by {ga=ggstaff}
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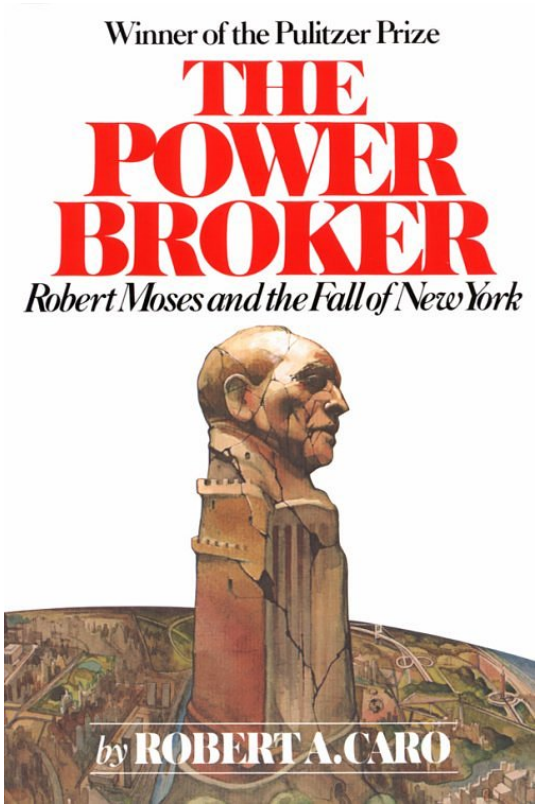
On August 20, Gotham Gazette's book club held an in-person discussion about Robert Caro's biography of Robert Moses, *The Power Broker*, with guest Tom Angotti, professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at Hunter College. An edited transcript of the talk is posted below.



Jonathan Mandell: Welcome to Gotham Gazette's Reading NYC Book Club. This is our second in-person meeting, after many online discussions. We previously read the other book that is considered one of the two best books ever written about New York City, *Here Is New York*, by E.B. White. That book is much less taxing for the reader, about 60 pages, and now we are reading the other best book, *The Power Broker*.

I just wanted to give a little personal anecdote about my conversion experience to the Power

Broker, I was at a party, a very small dinner party, and just in conversation this other person who I had never met said, "I am reading a book that has changed my life." And I said, "You know, that is funny, because I am reading a book that is doing that too." I asked, "What book are you reading?" and he said, "*The Power Broker*." "Me too," I said. So, for the next three hours at this party, that is all we talked about, to the exclusion of everybody else. And he was about 150 pages ahead of me, so every time I said anything he had this knowing, superior look and he said, "Well, that is how it appears to you now, but when you get to where I am you will see what the real story is."

So, it does have this amazing hold on people, both, I think, for the way that it was written, and reported, and also because of the person it is written about, the one person through which you can see fifty years, a sweeping history of the politics of how to "get things done."

So, this is informal, and it all depends on your contribution. Now Erica will read a passage from the beginning, and she has a couple of areas of discussion, but it is really your book club, so we want to hear from you your opinions about the book, and the person and city it is written about.

[Pearson reads a passage, starting with, "Robert Moses shaped New York" on pg. 5]

Erica Pearson: I would like to welcome our guest today. Tom Angotti is a professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at Hunter College, the editor of Planners Network Magazine, a member of the Task Force on Community- based Planning, and he writes the land use topic page for Gotham Gazette. Mr. Angotti, when did you first read *The Power Broker*?

Tom Angotti: Thank you, Erica. I have to apologize for coming late, because I came by bicycle, and I was thinking about all those highways that Moses built. It slowed me down quite a bit.

I also have to compliment Moses for having developed the first bicycle plan for New York City, which was unfortunately not really a full plan, but in any case, indicated some forethought about the necessity for sustainable transportation in the city.

