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**COMMENTARY: Joan Davidson and the J.M. Kaplan Foundation**

Ross Sandler

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## [COMMENTARY: Joan Davidson and the J.M. Kaplan Foundation](#)

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Ross Sandler, Center for New York  
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If all the charitable foundations everywhere in the United States were lined up according to impact, the J.M. Kaplan Fund would be in the top ten. The J.M. Kaplan Fund was established in 1945 by Jacob M. Kaplan and was led for thirty years by J.M.'s daughter, Joan K. Davidson. Joan was a fixture in New York City's political, charitable, and civic world, and she used her ideas and enthusiasms to make New York City a better place. The story is told in a new book by Roberta Brandes Gratz, [It's A Helluva Town: Joan K. Davidson, the J.M. Kaplan Fund, and the fight for a Better New York](#) (Bold Type Books 2020).

I was among the people Joan befriended and then involved in making New York City a better place. When in the late 1970s the Morosco and Helen Hayes Theaters were scheduled to be demolished to make way for the Times Square Marriott Marquis, Joan persuaded the Natural Resources Defense Council to take the case. I was the initial lawyer in that litigation. Joan's willingness to challenge the destruction of the theaters, even in the face of the fiscal crisis, took courage and led to protective zoning for the theaters.

Joan called on me a second time when she became concerned about public toilets. Joan brought to New York City J.C. Deceaux, the company that sponsors the public toilets in Paris and other European cities. Joan asked me to get City permits to put three experimental toilets on the City's sidewalks. The experiment was a success, but the City has yet to agree to widespread placement of public toilets on the City's sidewalks.

Joan also invited my wife Alice and me to be on the now famous bus trip up the Hudson River to showcase the magnificent Hudson River mansions of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. J.M. Kaplan himself made the trip. The result was a huge renewal of interest in the estates and the preservation of Hudson Valley history.

Other stories could be told: Westbeth artist housing, South Street Seaport, the New School, Greenmarkets. It is a great history.

Joan Davidson was an inspiration as a person and as a foundation executive. The title of the book *It's A Helluva Town* reflects Joan Davidson's enthusiastic battle cry. We are all better for it.

By: **Ross Sandler** (Ross Sandler is the Director of the Center for New York City Law and a Professor at New York Law School.)