

Jane Jacobs's Legacy

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Sometimes a book can change history. Books often influence ideas, but only rarely do they catalyze activism.

In the 1960s, a handful of books triggered movements for reform. These include Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962), which inspired the war on poverty; Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which helped galvanize the environmental movement; Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the manifesto of modern feminism; Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965), which made its author a household name and precipitated the rise of the consumer movement; and Charles Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael's *Black Power* (1967), which signaled the civil rights movement's transformation toward black separatism.

Jane Jacobs's 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, belongs in this pantheon. Perhaps more than anyone else during the past half century, Jacobs changed the way we think about livable cities. Indeed, it is a mark of her impact that many people influenced by her ideas have never heard of her. Her views have become part of the conventional wisdom, if not always part of the continuing practice of city planning.

The 1950s was the heyday of urban renewal, the federal program that sought to wipe out urban "blight" with the bulldozer. Its advocates were typically downtown businesses, developers, banks, major daily newspapers, big-city mayors, and construction unions—what John Mollenkopf would later call the "growth coalition" and Harvey Molotch label the "growth machine." Most planners and architects at that time joined the urban renewal chorus. It was, after all, their bread and butter. Moreover, they convinced themselves that big development projects would "revitalize" downtown business districts, stem the exodus of middle class families to suburbs, and improve the quality of public spaces.

Jacobs, a journalist, was self-taught. She had no college degree. This may have been liberating, because she was unencumbered by planning orthodoxy, although she carefully read and thoroughly critiqued the major thinkers in the field. Had she studied architecture or urban planning when she was college age (in the 1930s and 1940s), she would have been taught the value of top-down planning and modernist mega-projects. Instead, she learned about cities by observing and doing. In the 1950s, she wrote a series of articles in *Fortune* magazine (later the basis for *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*) that said, essentially, cities are for people.

When Robert Moses, New York's planning czar and perhaps the most powerful unelected city official of the 20th century, proposed building a highway bisecting Jacobs's Greenwich Village neighborhood, she sprung into action, mobilizing her neighbors to challenge and

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confront the bulldozer bully in the name of human-scale, livable communities. She was no armchair liberal. She was fully engaged in her community and in the battle to save it. For her efforts, she was arrested and jailed. Her courageous efforts helped catalyze a broader grassroots movement against the urban renewal bulldozer, first in New York and then around the country.

She persisted even as Moses and other powerful figures tried to vilify her. Eventually, her dissenting ideas found a wider audience. In 1969, Mayor John Lindsay killed Moses's expressway plan. In other cities, mayors and planning agencies began to rethink the bulldozer approach to urban renaissance. In 1974, President Nixon canceled the urban renewal program.

Jacobs's book became required reading in planning and urban studies programs. She was hailed by planners and others for her visionary writing and activism. But she refused to accept sainthood. She was offered, and turned down, honorary degrees from more than 30 institutions. She always gave credit to the ordinary people on the front lines of the battle over the future of their cities.

Through her writings and activism, Jacobs had a profound influence on two distinct, but overlapping, groups: city planners and community organizers.

She is best-known for her impact on city planning. She was among the most articulate voices against "slum clearance," high-rise development, highways carved through urban neighborhoods, and big commercial projects. But she was not simply *against* things. She was also *for* a different urban vision.

Cities, she believed, should be untidy, complex, and full of surprises. Good cities encourage social interaction at the street level. They are pedestrian friendly. They favor walking, biking, and public transit over cars. They get people talking to each other. Residential buildings should be low-rise and should have stoops and porches. Sidewalks and parks should have benches. Streets should be short and wind around neighborhoods. Livable neighborhoods require mixed-use buildings—especially first-floor retail and housing above. She saw how "eyes on the street" could make neighborhoods safe as well as supportive, prefiguring an idea that later got the name "social capital." She favored corner stores over big chains. She liked newsstands and pocket parks where people can meet casually. Cities, she believed, should foster a mosaic of architectural styles and heights. And they should allow people from different income, ethnic, and racial groups to live in close proximity.