Well, my first reading of *The Power Broker* was when I was a planning student and a graduate

student. And though I was born in New York I had lived most of my life outside the city of New York, and I thought that it was all about the same kinds of things that were going on in other cities. At the time I read it, I was working for neighborhoods in other cities that were fighting the urban renewal bulldozer, and were fighting against "big plans," just like Moses'. So, you know, the Boston redevelopment authority, Ed Logue in New Haven, there were many other Robert Moseses around the country. So this guy wasn't alone. And, he could do what he did because there was money for public works, and money for public housing. It was an era when there were funds to do these things. We live in an era today of public-private partnerships, of government downsizing, federal government divestment of its responsibilities, and cities don't have the kind of resources that Moses had.

Erica Pearson: The historian Kenneth T. Jackson has said that *The Power Broker*, celebrated as it is, is too narrow of a biography, and that Robert Moses did a great service to New York City by creating the infrastructure it needed to grow to become a modern city. What did people think about that? Did you feel you were reading a narrow view of Moses?

Audience member: I was struck by how Moses emphasized the cars over public transportation, and how much that changed things... And the fact that he couldn't build that bridge over the Battery, still, he had a very great effect on the domination of the car in the city.

Brett Goldman: My name is Brett Goldman. I kind of agree with Ken [Jackson]. I must confess that I have stopped at about page 700, so I still have to finish it, but up to this point, I have to agree, because if we didn't have the roads slammed through all the neighborhoods, you would still be trying to get through the neighborhoods, and we would be back to 1950 and 1940, and you wouldn't be able to get into the city, you wouldn't be able to get around. It wouldn't have been as big of a city, we wouldn't have competed.

Tom Angotti: We would have had a different city. We might have had a city that was more walkable, with cleaner air, and that had better mass transit. Because, right now, New York has a wonderful asset, which is the biggest and best mass transit system in the United States. It also has as bad of traffic as any other major city. And worse congestion, because it was carved up for the car, when Manhattan has such a density, that there is no reason that there should be private automobiles in such a high-density environment. If you want clean air, and if you want a livable, walkable city, and if you would like some open space, one third of Manhattan is taken up by asphalt and concrete, when that could become really a premier public space, [this is true in] Manhattan, and many places in the other boroughs. Bob Moses never developed a plan for the sidewalks and streets besides putting cars on them. Which is the use of public space by private vehicles.

Henry Stern: I have sort of a different view. I was fortunate enough to serve as Parks Commissioner for 15 years, under Mayor Koch for seven and Mayor Giuliani for eight, and I can tell you that most of the park system, and the playgrounds, and the swimming pools, were built by Robert Moses. And he had an enormous beneficial effect on the New York City park system. Now, I know that it has become fashionable, in the wake of Caro's book, to trash Moses, and say that he was a monster, he is very politically incorrect today. And, I think he will come through this, his reputation will survive. One fascinating thing that Caro did, is even while criticizing Moses, the very fact that this detailed book is printed about the public figure sort of secured his reputation. And the fact that it is used in so many schools, and in so many places, and is the definitive work on public works in this century, I think, is terrific. He can take care of himself, his ghost can.

I am reminded of Christopher Wren [the builder of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, whose inscription in the cathedral is, "If you seek his monument, look around you"]. On balance, his effect on the city and state is wonderful. The power plants at Niagara and throughout the state, he was head of the power authority. They don't build power plants anymore, because people object to having them too close to them, and you get blackouts. In fact, you can't do anything any more, it is very lucky that Moses lived when he did, because we have a city which reminds me of Gulliver, bound by a thousand midgets holding down the strings so that nothing happens. With Moses a great many things happened. Now, if you do a lot of big things, some of them may turn out to be wrong.

And he was not perfect, but the criticism of him is so vituperative. I was at the centennial of his birth, and there was a professor from Columbia, the graduate school, and he likened Moses to Albert Spier, Hitler's architect. He said that in his early works, roads and parks and so on Moses was like Spier, but then he said in his later works like housing and so on he was much worse than Spier. This what you get from the lefties.

And what is interesting, is that it follows a period of adulation for Moses when he was alive, where the closest thing to it was J. Edgar Hoover, he was beyond criticism. Which was also wrong. And I hope that the balance swings back to where you recognize his achievements.

