

The Many Urban Lenses of Jane Jacobs – Jacobs' Image of the City

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"The Jane Jacobs vision attracts all people of humanistic sense and instinct... Jane Jacobs won ideologically. She did not win in reality. She's lost everywhere in terms of how we build cities."

Professor Nathan Glazer, Harvard University, American Sociologist

"If you seek authenticity for authenticity's sake you are no longer authentic."

Jean-Paul Sartre, French Philosopher

"Obviously, neither radiance (sunlight), nor gardens, nor spaciousness, nor beauty can have any place in Mrs. Jacobs' picture of a great city."

Lewis Mumford, American Cultural Theorist

"This is Sesame Street; a place where people, birds, monsters all live in perfect harmony."

Phil Donahue, Guest Star on Sesame Street

Abstract: *Some of the leading ideas and themes in the discussions on the scenarios and futures in the age of global cities and rapid urban development deal with the concept of global cities, rise of the creative class and the urban crisis, the expanding network society, digital and smart cities of bits, splintering urbanisms, infinite sprawl, expanding planetary urbanization, and ultimately the triumph of the city as well as resilient, adaptable and well-tempered cities. These discourses see a plethora of structural transformations that the urban observer Jane Jacobs was unable to see or predict and that go beyond her understanding of cities; all which is ultimately bounded to specific places. The specific focus of this paper is Jane Jacobs' seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and the way she 'looks' and 'observes' urban form and city life. This essay specifically looks at some of Jane Jacobs' "urban lenses and images of the city". It goes from & beyond the specific points urban of view as well as the analysis of her famous "complexity of the urban" to & behind the narrow lens approach and deficiencies she had in not seeing the interdependency of the micro-meso-macro scales in the structure of cities & beyond.*

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Some of the leading ideas and discussions in the age of global cities under rapid urban development have and are still associated with different futures and scenarios: *the concept of global cities,¹rise of the creative class and the urban crisis,²the network society,³city of bits,⁴splintering urbanism,⁵planetary urbanization,⁶ and ultimately the triumph of the city⁷ as well as the well-tempered city⁸ and infinite suburbia.⁹ These discourses see a plethora of structural transformations that Jane Jacobs was unable to see or predict and that go beyond her understanding of cities, which is ultimately bound to specific places. New trends and emerging patterns are either in place, happening, or in the continuous phase of 'becoming'; creativity is becoming a more important part of the economy as cities hinge on creative people; they need to attract creative people's human capital, which generates growth. Therefore, cities are engines of growth and economic prosperity when they exemplify this 'creativity'. The American urban studies theorist, Richard Florida sees cities as a great source of innovation and economic growth, but also as a source of terrible tensions and traumas.¹⁰ He argues and indeed begs for the development of a new understanding of cities as complex, contradictory entities; of how they work, what they do that's good, and the problems and contradictions that they generate.*

What we are currently witnessing is a major flow of social and economic dynamics arising from the information age, in the virtual realm as well as in physical places interconnected by means of telecommunication links as well as by pedestrian circulation and mechanized transportation systems; these patterns are beyond any vision that Jacobs

could have imagined. The new network society becomes structured around networks instead of individual actors and works through a constant flow of information through technology.¹¹ This is closely connected to the ongoing miniaturization of electronics, commodification of bits, and growing domination of software over the materialized form.¹² The emphasis on the formation of cross-border dynamics, through which cities begin to form strategic transnational networks, is seen in the case of global cities; the dynamics and processes that get territorialized are global. The celebration of the city becomes an impassioned argument. Eventually, the cities will be the battlegrounds where the environmental, economic, political, and social challenges of the 21st century will be addressed and ultimately won (or lost). Jane Jacobs knew this but within a different scope and perspective than we are currently faced with; her remarkable legacy cuts across several political and ethical approaches, including ones that are contradictory.¹³ Her work has been reinterpreted by philosophers, economists, liberal scholars and scientists, as well as progressive and critical theorists.¹⁴

Over the years, Jane Jacobs has been called many things: an urban visionary, an anti-planner, an amateur economist, a urban geographer, a community activist, a feminist, an architectural critic, and a radical centrist. But she was, first and foremost, an urbanist who understood the value of cities at that time. In a 2005 article for *Metropolis* magazine, urban theorist Joel Kotkin introduced the idea of the “ephemeral city” as one that has become “playpens for the idle rich, the restless young, and the tourists.” He defined it as a “new kind of urban place, populated largely by non-families and the nomadic rich.” The ephemeral city “feeds off the wealth generated elsewhere while providing a stage where the affluent classes can expend their treasure most fashionably”¹⁵, a marked contrast to the well-functioning city Jacobs described in her seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which features Boston’s North End as a prominent example of a thriving, livable neighborhood.¹⁶ It is important to note here that this “ideal” city district – neighborhood unit, humanistic model of dwelling, and location of urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s notion of “third places” – has transformed into something quite different. The transition from Jacobs’ diversity, social mobility, and social capital to Kotkin’s monoculture of transience and wealth was primarily affected by infrastructural changes and the changes that Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin¹⁷ talked about as well as the changes that go beyond the place-based complexity of Jacobs’ cities. The transition is also influenced by urban demographic shifts, the nature of business establishments, new urban geographies, the decline of middle-class families, the changes in patterns of living, racial diversity, erosion of social capital, technological changes, etc. The most salient issue today for the neighborhood that Jacobs celebrated is the erosion of the very elements that made up neighborhood vitality: diversity, upward mobility, and social capital.¹⁸

Jacobs’ main argument is that a city, neighborhood or block cannot thrive without diversity. This includes racial and socioeconomic diversity as well as diversity of residential and commercial use, governing bodies (from local wards to state agencies), modes of transportation, public and private institutional support, and architectural style. Large populations concentrated in relatively small areas should not be considered a health or safety hazard; they are the foundation of a healthy community.¹⁹ Jacobs sees and understands cities chiefly as integrated systems whose development significantly influences community activity. She was opposed to the dominant and prevailing view of spatial urban-physical planning, which architects ‘knew best’ and was apparently good for people. Jacobs did not agree with the conviction that anonymity and alienation is prevalent in cities. Rather, she suggested that the city can and should provide diverse social life in public spaces, squares, streets, sidewalks, parks, etc., and this should be supported with appropriate planning schemes; the neighborhood is thus realized. As an activist, she fought against non-functional quarters, where many people would be crowded and squeezed into so-called sleeping settlements/communities/bedrooms with minimum common areas for social activities. There were opinions that cities were not just functional ‘life containers’ but functioned principally as a container of ‘sociability’. Jane Jacobs promoted the view of the inhabitants – of the primacy of sidewalks (or pavements) in response to the dominance of car traffic – something that pro-city urban movements, planners, urbanists, and majors would amplify in the future. The American sociologist Sharon Zukin pointed out that, according to Jacobs, city life was in essence the most ‘real’ one; although she did not use the word ‘authentic’ then, she would have used it if she were writing now. Cities are the most authentic form of human life and it was Jacobs who laid down those authentic, humane, and social design principles that most urban planners in North America cherish today. Jacobs praised the small blocks, narrow streets, small shopkeepers, individuals, and families who make up the social bonds of city life.²⁰

