



Jane Jacobs (1916 – 2006)

By Lydia Miljan

Jane Jacobs is best known for her books about cities. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, some people have speculated about the future of cities. With learning, working, and entertainment all being conducted in virtual spaces, are there still sufficient reasons to organize ourselves in places called cities?

A consideration of the work of Jane Jacobs is as good a place as any to answer that question. Jacobs was the author of nine books, ostensibly about cities, but also about economics, diversity, social theory, and democracy, infused with personal biography. Jane was born in Scranton Pennsylvania on May 4, 1916, to Bess Robinson Butzner, a former teacher and nurse, and Dr. John Butzner, her father. Jane was the third of the Butznerns' four children.

Jane had an unremarkable childhood except that she found school and her teachers uninspiring. She managed to graduate high school, but with little recognition and few awards. Her dislike of formal education was so profound that she was grateful that she was able to complete high school unrecognized as it spared her a tedious college education. The lack of formal recognition Jane received from the education system was not because she was incapable or ill-suited to learning—just the opposite—her interests and intellect were vast and the formal system of learning could not keep up with her.

Jane's parents advised their children to find two ways of earning a living: something they wanted to do and a skill or trade they could always rely on for an income. To fulfill the latter requirement, Jane trained at a business school and learned practical skills such as typing, shorthand, and stenography. But her preference was to be a writer. She knew that to succeed at that vocation she would need to develop a writer's skills, and to do so she approached the editor of a local newspaper to give her an unpaid job, which she stayed at for a year. In 1934, at age 18, she moved to New York. This move occurred midway through the Great Depression, but Jane was undaunted and continued to focus on her goal of becoming a writer. She eventually completed two years of university by attending continuing education courses through the Columbia University Extensions Program. Because she was free to take any course that interested her, Jane excelled at a broad range of subjects including geology, anthropology, economics, zoology, chemistry, and American constitutional law. It was in a course on constitutional law that she found the material for her first book, a monograph she edited on the rejected arguments of the constitution. Jane compiled *Constitutional Chaff: Rejected Suggestions of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, with Explanatory Argument* at age 25, despite having no formal credentials. The book was published in 1941 by the well-respected Columbia University Press.

Jacobs lived in New York for 34 years, mostly in Greenwich Village, where she would write about cities and urban planning and become a reluctant community activist. She spent her remaining 38 years in Toronto where she died in 2006. She was arrested twice, once for participating in a demonstration

to save her neighbourhood and once for protesting the Vietnam War.¹ But she was also highly acclaimed. In 1998 Jacobs was invested as an Officer of the Order of Canada. She received numerous other awards and accolades but refused all invitations for honorary doctorates, dismissing them as “false credentials” (Kanigel, 2017: 374). She was married to Donald Jacobs for 51 years and was the mother of their three children. Despite coming of age at a time when women stayed home to care for their families, Jane worked her entire life, taking only short maternity leaves for each of her children. She took time out to write books, and even rented a small office to give herself the time and space to think without distraction. In her later years, she complained that she was a slow and plodding writer who often had to decline invitations to give talks or write shorter articles so that she could work on her books. Some of those books took as long as 10 years to complete as she worked out theoretical and economic arguments.

Jacobs has been variously lauded and derided. She has been called “the most influential urban thinker of all time,” a “genius of common sense,” and the “godmother of urban America” (Kanigel, 2017: 6). But her nemesis, Robert Moses, New York’s master planner, dismissed her as a mere mother. And one academic criticized her as “an amateur in the professional’s den.” She eluded political classification. A reviewer of perhaps her best-known book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, noted, “It is the only book that we know of which is quoted in context both by liberals and conservatives.”² During her life, Jacobs was once a union member who recognized the benefits of collective bargaining and thought that the “right of workers to join unions of their choice is one of our important rights” (cited in Allen, 1997: 173). She also believed that women should have equal pay. However, she found the union leadership’s “adherence to the Communist Party line” destructive for the union. That nuanced perspective might have been lost on the US State Department

1 In December of 1967, she was arrested at an anti-draft demonstration protest. In fact, Jacobs’ opposition to the Vietnam War explained her move to Toronto; she wanted to ensure that her sons would not be drafted into military service. On April 10, 1968, she was charged with riot, inciting to riot, criminal mischief, and obstructing government administration (Kanigel, 2017: 260).