I also wanted to add one thing, a lot of the things that he did were believed by everyone at the time to be correct. For example, the replacements of trolleys by buses. Now, we all love trolleys, they are non-polluting, meet me in St. Louis, in the movie Who Framed Roger Rabbit, the glory of the trolley and so on. But I am old enough to remember when they took them out, and

everyone said "wonderful." Because with the trolleys, when one got stuck they all got stuck, you couldn't move, you couldn't change the route. The buses went everywhere, they picked you up at the curb, you didn't have to go to the middle of the street and get run over to catch one, and so on. So, a lot of the things he did represented the prevailing wisdom at the time he did them. And thirty years later, they appeared in another way.

Last thing, I fought him very hard, because I was opposed to the lower Manhattan expressway, along with Jane Jacobs and wonderful people. And this was in 1962, and it was decided, basically by Mayor Robert F. Wagner not to build the expressway. And I think that was a very important decision, and I think the expressway would have been awful. Now the streets are awful, but they were anyway.

Tom Angotti: Well, without turning it into a debate, I would like to state the lefty position. Which is, not that Moses was a bad guy, or that he was to fault or to blame for the problems of New York City or any other city today. In fact, the problem with Caro's book, I find, is that it personalizes something which has very deep, historical, social and economic and political roots. Moses didn't do all of those things. Moses had the good fortune of being an extremely organized, future-oriented person in the position to capture resources that every other city had, that were available because of the vital economic system, local economy in New York City. So, lets take it away from the personal.

When you look at New York City, you also have to look at what happened to every other city in the same historical period. New York City came out better for it, because there are fewer highways cutting through the city, the lower Manhattan expressway and other highways were stopped. The highways that actually were put in are today considered sub- standard because they have small ramps, they have narrow rights of way and so forth, and highway engineers go bananas, but actually that is one of the better things about the highway system that does exist in New York City, is, if they were built to interstate highway standards like they are in almost every other city in the United States, there would be less public space, there would be more pollution, there would be more congestion and more traffic. And that is historically what happens. The more pavement you provide for cars, the more cars fill them up. So, New York is actually better off than other cities are. Thank god the "meat ax"wasn't sharper. And, thank Jane Jacobs and the community groups and the many others who stood in the way of the bulldozers and said, "Stop, this is enough. You can't do any more."

So, I think the alternative, the historical alternative that arose philosophically, theoretically, politically has been the alternative that Jane Jacobs gave voice to in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* ,

which is the other great classic that should accompany the reading of *The Power Broker*. And what Jane Jacobs reflects is the idea that neighborhoods, and people should be involved in planning for their future. And if they had been involved from the beginning, and there were many people who were directly affected by Moses' projects, if they had been involved from the beginning, the outcome would have been quite different. I would like to see today, neighborhoods, who are organized, politically sophisticated, who have ideas about their future, as grand as Bob Moses' ideas, get the same kinds of power and resources that Moses had. I don't want to see the end of public works, I don't want to see the end of grand ideas and visions, but I would like to see democracy introduced into the process so that it isn't all the responsibility of an empire builder.

Erica Pearson: The quote that Mr. Angotti referred to earlier, Caro writes that Robert Moses often said, "When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax," and "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs." Does anyone in the audience have any comments, both about the description about the way that planning happened for projects like the Cross Bronx Expressway and how planning happens today?

Henry Stern: I agreed with 90 percent of what you [Tom Angotti] said, right up until the end. Robert Moses was appointed to positions by elected officials who were elected in the great democratic tradition. He worked with Fiorello LaGuardia. It was Mayor LaGuardia who appointed him Parks Commissioner, which is the only position he took a salary from until the Worlds Fair. And other mayors continued it. And when he fell out of favor, it was an elected official who removed him. It was Nelson Rockefeller in 1968. The reason for that was that Nelson wanted to make his brother Laurance chairman of the state council of parks in 1963, which Moses had chaired for 39 years. Moses got very upset and personal. Nelson Rockefeller was the wrong person to pick a fight with.

