

## Jane Jacobs, a Rebel with a Cause

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### 1 Introduction

It is more than five years now since Jane Jacobs died in Toronto, having nearly reached the age of 90. Her name still resonates powerfully and most likely will do for several years and decades to come. Her life was a fascinating one and her thoughts on urban life have been highly influential across the world. Although the major social work journals contain few references to her work, her key concepts have rightly influenced social work practice. This article tries to rectify the absence of her work in scholarly social work journals and to honour Jane Jacobs as a rebel with a cause.

Born Jane Butzner in 1916 in the small town of Scranton in Pennsylvania, she quickly learned to love city life but also that good times can change into times of unemployment and economic harshness. In 1935 in the middle of the great depression, Jane Jacobs decided her future was not to be in small towns and moved to Brooklyn, New York. Jacobs was eager to do reporting work but the media was pretty much a man's world. To generate some income, she did occasional secretarial work for a candy store, a clock company and a steel distributing company, among others (Alexiou, 2006). In between jobs, Jane Jacobs travelled through the city, preferably walking around and watching urban life. She was a keen observer and hadn't lost her eagerness to report. Some of her written reports found their way into magazines, earning her some money and building up a reputation.

Jacobs came another step closer to her later career in 1944 when she met and married Robert Jacobs. He was an architect who came to specialise in hospitals. They bought a house in Greenwich Village at 555 Hudson Street. Now a sought-after neighbourhood for the upper middle class in New York, at the time it was bohemian and home to the Beat Generations and authors like Allen Ginsberg and, for a time, Dylan Thomas. Residents included Bob Dylan and its music scene saw the first steps of many musicians, including Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell and the Velvet Underground. The Jacobs family lived in Greenwich Village up to 1968 and raised their three children there.



The next development in Jane Jacobs' career came in 1952 when she applied for a job and was appointed associate editor at *Architectural Forum*, a journal her husband subscribed to. She was given assignments on city planning and became intrigued by what she saw happening. Disclosing the weaknesses of some of the most accepted views on contemporary city planning would become her cause for the rest of her life, and she did it with a vengeance, both as a writer and as a community activist.

## 2 The Philadelphia mission

During the 1950s, American cities (and others elsewhere) experienced an exodus of the white middle class from the centres to the more spacious suburbs, a transformation well captured by photographer Bill Owens in his *Suburbia* (see <http://www.billowens.com/suburbia.html>). Public transport had improved and private car ownership began to increase rapidly from 1950, giving people the choice to start commuting daily and to live away from their place of work.

However, this process left city centres depleted and impoverished, with mainly the poor and unemployed left behind. Urban planners were concerned and took initiatives to revitalise the poorest neighbourhoods in early attempts at gentrification. They were greatly inspired by the Swiss-French city architect Le Corbusier. Few Western cities are currently free from the scars reminding us of Le Corbusier's popularity throughout the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was the pioneer of modernism in architecture and a major proponent of high rise tower blocks, arguing that cities should only be allowed to expand upwards. To improve the conditions of crowded inner cities, whole housing blocks had to be demolished to give way to skyscrapers amidst large green spaces and highways. There should be strict separation between places to live, places to work, and places to shop. The city centre should be for commercial activities and a few public services, surrounded by a ring of tower blocks which should again be surrounded by the suburbs, the 'garden city'.

As a reporter for *Architectural Forum*, Jacobs was assigned to write a piece on a city renewal project in Philadelphia very much inspired by Le Corbusier's ideas. The tour she was given by city planner Eduard Bacon made an everlasting impression on her. Exactly fifty years later, she would still talk about it in an interview: "Philadelphia was the big thing at the time, and Ed Bacon was very fashionable. So they sent me to Philadelphia, and Mr. Bacon showed me all that they were doing. First he took me to a street where loads of people were hanging around on the street, on the stoops, having a good time of it, and he said, well, this is the next street we're going to get rid of. That was the 'before' street. Then he showed me the 'after' street, all fixed up, and there was just one person on it, a bored little boy kicking a tire in the gutter. It was so grim that I would have been kicking a tire, too. But Mr. Bacon thought it had a beautiful vista." (Goldberger, 2006).

