

Jacobs, Jane

LUKAS LEY

University of Toronto, Canada

Jane Jacobs (1916–2006) was an American-Canadian author and urban activist. From her 40s until her death, Jacobs published numerous books on diverse subjects – urban planning, economics, and cultural politics – that attracted a wide readership. Her first book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1992), is considered to be a seminal work that describes urban complexity and multiple functions and criticizes modernist or rationalist planning. By zeroing in on the microsocial processes sustaining “organic” city development, the book influenced the study and conceptualization of cities across academic disciplines. While reflecting Jacobs’s deep involvement in North American urban activism, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* also attempts to outline a theory of urban ecology. Jacobs would later refine this theory in numerous books, by appreciating and understanding seemingly disorderly social processes from the bottom up.

Jacobs (born Jane Butzner) grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania. After graduating from high school, she attended trade school for six months to learn shorthand writing and stenograph. Jacobs’s biographers often emphasize Jacobs’s strong yearning for the city, a place that her parents described as economically advanced and promising. In 1935, Jacobs decided to join her sister in New York. In the midst of the Great Depression, Jacobs made ends meet by taking stenographic and secretarial jobs in various manufacturing businesses. While Jacobs never received an academic degree, she did take classes at

Columbia’s College of General Studies from 1938 until 1940. While briefly working for the trade magazine *Iron Age*, Jacobs published an article on her hometown Scranton that garnered her national attention. Published in 1943, this political commentary urged a Pennsylvania state senator to mobilize the city’s resources for war efforts. In 1944, Jacobs married the architect Robert Hyde Jacobs Jr. with whom she would have three children. The couple moved into a declining three-story house on Hudson Street in Greenwich Village. By then, Jacobs had found employment as a feature writer with the government’s Office of War Information. She later transferred to the State Department’s Magazine Branch where she composed pamphlets, articles, and books on the history, culture, science, and military superiority of the United States. In 1949, the government opened an investigation into Jacobs’s alleged sympathy with communist thought on the grounds that she had been called a “troublemaker” by her previous employer and had applied along with her husband for a Soviet travel visa.

Being cleared of all charges by the end of 1950, Jacobs continued to work for the department, writing extensively on the United States Housing Act of 1949 which foresaw a “comprehensive approach to the problems of slums and blight” through “urban redevelopment” (Wilson 1966). According to Laurence (2007), Jacobs familiarized herself with the idea of urban renewal in this phase. In 1952, Jacobs took a position with the magazine *Architectural Forum*. This period is often considered to be Jacobs’s transition from a “writer” to an “author.” Her 1958 essay “Downtown is for People” published by *Fortune* was well received by both her superiors and readers. The essay

problematizes major city redevelopment projects and poignantly asks what the city of tomorrow would look like if “country civic leaders and planners” realized the “new downtown projects already under construction” (Jacobs 1958). Jacobs argues that these projects, which purportedly aimed to revitalize downtown by injecting parks and other typically suburban spaces, would ultimately deaden it, since “they work at cross-purposes to the city” (Jacobs 1958). Such plans ignored how people actually make use of downtown amenities, Jacobs argued, by looking at streets – the city’s “nervous system” – and the ways in which certain buildings promote vibrancy by centralizing urban activities. At ground level, she further reasoned, downtown streets should offer space for small enterprises whose diversified products entertain and lure the pedestrian. The essay clearly reveals Jacobs’s admiration of walkable city space. However, Jacobs did not specifically have the environmental benefits of walkable downtowns with reduced car traffic in mind, but argued from an economic standpoint. If downtowns managed to “play up the streets’ variety, contrast, and activity by means of display windows, street furniture, imagination, and paint” and “exploit the contrast between the street’s small elements and its big banks, big stores, big lobbies” (Jacobs 1958), urbanites – clients – would naturally flock to these spaces. Focal points like fountains or enclaves suggesting a visual order are as important as messiness, Jacobs argued, for building successful downtowns. In the essay, Jacobs further criticized the self-enclosed culture of city planning which would apply abstract concepts of urban order, enshrined in a philosophy of urban order, to cities across the nation: “an image was built into the machinery; now the machinery reproduces the image” (Jacobs 1958).

At the age of 45, Jacobs published *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1992), a

detailed celebration of downtown life and its self-organizing communities and economies. A writing grant from the Rockefeller Foundation allowed Jacobs to spend three years on the manuscript. Although initially falling short of achieving wide readership, the book became a hot topic in the United States when Jacobs organized a protest against a controversial innercity expressway construction project that required the demolition of large parts of Manhattan’s Harlem district. Robert Moses, New York’s master builder and modernist planning visionary, embodied all that Jacobs saw as wrong with contemporary urban planning. Jacobs and her family moved to Toronto in 1968 in protest of the Vietnam War. In Toronto, she quickly became a strong voice in urban politics, fending off large-scale infrastructural interventions by the city government.

Jacobs’s work can be appreciated for its thorough analysis of empirical data and rigorous attention to the details of urban social orders. For example, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* assembled an impressive number of first-hand observations of New York street life. Although Jacobs never claimed a scientific perspective, her approach bears strong resemblance to the detailed ethnographic description of North American cities developed earlier in the twentieth century by members of the Chicago School of urban sociology, Robert E. Park and Louis Wirth. Her reflections on urban space and its functions are based on direct observations of routine economic activities and use of public spaces and therefore required social immersion. While Jacobs tackles the basic assumptions of modernist planning, she gives voice to the mundane and raw business of urban economies. By virtue of capturing everyday life, Jacobs was able to elaborate upon new concepts, such as “eyes on the street,” that inspired urban scholars across disciplines to document the microsocial

processes that shape urban life. Her attention to an anthropological “sense of place” that people develop at the human scale through everyday practices anticipated influential critiques of modern cities, such as the study of “nonplaces” by French anthropologist Marc Augé (1995) and Michel de Certeau’s (1984) theory of everyday resistance.