Although many developers and elected officials still favor the top-down approach, most planners and architects have absorbed Jacobs's lessons. Advocates of "smart growth" and "new urbanism" claim Jacobs's mantle, although she would no doubt dispute some of their ideas, particularly the failure of these approaches to make room for poor and working class folks. In later writings, Jacobs touted the role of cities as the engines of economic prosperity. In doing so, she anticipated arguments against unfettered suburban sprawl, recent debates about the reliance of suburbs on healthy cities, and the new wave of thinking about regionalism.

More importantly, perhaps, Jacobs paved the way for what became known as "advocacy planning." Starting in the 1960s, a handful of urban planners chose to side with residents of low-income urban neighborhoods against the power of city redevelopment agencies that pushed for highways, luxury housing, expansion of institutions such as hospitals and universities, corporate-sponsored mega projects, and government subsidies for sports complexes and convention centers.

Based in universities or in small nonprofit firms, advocate planners played an important role in battles over development in most major cities. They provided technical skills (and sometimes political advice) for community groups engaged in trench warfare against displacement and gentrification. At first isolated within the profession, advocate planners soon moved from the margins to the mainstream—or at least became enough of a force to have a serious impact on urban planning education. These activist planners worked for advocacy consulting firms (such as Urban Planning Aid), community groups, and university planning departments (such as Pratt Institute's Center for Community and Environmental Development), and as oppositional "guerillas" inside municipal planning agencies or even, as recounted in Norm Krumholz and Pierre Clavel's book, *Reinventing Cities: Equity Planners Tell Their Stories* (1994), for progressive neighborhood-oriented mayors.

Often overlooked is Jacobs's influence on community organizing. Most histories of community organizing trace its origins and evolution to the settlement houses of the Progressive Era, to Saul Alinsky's efforts (starting in the late 1930s in Chicago) to adapt labor organizing strategies to community problems, and to the tactical creativity of the civil rights movement. But Jacobs's activist work showed people around the country that they could fight the urban renewal bulldozer—and win.

The upsurge of neighborhood organizing that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was triggered by the initial battles against urban renewal, or what some critics called "Negro removal." By leading the fight in New York City, the nation's largest city and media center, Jacobs inspired people in New York and other cities to organize to stop the destruction of their communities and to find more community-friendly ways to achieve such goals as improving housing. They won some battles and lost others, but many of them persisted to gain increasing influence over plans by city governments and private developers for their neighborhoods. Out of this cauldron emerged new leaders, new organizations, and new issues—such as the fight over bank redlining, tenants rights and rent control, neighborhood crime, environmental racism, and underfunded schools. Some groups that were founded to protest against top-down plans began thinking about what they were for. Hundreds of community development corporations (CDCs) emerged out of these efforts. National networks of community organizations, such as ACORN, the Industrial Areas Foundation, PICO, and National Peoples Action, and thousands of other independent community organizing groups, unwittingly built on Jacobs's efforts.

In 1981, Harry Boyte chronicled this revival of grassroots activism in his book, *The Backyard Revolution*. Even though it, and many subsequent books about community organizing, do not acknowledge (and may even be unaware of) Jacobs's influence, these activists were (and still are) standing on her shoulders as well as those of Jane Addams, Saul Alinsky, and Ella Baker. Jacobs is mentioned once, in passing, in Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar's fascinating book, *Streets of Hope*, about the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative that brought together residents of Boston's Roxbury ghetto, along with local churches, social agencies, and other institutions, to rebuild their community as an "urban village" from the bottom up, starting in the 1980s. Few if any of DSNI's leaders, or foundation allies, had ever heard of her. But it is unlikely that Medoff, DSNI's first director, who graduated from Columbia's urban planning program, had not been influenced—directly (by reading her book) or indirectly (by studying with professors familiar with Jacobs's writing and activism)—by the activist author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

A fierce critic of Moses's efforts to decimate New York neighborhoods, Jacobs was equally opposed to President Johnson's plans to destroy Vietnamese villages. Always an activist, she marched in antiwar rallies. In 1968, Jacobs moved with her husband and children from New York City to Toronto, triggered by her antiwar sentiments. She did not want their two draft-age sons to have to go to Vietnam.