Jacobs came back from Philadelphia deeply sceptical about the dominant urban renewal paradigm. Moreover, upon returning to New York, she became aware that what was happening in Philadelphia was also happening in East Harlem. Described as 'slum clearance', large sections of the neighbourhood were demolished to make way for new housing. Unfortunately, this didn't result in improvement of the quality of life for residents. Ellen Lurie, a voluntary social worker, had taken the time to go out and interview some of the people affected by the urban renewal in the George Washington Houses initiative, a housing development consisting of 14 tower buildings containing more than 1500 apartments. She came to the shocking conclusion that the high rise building replacing the slums made matters even worse than before (Alexiou, 2006, chapter 3; Zipp, 2010, chapter 7). The design of the

tower blocks made vandalism and crime easy, and created barriers to neighbouring. Small businesses were ruined, resulting in a crippled local economy and increased unemployment.

With these examples in mind but with little formal training, Jacobs set out to challenge the experts and criticize their weak focus on what life in these neighbourhoods really looked like.

### **3 The fight with Robert Moses**

Jacobs wasn't impressed by authority, and consequently didn't shy away from confronting the biggest authority of all in the field of urban planning in New York, Robert Moses. Their paths had already crossed in East Harlem where Moses was chairman of the 'committee on slum clearance', and their paths crossed again on the issue of Washington Square Park (Flint, 2009, chapter 3). The park was popular at the time for young mothers with children, and also for folksingers (Bob Dylan played his first songs there), but Moses wanted to extend Fifth Avenue through the park. Residents of Greenwich Village, with Jane Jacobs among those in the frontline, resolved not to let this happen and started a media campaign to close Washington Square Park for all traffic except emergency vehicles. When the city agreed to close Washington Square Park to traffic temporarily in June 1958, it was the beginning of the end of Moses' plans to extend Fifth Avenue through it, and it marked a significant success for Jacobs as an activist.

It was a small victory, for the big battle was yet to be fought. Moses wasn't the average urban planner. He had a strong local power base combining several roles such as chair of the committee on slum clearance, as park commissioner, as chairman of the Bridge and Tunnel Authority and several other positions he held. Moreover, his local power base was strengthened on the federal level by the Housing Act of 1949, among other regulatory powers.

Moses was a great believer in the car as a feature of progress and key to the future. Mobility of people and commodities was becoming ever more important, and the car was the way to help realise the possibilities of mobility. Moses had set out to build a complete network of some six hundred miles of highways through the New York area, backed up by federal funding under the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. Part of this plan was to build a 10-lane highway through New York, starting at the Williamsburg and Manhattan bridge in the east all the way to the Holland tunnel in the west. This part was known as the Lower Manhattan Expressway, or Lomex. Planning had been underway for several years, and constructing it would imply levelling about fourteen blocks of houses, displacing about 2000 families and up to 1000 small businesses.

The Lower Manhattan Expressway gave Jacobs a new cause and a new confrontation with Robert Moses (Alexiou, 2006, chapter 6; Flint, 2009, chapter 5). Moses had already won approval to build the Cross Bronx Expressway in the north of Manhattan and lost the case for the Mid-Manhattan Expressway, when in summer 1962 there seemed to be no more barriers to start constructing the Lower Manhattan Expressway in the south. Except Jane Jacobs. She was drawn into this new tussle with Robert Moses by Father La Mountain, a priest at a local church. Soon enough, drawing on the experiences gained protesting against the Washington Square initiative, the campaigning of Jacobs and the residents led to a minor victory at the end of 1962. Moses however strengthened his lobbying and gained some ground in the years afterwards. It became a cat-and-mouse game until spring 1968 when, at a public hearing about the expressway, Jane Jacobs was arrested for disrupting public order and charged with inciting a riot. In the heady days of '68, arresting a public figure like Jane Jacobs caused such a public uproar that it became a turning point for the case against Moses' plans. John Lindsay,

the mayor of New York at the time, finally decided he was opposing the plans as he “did see that Jacobs’s arrest had permanently tarnished the Lower Manhattan Expressway as a project pushed by heartless bureaucrats who would go to any lengths to subdue public opposition.” (Flint, 2009, p. 176). The plans for the Lower Manhattan Expressway were eventually successfully scrapped, leaving the neighbourhoods we now know as the attractive Little Italy and SoHo in New York.

