

[BEGINNING OF ROBERT CARO — 9/17/08]

ROBERT CARO: That was such a nice introduction that I'm reminded of something that Lyndon Johnson use to say whenever he got an especially nice introduction, he use to say he "wished his parents were alive to hear," because his father would have loved it and his mother would have believed it.

AUDIENCE: [LAUGHTER]

CARO: But of course I'm going to talk tonight about Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs. Actually I'm going to talk first about a letter that she wrote, not to her mother, about me, but to my publisher about me. And as those of you who have written books know, you know, when your book is in galleys and getting ready for publication, your publisher asks you for a list of famous writers who might give blurbs or quotes to your book. And when my book was in galleys perhaps four or five months before publication, he asks me for such a list.

Well that was embarrassing. Inar and I were really broke when we were writing *The Power Broker*, and we've been living up in the Bronx for seven years, and I knew a few writers, but none who were famous enough, or appropriate enough, to be giving a quote to a book like mine. So I had to tell my editor that I didn't have a list.

So he, my editor, a guy named Robert Gottley, made a list himself and sent it out without asking me about it. Everyday while we were working on the Galleys, the PR man from Kanupp, a gentleman named Bill [?Levered], would come in with responses to his letter, and he'd show them to Bob and me. And some of them were from quite famous writers, whom I'd only heard of, and they were very generous in their comments. But as I look back on it, I think I was so unsophisticated, that I didn't really realize how generous these comments were. And I heard later that Levered had said around the halls of my publishing house, Kanupp, "I've never seen anyone as unexcited by good blurbs as Bob Caro."

AUDIENCE: [LAUGHTER]

CARO: Then one day, while we were working on the galleys, he came in with another stack of letters; and the first one I saw was from Jane Jacobs. And it didn't really matter what she said. It was very nice, very generous. But when I saw her name, I don't know if I said anything, but I remember what I felt. What I felt was, "Wow!"

I remember that moment very clearly. Since then, *The Power Broker* has given me a lot of great moments, but that was the first. I remember it so clearly, because it was the moment I first felt that perhaps I had done something worthwhile.

I hadn't gotten any reviews yet, of course, the book still wasn't out. But it didn't really matter what anyone else thought about it, as long as she liked it. It was a great moment for me because I knew her. I don't mean that I knew her personally. I had never met Jane Jacobs at that time; and in fact, later in my whole life, I was to meet her in person, face-to-face, only once. But I knew her in an essential way. A different way. I knew her through her work, through her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

I didn't read her book when it first was published in 1961. I was working then as a reporter, an investigative reporter who found himself drawn more-and-more to politics, the news day on Long Island. And I didn't do stuff in urban planning and development. And I still hadn't read it when I went up to Harvard on a Nieman Fellowship in 1965.

I hadn't thought of writing a book on Robert Moses, when I started my Nieman year, I knew I wanted to examine the sources of this political power, but I was thinking of doing it in terms of a newspaper series, not in terms of a book. But I thought then, I realized then when I had a chance to think, when you're a reporter you're always running, so you don't really have a chance to think, and that Nieman year, gave me a chance to think. And what I thought was, that I needed something the length of a book to do this, and I better learn about urban planning and development.

So I started reading every book I could get my hands on. I still see myself...each Nieman then had a little office up at Harvard, and I still see myself sitting in there at night, with this stack of textbooks besides me, taking notes on them.

And the first couple of books that I took a lot of notes, because it was all new to me. But then I started realizing that I was going through book-after-book, and I was taking hardly no notes at all. Sometimes I'd read a whole book, there wouldn't be any notes. These were books that were filled with statistics. They were filled with the answers that had been given to questionnaires. And they all seemed to be saying basically, or coming from basically the same place.

But then I read *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. She got me with the very first page, when she laid out what questions she would be asking in the book. "What, if anything, is a city neighborhood?" And, "What jobs, if any, neighborhoods in great cities do?"

The questions that in all these other books that I was reading, no one ever asked.