For Jacobs, the wealth and prosperity of the city (its well-being and the sociability of all its citizens) is located in the varying dynamics of the physical and social exchange of neighborhoods; she strongly advocates the idea that a certain proportion of local residents must be present in the public areas of a city, if that district is to be able to function and develop. Jacobs' ideas were popularized almost 60 years ago and are currently highly valuable in the struggle over public space, heritage, and the inclusion of residents in the process of creating and renewing urban districts. Given this, we might ask, what is her core urban idea? It seems that two central principles emerge from the free-flowing 'observational urbanism' she uses in her seminal text of *Death and Life*.²¹ First, the essential component parts of cities are their streets. Streets are not a city's skeleton or its veins but a complex system, its urban neurology, and its accumulated intelligence.²² Second, urban diversity and density reinforce each other in a virtuous circle. Her formula is simple: with more people on the block, there is a higher demand for more kinds of shops and social organizations, clubs, bakeries, restaurants, cafes, and barbers, with more and different kinds of amenities, and more people gathering there to seek them out. The American Project for Public Spaces (PPS) organization later adopted it in the principles of their Power of 10+ formulation – and its concept that places thrive when people have a range of ten or more reasons to go to them. You can't have density without producing diversity, and if you have diversity, things get dense.²³ These two principles make it clear that any move away from the street (the quintessential American public space realm) – such as a shopping center, car park, or enclosed plaza – is destructive to a city's urban and social health system. Another point is less a principle and more an encoded ruling: that cities should be free from vehicles, the car being seen as a menace to urban and social habitats.²⁴



Jane Jacobs speaks at an event organized in opposition to the proposed construction of New York University's Elmer Holmes Bobst Library in New York City, June 20, 1966. Photo courtesy of Fred W. Mc Darrah/Getty Images.

As the economist Sandy Ikeda points out, the key for Jacobs is that each neighborhood or city district should have sufficiently diverse attractions at different times of the day – what is sometimes today called “mixed uses” (a term renewed and popularized by New Urbanists) – so that many different types of people are present at different times in pursuit of their various activities. The people who use the schools, places of worship, stores, offices, residences, workshops, theatres and restaurants located in the same vicinity help to make it interesting and attract still more people, who encourage still more diverse uses. When it is lively enough, an area becomes safe and feels safe. This, as Jacobs argued, is a bedrock attribute of any successful city. And all this is done on its own.²⁵ At the end of her life, she

witnessed, on one hand, an overuse or misuse (often a misinterpretation) of her ideas and principles in the New Urbanism planning and design approach that was based on neo traditional neighborhood development, transit-oriented approaches, and the regeneration of human-based city planning ideals. On the other hand, she witnessed what she called the “over success” of her pro-neighborhood policies, which often resulted in gentrification. Over success, she argued, stemmed from undersupply. If the suburbs (which were not cities by definition, implementation, or use really) did not keep sucking potential residents out of cities, more neighborhoods would blossom into desirable places to live. Another misuse of Jacobs’ ideas is something we see in the entire array of principles and approaches to create happy, feel-good cities based on a humane and habitable cityscape; a place that gives people comfort, where people can feel that they belong and are at home, but also a place of exclusion in many ways at times; the worst simulacrum of urbanism one can imagine. These so-called happy, feel-good, urban oases of a post-Disneyesque future, driven by place making principles of generic urbanity, would probably be among Jacobs’ biggest concerns if she were still alive today. As the urban planning theorist, Jill Grant observes,²⁶ many of Jacobs’ ideas seem implicit in the thinking and prescriptions of New Urbanists and end up in their final designs. The funny thing is that New Urbanism primarily works at the neighborhood scale that Jacobs was so highly critical of. As Jacobs wrote, “Neighborhoods built up all at once change little physically over the years as a rule.” They cannot update or repair themselves and are effectively ‘dead’ from birth.²⁷ As with Jacobs, New Urbanists advocate and accept that developing a mix of uses, short blocks, and continuous networks can foster lively streets; that integrating parks, squares, and public buildings with the street fabric enhances the public realm; and that emphasizing the identity of districts helps to connect people to the place.²⁸ New Urbanism practitioners embraced Jacobs’s pro-city fully, anti-suburb sentiments with zeal and a determination to eradicate the misery contemporary planning and urbanism were causing²⁹. Yet, Jacobs saw the tangible outcomes of her vision as a betrayal: ‘They [New Urbanists] only create what they say they hate’ she is quoted to have said³⁰. The fact of the matter is, and this does rest on high speculation, Jacobs was probably discomfited by the fact that her ideas, plainly laid out in her book through key elements: *Density, Diversity, Design and Destination*, when implemented were structured into simple rules and codes producing environments that were branded as New Urbanism. Her disappointment could also have related to the fact that the ideas she laid out were not that complex at all and that through New Urbanism principles and their implementation they simply had to look as they did; therefore, the disappointment and regret over New Urbanism. We will never know.

In the first biography of Jacobs, Alice Sparberg Alexiou argues that one of the rather serious shortcomings in Jacobs’s otherwise brilliant discourse on cities (in *Death and Life*) is her failure to include any meaningful discussion of race.³¹ Margaret Crawford, the UC Berkeley professor of architecture and urbanism, often brings forward the important issue of race and poverty in relation to Jacobs in her various talks on public realm and urbanism. And this omission in Jacobs’ work remains problematic, in the sense of its failure to include race as an important element of urbanism – what the London School of Economics sociologist Fran Tonkiss characterizes as the real “social life of urban form”.³² Jacobs was an outspoken advocate of racial equality, but her primary audiences were white Americans and her discourse was therefore very much dependent on that.³³ This was a difficult issue to tackle; nonetheless, it was essential, considering that *Death and Life* is now seen as one of the great treatises and manifestos of architecture, planning and urbanism. The hugely influential architect and urban theorist Rem Koolhaas declares that hardly any theoretical descriptions of the city have been presented by architects since Jacobs’ *Death and Life* (1961), Robert Venturi’s *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), and his own *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (1978), which describes how a city performs and how it should perform.³⁴ In her book *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (2009), Zukin directs criticism at Jacobs for her representation of two urban quarters – New York’s West Village and Boston’s North End – as idealized visions of the future for American (and all other) cities. Zukin posits that Jacobs focused too much on the built character of the street and did not give sufficient attention to the sociological factors affecting cities. Jacobs’ overly romanticized notions of the city and neighborhoods helped attract people back to the city but, in the process, transformed them into “idealized urban play grounds”. A misinterpretation of Jacobs’ message has even been used by developers and their political allies to the point where her ideas have been deployed as marketing tools. As Zukin astutely observes, despite Jacobs’ intentions, her vision of ideal city life has shaped two important tools that help developers achieve their goals: the politicians’ growth theory and media representations of cultural consumption in cities.³⁵ Her

analysis of the mechanics of street life and of the ways in which people use buildings, streets and vacant spaces in such areas is eye-opening. The principles of neighborhood planning that derive from her observations are far more closely attuned to how people actually live than those of orthodox city planning.³⁶ Another problem associated with Jacobs' lack of deeper understanding of cities and neighborhoods is closely connected with the understanding of culture, ethnicity and justice (issues of race and conflict in public space) in relation to the built environment, particularly the public realm that bonds the urban fabric of cities.³⁷ These issues are well understood and brilliantly discussed by authors and researchers such as Setha Low and Ash Amin, who see the need for socially collective and just public spaces as an absolute necessity for cities to thrive and be inclusive and livable.