2 Book Review: *Death and Life*, American City Magazine, New York, as cited in Allen (1997): 50.

when it investigated her for her beliefs during the height of McCarthyism. Her response to their questioning of her ideas was to write:

I was brought up to believe that there is no virtue in conforming meekly to the dominant opinion of the moment. I was encouraged to believe that simple conformity results in stagnation for a society, and that American progress has been largely owing to the opportunity for experimentation, the leeway given initiative, and to a gusto and a freedom for chewing over odd ideas. (cited in Allen, 1997: 169)

Even though she had many allies in her efforts to use affordable housing to reduce poverty and was a strong advocate for diversity in cities, she clashed with central planners and urban planning experts. Her lack of adherence to the ideas of a single political party or a narrow set of political beliefs came about partly through her focus on urban issues. As she put it, “what we were inventing was issue-oriented politics” (Kanigel, 2017: 228). She took care to not align herself with any one ideology.

Woven throughout her work is not the question of how to build a grand modern city—in fact, she was highly critical of planners’ visions of the “garden city” and its sterility. Instead, she was more interested in how spontaneous order leads to the growth of cities and, conversely, how central planning causes the decline of cities. For example, her 1969 book, *The Economy of Cities*, starts, “This book is an outcome of my curiosity about why some cities grow and why others stagnate and decay” (Jacobs, 1969: 3). Similarly, in *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* she observed that any system of government or economics can have stagnant regions, but what she noted was that “the difference between stagnant regions that lose population and stagnant regions where people stay put is simply that people from places like Scranton, Wales and the deserted parts of Ontario can have realistic hopes of doing better somewhere else and have the means to get there, while people in such stagnant places as Haiti, where most people stay put, lack a way of getting out or a place to go” (Jacobs, 1985: 72-73). In *Dark Age Ahead*, she asked bigger questions about culture and society: “How and why can a people so totally discard a formerly vital culture

that it becomes literally lost?" (Jacobs, 2005: 4). Despite her discussions about decline and decay, she believed that "life had the upper hand." In a letter to her publisher, Penguin, she balked at the suggestion that the title of her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* be shortened to exclude "and Life." Her response to the title change request was that this "sounds all doom and gloom and the battle lost."³

The Death and Life of Great American Cities was not her first book, nor her last, but it was the one that she is best known for and the one that had the most influence. It was the culmination of more than 20 years of work in journalism writing for various trade publications like *Architectural Forum* and for the propaganda office of the US State Department, first during the Second World War and then for the department's magazine *Amerika*, whose audience was Soviet citizens. Although her articles were diverse, many focused on urban issues, including some discussing New York's fashion districts (fur, leather, flowers, and diamonds) that she worked on while freelancing for *Vogue*. It was in her work for *Architectural Forum* that she honed her critical analysis of city planning. Although Jacobs admitted that like many others before and since, she had been seduced by exciting and ambitious architectural drawings of massive revitalization projects, once she looked beyond the artists' renditions and walked the streets of these developments, she came to realize that the most important element of these visions was missing: people.

Jacobs was a reluctant speaker, but a 10-minute talk she gave at an urban design conference at Harvard brought her to the attention of publishers and grant funders. Her talk attracted the support of Lewis Mumford, the leading architectural critic at *The New Yorker*. (Despite his early support of her, he was largely critical of *Death and Life*, saying she was "a more dubious character who has patched together out of the bits and pieces of her personal observation nothing less than a universal theory" (Kanigel, 2017: 216)). After her Harvard talk, Jacobs was courted by *Fortune Magazine* for which she expanded her ideas. The article she wrote for *Fortune* took aim at the urban planners who exalted the idea of the garden city. She described their ideas of the modern city the following way:

3 Undated draft letter to Frank Rudman, Penguin Books, as cited in Allen (1997): 59-60.

They will be spacious, parklike, and uncrowded. They will feature long green vistas. They will be stable and symmetrical and orderly. They will be clean, impressive, and monumental. They will have all the attributes of a well-kept dignified cemetery. (Kanigel, 2017: 159)

The article led to her being introduced to Chadborune Gilpatric of the Rockefeller Foundation who provided her with a grant that enabled her to take time off from the *Architectural Forum* to write *Death and Life*.

The Death and Life of Great American Cities

Death and Life has been described by some as a life-altering experience and derided by others as a quaint book written by a mother. It elicited strong reactions from friends and foes and was simultaneously credited for changing urban planning for a generation and denounced for being “unenlightened” and not “understanding the social costs of disease, poverty, and crime” (Kanigel, 2017: 213).

Death and Life leads readers to become excited about cities. Jacobs’ portrait of city life is not completely flattering. She notes the smells, the traffic, and the cacophony, but she also rejoices in the spontaneous order of cities. *Death and Life* will help readers think with a different perspective about all the cities they have lived in and visited. What exactly was Jacobs’ perspective? She described city life as a ballet. And that ballet was incomplete without sidewalks.

