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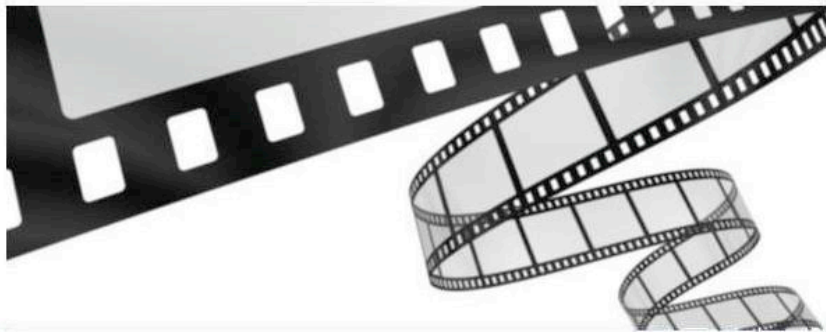
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Citizen Jane: Battle for the City

(Documentary, USA, 2016 - 92 mins)

Director: Matt Tyrnauer

Camera: Chris Dapkins

Jane Jacobs	Herself
Robert Moses	Himself
Thomas Campanella	Himself
Vincent D'Onofrio	Robert Moses (voice)
Mindy Fullilove	Herself
Alexander Garvin	Himself
Paul Goldberger	Himself
Steven Johnson	Himself

Directed by the gifted journalist and documentarian Matt Tyrnauer ([Valentino: The Last Emperor](#)), this tells the story of a David-and-Goliath fight over urban planning that took place more than 50 years ago. Yet the movie just about pulses with contemporary resonance. It ... explores the scope and meaning of that overly familiar thing — the city — in ways that will box open your thinking. It's a finely woven tapestry that feels as relevant and alive as the place you live.

It's also got great sparks of conflict. The movie features two nearly mythological antagonists. In one corner is [Robert Moses](#), the scabrous New York power broker and construction czar who, in the years after World War II, transformed the city by gutting its poorer sections and erecting miles of concrete-slab housing projects and snaking superhighways. In the other corner is [Jane Jacobs](#), activist and author of [The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#) (1961), who led an uprising against Moses' dehumanized dream of a paved-over utopia. She fought his plans to destroy Washington Square Park, to bulldoze the beautiful historic buildings of Greenwich Village, and to bisect lower Manhattan with an expressway that would likely have been the most ruinous — and influential — disaster of urban "renewal" in the history of the United States.

It's no trick figuring out who to root for, but the fascination of "Citizen Jane" isn't just in seeing how Jacobs took on the system and won. The movie invites you to sink into her challengingly supple and vibrant analysis of why cities, which we mostly take for granted, are in fact rather magical places. Even if you live in one and think you know it inside out, you come away from "Citizen Jane" understanding, more than you did going in, the special chemistry of what makes a city tick.

It comes from the ground up — and that's the tricky thing to see, since urban planning generally occurs from the top down. Moses started out in the '30s as a progressive thinker, but his idea of what it would take to make cities better evolved into a Teutonic, machine-age vision of monolithic apartment buildings in massively organized rows and "clean" streetscapes erected in place of all the neighborhood hurly-burly. We see Moses in clips from the '40s and '50s, a blustery, dour-looking man whose eyes gleam with reptilian cunning, and each time he talks about making things better, he expresses such high-handed contempt for those who'll be displaced that he sounds like he's talking about roaches. His "philosophy" walks a thin line between improvement and incineration.

Jane Jacobs rejects all of this, but not just on basic common moral human grounds. At heart, she's an anthropologist, and her subject is the mysterious spirituality of neighborhoods: the way they evolve, over generations, into thriving organic places that are nurturing and protective and embedded with stories that rise out of the streets. Jacobs makes the point that true



neighborhoods, with clusters of small businesses and people sitting on stoops, are far safer than the stark moonscapes proposed by Moses — there are more people around, so the streets are more naturally patrolled. (Sure enough, once housing projects started to get built, they turned out to be far more dangerous places.) More than just "blocks," they're human networks, enveloping hives.