The celebration of people-centered public spaces, neighborhoods and cities is at the heart of Jacobs' urbanism; but which people do we mean? Who is doing the celebrating? And what are these spaces really for? Race, equality, ethnicity, justice, poverty, equity and diversity were incredibly difficult terms to define during those times, and they were difficult for Jacobs to handle in the everyday urban discourse. However, places of happiness and relaxation, and places for people to enjoy and thrive in were the hallmark tenets of that era's racial liberals, whereby the celebration of people's similarities was a much easier task – and certainly cozier and safer than a discussion of racism and the differences and inequalities among people. That was simply not Jacobs' focus.

Sidewalks were the essence, the primary public spaces of the city, where Jacobs sees the celebration of 'publicness' and authentic urbanity as the "intricate street ballet outside of her home in Greenwich Village". Here one can see parallels with the New Urbanism movement which held the same view, although the movement did manage to produce, in spite of all the hurdles, the most important American social housing revitalization initiative of all time in the form of the US housing department's HOPE VI program (with Choice Neighborhoods soon to follow). Omissions and exclusions embedded in Jacobs' urban ideas (and idealism) were understood neither then nor now, as the majority of city planners, urbanism advocates, academics and professionals only see the glorification of her work and blind adaptations of it, ignoring the reality of American and other multicultural and diverse places and cities around the world. The daily life of a city and the evolution of its fabric are among the most complex issues about cities in general. The "perfect urban neighborhoods" Jacobs identified can therefore at times be seen as a radically disruptive homogenous community, notwithstanding diversity and urban social mix. Jacobs did address the issues of affordability and displacement in her vision of the city, although one finds only fragments of this in obscure places, beyond the realm of her major works. So the ideal of the urban village (a term associated with the sociologist, Herbert Gans and later with the urban planner, David Sucher, and HRH The Prince of Wales) that Jane Jacobs advocates is in danger of becoming a 'gentrification' ideal and can be used as a lever of power to displace long-time residents. But Jacobs herself was not someone who attacked state power or the power of capitalists; she instead went after the planners as she was a communitarian spirit in essence, a free spirit against state control.

Looking through the contemporary lenses of ever-transforming cities and changing landscapes but still having in mind the multilayered urbanism, culture, history, and timeless principles of built environments for people, Jacobs' ideas now seem rooted in the past and outdated in many ways. In trying to understand how cities work, she sometimes could not see the forest for the trees. Despite her deep and natural dialectics and thinking about systems, Jacobs had trouble seeing the bigger picture and structural complexity of the macro-meso-micro foundation of urbanity – such as the city's infrastructure development, the problems of scale, the green areas, race and ethnicity, the booming population, the ever-changing nature and fabric of cities, and the economy. These complexities are part of city building. Jacobs' greatest adversary, Robert Moses, or as the Jacobians see him, the "evil planner of New York", had to deal with all of those complexities in parallel.³⁸ The rivalry between Jacobs and Moses, a struggle for the soul of a city versus the body of a city, is one of the most dramatic and consequential rivalries in modern American urban history. Roger Starr, who was once the city's housing commissioner, was also in conflict with Jacobs. In his view, there was a contrast between what one can actually do and what would best be done in an ideal world. In the political and economic realities of that time, if you have many poor people who need housing, what could be done was to build public housing. According to Jacobs, doing so was disastrous, but she did not really offer a viable and realistic alternative. Jacobs and Moses were symbols of two divergent forms and forces of urban modernism. During his lifetime, Robert Moses was known as a master builder and a person who could get things done; he did create the dynamic infrastructure that helped New York boom. At the same time, he initiated some of

the largest wipeouts of communities in the surrounding area, which had catastrophic consequences; nonetheless, the city center is what it is because of the Moses vision.³⁹ Jacobs is justifiably renowned for fighting to preserve the West Village community. Her achievements in New York, however, were primarily defensive victories, and not easily compared with Moses' massive public works or even the more human-scale kinds of community improvements she longed for.⁴⁰

The real urban balance can be achieved via a combination of the Jacobian–Moses vision for the city because neither can work alone. Jacobs' vision was overly focused on aesthetics, small streets, and varied sizes of buildings, as in micro-urbanism, which includes small plots and streets that make up a neighborhood; it therefore tends to omit the economic component (critique), as she did. The need to protect cities from gentrification and to ensure that they cater to all its residents, particularly low-income communities, was and always will be among the prime goals of any urbanist; however, sometimes (and often today) those idealized Jacobian neighborhood schemes can become actively hostile toward low-income neighborhoods and real integration. Jacobs did study the economy of cities and advocated for diversity, the granular structure of social movements, housing typologies, plot urbanisms and tenures, and she wrote about it in her later works; she simply did not unpack urban complexity in an effective manner, only going halfway. Jacobs suggested that "just and diverse streets" reflected the functioning of the city as "a problem of organized complexity", but in that process, she forgot the organized and founding complexity of the city as a living machine, not just as an aesthetic exhibit. With or without Moses, Jacobs' romanticized social conditions were already becoming obsolete when she wrote about them in the 1960s (the force of money and state power, large-scale projects, hyper-gentrification and the commodification of the public realm.⁴¹ Gans astutely summarized the crux of the matter in Jacobs' urban lens when he addressed the fallacy of physical determinism (something David Harvey addresses in the "Communitarian Trap" in relation to New Urbanists, but in a much smaller and shallower manner than Gans).⁴² According to Gans, Jacobs made claims about social cohesion based on architecture, for which she had no evidence. She also refused to acknowledge that the pathologies of American cities in the 1960s were mostly due to issues of racism, not solely urbanism and construction.⁴³ Her argument is built on three fundamental claims: (1) people desire diversity; (2) diversity is ultimately what makes cities live and the lack of it makes them die; and (3) buildings and streets as well as the planning principles on which they are based shape human behavior.⁴⁴ The first two of these claims were grounded in her observation studies and fact-gathering in the places where she lived and observed, but they still lack the facts and empirical data required for them to be fully accepted. In contrast, the third claim is in the realm of physical fallacy, physical determinism (something modernists were famous for and later new urbanists), and leads her to ignore the social, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to vitality or dullness. It also blinds her to the less visible kinds of neighborhood vitality and the true causes of the city's problems.⁴⁵ Her analysis in the "Forces of Decline and Regeneration" section of *Death and Life* is accurate when it talks about the self-destruction of diversity; the problem is that self-destruction of diversity, which is similar to the "gentrification" that we know of today, is not exactly the same thing. Self-destruction of diversity is a concept that is much more over-arching than gentrification, because it also includes the self-destruction of diversity in business districts (and not just by chain stores and office buildings). Nobody is denying that Jacobs often took the long view of urban issues, and "gentrification" (using today's term) was no exception.⁴⁶ One of her main points about the self-destruction of diversity was that the best way of preventing the problems generated by self-destruction is to create even more healthy urban neighborhoods that would be capable of being gentrified (today's term again) in their turn, so that pressure was taken off of those relatively few existing urban neighborhoods that experienced the self-destruction of diversity (gentrification).⁴⁷ Claims similar to these have also been made by New Urbanist proponents, particularly the American architect and urban planner Andres Duany.