The Death and Life of Great American Cities and Jacobs’s public presence lent, and continue to provide, argumentative force to urban activism for protecting the intricate fabric of low-income downtown neighborhoods against waves of urban redevelopment and gentrification. Jacobs is often invoked in global “right to the city” activism. Large-scale expansionist urban redevelopment, many argue, is still a threat to socially heterogeneous, multiethnic communities (see La Cecla 2012).

The observing “eyes on the street” can be understood as an intrinsic quality and asset possessed by “functioning” downtown areas. Urban space, according to Jacobs, thrives on visual and verbal communication, which in turn produces safety. While traditionally dense urban neighborhoods foster exchange and produce in residents a sense of coownership, modern city planning most often individualizes and isolates citizens, leaving neighborhoods unable to deal with intruding “strangers.” As a critique of Jacobs’s theory, commentators have noted, however, that vigilant “eyes on the street” do not necessarily mean respectful cohabitation across class and ethnic boundaries. In fact, the advanced securitization of downtown neighborhoods can be founded on racist and exclusivist ideologies. As Sharon Zukin (1998: 825) argues, the “increase in private groups’ control over specific public spaces” is accompanied by new patterns of urban consumption. Catering to such groups, private-sector managers of public space may promote trust among strangers strategically through “aesthetic design and

private security guards” (Zukin 1998: 836). While Jacobs taught generations of readers to appreciate big cities as theaters for intricate performances of communal life, she paid little attention to social stratification or race (Montgomery 1998: 273). Jacobs directed her criticism at city planners instead of pointing out the structural causes of systemic reasons for urban transformations (Zukin 2006: 224), such as capitalism and class struggles. As Montgomery has pointed out, the sustained popularity of Jacobs’s work “becomes much more intelligible when we perceive its vanguard position in the biggest political change of our times,” notably an onslaught of privatization and the divesting of state power.

In line with Jacobs’s heuristics and interest in the grit of cities, the first Jane Jacobs Walk (www.janejacobswalk.org) was celebrated in 2007 in Toronto by a “group of Jacobs’s friends and colleagues who wanted to honor her ideas and legacy.” It is important to note that Jacobs’s engaged writing owes strongly to her political ambitions. Her most celebrated writing, which represents “an attack on current city planning and rebuilding” (Jacobs 1992: 3), reveals the conceptual flaws and injustices in modernist city planning. It deeply influences debates within the profession of urban planning and beyond and is invoked in contemporary conflicts about the “right” ingredients of urban life. Jacobs was known to criticize sweeping and large-scale urban planning, whether towering high-rises or mass highways, especially if it ignored “how cities work in real life” (Jacobs 1992). As Laurence (2007: 13) stated, “compared to the bird’s-eye view and arm’s-length approach of professional theorists, her approach, like her activism, was eye level and hands on; her urban theory was the corollary of her activism, and vice versa.”

Jacobs’s legacy to social theory can be understood as a sustained effort to reveal the organic character of human society. Her book *The Nature of Economies* (2000)

further explores this line of argumentation by anchoring economic development in ecological theory. Authored in the style of Socratic dialogue, Jacobs, then in her 80s, tried to dispense final scientific authority on the subject. *The Nature of Economies* draws on diverse scientific findings, incorporating evolutionary theory, microbiology, and economics, to reveal what nature says about money (Jacobs 2000: 12). Economic planning, in Jacobs's opinion, should look for inspiration in the natural processes of adaptation, differentiation, and negative feedback. Implicitly, the book is a critical take on human interference with the self-regulating character of economic life. It can therefore be interpreted as an effort to restore a just balance in ecological and economic processes.

Jacobs's contribution to social theory is a constant reminder that scholars have a responsibility toward society and the environment. While starting out as a critic of modernist planning and defender of urban diversity, the late Jane Jacobs can be considered an influential commentator on the political processes that shape our experience of an urban world.

SEE ALSO: Certeau, Michel de; Chicago School of Sociology; Urban Design; Urban Ecology; Wirth, Louis

REFERENCES

- Augé, Marc. 1995. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jacobs, Jane. 1958. *Downtown Is for People*. Fortune Classic. Accessed November 19, 2016, at <http://fortune.com/2011/09/18/downtown-is-for-people-fortune-classic-1958>.
- Jacobs, Jane. 1992. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage.
- Jacobs, Jane. 2000. *The Nature of Economies*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.
- La Cecla, Franco. 2012. *Against Architecture*. Francisco, CA: Green Arcade.
- Laurence, Peter L. 2007. Jane Jacobs Before Death and Life. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 66(1): 5–15.
- Montgomery, Roger. 1998. Is There Still Life in the Death and Life? *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 64(3): 269–274.
- Wilson, James Q. 1966. *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Zukin, Sharon. 1998. Urban Lifestyles: Diversity and Standardisation in Spaces of Consumption. *Urban Studies*, 35(5–6): 825–839.
- Zukin, Sharon. 2006. Jane Jacobs: The Struggle Continues. *City & Community*, 5(3): 223–226.

FURTHER READING

- Alexiou, Alice S. 2006. *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Desrochers, P. 2007. The Death and Life of a Reluctant Urban Icon. A Review Essay on “Jane Jacobs, Urban Visionary” by Alice Sparberg Alexiou. *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 23(3): 37–58.
- Laurence, Peter L. 2006. The Death and Life of Urban Design: Jane Jacobs, The Rockefeller Foundation and the New Research in Urbanism, 1955–1965. *Journal of Urban Design*, 11(2): 145–172.