She had a profound influence on city planning and community activism in her adopted country. There, too, she did battle with powerful forces who pushed for highways over public transit, and large scale projects over people-oriented neighborhoods. As she did in the United States, she helped lead the fight to preserve neighborhoods and stop expressways, including the proposed Spadina Expressway that would have cut right through the heart of her own Annex neighborhood (where she lived until her death in a three-story brick building) as well as parts of downtown. Soon after moving to Toronto, she wrote a newspaper article critical of city planners for their plans to "Los Angelize" Toronto, which she described as "the most hopeful and healthy city in North America, still unmangled, still with options." It is difficult to know how much of Canada's success in creating more humane cities is due to Jacobs's influence, but many Canadian politicians, planners, and advocates give her credit.

One unfortunate side-effect of the battle against urban renewal in the United States was a knee-jerk opposition to government efforts to improve cities, a sentiment that lingers on. We see this in the growing antagonism to the use of eminent domain. Rather than see it as a tool that could be wielded for good or evil—depending on whether a city regime is progressive, liberal, or conservative—many people in the United States view the tool itself as the enemy.

Canadians, too, battled against their country's version of urban renewal. But they, like Jacobs, did not view elected officials or government actions with the same degree of suspicion, as mean-spirited and heartless. They oppose government officials when they are in the pockets of private developers and businesses or refuse to listen to the voices of ordinary people. During Jacobs's years in Canada, municipal and provincial governments were often controlled by the Liberal Party and the progressive New Democratic Party—both to the left of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in the United States. The two Canadian parties had close ties to labor unions, environmentalists, women's rights advocates, and community activists.

Canada has a similar economy and distribution of wealth to the United States but it provides a much wider and more generous array of government-sponsored social insurance and safety net provisions to cushion the harshness of poverty. The U.S.'s stingy social programs have only a minor impact in reducing the poverty rate, while programs in Canada have a dramatic impact in lifting children, low-wage workers, and the elderly out of poverty. Not surprisingly, compared with the United States, Canada has a much smaller poverty rate, a higher proportion of subsidized housing, more mixed-income neighborhoods, less economic segregation, and fewer homeless people. It also has safer cities, greater reliance on public transit, lower levels of pollution and traffic congestion, and stronger downtown and neighborhood commercial districts. This is why Jacobs loved Canada.

Jacobs was a true "public intellectual" who put her ideas into practice. She loved cities and urban neighborhoods. She was fearless and feisty. She was a moralist who believed that people had a responsibility to the greater good and that societies and cities existed to bring out the best in people.

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Jane Jacobs OC OOnt (née Butzner; 4 May 1916 – 25 April 2006) was an American-Canadian journalist, author, and activist who influenced urban studies, sociology, and economics. Her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) argued that "urban renewal"/"slum clearance" did not respect the needs of city-dwellers. Jacobs organized grassroots efforts to protect neighborhoods from "urban renewal"/"slum clearance", in particular Robert Moses' plans to overhaul her own Greenwich Village. Featuring interviews with a carefully selected range of city planners, historians and activists, alongside recordings of Jacobs herself, this special episode of *Monocle 24's The Urbanist* examines why Jacobs was—and remains—so influential when considering the contemporary city. Accessed . ISSN 0719-8884. Read comments. Save. In honor of Jane Jacobs's 100th birthday, explore her life and legacy, from the battles over NYC's LOMEX to Jacobs's later years in Toronto to the Robert Moses-Jane Jacobs opera. Then take our quiz to see how your neighborhood meets Jacobs's criteria for a successful city. Celebrating Jane Jacobs. The legacy and life of a great American urbanist.