Jacobs' work was, as noted previously, not distinctly feminist, but in the context of a masculinist urban studies tradition, the adoption of ideas and observations from *Death and Life* and its perspective on the actual lives of women, children and the elderly may create room for a gendered view on re-urbanization and gendered urban processes such as gentrification.⁴⁸ In the late 1960s, discussions about the problem of cities (urban crisis) often centered on issues relating to the black underclass, making much of crime and riots. A deeper understanding of the role of a place within the spatial configuration of meso-macro cities and regions in fostering social mobility with

social capital was beyond Jacobs. As previously mentioned, she lacked a deeper economic understanding of micro-urbanism and analysis of race and justice. Jacobs was not oblivious to race, but specifically chose to focus on other issues because for her, race was obscuring the real problems of cities. According to her, cities decline, stagnate, and grow even without racial problems, and in the final analysis this indicates a problem both in her thinking and her writing.



1963: American writer Jane Jacobs and architect Philip Johnson stand with picketing crowds outside Penn Station to protest the building's demolition, New York City. Photo courtesy of by Walter Daran/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Two names best capture what the thinking public has in mind when the term “city planner” is mentioned. One is Lewis Mumford and the other is, of course, Jane Jacobs herself. Mumford thought of himself as a planner – he was after all greatly influenced by the Scottish theorist Patrick Geddes, an early figure in the development of contemporary city and regional planning. Mumford was not a professional planner – professional planning barely existed at the beginning of his career in the 1920s.⁴⁹ And while he wrote influential books on literature and technology as well as on cities, he was best known as an architectural critic, particularly for *The New Yorker*. Mumford’s attack on *Death and Life* in that magazine could do nothing to save the alliance between the social agenda and modernism at that time. Jacobs, as we know, was no planner, and she had as low an opinion of planners as did her great antagonist, Moses.⁵⁰ To the end, she remained skeptical of urban planners, even the so-called New Urbanists, who adopted some of her design principles but not her sensitivity to what makes the healthiest communities the way they are.⁵¹ Jacobs believed that the essence of urban form was “organized complexity.” *Death and Life* attacks most attempts to envision new urban forms, such as the US City Beautiful Movement, Englishman Ebenezer Howard’s “garden city” idea, Le Corbusier’s “radiant city”, and American experiments like Sunnyside Gardens on Long Island, Radburn in New Jersey, and Chatham Village in Pittsburgh. In contrast, although Mumford was a critic of many attempts to beautify cities, he believed that order was preferable to disorder and beauty to ugliness. He took particular umbrage at Jacobs’ treatment of Howard’s garden city vision. Jacobs saw the garden city as the precursor of suburban sprawl. Mumford opposed neat and clean systems that did not account for life’s irrationalities and dilemmas. He favored ideals, but opposed utopianism. The critical difference between Mumford and Jacobs lay in the question of walking in the city. For Jacobs, the existing street grids were the focus. She wanted shorter blocks and a greater mix of amenities to enhance pedestrian activity. Mumford was a proponent of the

superblock– rebuilding cities on the basis of exclusive pedestrian areas separated from traffic. The dispute came to a head in Mumford's *New Yorker* review which was headlined "Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies", which portrayed her as an amateurish housewife.⁵² Robert Fishman, one of the leading contemporary American urban historians, attributed this critical offensive to Mumford's observation that Jacobs' blunt and irreverent treatment of the regionalist tradition expressed some of his own growing self-doubts.⁵³ Just a year later, Mumford's view had already become more sympathetic and he cited Jacobs' analysis of the destructive effects of "cataclysmic finance".⁵⁴ She certainly had a profound influence on city planning and community activism, not only in the US but also in Canada, to where she later emigrated. Even in Canada, she battled with powerful forces that pushed for highways over public transit and large-scale projects over people-oriented neighborhoods. As Christopher Klemek observes, Jacobs taught us to dislike large-scale redevelopments. But her own frustrations and her inability to achieve real underlying goals, despite some stunning defensive upsets, can be seen as emblematic of a broader paralysis in urban planning and governance.⁵⁵

In many ways, Jacobs was part of the Kuhnian paradigm shift, one applied to social sciences. Her book's great strength lay in her ability to analyze the interplay and intricacy between structure and society at the block level. Her understanding of the dynamics of the city (at the micro level) came from the inferences she made as she walked around it, observing it closely. As discussed previously, her lack of academic training was problematic when it came to the methods of social science and research in general, but it was probably also a source of strength because her understanding of the street was not distorted by preconceived ideas or the prevailing social scientific methods of the time.

The American economist Edward Glaeser rightly points out that the built legacy of Moses was by no means all bad. His parks and pools added value to the city and were a great blessing to New Yorkers in the years before air conditioning. The transportation infrastructure of his roads and bridges were necessary, enabling millions of Americans to save hours, months, and years through faster journey times.⁵⁶ Cities are nothing without their infrastructure, and while Jacobs was right that cities are built for people, they are also built around transportation systems. Jacobs underestimated the true value of new construction, of building up. Today we know that successful, thriving cities need both the human interactions of Jacobs and the enabling infrastructure of Moses.⁵⁷



At city hall with architect Barton Myers, one-time TIFF honcho Wayne Clarkson, musician Phil Nimmons, actor Eric Peterson, author Margaret Atwood and artist Michael Snow. They were the recipients of the first Toronto Arts Awards; Jacobs earned a lifetime achievement trophy. Image Courtesy of Ron Bull/Toronto Star via Getty Images.