The importance of sidewalks

Jacobs artfully described the “peculiar nature of cities.” Much of what she observed was how integral sidewalks are to the smooth functioning of cities. Her criticism of urban planners of the time was that they did not understand how the relationship between people and the streets made for dynamic and safe cities. In her mind, the “garden cities” where people would be housed in towers and separated by green space were wholly unsuited to creating safe and dynamic spaces. To make her point she devoted three chapters in Part One of *Death and Life* on the many uses of sidewalks: safety, contact, assimilating children. In short, the larger and busier the sidewalk, the better it is for the city.

Safety

How does a sidewalk make a neighbourhood safe? Jacobs answered this question by showing how busy streets protect people from “street barbarism.” If a street is well used, she argued, it is a safe street. If, in contrast, it is deserted, then it is unsafe. Jacobs acknowledged that police are important, but explained that they do not single-handedly provide safety. She argued that the peace of a street is not kept by police; it is “kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards” (Jacobs, 1961: 32).

One way to ensure a street is safe is to allow for the “presence of strangers.” Those strangers help maintain vitality. But to get both strangers and locals to be on the street you must have “eyes on the street.” In contrast to strangers, the eyes on the street are the “natural proprietors of the street.” These are the people who look out their windows and live on the street, but also those who work on the street. For the eyes on the street concept to work effectively and spontaneously, the people doing the looking must have something interesting to look at.

The basic requisite for such surveillance is a substantial quantity of stores and other public spaces sprinkled along the sidewalks of a district; enterprises and public places that are used by evening and night must be among them especially. Stores, bars and restaurants, as the chief examples, work in several different and complex ways to abet sidewalk safety. (Jacobs, 1961: 36)

To make her point, Jacobs contrasted a street containing walk-up apartments and housing to the garden city towers. Those garden cities are how urban planners used to create public housing in the 1950s and the 1960s, colloquially known worldwide as “the projects.” Although she acknowledged that project housing included large windows and green spaces to look down on, Jacobs called those areas “dull” because there was no incentive for people to congregate in those areas. The distance between the eyes on the street and the street itself are so great that it cannot provide safety. Meanwhile, inside the building, while the corridors might be large, the elevators could be jammed and tampered with, and strangers could hide in dingy stairways. Her analysis of project housing showed that by taking people from the street and putting them into high-rises, urban planners had created the conditions for crime to flourish. In other words, the planners had inadvertently provided opportunities for bad

actors to become even more powerful because they were not kept in check by the natural, neighbourhood surveillance of the streets. Although Jacobs admitted that there was plenty wrong with existing housing in big cities, including crowding, substandard buildings, and even vermin, the solution was not to create expensive tower blocks that displaced families, closed businesses, and destroyed communities, but instead to invest in more people-oriented spaces that selectively rehabilitated old buildings and also allowed for new spaces to be built that were in scale with how people actually lived.

Contact

The documentary *Citizen Jane: Battle for the Citizen* depicts the battles between city “reformers,” such as planner Robert Moses, and Jacobs. The film shows the streets that Moses had labelled slums and earmarked for clearance. But where Moses saw people loitering with no adequate housing to go to, Jacobs saw a vibrant social life. At the centre of this social life was what she called “public characters.” Public characters are those among us who have a wide circle of acquaintances with whom they are in contact. Her examples included the grocer, the cleaner, and the music schoolteacher, who all perform valuable roles in their primary occupation but also serve as messengers of community news and information. Jacobs noted that each of these public characters is tied to private enterprise. They offer services to the city’s inhabitants and its visitors, but also provide social contact. And it is not just the public characters providing contact, but individuals occupying those same streets. Although Jacobs’ book was criticized as being just the homey observations of a mother, it was rooted in evidence, including the number of businesses and livelihoods that disappeared as a direct consequence of “urban renewal.”

In 1973, sociologist Mark Granovetter affirmed Jacobs’ observations about contact in his argument that for people to get new information and ideas, weak ties were more important than strong ties (Granovetter, 1973). This was precisely what Jacobs had observed in her analysis of the street and in discussion with sociologist Herbert Gans. As she wrote, “Overcoming residential discrimination comes hard where people have no means of keeping a civilized public life on a basically dignified public footing, and their private lives on a private footing” (Jacobs, 1961: 72).

Assimilating children

To reinforce her point that busy sidewalks are safe places, Jacobs devoted a chapter to a description of how streets also serve to assimilate children. Children playing on streets, cycling, and roller skating all help them find diverse places in which to play and learn. Her overall argument was that streets are the fabric of life that should include a diverse group of people. In particular, the assimilation of children is not the exclusive domain of women but should include both sexes. She observed, however, that while planners were predominately male, they often excluded men as part of “normal, daytime life wherever people live. In planning residential life, they aim at filling the presumed daily needs of impossibly vacuous housewives and preschool tots. They plan, in short, strictly for matriarchal societies” (Jacobs, 1961: 83).

