under duress after months of advocacy by dozens of neighborhood-based groups working in coalition to demand it. During the 2000s, as in Jacobs' day, community organizing has been required to convert critical discourse about urban redevelopment into policy change. Political engagement at the neighborhood level has now helped to elect a governing regime that is likely to make the inclusion of affordable units in large-scale residential projects mandatory.

"Building Like Moses With Jacobs in Mind" is a provocative exploration of the power of discourse and memory in shoring up political power in a specific urban setting. Larson has written a book about narrative which will itself join the many narratives shaping redevelopment politics in New York City going forward.

References

Ballon H and Jackson K T (eds) (2007) *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company

Fainstein S S (2005) Cities and diversity - Should we want it? Can we plan for it? *Urban Affairs Review* 41(1):3-19

Laura Wolf-Powers

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Department of City and Regional Planning

University of Pennsylvania

lwpowers@design.upenn.edu

April 2014