This is only Tyrnauer's second feature, but he has taken a subject that might have been dryly academic and turned it into a visual hymn to the streets of New York — to how their development, over the 20th century, influenced everything around them. Tyrnauer interpolates clips from the '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s, and '60s, to the point that the past starts to feel like a living thing. New York was built, but more than that it metastasized, so when Moses treated low-income sections of it as a "cancer" that had to be cut out (he would happily have razed Harlem), he was violating the city's essence.

With her long thin nose, graying hair, and elfin grin, Jacobs bears a striking resemblance to the film critic [Pauline Kael](#) (with a hint of a female [Poindexter](#)), and she's got some of Kael's playful imperiousness. Born in 1916, she's a bohemian scamp who starts off writing about the city for places like Vogue. By the time she reaches her forties, she has evolved into an activist, but in the least self-righteous way possible; she wants to preserve her home. In the duel between herself and Moses, gender is far from incidental, and not just because Jacobs emerged out of the same second-wave-feminist era defined by writers like [Betty Friedan](#) ([The Feminine Mystique](#)) and [Rachel Carson](#) ([Silent Spring](#)). Jacobs' vision of the city was bravely and spectacularly feminine: She viewed it as a teeming enigmatic cooperative, a garden of earthly delights, whereas Moses, offering a degraded version of the ideas of the Swiss-French architect and urban planner [Le Corbusier](#) (who'd created the template of the future presented at the 1939 World's Fair), was all about abstract masculine dominion: tall hard buildings, no hint of mess, a city that was nothing but sharp edges.

Since we're talking about buildings, it's no stretch to say that there's something more than a little Trumpian about Robert Moses. His drive to erect looming, impersonal housing was a form of control; his desire to sweep everything else away was even worse — a fascism of the spirit. "Citizen Jane" provides stunning evidence that as the population explodes, more and more cities around the world are being built in the spirit of Robert Moses: acres of skyscraper cages for the anonymous horde. Yet the spirit of Jane Jacobs is heard each time a neighborhood is allowed to evolve. What she fought and defeated, most dramatically by keeping a highway out of lower Manhattan, was the prototype for urban planning that would steamroll everyone it was supposed to be planning for. Jacobs insisted that the city is a place for the people. That's why it can't just "serve" them; it has to express who they are.

Owen Gleiberman, Variety



Citizen Jane: Battle for the City, the new documentary from award-winning journalist and filmmaker Matt Tyrnauer and co-producer (and co-founder of the Friends of the High Line) Robert Hammond, is as much about Jane Jacobs, the urban activist, as it is a blueprint for taking action in the current age. Published in 1961, Jacobs's influential book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* changed the way we think and talk about cities, putting people at the center of what makes a community vibrant. Jacobs also believed—and practiced—that real power comes from the bottom up.

We spoke to Tyrnauer about Jacobs's pioneering work, her role as an activist and public intellectual, and why her ideas are still so relevant today. *Citizen Jane* opens theatrically and on demand on April 21.

What led you to make this documentary? You have a very diverse career, so what drew you to Jane Jacobs?

*I've always been interested in architecture and cities, and part of what I wrote about, mostly for *Vanity Fair* and other places, too, was design and architecture. So I've had an interest in the broader subject, and in New York history, and public intellectuals. The Jane Jacobs story—and the Robert Moses aspect—touches on all of those things.*

Also, Jacobs is a subject who really hasn't been given, until now, the full-dress documentary treatment. She's been a part of other stories. So I saw a major figure, great thinker, public intellectual, and activist who I wanted to bring to a wider audience.

Was there a specific aspect of her work that compelled you to take this route?

[Jane Jacobs] was a great thinker but she was also a warrior, and she absolutely saw the city in a way that people weren't seeing at the time in the country. You could call her a visionary.