Part Two of *Death and Life* is an examination of the conditions for city diversity; it focuses on what generates diversity. Jacobs examined these components: mixed use, small blocks, aged buildings, and concentration. She ended the section with a chapter on the myths of diversity. Part Three of the book offers Jacobs’ detailed take on the forces of decline and regeneration. She ended the book by describing a new approach to planning—one that rejects the ideas and theories of the central planners.

Economics

Jacobs’ next books continued her work on cities by tackling their relevance to the study of economics. Although not as well known or even as well regarded as *Death and Life*, Jacobs used her critical mind in her books on economics to dispel conventional wisdom and stir passions. In *The Economy of Cities* she continued to ask why some cities stagnate and decay while others grow. She questioned conventional wisdom in both economics and archeology by arguing that cities came *before* agriculture. The initial impetus for some readers will be to dismiss Jacobs as an amateur. However, her method of taking the reader along with her on her journey of questioning previously held beliefs leads many to appreciate her arguments. She begins *The Economy of Cities* by providing a fable about a city she calls New Obsidian. This city arises out of the need to trade in the area’s natural resource, obsidian, created by volcanic activity. The city is near the volcano, but far enough away from it for those who collect

obsidian to be protected. The city becomes a main trading hub for obsidian, but also a place where other things caught and gathered in the wild are traded: grains, animals, fruits, etc. Jacobs makes the case that only when the grains and seeds accumulate in the city do some become scattered about and grow. This, she argues is the beginning of agriculture—in cities, not in the countryside.

Jacobs did not claim that this theory was historic fact, but rather a parable explaining how cities create innovation for agriculture. She argued that the improvements in agriculture did not occur in the countryside, but in the cities. Industrialization, the creation of fertilizers, tractors, combines, etc. all arose out of the competition that occurs within cities. Those innovations were then transferred to the countryside and help explain the incredible improvements in food production that have characterized the 20th century. Her analysis stands the test of time as global hunger and poverty have declined despite a considerable population increase.

Although Jane Jacobs had no formal economics credentials, through her observation, reading, research, and analysis, she developed and articulated an explicit theory of economic development based on innovation. Nonetheless, she was critical of accepted economic thinking, including the prevailing view that agriculture leads to cities. Many of her ideas touched on important economic concepts such as creative destruction, economic diversity, government failure, and even the importance of innovation stemming from having a diverse group of people working together sometimes, and working in competition at other times. For Jacobs, all these forces came not from government, but from having people organized in cities.

Impact

Despite being associated with left-wing political activism, Jacobs strenuously objected to government violation of individual freedom. American city planners in the 1950s and 1960s wielded enormous power as they sought to rid cities of urban blight and slums. They could declare that certain areas were slums and insist that they be cleared of inhabitants, businesses, and communities, which were then replaced with low-income housing in towering blocks. These drastic changes came at no small cost to government and society, but as Jacobs noted, it was false economy. She stated, “The economics of city rebuilding do not

rest soundly on reasoned investment of public tax subsidies, as urban renewal theory proclaims, but also on vast, involuntary subsidies wrung out of helpless site victims” (Jacobs, 1961). In fact, just after *Death and Life* was published, Jacobs’ own neighborhood was earmarked for urban renewal and declared a slum. Thus began her most well-known contribution to community activism—her effort to prevent the West (Greenwich) Village from being destroyed.

Jacobs was also known for opposing large highway projects. Her initial foray into community activism was sparked by a plan to push a road through Washington Square Park in her neighborhood. Later, when she moved to Toronto, she became instrumental in stopping the Spadina Expressway. Jacobs was not opposed to cars—or to even highways. But she believed that highways should take people *to* the city, but not *through* the city. For evidence, she needed only to point to American cities such as Detroit where massive road works cut through entire neighborhoods and left only desolation and destruction in their wake.

Death and Life has been taught in universities and as part of the urban planning curriculum for nearly 60 years. Former Toronto mayor David Crombie used the book in his courses at Ryerson when he was a professor there and sought her advice when he became mayor. Not only did Jacobs save the West Village and Washington Square in New York, but she is also credited with saving Toronto from the ravages of large American-style urban renewal projects. Project housing has been so roundly rejected since Jacobs first drew attention to it that such housing has not survived the test of time. In city after city this type of accommodation has been demolished and replaced with low rise and mixed-use communities. In Toronto, thanks in large part to Jacobs’ efforts, neighborhoods were kept intact and welcomed mixed uses, including schools, parks, and businesses. Jacobs was also instrumental in encouraging the city to eschew rigid zoning bylaws to ensure that the mix of activity was broad and eclectic.

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