And she got me with her answers, her analysis. The analysis, of course, took her hundreds of pages, and it was crammed with truly original observations and insights. She didn't just use words like "community," and "neighborhood." She showed what communities and neighborhoods meant, by isolating and

observing their peculiar properties and seeing what worked and what didn't work, and extrapolating from her observations. And her theories were derived from observations that she had made with her own eyes.

"Look what we've built," she wrote. And she talked about the low income projects that become worse than the slums they were suppose to replace. And she wrote about promenades that go from no place to nowhere, and have no promenaders. And about expressways that eviscerate great cities. "Whole communities," she wrote, "are torn apart and [?sewing?] to the winds with a reaping of cynicism, resentment and despair, that must be heard and seen to be believed." And she said, "This is not the rebuilding of cities, this is the sacking of cities."

As it happens, I was thinking at this time about what I wanted to do I the book that became *The Power Broker*, and I was approaching things from a very different angle from hers. I was thinking *The Power Broker*, less as a biography. I never had the slightest interest in writing a book that was just about the life of a great man. I [?think?] whether it was Lyndon Johnson or Robert Moses, I never had any interest in doing that. But about using Robert Moses life as a way of examining what are the true roots, in essence, of urban power. Power in cities. Power not only in New York, but in all the cities of America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because I thought what you're taught in textbooks is that we live in a democracy, and in a democracy, power comes from the ballot box. From being elected.

But here was a man who was never elected to anything, and he held power for 44 years, and he had more power than anyone who was elected. More power than any mayor. More power than any governor. More power than any mayor and governor combined.

So I said if I can find out, because I didn't understand, no one understood, where Robert Moses got his power, and explain that, and explain how he used it, then and how he shaped the city with it – then I would really be adding something. I would be talking not about the textbook definition of power, but of what urban power, the real roots of it. Where did Robert Moses get the power to build what he built? Where did he get the power to destroy what he destroyed?

But gradually, during the seven years in which I was doing the research for the book, I came to realize that I wanted to show something else, the human cost of what Robert Moses did. So many of the books on highways and land use planning, etc., that I was reading, used the phrase, usually in a very offhand way, "human cost," the "human cost of highway." But they never really went into what the "human cost" was.

And I...as I was examining Robert Moses life, and as I was watching him change as he invented and acquired power, change from an idealist and visionary, to what he became, I realized that power was like a sword, a very unusual sword, in which the hilt, as well as the blade, is as sharp as a razor. So it

cuts into the man who's wielding it and changes him, it alters him. But it also, of course, cuts into those on who it is swung.

So I came to feel, as I was doing the book, that if I wanted to show political power, truly, it would be necessary to show in effect...and show its effect on neighborhoods and communities, to show if you will, the human cost of what Robert Moses did.

You know, as you know, those of you who have read *The Power Broker*, and for any of you who haven't, the test isn't 'till Tuesday...

AUDIENCE: [LAUGHTER]

CARO: ...Robert Moses evicted for his expressways and slum clearance, projects by the most conservative estimate, and it is really too conservative, 500,000 people. That's a tremendous figure. But you also...you can talk of it in terms of communities. In *The Power Broker*, I identify 21 separate neighborhoods and communities that were destroyed. I wanted to show what that meant, that communities were destroyed. That's why I wrote in such detail about East Tremont and Sunset Park. Not to lecture about them to people, but to show people what it was that was lost, by showing what was there before. To show what was lost when a city lost a neighborhood. To show, if you will, the human cost, human value, the values of neighborhood and community.

And as I was thinking about this, I found myself thinking so often about Jane Jacobs book. "This is not the rebuilding of cities, this is the sacking of cities," she said. And she not only said it so eloquently, but she proved what she was saying, so convincingly, by the evidence of her own eyes and her own experience. So that to me, the book was pervaded with, and sort of emitted, threw off, a brilliant penetrating light, the unique brilliance and penetration of a truly original mind, because she refused to stopped looking, to stop her observations, as long as she felt there was something else to look at, to observe. And she was so honest, that you could just see the train of thought in her book. She let the facts lead to her conclusion. It wasn't statistics or questionnaires, what is a neighborhood? It was "eyes on the street," an original phrase.