Jacobs' visionary perspective is evident in the suggestion that, in the 1960s, it was via the street that a society's life and plurality could be better investigated. A street is a place of passage involving circulation, street corners, conversations, violence, understanding, eroticism and diversity; a place of sociability where civilization is constructed. It is in the street space that contemporary social relations effectively happen.⁵⁸ In treating sociology as the study of human relationships and behavior, the American sociologist Nathan Glazer did not feel restricted to the methods and theories of the discipline, preferring to forge his own. In an autobiographical essay⁵⁹, he wrote: "As a sociologist I have been more interested in specific issues than in the discipline of sociology itself, more in empirical subject matter than in theory, more in substance than in methodology." Glazer had at least partially rejected the sociological method in favor of a more impressionistic portrait, or cultural study, based on a range of sources.⁶⁰ Jacobs continued to champion empirical knowledge using observation as her main method of collecting real-life data, which fed her understanding of planning, building, traffic, etc. Her inductive reasoning was the obvious driving force of her vision, and it had richness and validity, but her reasoning should by no means be equated with or mistakenly taken for (as some authors would want us to believe) the conceptualization and methodology contained in the 1967 work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*⁶¹ by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. Jacobs had in fact developed, through direct observation rather than utopian theory, a highly personal way of thinking about cities and "researching" them. Decades later, New Urbanists would try to replicate her approach of verifying almost everything with their own eyes. If this was developed into a systematic approach, a research strategy, we could easily call it "observational urbanism". Unfortunately, it is still in the stage of becoming, but it remains a powerful quasi-scientific method and stands in direct opposition to academic theorists who put their trust in embedded urban planning and design ideas, approaches, and theories as well as the intellectual fashions of postmodern and post structuralism, which dominate the field of fundamental sciences today, more than their own field observations and experiences. Jacobs not only saw things differently with her own eyes, but she habitually observed, measured, and walked the city. She took nothing for granted and internalized everything around her. If a theory did not fit with her observation, she trusted her senses. In this regard, the American urbanist William H. Whyte and Jacobs were of a similar mindset. So, what is to be made of observational urbanism then, if anything at all, in this case? The "grounded theory" involves a systematic generation of theory from data, an inductive methodology and a process that is systematically executed.⁶² Grounded theory has the capability to produce theory from data, theories that are empirically grounded in the data from which they arise.⁶³ The important thing to remember is that this is not some kind of naïve inductivism but rather a process of sensitive deduction based on carefully developed ideas. This conceptual induction fosters even more deduction. According to Glaser and Strauss, the grounded theory inductively emerges from its data source in accordance with the method of constant comparison, which includes an amalgam of systematic coding, data analysis, and theoretical sampling procedures. These procedures enable the researcher to interpret most of the diverse patterning in the data by developing theoretical ideas at a higher level of abstraction than the initial data descriptions.⁶⁴ It is a highly systematic approach, which takes the view that all things are integrated, all actions are integrated with other actions, that nothing is mono-variable, that everything is in motion, and that patterns are systematically recurring over and over again.⁶⁵ This approach, certainly then and even today, is a leading method of social science research out there. Much can be learned from close observation of the rich dynamics of communities and the relationships between people. As far as we know, Jacobs never encountered or came into contact with the grounded theory work of Glaser and Strauss, nor did she apply any of their principles or methods. Perhaps due in part to her acknowledged disdain for academia, her empirical methods and observations were never granted much legitimacy in that intellectual realm. Nor did she expect readers to interpret her amateur, inductively generated ideas as in any way founded on academic credentials. She had every opportunity to consult with the leading sociologists, geographers and environmental psychologists of the day but of course she never did. A similar disconnection can be seen with regard to case studies, where data (as in the case of grounded theory) can be acquired from multiple sources, with observations (looking and listening) being just two methods along with reports, documents, theoretical literature, quantitative sources/statistics, interviews, surveys, questionnaires and ethnological approaches, etc.⁶⁶ To gain better, more valid and reliable results and more truthful and stable data, more sources are recommended.⁶⁷ For example, the work of social scientist Robert Yin in his article, "The Case Study as a Serious Research Strategy" (1981), never entered her realm of interest in her later days, where one expected a certain maturity in her

perception toward academia and real social science research (not just the interest she had in complexity theory, one that has never really gained proper traction and acceptance in built environment disciplines, except for a few eccentric architects and researchers within urban science, spatial analysis and data – space syntax).

That notwithstanding, the seminal publications of Jacobs (1961),⁶⁸ Christopher Alexander (1977),⁶⁹ and William Whyte (1980)⁷⁰ cannot be construed as empirical science (for example, in the vein of Glaser and Strauss) but are based on detailed observations of cities, neighborhoods, districts, and people. Such “research” as they contain can be fitted into urban design, an applied social science where knowledge is and must be much broader, spanning both natural and social sciences as well as the arts and humanities. As the Australian academics Kim Dovey and Elek Pafka observe, better metrics than those used by Jacobs need to be developed for understanding density and distinguishing between building and population densities, housing and job densities, and internal versus street life densities, etc.⁷¹ There simply are no typical or universal cities that one might study.⁷² Interestingly, these chief protagonists of “observational urbanism” are not sociologists, but, as Nathan Glazer points out, they do have “sociological imagination”; so they cannot be discarded. Jacobs had developed a highly personal way of thinking about and seeing cities, and she explained her ideas and the rationale behind them so effectively that they have since been either adopted or rejected by generations of planners. Research in applied social sciences such as urban planning and urban design is the systematic, rigorous investigation of a situation, problem, or urban phenomenon geared to generate new knowledge or validate existing knowledge within the field. However, another parallel concern in this field has to do with the discovery and definition of problems, rather than with matters of research design, by which the hypotheses derived from these problems may be put to the test. In that spirit, scientific research can be seen as an art, not a science.

William Hollingsworth “Holly” Whyte was an American urbanist, organizational analyst, and people-watcher, not so very different to Jacobs, who was also an urbanist, a journalist, an author, and an activist. Both were observational urbanists. White was in many ways Jacobs’ mentor, and both celebrated the small-scale, the diverse and the mixed, thus they were antagonists of large-scale planning in terms both of housing, commercial or other types of redevelopment. Admittedly their views sprang from the quarters of Greenwich Village and Midtown Manhattan, but for them large-scale development represented the death of the city that they knew and loved: the destruction of the essential ingredient that was diversity. They favored retaining the old infrastructure and voiced its advantages in creating a diverse social environment (for example, Boston’s North End, which was an area that Gans had introduced to Jacobs). But as Nathan Glazer observed in a discussion just before he passed away, based on what was happening in the urban realm of cities – like the redevelopment of Manhattan’s west side, the Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, or the hyper-development of Shanghai and Beijing, coupled with New Delhi and Mumbai – he felt and feared that the true prophet of the future city would not turn out to be Ebenezer Howard or Jane Jacobs (or Holly White for that matter) but rather Le Corbusier.⁷³ In many ways he was proven right.

As for high-rise buildings, Jacobs was either ambivalent about them, or benignly disposed. She does not address them in her work, so it is hard to say what she might have made of modern cities with vast numbers of sky-scraper housing blocks, their density out of all proportion. As Glazer observes, high-rises are seen as a political or economic necessity, in Jacobs’ time and even more so now, and their reality overwhelms what you might call a more humane vision, which other political and economic circumstances once made possible. The realities of our time appear to produce another default that is highly unappealing, and we may not know how to deal with it.⁷⁴

One of the difficulties in confronting social sciences (or applied social sciences such as urban planning, urban design, and architecture) arises from the fact that human beings frequently modify their habitual modes of social behavior as a consequence of acquiring new knowledge about the events in which they participate or the society of which they are members. Another difficulty concerns the validity of conclusions reached in social inquiry.⁷⁵ A particular problem is located in the tension between individuals and society. The term “human beings” could be accounted as a specific one because it is predicated on individual human beings; but it could also be designated as a collective term on the grounds that it involves reference to forms of activity characterized by the behavior of groups of human individuals. However, there are no firm principles for deciding between these alternatives or much prospect of developing these rules.⁷⁶ An important aspect that one has to keep in mind is the problem confronted by social scientists when they import their own values into the analysis of social phenomena, the so-called “value

judgment". We observe something when we become aware of it. We acknowledge what we observe, as in "This is so." We judge when we form an opinion, as in "I think this about that." Observation in the urban arena is a neutral act of taking in information upon which we base our judgments. Such judgment involves rendering an opinion on the relative value or merit of what is being observed. Jacobs gathered and chose facts and empirical information in an unsystematic way that supported her preconceived theoretical standpoints or notions about the city that did not consider random statistical selection or the explicit articulation of sampling methods.⁷⁷ Even though this might seem to be case study research, it is not. If she subconsciously followed the logic of scientific discovery and case study research, as some authors naively believe she did,⁷⁸ or even used inductive qualitative approaches of grounded theory based on sensitive deduction, the results of her studies are based on her belief that the overpowering strengths of unstructured observation and the validity of the data so generated will simply be sufficient – and the final proof of the grand conclusions she draws.