There is one more intriguing story about Robert Moses, indicative of the atmosphere of deception that can confuse the politics of planning, which so pre-occupied Jane Jacobs. In 1980, Langdon Winner wrote an article arguing that artefacts can have politics, that products and things have a political influence on our lives. One of his examples referred to low overpasses on the bridges on the parkways on Long Island, New York. Winner argued that Moses deliberately designed these at a specific height so that buses could not pass beneath them. According to Winner, the bridges thus encapsulated social class and racial prejudice: “Automobile-owning whites of “upper” and “comfortable middle” classes, as he called them, would be free to use the parkways for recreation and commuting. Poor people and blacks, who normally used public transit, were kept off these routes because the twelve-foot tall buses could not handle the overpasses.” (Winner, 1980, p. 23).

Unsurprisingly, this fascinating statement on artefacts and politics was several times reprinted and is often quoted. However, almost two decades later the British scholar Steve Woolgar, lecturing about Moses’ bridges, was challenged by an American student who indicated that the bridges do not have low overpasses and buses were perfectly capable of handling them. It’s beyond the scope of this article expanding on this, suffice it to note that Woolgar and his students checked the facts, using bus schedules among other sources, and labelled Moses’ bridges as a form of urban legend (Woolgar & Cooper, 1999). To my knowledge, Langdon Winner has never replied to this analysis.

#### **4 Jacobs’ masterpiece: The death and life of great American cities**

The public status that was the origin of the uproar about Jacobs’ arrest resulted partly from her activism in New York, including saving Washington Square Park, but to a larger extent came from her 1961 book publication: *The death and life of great American cities*. The idea for the book emerged after an article she published in the April 1958 issue of *Fortune* generated a lot of attention. Jacobs wrote to the Rockefeller Foundation requesting support to turn that article and her ideas about urban renewal into a book, and received a grant. It took her most of 1959/1960 to complete the work, but it didn’t fail to attract attention when it came out.

*The death and life of great American cities* is basically a venomous attack on the urban planning of the early and middle 20<sup>th</sup> century and a love ballad for the ‘real’ old city centres with their winding and curling streets and apparent chaos. Jacobs did not attempt to disguise that. In the first sentence she writes: “This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding.” She condemned both the notion of garden cities of Ebenezer Howard and the radiant city idea of Le Corbusier, both dominating the thinking at the time, as inherently anti-city. And she was sharp about it: “Since theoretical city planning has embraced no major new ideas for considerably more than a generation, theoretical planners, financiers and bureaucrats are all just about even today. And to put it bluntly, they are all in the same stage of elaborately learned superstition as medical science was early in the last century, when physicians put their faith in bloodletting, to draw out the evil humors which were believed to cause disease.” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 12).

On almost each of the fundamental principles of urban planning of those days, Jacobs had diametrically different views. While the mainstream view was that zoning should be introduced (places specifically for living, working, leisure...), Jacobs argued for diversity in the city. Streets should have mixed uses, short housing blocks and a mixture of buildings of different ages.

While Le Corbusier and his followers, including Moses, believed in high-rise towers and lots of green space to improve quality of life, social worker Ellen Lurie's survey had already hinted they might be having an adverse effect: "The new high-rises, it turned out, were making the environment worse than it had been before 'slum clearance'. Tenants told Lurie that they were afraid to walk the streets at night, that the new projects were being quickly defaced by vandalism, that police protection within the projects was inadequate. The high-rise design, with its elevators and empty public areas, was only increasing the opportunities for crime." (Alexiou, 2006, p. 45-46).

Jacobs countered this by describing how public safety worked in an old city centre. She observed that in her neighbourhood of Greenwich, people were looking out for each other even if they scarcely knew one another. They were, as Stanley Milgram would later describe them, familiar strangers because their daily paths crossed, and consequently they watched for each other's safety. Jacobs stressed the importance of having 'eyes on the street' at all times, and this called for a diversity of activity in the neighbourhood. "No amount of police can enforce civilization where the normal, casual enforcement of it has broken down." (Jacobs, 1961, p. 32).

Another idea that was very unfashionable at the time was to value old buildings. Gentrification at the time basically implied demolishing all that was there and replacing it. Jacobs argues strongly that any city needs old buildings as well as new ones. If there are only new buildings, the citizens or companies using them either have to pay for the high rents or be subsidized. A wide variety of small artistic initiatives or small enterprises need cheap accommodation in order to thrive. Consequently, "old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings." (Jacobs, 1961, p. 188)

In the final chapter of her book, Jacobs develops a plea to approach cities in much the same way as the life sciences approach living creatures, as systems of organized complexity, which are, and she quotes "situations in which a half-dozen or even several dozen quantities are all varying simultaneously *and in subtly interconnected ways*." (original italics, Jacobs, 1961, p. 433). Cities are living organisms and should be treated as such: "Human beings are, of course, a part of nature, as much so as grizzly bears or bees or whales or sorghum cane. The cities of human beings are as natural, being a product of one form of nature, as are the colonies of prairie dogs or the beds of oysters." (Jacobs, 1961, p. 443-444)

This is contrary to the mechanical perspective of the traditional urban planning at that time, which resulted in the idea that any part of the city operated independently and could be demolished and rebuilt without harming the relations it had or would have in future with the rest of the city. In life sciences, that would mirror the idea that a surgeon could amputate a leg and construct another one without any impact on the rest of the body.