So it wasn't Moses alone who just did it. He did it because the elected officials as well as the city power structure wanted him to.

He was an anti-Semite. He was classic, self-hating Jew. He was as Jewish as you can get. His parents were Emmanuel and Bella. He was named Moses. So when he went to Yale he had some experience... something like Lawrence of Arabia in the captured land of the Turks. And he ended up an Arabist. When I graduated from law school in 1957, I wrote to him asking for a job or an interview at least. And I never got an answer and I think it was because I was Jewish. He married two Catholic women. He did not deal with Jewish companies. He had no relationship to the Jewish power structure... I went to his funeral with Mayor Koch and he was buried in an

Episcopal cemetery. He was bad on the Jewish issue for sure.

But he did what the powers that be wanted but he did it better, cheaper, and quicker than anybody else. Which is the reason that they wanted him to be the head of every city agency. And I think that being a really mean, nasty, threatening guy was almost a prerequisite for that kind of success and getting people to do what you want them to do.

One last thing. He wrote beautifully. He had a fantastic command of the English language. I wish someone would collect some of his letters he wrote denouncing public people. You have to a certain appreciation for that.

Alan Gerber: My name is Alan Gerber. I am a retired public school teacher and also a former school board member in Brooklyn. Although I come from the Lower East Side. And I will always remember the big fight over the expressway down there. You mentioned Jane Jacobs. But there was also the late Reba Lebowitz who was organized in the local fight. In fact, there is a street down there named after her.

The most fascinating aspect of the book that I found, having come originally from the Lower East Side was something that is a very unique talent of Robert Caro. He did this in his biography of Lyndon Johnson. He steps aside from the main character and devotes a chapter or two to an extensive biography of another character. He did that with Sam Rayburn in his biography of Lyndon Johnson. Nobody knew anything about Rayburn and he opened the book on that man's personality and his influence over LBJ.

He did the same thing with Al Smith in *The Power Broker*. I met Robert Caro a few months ago. And I asked him in public about that section, over 100 pages about Al Smith. It would be the basis of a biography for a man who I think is the most forgotten, public figure in 20th century New York politics. That man was it. He was one of the greatest New Yorkers in the mid 20th century. Anything that the New Deal was about, anything that anybody stood for was Al Smith.

And Caro said that it is his ambition to one day do a biography of Al Smith. And he should be encouraged. Al Smith was the influence on the good aspects of Robert Moses. The review of the book that it was too personal and too down on Robert Moses, there is a good part of this book that gives an upswing to the man's personality. All that deals with the years that he was

the man who wrote the legislation that kept Al Smith's programs alive and well and continue to this day.

Audience member: I wanted to touch on something mentioned here briefly. Moses wrote the laws that gave him the power to create the parks, to create the power authority, and to give him the money to do the things that he wanted to do. And that created a sense of faith in him that people couldn't or wouldn't turn away from. People did not want to look at Moses and think that he could do anything but good. That is why I think his programs went as long as they did. Nobody wanted to see them as anything but good.

Henry Stern: Tell us what was so bad about Robert Moses. What did he do that was bad?

Audience member: As a non-driver, I will agree with Caro, in that all of the parkways and highways in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx and all of the ones in Long Island, could have been done differently. They could have been done less extreme than to the point that Moses did.

The Van Wyck Expressway, where they wanted to put the railway running along the highway, and he flatly refused it because he could not see the scope of the future. He had it stuck in his mind that this is the way it gets done, and if I don't do it, than nobody else will.

So in that respect, he was hard edged, non-swaying in his opinion.

Michael Miccone: Some wanted to put down an extension of the subway along the median of the Van Wyck, but to this day the median is too narrow to accommodate a train. Even the Air Train had to be elevated and that is why.

Audience member: As the book states, he did not accommodate the population in Long Island that he knew would be coming there. The population did not slowly evolve over Long Island. It exploded in pockets, where there was industry and jobs. I think if he would have had the foresight, he could have eased traffic in the city.