Urban historian Peter Laurence points to the fact that Jacobs endorsed and welcomed complexity science, which offered her a way to understand not only the intricacy and interconnectedness of a city's plans and purposes but also the interwoven nature of life itself, as suggested by the word's etymology.⁷⁹ This does not condone the fact that Jacobs never performed organized research and inductive studies in the manner of Glaser and Strauss, or that she never really followed any kind of real social science case study methodology. Her lack of education in planning, urban design, architecture, environmental psychology, aesthetics, urban sociology and human geography etc., or any other built environment discipline is highly problematic and one of the reasons for the lack of any formal research methods in her work. Moreover, she did not like or admire academics or professional planners, indeed she tended to despise them, as was clearly indicated by the complete absence of references or any real bibliography in her work, which may be seen as extremely pretentious and even shocking. Her application of complexity science – and its orthodox proponents even today suggest that this is the only way to study and understand cities (and that she went deeper than any other urban researcher before her and even after her) – did not bring her the full picture of cities she hoped for. She would not be forced to go beyond the aesthetic zed "place-centric" obsessions of her non-scientific observations, yet *Death and Life* was presented as a manifesto and a new universal theory of cities. Her strong belief in the beauty of urban smallness and the sanctity of the so-called human scale would be both her blessing and her curse.

The poet Charles Baudelaire's aesthetic vision of the modern city was framed around the debonair figure of the *flâneur* (Jacobs was certainly one of those, as were William H Whyte, Alan Jacobs, Christopher Alexander, Georges Perec, Charles Wolfe, Elke Krasny, Suzanne de Lavaland other observational urbanists) – whose role as an observer of, and commentator on, life in the streets and arcades of Paris was presented as the counterpoint of modern man.⁸⁰ The *flâneur* was not only the dweller of the emerging modern metropolis but also its creation.⁸¹ The *flâneur* simultaneously embodied a way of occupying public space and relating to it in a manner that was possible only in the new urban environment, while also being defined in terms of this relationship to space. In addition to providing an aesthetic rendering of the modern world, Baudelaire's vision was therefore, at its core, an urban one which celebrated the spectacle, energy, creativity and cultures of the "street".⁸² Jacobs' ethnography of everyday life and urbanity provided us with a picture, scope, and scale of urban life, inviting us to leave our workplaces to mingle in the social relations that give life to a city. Jacobs avoids a broader scale (her critique of the modernists) and ends up concentrating on the other extreme – the scale of the city block (as she did in the North End in Boston and Greenwich Village in New York).⁸³ Michel de Certeau, the cultural theorist, provided a way of analyzing how, using city space in a myriad of idiosyncratic ways, people subvert the meanings and values of the powerful, including resisting the totalizing notions of the urban. Through the act of walking, cartographic space is transformed into a place of meaning and memory. Thus, multiple places defined through use, imagination, and a range of cultural practices will exist within a single urban landscape.⁸⁴ Jacobs was not so much rigorous as intuitive in her observational approach, but she did look with a keen, clear and imaginative eye and she did have a natural (grounded) insight into the built environment around her.⁸⁵ The interesting thing, which distinguishes Jacobs from, for example, the most prominent New Urbanist, Andres Duany, or one of the latest "observational urbanists", Charles Wolfe, is the fact that even with her lucid prose and her simple allusion to urban immersion and participation, *Death and Life* contains no illustration that would give us a sense of the city's visual aspects – no movement, snapshots, living diaries, sketches. These are some of the most fundamental elements of sensing and decoding the city for an observational urbanist⁸⁶, especially one that advocated details as the crucial elements of the city.

That being said, there has clearly been an overemphasis and focus on Jacobs and her work, while people like the sociologists Louis Wirth and Lewis Mumford have been rather unfairly overshadowed. These scholars and great writers had a great deal to say. In particular, they were able to describe cities based on a scholarly focus on the systematic theory of city building and the complexity of the urban realm. They created a dialogue about everyday city life that was fundamentally different than before; this included straightforward issues such as how cities affect human life, life choices, and everyday conduct. Wirth believed that there were three key characteristics of cities: a large population, social heterogeneity, and population density – and all three have fundamental consequences for social life in the city.⁸⁷ Wirth ordered us to avoid identifying urbanism as the way of life that defines a city. In contrast, Mumford, in addition to stressing the importance of cities, believed that cities evolved as a function of their relationship to nature and their spiritual values, followed by their physical design and economic functions in the community. He also portrayed the city as a kind of theatre, with the social drama of the community being the “play”⁸⁸, something Richard Sennett would do later. Wirth argued that explaining the nature of urban life and accounting for the differences between cities of various sizes and types was possible using his three key defining characteristics. In contrast, Jacobs saw a living city as a problem of “organized complexity,” which involves “dealing simultaneously with a sizeable number of factors which are interrelated into an organic whole.”⁸⁹ That notwithstanding, Mumford’s book, *The Urban Prospect* (1968), was a tour de force collection of essays on the nature and the city, at the same intellectual level of Glazer’s *From a Cause to a Style* (2007), written about 40 years later; both works went much deeper into the real complexity of cities than Jacobs could ever imagined to do.

Jacobs was not rather known for participating in discussions within the professions of architecture, urban planning and design; nor did she attend relevant conferences (except for one in Harvard in 1956), contribute to the zeitgeist topics and projects of the day, or publish in professional journals.⁹⁰ In other words, she was not part of the contemporary language and discourse; instead, she had her own. Her emphasis lay elsewhere. Jacobs’ words and images created a language that embodies our longing for a good place to live. Over time, this language may convince us that the good life is dependent on the building of more cultural attractions that can draw tourists to the city, opening more cafés and shops, and restoring old buildings to their former elegance. These images of the good life camouflage a fundamental conflict. Politicians are dependent on both investment and construction by private construction companies as well as the backing of voters; they constantly seek a balance between pledging more cheap housing that helps to preserve the local community and expressing their support for remediation projects that are likely to change that same local community. Originating in mid-20th century American discourse, the corporate city and the urban village are, in one way or another, the pre-eminent socio-spatial constructs of global urbanism today.⁹¹ Jacobs simply did not want to submit to this reality; she had some successes and she often won the ideological battle. But her ideological triumphs were not matched by a successful creation of the more positive urban environment she had in mind. Indeed, Klemek concludes that Jacobs’ impact was to contribute to a broader paralysis in urban planning and governance – there were no more public megaprojects that engendered mass displacement but there was also no defense against incremental gentrification pressures or even large-scale private actors. But Klemek also suggests that Jacobs’ reputation as an opponent of plans in New York fails to credit the more constructive influence she has had elsewhere.⁹²