Jacobs's book is not the only one attacking modernism in urban planning. There is also for instance the sociologist Herbert Gans's *The urban villagers* from 1962, based on what he saw happening in Boston (for an overview and critical analysis, see Talen, 2006). But *The death*

*and life of great American cities* was undoubtedly the most influential. More than fifty years after it was first published, it is still being reprinted and translated (e.g. into Dutch for the first time in 2009).

## 5 Later life

Soon after the decisive turn of the Lower Manhattan Expressway plans, Jacobs announced she was leaving New York for Toronto. Her husband had a new job there as a hospital architect. More importantly, their two sons were about to be drafted for military service and like many, the Jacobs family opposed the war in Vietnam. Canada overall welcomed the US political refugees, and Toronto specifically welcomed Jane Jacobs. Her book was already well known and appreciated before she moved home. But not all was well. Toronto had plans to build a 6-lane road right through the city which would imply demolishing some 900 homes, including that of the Jacobs family. The Spadina expressway sounded like the Lower Manhattan Expressway all over again. Fortunately for Jacobs, concern was rising as a result of increasing costs for constructing the highway. Public opinion was already turning against the Spadina expressway and that only increased when the Jacobs family gave their support to those opposing it. In 1971 all further construction was cancelled.

Jane Jacobs was to live in Toronto and remain active in the area of city development and urban planning up to her death in 2006. She wrote a number of other books, including two on economic issues of cities (Jacobs, 1969, 1984). Towards the end of her life, she published a last rather gloomy book in which she writes about the erosion of civilization in the US and Canada as she observed it and the reasons behind it: *Dark age ahead* (Jacobs, 2004).

To commemorate Jane Jacobs, several cities have installed *Jane's walks*: city tours that focus on the current life in neighbourhoods, guided by citizens themselves. These give a view on the living city, not on the historical 'dead' city. They are also sometimes referred to as urban safaris.

## 6 Conclusion: Jane Jacobs and social work

Jane Jacobs's work remains highly pertinent today. There is hardly a university course on urban architecture or the sociology of cities that does not include a section on her work. New scholarly work updating her vision on city life is still being published and new analysis of her work appears regularly (see for instance Goldsmith & Elizabeth, 2010). The aim of this article was however not to provide an in-depth analysis of a certain aspect of Jacobs's work, but to provide an overall introduction to her life and work for an international social work audience.

Jane Jacobs's work not only thrives in higher education and research, but also in community development and urban regeneration. In my own city, Antwerp, in just the last couple of years there have been several episodes that illustrate Jacobian principles. The construction of the new Court of Justice in the south of the city and the replacement of a train maintenance depot by a park without demolishing building blocks are the kind of organic interventions in urban development of which Jacobs would have approved. The same goes for the conversion of an old port warehouse into the new city archive, which reflects her plea for appraisal of old buildings. Equally she would have been enthralled by the David-and-Goliath fight that erupted only two years ago between citizens on the one hand (with two 'Jacobian' frontmen) and a cluster of politicians and traffic planners on the other. The massive plans to build a new part of the highway across the north of the city were effectively opposed.

I noted in my introduction that few social work journals contain direct references to Jane Jacobs. There are however numerous indirect links between Jacobs's work and social work. For one, she clarified the ways in which the physical and the social environment are closely related to each other. She also showed us that careful observations and sound reasoning are good instruments to stand up against those who have power and formal education but also have disastrous plans. Finally, the successes Jacobs achieved in her fight against urban follies like the extension of Fifth Avenue through Washington Square Park or the building of Lower Manhattan Expressway are encouraging examples of how David can indeed sometimes slay Goliath, however daunting that task may be at the beginning.

## References

There are some informative videos on Jane Jacobs on youtube, including some containing fragments of interviews with her at old age. A simple search on the keywords 'Jane Jacobs' on google or youtube will help you find these.

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