

HISTORY

OF SOCIAL WORK

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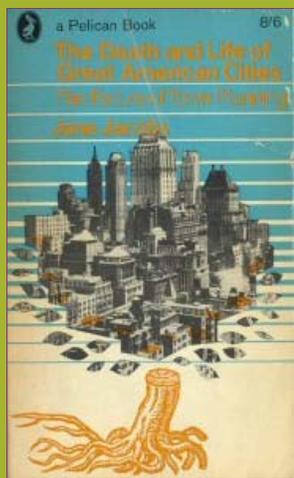
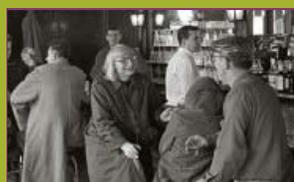
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1961 Jane Jacobs

Urban visionary



It's probable that Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) had more influence than anyone else on our thinking about cities and city life during the second half of the twentieth century. A lack of any formal education in city planning or related subjects didn't constrain her influence. At a very early age, she moved to Greenwich Village, a neighbourhood in Manhattan, New York, where she had to take several different jobs to survive in the economic crisis. Periods of unemployment were filled with long walks through the city. During that time, her eloquent writing and sharp analytic eye became to be noted. She married an architect and started writing for *Architectural Forum*. In this way, she developed a keen interest in cities and city life.

Jacobs published her best-known book in 1961, *The death and life of great American cities*. It was a protest against the megalomaniac plans of [Robert Moses](#), the city architect of New York. He wanted to build huge traffic gateways through the inner city to give maximal freedom to car transport. Jacobs was furious about these drawing board plans, and argued that a city is not created on maps but grows like a living organism. Cities are like bodies, and streets are the arteries. Through her publications and protest actions, Jacobs together with many others succeeded in stopping the building of the Lower Manhattan Expressway. She had been *wrestling with Moses*, and won.

In 1968, Jane Jacobs moved to Toronto as a protest against the war in Vietnam and to avoid military service for her sons. She was to stay in Toronto until her death in 2006. The situation Jacobs found in Toronto wasn't that different to New York. Plans existed to build the huge Spadina Expressway all the way through the centre of town. Jacobs became one of the most visible activists against these plans, and again she and her companions succeeded in stopping the further planning and building of this expressway.

In many cities across the Western world, acquiescence in the domination of car transport has gradually been replaced by an appreciation that other transport is equally relevant and car-free zones are a benefit for the city. Jacobs' role in this enlightenment was significant.

Several elements in Jacobs' vision on the city can be identified in our present day thinking. She argued that a mix of functions at the local level was key to the general attractiveness of a neighbourhood. If functions become geographically separated, we get neighbourhoods that are only partially used, e.g. places where people only come to sleep, places where people only shop, places that are only used during office hours. Jacobs argued that it was best to intermingle these functions in the same locality, stimulating continuous activity. Related to this Jacobs introduced the principle of *eyes on the street*. Encouraging plenty of people to use the city at different hours provides informal social control that enhances public safety. Robert Putnam was later to use and expand this notion in his work on social capital. Another idea from Jane Jacobs which remains popular is her saying that 'old ideas can sometimes use new buildings, but new ideas must use old buildings'. She meant that city development is not about destroying old buildings and constructing new ones, but about giving old buildings a fresh purpose. Numerous examples exist, such as [Tate Modern](#) in London, housed in an old power station.

To commemorate Jane Jacobs, several cities have installed Jane's walks: city tours 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 called urban safaris.

Extra

A [small video on Youtube](#) showed how local candidate Keith Wilkowski invites presidential candidate (at that time) Barack Obama to express his views on urban development and offers him "the most important book about rebuilding cities". Obama reacts immediately by

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This initiative also exists in Dutch, where it covers the history of social work in the Netherlands, in Flanders, and internationally.

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asking "is it Jane Jacobs?".

Notice that Joe Biden takes the book and glosses through it once Obama starts talking. He clearly didn't know Jacobs' work at the time.

Read more

-  Hospers, G.-J. (2006), [Jane Jacobs: her life and work](#), *European Planning Studies*, 14(6), 723-732.

Additional information

-  Jacobs, J. (1961), [The death and life of great American cities](#), New York: Vintage books.
- Jacobs, J. (2004), *Dark age ahead*, New York: Random house
-  Sparberg Alexiou, A. (2006), [Jane Jacobs, urban visionary](#), Toronto: HarperCollins
-  Flint, A. (2009), [Wrestling with Moses, how Jane Jacobs took on New York's master builder and transformed the American city](#), New York: Random House.
-  Goldsmith, S., & Elizabeth, L. (Eds.). (2010), [What We See, Advancing the Observations of Jane Jacobs](#), Oakland, CA New Village.

Links

- [Wikipedia about Jane Jacobs](#)

Study tasks

Click [here](#) to see the study tasks