She figured things out about the city that were very much against the conventional wisdom of her day and made a very compelling argument for cities as places where social capital was [seen], and that the real power in cities comes from the bottom up not the top down, a really contrarian argument in the 1950s. I think she deserves enormous credit for that, one of the great paradigm shifts of the 20th century.

It's a great story of someone who had these ideas that—I'm trying to think of the cliché—she really practiced what she preached, I guess, is what I'm looking for. When she became an activist, she began to deploy all of these ideas [from her book] when New York City was being torn apart in a brutal way by Robert Moses, who was the paradigm of the urban renewal generation. Jacobs went to the barricades against him and won. The movement she organized helped bring down the man they

called the power broker, master builder, the most talented, diabolically brilliant bureaucrat of maybe ever. So it's a good story.

Why do you think it was important to bring together these two opposing forces in a portrait of Jacobs?

The film is about ideas, but it's also about action. The concepts that Jane introduces about the city are not the easiest to explain, so we had a filmmaking challenge to get her ideas across, and we wanted to bring people up to speed on her vision of what a city is.

The next part of the film is action because she sees Robert Moses as a threat and helps organize several movements that ended up defeating really treacherous plans for New York, such as the plan to pretty much obliterate Washington Square Park and replace it with a highway, the plan to tear down much of the West Village and replace it with housing projects, and to run a highway through what's now Soho. Jacobs was instrumental in all of those fights and those were all Robert Moses projects, and Robert Moses, really for the first time, tasted defeat. Jacobs is one of those people who helped hand it to him.

What you have is a playbook for how to be an effective activist, a story that is really relevant for our present time.

Why did you want to make the film now?

I think the movie is about activism and intellectuals. [Jacobs] was an under-appreciated, under-known figure, and frankly Robert Moses is, too, at this point. That was my original motivation.

It so happened we thought we were going to be releasing the movie to a world where we had the first female president of the United States. We ended up releasing it into a world where an egotistical New York builder and developer actually ends up taking over the country. That wasn't intended when we began to make the film, but surely people are seeing very clearly now.

What are some of your hopes for the film's distribution?

I hope it inspires people to resist, and to fight destructive forces, speak truth to power, organize. As Jacobs memorably says in the film, Stop being victims. "It's wicked, in a way, to be a victim. It's more wicked to be a predator, but it's wicked to be a victim. You have to organize." I'm paraphrasing.

But we all need role models, and we all need strategies to become activists. [Jacobs] was a brilliant strategist. There's something now called the Indivisible movement. These congressional staffers have written a handbook about how to effect change by bringing your cause to government officials. Jacobs was the original purveyor of that, and I think she's a fitting role model for [this] time even more so than we knew when we began making the film.

What's the takeaway for viewers who have never heard of Jane Jacobs?

Jane Jacobs was really about independent, critical thinking. She wanted people to open their eyes and look at the world around them and try to have a deeper understanding of their physical environment. She thought if they did, then we would be on solid ground because people will then self-regulate and ensure that they had a say in creating their neighborhoods. Cities are collections of neighborhoods, so start with the individual. We all have to be responsible for doing our part. I think in a time of real political danger and the shocking political change in the country—that you have an example of how to resist, how to be an activist, and someone to inspire us to speak truth to power is a really important thing.

Amazing how relevant it is today.

I agree. I think Jacobs is utterly relevant even though her book was written more than 50 years ago.

Lauren Ro

Our previous presentation:

Based on the feedback slips returned on the night, you rated [After The Storm](#), screened on Monday, February 5th, **3.8** stars out of 5.

Please visit the current season page at <http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk> to read all the feedback comments.

You can still provide feedback on this, or any other film, by visiting the Discussions page: <http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk/discussion/>.

Next Cramphorn "Picture House" Film, Tue 20th Nov: [The Killing of a Sacred Deer](#) (15), UK, 2017, 121 mins, dir. Yorgos Lanthimos

Our next presentation:

Monday, 5th March: [Toni Erdmann](#) (2016, Germany, 162 mins, dir. Maren Ade) at 8pm.