

THE FREEMAN

IDEAS ON LIBERTY

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Perspective

Jane Jacobs (1916–2006)

On the second page of her first book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), which has become a classic, Jane Jacobs wrote:

There is a wistful myth that if only we had enough money to spend—the figure is usually put at a hundred billion dollars—we could wipe out all our slums in ten years, reverse decay in the great, dull, gray belts that were yesterday's and day-before-yesterday's suburbs, anchor the wandering middle class and its wandering tax money, and perhaps even solve the traffic problem.

But look what we have built with the first several billions: Low-income projects that become worse centers of delinquency, vandalism and general social hopelessness than the slums they were supposed to replace. Middle-income housing projects which are truly marvels of dullness and regimentation, sealed against any buoyancy or vitality of city life. Luxury housing projects that mitigate their inanity, or try to, with a vapid vulgarity. Cultural centers that are unable to support a good bookstore. Civic centers that are avoided by everyone but bums, who have fewer choices of loitering place than others. Commercial centers that are lackluster imitations of standardized suburban chain-store shopping. Promenades that go from no place to nowhere and have no promenaders. Expressways that eviscerate great cities. This is not the rebuilding of cities. This is the sacking of cities.

Almost midway through the book, she wrote, "Although it is hard to believe, while looking at dull gray areas, or at housing projects or at civic centers, the fact is that big cities *are* natural generators of diversity and prolific incubators of new enterprises and ideas of all kinds. . . . The diversity, of whatever kind, that is generated by cities rests on the fact that in cities so many people are so close together, and among them contain so many different tastes, skills, needs, supplies, and bees in their bonnets. . . . The diversity of city enterprises includes all degrees

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of size, but great variety does mean a high proportion of small elements. A lively city scene is lively largely by virtue of its enormous collection of small elements.”

And therein lies a city’s greatness, as Jacobs spent so many years teaching us so eloquently. Through nearly a dozen books, Jacobs made an indelible contribution to our understanding of what makes cities vibrant and what makes them dull. She struck heroic blows in defense of the “underlying order of cities” and against the pretensions of social engineering. Alas, she died April 25 at age 89.

Although no advocate of *laissez faire*, Jacobs was critical of city planners because in seeking models, they looked to “anything but cities themselves.” But of course. Who needs city planners if they are going to base their plans on actual cities? How do you plan spontaneity? You can’t. So they brought “order by repression of all plans but the planners’.”

With her sharp eye she noticed that “In city after city, precisely the wrong areas, in the light of planning theory, are decaying. Less noticed, but equally significant, in city after city the wrong areas, in the light of planning theory, are refusing to decay.” Jacobs reminds me of the late Peter Bauer, the development economist. Like Bauer, Jacobs really cared about people, and because of this she was exquisitely sensitive to how they actually live and to the prerequisites for the fulfillment of *their* aspirations.

People are so much smarter living day to day in the microworld than they are designing the macroworld. The rationalism of the social engineer’s laboratory is a curse that has brought untold misery. A popular slogan goes, “Think globally, act locally.” Jacobs’s work suggests a better if less romantic one: “Take care of the micro and the macro will take care of itself.”

It is our deep loss that there will be no more from Jane Jacobs.

In France, when a proposed change in labor law would have made it easier to fire—and hence hire—young workers, students and union activists took to the streets in protest. Just a typical day in France? Maybe, but Anthony de Jasay analyzes the issues.

After 18 years, Alan Greenspan retired as chairman of the Federal Reserve at the beginning of 2006, ending the second-longest tenure for that position. Roger Garrison puts Greenspan’s central-banking era in perspective.

China continues to exhibit the bizarre combination of an ever-freer economic system and a highly centralized authoritarian political system. James Dorn looks at China’s prospects for full freedom.

As the scope of legislation expands in the United States, the police have jurisdiction over more and more of our lives. Earlier Americans were not so trusting of those who patrolled their streets. Becky Akers draws the contrast.

Why do so many people talk free enterprise, but practice statism? Our *Freeman* 50th-anniversary FEE Timely Classic this month is a ringing call for consistency by Fred DeArmond.

Ludwig von Mises stands as a giant in twentieth-century political economy, both for his economic theory and his defense of liberty. Richard Ebeling completes his two-part article on Mises’s contributions to freedom.

Here’s what our columnists have come up with: Richard Ebeling warns against predicting the future. Donald Boudreaux celebrates the wisdom of H. L. Mencken. Stephen Davies discusses underdevelopment. Russell Roberts sees a way to overcome the welfare state. And Joseph Stromberg, reading some recent bad-mouthing of the anti-federalists and Articles of Confederation, ripostes, “It Just Ain’t So!”

This issue’s reviewers have been busy assaying tomes on foreign aid, capitalism, water markets, and economic theory.

—Sheldon Richman
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