The fundamental premise of Jacobs’ urban thinking was that planning should be undertaken from the grassroots up, predicated on a measure of self-determination. As the urbanist and historian Thomas Campanella observed: “It was the Jacobian revolution and its elimination of a robust physical-planning focus that led to the diminution of planning’s disciplinary identity, professional agency, and speculative courage.”⁹³ The idea, which exists even to this day, that some megaproject or “st architecture” development could cure all the ills of a city is absurd⁹⁴. But Jacobs’ concern was mostly about what the central planners were actually doing, and not that their very existence. Campanella’s further observations bring us to the first of the three legacies of the Jacobian (planning) turn: it diminished the disciplinary identity of planning. The second legacy of the Jacobian turn was related to the first: granting the grassroots precedence over the authority and expertise of planners led to a loss of professional agency. The third legacy of the Jacobian turn is perhaps the most troubling of all: the apparent paucity among today’s American planners of the speculative courage and vision that once distinguished their profession.⁹⁵ Many good ideas – public housing, urban renewal, new-build suburbs – seemed to be turning out bad; all of them the target of Jacobs’ profound and hostile criticism. However, planning was connected with the realities of the politics and economics of urban development. And the reality was that the involvement of planners or the planning model seemed unable to improve what would occur as a result of normal economic activity.⁹⁶ Jacobs is best-known for her

impact on city planning and she was among the most articulate voices against “slum clearance”, high-rise development, highways carved through urban neighborhoods, and big commercial projects. But she did not object to developments simply because they were big; she also advocated an entirely different urban vision.⁹⁷

While the expanded range of scholarship and practice in the post-urban renewal era diversified the field, that diversification came at the expense of an established expertise – strong, centralized physical planning – which had provided professional visibility and identity both within academia and among “place” professions such as architecture and landscape architecture. Yet ultimately, Jane Jacobs, Richard Florida, Saskia Sassen, Ed Glaeser, Alan Berger and others are in many respects’ complementary urban thinkers with very different lenses on the macro, meso, and micro complexity of cities. “Cities are thoroughly physical things,” Jacobs once wrote, but as Wirth, Tonkiss, and other urban theorists’ remark, “Cities are also products of social relationships – they are socially produced.” Her ability to influence how cities are perceived remains unrivaled. But Ed Glaeser, William Mitchell, Richard Florida, Alan Berger and others add a compelling new component to that perception, and go beyond nostalgia and the romanticizing of diverse, child-friendly, dense city neighborhoods. Their forceful, systematic advocacy of increased complexity of the city (as well as suburbs) beyond Jacobs’ aestheticized “place-centric” obsessions, focusing on redevelopment efforts involving people, technology, infrastructure, land issues and global flows, should provoke serious discussions among academics, practitioners, and policy makers for years to come. As Campanella observes, “Planners today need not a close-up lens or a wide-angle lens but a wide-angle zoom lens. They need to be able to see the big picture as well as the parts close up; and even if not trained to design the parts themselves, they need to know how all those parts fit together.”⁹⁸ As Peter Laurence points out, despite Jacobs’ well-known antagonism toward the abstract understanding of cities expressed by a plethora of architects and planners, she was at base a theorist. Yet, compared to the “bird’s-eye view and arm’s-length approach of professional theorists”, Laurence notes that her approach is like her activism – at eye level and hands on; her urban theory was the corollary of her activism and vice versa.⁹⁹ Coming to terms with complexity and intensity is the key to understanding a city. The Jacobian idea is that cities are not static, the cities of tomorrow may be very different from the cities of today, and that outlying neighborhoods should also be allowed to grow into dense, lively, diversified areas (with, for example, high concentrations of residences or businesses, small blocks, mixed uses, and old buildings).¹⁰⁰



Shooting the documentary City Limits with director Laurence Hyde in 1971. The film features Jacobs discussing her urban philosophy while traipsing through the city, ferrying to the Island and flying over the highway system. Image Courtesy of John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

With society becoming ever more networked and digitalized, a significant shift in all walks of life is occurring with the move from reality to the virtual world, and shopping is no different. This has direct effects on the built environment. Although shopping malls and big-box retailers were formerly seen as a menace and the biggest threat to traditional shopping, they are now themselves struggling in the wake of digital e-commerce (something Jane Jacobs could not envision or predict). The corner store, high street, and main street, especially in immigrant communities, are not only places to buy goods but also meeting points, a sort of small *agora* in today's (metro)polis. That might soon cease to be the case, and no Jacobian built environment remedy will be able to salvage it. Online retailers are creating a whole new culture for the way we shop. It is convenient, quick, and cheap. Shopping is often necessary, but it can also be time-consuming and inconvenient. To save the "old look of shopping and streets", retailers need to build on communities or create living spaces instead of just selling things; they might then just be able to find a place in the fabric of the city (but even that is highly questionable). Shopping centers will have to redefine themselves to survive and create a simulacrum of the closest real city with high/main streets that one can get to, integrated with other services, in order to succeed. However, a key remaining question is whether online shopping has the capacity – and can gain the popularity – to make physical shops entirely obsolete in the future. Jacobs was surely right about the need for shops in their physical form on the high and main streets and on street corners. Although some places like bookstores and coffee shops will always be around, providing a service that is always going to be needed, many others will simply die out and disappear in the rapid-hyper gentrification and commodification of services and spaces. It is true that online shopping (such as Amazon, eBay, Etsy, Apple, Walmart, Dell Technologies and others) will never completely replace high and main street shops; there will always be a small demand for actually going into stores. As Saskia Sassen observes, urban space is the key building block of these economies in Jacobs' mind. She understood that it is the weaving of multiple strands that makes the city so much more than the sum of its residents, or its grand buildings, or its corporate economy.¹⁰¹

What each of us sees and understands depends on our own experience: where we come from, personally and professionally. Observation can often tell more about the observer than about the environment being observed. It reflects the values, beliefs, and worldview of the witness. We see through the lenses of our interests and understanding. We recognize patterns that match what we have seen before. Urban observation is also aimed at informing better, more equitable, plans, policies, and political decisions. A historical, interdisciplinary tradition of urban observation, with the modern-day "urban diary", is an experiential method of documenting city life and form¹⁰². Through evocative photography, use of smart phone apps, and other cutting-edge tools, we can explore and document the urban spaces as well as the structures and human activities around them. According to Merriam Webster's Dictionary, to observe is to watch carefully, especially with attention to details or behavior for the purpose of arriving at a judgment; to make a scientific observation is an act or instance of observing a custom, rule, or law and an act of recognizing and noting a fact or occurrence, often involving measurement with instruments. Public life studies have been useful for documenting the relationships between environmental design and behavior so that informed decision-making and design processes can improve places for people. They enrich our understanding of city life, particularly the quality, performance, and success of a place as well as the needs of inhabitants. Such studies assist with documenting existing conditions, identifying issues, developing solutions, and evaluating the impacts of design interventions. Observing people in public space is complex. City life is transitory, with people moving and conditions constantly changing. There are extensive variables such as architecture and design, weather, noise, smell, light, and shade as well as the number, location, and types of people using the space. Proponents of New Urbanism, for example, chose to visit the cities, towns, neighborhoods and streets that they liked – not only to observe but also to measure them in detail. That has been the New Urbanism method ever since – dealing with every kind of community plan, from hamlets to big-city downtown zones. New Urbanists verify everything with their own eyes, again and again, as Jacobs did. This is what can truly be called "observational urbanism." Though still unstructured and in the becoming, it is a powerful method that does not oppose academic theorists who trust ideas and intellectual fashion more than their own observations and experiences, rather it complements them. This approach, whereby New Urbanists diligently work to ground their ideas by testing them with the empirical data of observation and experience, was championed by Jacobs and by the architect and theorist Christopher Alexander¹⁰³. But the ultimate challenge for all urbanists involved in influencing and practicing urban planning and urban design is to translate, apply, and further develop the best ideas to promote the types of urban