Tom Angotti: I don't think you can blame Moses for that because Moses was doing what every other city in the United States was doing in the 1930's and 1940's. The highway system, the interstate system, and federal mortgage policies all lead to suburban sprawl. They are culprits. Moses was the instrument locally. The problem is that this is a nation that became car crazy. That suburban sprawl became the model for urban development.

What I don't want you to do is call Moses a visionary. Because if he were a visionary, he would have developed a different vision. He would have bucked the trend. He would have said you can do that in Columbus, Ohio, but you really shouldn't do it in New York City because we have a subway system and a high density.

New York is a chaotic region and every time I get a planner from Europe [visiting] they look at me and say, "There is no plan at a regional level?" You have mass transit systems, all of these different trains, and awful traffic congestion. And all of the European cities have traffic calming in the center, intermodal systems, buses linking up to trains, car-free zones, and bicycle routes. New York doesn't have any of this.

That is where I stop and say don't blame Moses, but also don't praise him. He wasn't that forward looking. He built for suburban sprawl and so did everyone else in America. That is what the political figures wanted him to do as well and gave him money to do.

Brett Goldman: What would have happened if we didn't have that suburban sprawl? What would the city look like today?

Tom Angotti: Well, it'd be a city with better mass transit, a real above surface mass transit system, instead of buses that get stalled in transit. New York City has the slowest moving buses of any city in the country. And the reason is because there is too much traffic, I think the traffic is getting worse... This is a very densely populated area so I think you can say it doesn't run as well as other major cities in the world, as well as it should be... as other major metropolises in the world.

Brett Goldman: I don't know if you answered my question really fully. What if we didn't have in

1940 or 1930 to 1960 or whatever, we didn't have Robert Moses building roads? Now we might not have the cross town traffic at 2.6 miles an hour, but would New York have been able to compete through that period with other American cities, and with other international cities? Does it end up the same place it is today?

Tom Angotti: New York is still different from other American cities, because of many things, because of its public works, because of its transit system, because of its density, and it is competing very well. I think what would be different... the New York region probably would have developed much differently.

We might have a unitary mass transit system with trains that connect with each other, we might have had what is now called smart growth, which is concentrated development. You'd have concentrated development around train lines, around suburban train lines, you'd have planned suburban centers rather than low density sprawls, residential areas. Now the metropolitan region is developing into a multi-center region, which is cities, Stanford, New Haven, all these cities outside of New York City- but none of that was planned. If it had been planned, it would have been a very different region, and it would have strengthened the role of New York City as a center... .

Erica Pearson: We have been talking quite a bit about transportation, but Moses was also in charge of urban renewal projects, both housing and things like Lincoln Center. Does anyone have comments?

Henry Stern: He got in trouble with housing because there was corruption... He didn't get the money, but the people he was dealing with to make the projects did. They would clear sites and then they operated tbem for many years as different properties. It contributed to his downfall, because I think if he had been younger, he would have been tougher on the people who were working with the city.

He was wrong when he tried to put a highway through Washington Square Park. There were a lot of issues, which you will find towards the end of his career, where time passed him by. He fought the Delacorte Shakespeare Theater in Central Park because he thought that Joe Papp was a Communist, which he was, but just because he was a Communist doesn't mean you shouldn't have Shakespeare in the Park... and in 1959 he wanted to build a parking lot for the Tavern in the Green, so he wanted to take down some trees... In the end he fell apart. But the base of his achievements is monumental.

In the end everyone thought he went crazy and then he died. Moses has been out of power since May 1st, 1968. He's been out since then. Traffic has gotten much worse in the last thirty-five years... He's been out of power for 35 years, and cannot be blamed for all the bad things that have happened since then.

Audience member: I was curious when you said that if Moses hadn't been around we could have had a unified transit system. I mean, the transit system was started as a whole bunch of separate companies early in the 1900s, and I don't think we can blame Moses on that end, either. He wasn't around in 1904. I'm curious where you see his particular influence could have been through the development of a real unified transit system.