And I found myself thinking so often about that book, I came to feel that community and neighborhood, was what New York was all about. That centuries from now, when historians look back on New York, you say "Well..." you say, "Rome was power. Greece was glory. But New York was home. New York was the inn gatherer. The place where all the peoples of the earth come to start over, to start better. And it is the city that always took them in. The place that took-in, that gathered-in, and made it home, all the peoples of the world. The Irish, the Jews, the Italians – and now, 168 languages spoken in queens alone – all the peoples of the world. New York is the place that gathered them in. The place in which they could have their neighborhoods again. The place that gave them all a feeling of community."

And these values of neighborhood, of community, was what Jane Jacobs had written about, had analyzed, as they had never been analyzed before. Explained as they had never been explained before. And more than analyzed, or explained, but emphasized, stressed, given the importance that they deserve, as they had never been given this importance before.

So I came to feel quite close to this person whom I had never met. She helped me know what I was trying to say. And I came to feel, on the definitive evidence, the evidence of her mind on the printed page, that she was unique, uniquely perceptive, uniquely brilliant in her insights, in her understanding of cities. That's why it meant so much to me when the publicity man came in that day with a note saying that she liked my book.

This award ceremony this evening isn't the place to do more than mention the dichotomy between the philosophy of Jane Jacobs and the philosophy of Robert Moses. And what the resolution, or the lack of resolution, a failure to resolve that dichotomy will mean for the future of New York. But, obviously, it is the fundamental dichotomy the city faces.

I wrote in *The Power Broker*, that while Robert Moe is to quote myself... While Robert Moses may have bent...

AUDIENCE: [LAUGHTER]

CARO: I'm not going to write it again. [Laughs]

While Robert Moses may have bent the democratic processes of the city to his own end to build public works, left to themselves, these processes proved unequal to the building required. The problem of constructing large scale public works in a crowded urban setting, where such works impinge on the lives of thousands of voters, is one which democracy has not yet solved. Today, 34 years after that book was published, democracy has still not solved that problem. Can the city build great public works, the great public works that a great modern city requires? And to this day, if you look back almost a century, only a single man, Robert Moses, with his over-arching vision and his savage will, only that single man has been able to build such works. Can the city build such works and still preserve and protect and create environments that will foster in the future, the atmosphere of neighborhood, of community, that Jane Jacobs understood was so vital? Well we're going to be able to see for ourselves, in this current year of huge new construction, we will be seeing rather soon, I think.

There was one other thing I should mention about Jane Jacobs, and it relates to the only time I ever met her in person, she is, of course the heroine of...the fight against Robert Mosses' Lower Manhattan Expressway, and she won. Here's how that fact relates to the one time I met her in person. We had a mutual friend named Mary Perot Nichols. Mary is sort of forgotten now, but she was the great crusading editor of the *Village Voice* back in the 60's. And she was

a friend of Jane Jacobs and mine, both. Jane had moved to Toronto, but some years after *The Power Broker* came out, Mary called and said Jane was coming to New York and would like to meet me. And, of course, I wanted very much to meet her. So Mary gave a buffet dinner. And I remember that Jane Jacobs and I sat the whole evening on the sofa talking.

Of course, what we wound up talking about was Robert Moses. He didn't like either one of us very much. We had a great talk. It turned out that we each had a question that we wanted to ask the other. Jane wanted to ask me what it was like to meet him. I wanted to ask her, what it was like to beat him.

AUDIENCE: [LAUGHTER]

CARO: I remember that the next day Mary Nichols called me up and said, "Jane had really enjoyed meeting me." And that was almost as great as the blurb. Thank you very much.

AUDIENCE: [APPLAUSE]

[END OF ROBERT CARO — 9/17/08]