environments that can encourage and nurture the full potential of our social creativity, targeted at sustainable and open-ended human development.¹⁰⁴ Much more congenial to Jacobs' way of thinking, when it comes to the above issues, were the design theories of Kevin Lynch,¹⁰⁵ Alexander,¹⁰⁶ Whyte,¹⁰⁷ and Jan Gehl¹⁰⁸ as well as the novel traffic policies of "shared space" that are spreading across Northern and Western Europe today. All of these pay careful attention to what real people do and how they interact with each other and with the built environment. Each of these researchers, to some degree, shared Jacobs' understanding of the city as a spontaneous entity.



Rigorous and polemical: Author and activist Jane Jacobs at a community meeting in Greenwich Village's Washington Square Park in 1963. Photograph courtesy of Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images.

While Jacobs tackles the basic assumptions of modernist planning, she gives voice to the mundane and raw business of urban economies. By capturing the practices of everyday life, Jacobs was able to elaborate upon new concepts, such as her "eyes on the street", that inspired urban scholars across disciplines (not least those dealing with crime and urban security as well as housing in general) to document the micro social processes that shape the urban life of a street and block. Her attention to the "sense of place" that people develop at the human scale through every day practices remains essential and eternal. Jacobs was undoubtedly a great thinker and a visionary urbanist, but she was no saint, nor was she a clairvoyant reader of the future of cities, or an untouchable urban icon without flaws (even serious ones) in her thinking and writing. We can take up her ideas and use them to help formulate more questions about the nature of today's society; that is surely the task she would expect from us now. In doing so, we are compelled to think in a systematic multi-disciplinary manner, look for linkages, connections, causes, serendipities, synchronicities, and elements, and provide an overview of the current and future condition of the city – addressing urban density, diversity and equality, informality, urban environment, and urban infrastructure –so going beyond Jacobs' "conventional" complexity logic. It is wrong to say that Jacobs was an underrated thinker and that her influence has not been as wide as it should be; she has almost created a canon of her own in urbanism.¹⁰⁹ The architect and urbanist Michael Sorkin, in his writing on buildings and cities, particularly New York, observes that Jacobs' influence is very much present in any contemporary outcry over large-scale projects; it is present in any grassroots defense of threatened textures, authentic neighborhoods and city life; in the suspicion of big, single-sourced plans; and in the anger at the unyielding imperatives of profit in a city that seems bent on running its poor and middle classes out of town.¹¹⁰ *Jacobs saw the problems of cities, but she did not see the city as a problem.* As Mumford observes, Jacobs' work displayed several surprising gaps in her awareness of the city, such

that this undermined many of her sound statements. Some of her boldest planning proposals, for instance, rested on faulty data, inadequate evidence, and a startling misapprehension of opinions that were contrary to hers.¹¹¹

But it is undeniable that *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* has had a profound influence and is of historical significance for contemporary urban planning and design and the way we see cities today. It is one of the foundational texts, an urban guide, for contemporary planners and practitioners and a fundamental volume for scholars of urbanism. It might just be, as Koolhaas once declared, one of the best – and one of the only three real – manifestos or treatises in architecture, urban planning and urban design that we have ever had the good fortune to read. Her “urban lens” observations of a city’s life, its streets, built environments and general dynamics remain unsurpassed and are forever vital and actual. It has changed our profession, our view of cities, and our understanding of the urban forever. That notwithstanding, the fundamental problem of Jacobs, Whyte and later followers like the Dane, Jan Gehl, large portions of the New Urbanism movement, the Project for Public Spaces and others remains, in the excessive focus on and celebration of the small-scale, the diverse and the mixed; sidetracking and even working against the large-scale and aesthetic vision, and the master and strategic planning. To understand the real complexity of cities and the complexity and contradictions that make them evolve, function, thrive, survive, and die, requires an appreciation of the logic and necessity of the larger scale. Another major flaw of Jacobs was her lack of understanding of the symbiosis of natural and urban landscapes, their dichotomy, and, most importantly, the conversation between urban-natural-urban needed for cities to function. The fact that she often underestimated the value of great green enterprises, such as Central Park and Prospect Park, and the fantastic work done by people like the father of American landscape architecture, Frederick Law Olmsted, shows that she did not fully grasp the organic nature of cities – and the fact that great urban places cannot function optimally without true symbiosis and linkages between the urban realm and the natural world. That maybe remains as her greatest ‘sin’ and flaw in thinking.

In the perspective of people like Jacobs and Whyte, “large scale” development schemes (including parks) have a negative impact on the heart of a city – its diversity. This Disneyesque diversity may well be, for many of its residents, their city’s most attractive feature, but it is also a dangerous one, a limited vision, and, worse still, it is indicative of a narrow understanding of the contemporary city and the city of the future. The contradiction between Jacobs’ unqualified idolization and perception of the small scale, the intimate values of neighborhood life and diversity, set against the qualities of large scale, metropolitan magnitude, beauty, order, spaciousness, and clarity of purpose (none of which have a place in her world) remains un-reconciled. This is largely because she rejects the principles of academia, research and practice of the discipline that were established at the first Urban Design conference at Harvard in 1956. Those principles would unite these complementary qualities, in a discipline about which, unfortunately, she knew very little and cared less. Ultimately many of Jane Jacobs’s solutions and remedies for cities seem insufficient to the problems of modern contemporary urban condition. She was not able to reinvent herself amid transformative complexities around her and everyday changing urban worlds on all scales. Jane Jacobs was way too much imbedded in her stable and grounded beliefs and ideologies about the city, immune to any external penetration of new ideas and forces. And maybe, just maybe there lies her biggest blessing and curse in one. It could be the end of an old story or the beginning of a new one, but maybe it was Herbert Gans who best encapsulated the essence of Jacobs’ accomplishment in *Death and Life*, when he wrote: “No one, it is true, has stated these ideas as forcefully as she, or integrated them into an over-all approach before. The neighborhoods with which she is most concerned cannot serve as models for future planning, but the way in which she has observed them, the insights she has derived, and the principles she has inferred from her observations can – and ought to be – adapted for use in planning cities and suburbs in the future. Her book is a path breaking achievement, and because it is so often right, I am all the more disappointed by the fact that it is also so often wrong.”¹¹²



In 1969 with city controller Margaret Campbell and councillor Ying Hope at a meeting about the Spadina Expressway, where Metro chairman Albert Campbell fought for construction to continue. Image courtesy of Boris Spremo/Getty Images.

Acknowledgements & References (Endnotes)

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