Tom Angotti: You misunderstood my comments... What if New York under different political leadership, or a different person, or perhaps with Moses at the helm, had said we're going to have a different type of development? In 1898, the organized area of New York City was essentially Manhattan, and not all of Manhattan. The consolidation of the five boroughs offered an opportunity to plan the region. It was an unparalleled historical opportunity all under one government. And it was a historic bumble. It never happened. It wasn't comprehensively planned. Instead, other transit companies put in their lines, and eventually they were all consolidated into one, the MTA, now we have New Jersey Transit, we have private bus companies, etc. etc. Now we have a metropolitan region with up to 20 million people in three states - some say even four states - that is out of control. And it could have been very different.

I'll just give one example and how it relates to New York City: the abandonment of the South Bronx, which is often pointed to as a very unique New York City problem. What if in the fifties and sixties instead of everyone, including Moses, building expressways that go out into the suburbs, industry had been reinforced in the city? By the way, many planners had proposed this and tried to do it, and did try to head off the trend. But they couldn't because it was a national trend and it was influenced by a national policy. [There was a plan] to create loads of mixed-use development, including industry so that industry couldn't leave the city and take labor with them to the abandonment of the south Bronx, which was a catastrophe. Now, it's not Moses' fault, but it was part of the trend of the time, and it could have been different if there had been a different motto for urban development, not just in New York City, but in the nation.

Mark Berkey Gerard: I would just like to hear people's opinion on the rebuilding of the World Trade Center, there's been a lot of discussion as to whether we need another Robert Moses to have a vision for that area or whether twenty different constituency groups all competing for the

same space can create something great.

Brett Goldman: Pataki is your Moses in this age. He is Moses by default because he has the power, and that's the truth of it, because... whatever end decision or whatever design comes out of the public process, the final decision lays with the person in power.

Tom Angotti: I think it's actually a good thing that people are talking about the planning of lower Manhattan... the mayor has actually come up with a plan for lower Manhattan... there are a lot of local neighborhood people who want to be involved in the planning process, and that's a good thing, too.

The problem is that we're too accustomed to only getting things done through a top-down process, and so why can't we have both a top-down and bottom-up process, and organize it in a better way? I can understand why people get nostalgic for a Robert Moses. What we have now is a process where someone comes up with an idea for city government to do something, and immediately they are surrounded by fifty advocacy groups that say no.

Why can't we organize the process so that government and advocacy groups and neighborhood groups can be partners right from the start and develop and process with a time limit so that this does not become a endless process. Give neighborhoods the resources. You know, people in neighborhoods aren't stupid. In fact, my experience is that they're smarter than most of the self-selected Robert Moses in government, and why can't they work together as partners. That's the gridlock problem in New York City is that once you get into government you say you are going to do this and you immediately get halted in your tracks, and you shut down and you don't talk to anybody and you don't even know how to talk to people.

There needs to be sea change. Everyone needs to read Jane Jacobs again because she solved the city from the sidewalks and the streets and the point of view of neighborhoods and the people in the government have to do that too. There are a lot of people in the government who do that, there are a lot of good people in the government, but they are stymied because you're not supposed to make any varied proposals, because you will get your head cut off by your supervisor, and if your supervisor makes the proposal, he'll or she'll get their head cut off... . So come on, community boards are a joke. Reform the community boards, give them resources, make them partners in government. You know, each community board is in charge of a 150,000 population. That is as big as the city of Stanford or New Haven. They have no resources. Of course they're going to act like an unloyal opposition and just stick their fingers in the machinery

and stop it, because that's the only power that they have.

This is a different time, a different century. There is no room for another Moses, and nobody wants chaos, so that's where I think we have to go with lower Manhattan, with Midtown West, with all of the other big proposals.

Jonathan Mandell: We do need to finish up by 7:00, but before you go, please let us know your nominations for the next book club selections. Thank you, everyone. The conversation is not over, please continue it online.