

# “Detropia”: Can Detroit be saved?

*Showing: Friday, Saturday, Sunday, October 12, 13, 14, at 7:30 PM at Webster University*



If the vague, sweeping rhetoric at both major political conventions mainly concerned economic issues, from jobs to mortgages to the Republicans’ witch-doctor insistence that cutting taxes on the super-rich will somehow benefit the rest of us, hardly anyone in either party mentioned the fiscal plight of America’s cities. There’s a good reason for that: The outlook is dire and getting worse. Two California cities (Stockton and San Bernardino) are already in bankruptcy and numerous other municipalities across the country are no longer able to meet debt obligations or provide basic services. In all probability, we’re entering an era when many cash-starved cities will require outside intervention. As filmmaker Heidi Ewing, co-director of the remarkable documentary “Detropia,” puts it, “That’s going to be the next bailout.”

“Detropia” is a haunting, beautiful and tragic portrait of contemporary Detroit, a city that exemplifies the lost American century in many ways, for good and for ill – and a city whose sad fate once looked like an aberration and now looks like a harbinger. Both major parties held their conventions in Sun Belt boomtowns that represent a particular (and, to my mind, a particularly depressing) vision of the urban future – a hollowed-out downtown “entertainment zone” supporting a service-sector economy and surrounded by vast rings of suburban development. Detroit, of course, represents America’s vanished industrial past; it was where Henry Ford built his empire and where the “arsenal of democracy” that defeated fascism was forged. In its current state of dereliction and instability, and also in its potential for rebuilding and reshaping, Detroit now represents the dangers and possibilities of the urban future.

# Film brings to life Richard Baron, Jean King and birth of McCormack Baron



## Rent strike documentary

“It started right here in this room,” Jean King said, as she reflected on the 1968-69 rent strike that changed the face of public housing around the nation.

As she sat in her office in the building that was formerly the Bluemeyer public housing site, the assistant care manager for Urban Strategies instantly traveled back to the moment nearly 45 years ago that started her personal historical narrative.

“They were standing all around the walls talking about their problems and saying that they needed somebody to lead the rent strike,” King said pointing to each corner of the room. “I said somebody has to do something, and they elected me to lead the way.”

The first item on the agenda was a meeting at Carr Square with Richard Baron, the young lawyer from the Legal Aid Society who would become a founding partner of McCormack Baron Salazar – whom King initially rejected.

King said, “Isn’t that funny? I said, ‘What does he know, he’s just a kid? A cute little blond – his hair was blond then – 20-something year old. What does he know?’” King said. “They said, ‘Ms. King, he is our lawyer.’”

Out of that meeting came a 40-plus year partnership and friendship between King and Baron that has helped change the face of urban St. Louis and other metropolitan areas across the country. It is the subject of Daniel Blake Smith’s documentary, *Envisioning Home: The Jean King and Richard Baron Story*, which will premiere to a private audience next week and be an official selection of Cinema St. Louis’ St. Louis International Film Festival next month.

“I said to Richard when we were filming the movie that you know when I met the writers they were getting ready to do my life story. I’m not ready to give my life story yet. I’m not through,” King said.

“I’ve got some more stuff to do. What I really wanted that movie to do – and it’s doing that – is for it to be Richard’s legacy. I’m proud of that. Although he thinks it’s the Jean King movie.”

The feature-length documentary film explores the relationship between King and Baron from the beginning. A charismatic, homegrown leader, Jean King meets Richard Baron, a Legal Aid lawyer turned visionary planner and developer during the St. Louis public housing tenant strike in 1968-69.

King was actually on her way out of public housing – waiting for a cab to take her to her new apartment to sign a lease. Witnessing a seemingly insignificant incident changed the course of King's life and the face of affordable housing.

She was waiting for her cab and she saw a boy that she knew – Andre Smallwood – leaving Peabody School pick up a soggy piece of bread that someone had dropped in the snow.

She marched home to speak to the boy's mother.

"I went to her and I said, 'You get food stamps, you get welfare. Why is this child hungry?' And she started to cry and she handed me a letter. Her welfare grant was \$134 and her rent had just been increased to \$165. I said, 'My God; they really do have something to talk about a rent strike.'"

She reluctantly teamed with Baron.

"I began to talk to him and I found out he knew a hell of a lot more than I did about housing law. Everybody that I needed to know, somehow Richard already knew," King said of Baron.

"Knowing nothing about housing law – knowing nothing about nothing except somebody's got to do something. I came to the meeting to see what was going on since my taxi didn't come and Andre was eating bread off the ground. That's what made me come."

Nine months after it started, the rent strike ended with the tenants' victory – thanks to Baron, King and a host of power players that were in their corner.

"In October 1969, the strike was over," King said. "And that's when the work began. Everything that McCormack Baron operates by was created in my living room – in the projects – with me and Richard dreaming."

The dreams of King and Baron went beyond simply making housing affordable.

"Richard came to me and said, 'I've come to the conclusion that the government is never going to build decent affordable housing for poor people, and I just see that one day we are going to have to do it ourselves,'" King said.

"I said to myself, 'Okay, now he's really crazy.' I didn't want to manage the stuff, and he's talking about building and owning the stuff. Through the years we started planning."

Their plans became the seeds of McCormack Baron Salazar. Since its inception in 1973, the organization has become the nation's leading for-profit developer of economically integrated urban neighborhoods with an impact that stretches over 18 states.

"Out of that rent strike, McCormack Baron was born," King said. "And when I look at where we started – this blond, blue-eyed lawyer and me wild, and crazy vicious. I have to say that this was a mission from God."

Envisioning Home: The Jean King and Richard Baron Story *will be a featured selection for the SLIFF for more information, visit [www.cinemastlouis.org](http://www.cinemastlouis.org).*