
Jane Jacobs

BY SANDY IKEDA

Jane Jacobs, one of the most important and influential public intellectuals of the twentieth century, died last April, a few days shy of her ninetieth birthday. The intellectual legacy she left for social theorists is as significant as that of anyone else of her generation.

She was the author of nine books, including *The Economy of Cities* (1969), *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (1984), *The Nature of Economies* (2000), and her most famous work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). She also published an article in the prestigious *American Economic Review* (“Strategies for Helping Cities,” September 1969). Most are surprised to learn that she held only a high-school diploma and began her book-writing well past the age of 40.

In her first book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs argued that the urban planners of her day, infected by the top-down collectivist ideology that was the conventional wisdom among nearly all intellectuals, ignored the perspective of ordinary people on the street. Her position, radical for its time, was that real cities don’t conform to one person’s or group’s aesthetic ideal because visual order is not the same as actual social order. She argued that complex social orders, such as a city, begin with ordinary people forming informal relations with one another in the neighborhoods in which they live, play, or work. Such networks emerge and thrive when people are able to have free and casual contact with acquaintances and strangers alike in the safety of streets, sidewalks, and other public spaces.

But most of that safety is achieved not by aggressive

formal policing but by voluntary recognition and informal enforcement of local norms. The key is for each neighborhood or city district to have sufficiently diverse attractions at different times of the day, what is sometimes today called “mixed uses,” so that there are lots of different people pursuing their own plans around the clock. The people who use the schools, places of worship, stores, offices, residences, workshops, theaters, and

restaurants located in the same vicinity help to make it interesting and attract still more people, who encourage still more diverse uses. When it is lively enough, an area becomes safe and feels safe, which, as Jacobs argued, is a bedrock attribute of any successful city. All this is done on its own.

Jacobs was not opposed to all government planning at the local level. She thought that zoning could be used to prevent too many large single uses in a given neighborhood, for example, several car dealerships or office buildings that would dominate and stultify the life of a street. For the same reason she argued that official municipal buildings, courthouses, and such should be strategically placed around the city, rather than collected into a single civic mall.

But to the end she remained skeptical of urban planners, even those such as the so-called New Urbanists, who have adopted some of her design principles but not her sensitivity to how the healthiest communities are



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those that arise spontaneously over time. Large-scale visions of the ideal city, modernist and postmodernist alike, that seek to impose a visual order or a unified aesthetic principle on *seemingly* chaotic social orders ignore what Jacobs called the “locality knowledge” of unwritten rules and unseen interpersonal relations possessed by the people who live, work, and play in a neighborhood. Actually implementing those visions, as for example Lincoln Center in New York or Brazil’s capital city of Brasilia, undermines or leaves no room for the foundations of the underlying social networks that generate safety, trust, and, ultimately, creativity in commerce and art in an unplanned but coordinated way.

Two of the books that followed represent a logical extension of Jacobs’s micro-based approach to understanding social order. Thus, as others have observed, if *Death and Life* shows how cities are composed of neighborhoods and districts, *The Economy of Cities* explains how cities depend on one another for economic development and expansion, and *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* explains that the global economy is a dynamic network of great cities, some living, some dying, that are interdependent to a degree that only now are we beginning to appreciate.

(I once asked her what she thought her most important contribution to economics was and she answered, “the discovery of the fractal”; that is, the idea associated with modern chaos theory that complexity exists symmetrically at different orders of magnitude—“a universe in a grain of sand.” What I think she meant was that the same kinds of emergent forces and complex network relations that support dynamic neighborhoods appear again at the level of the city, the region, and ultimately on a global scale.)

But more than this, these books, especially her second, represent a consistent development of the methodologically individualist approach she takes in her first. Nearly 40 years after *Death and Life* came *The Nature of Economies*. In less than 200 pages Jacobs provides a distillation of her economic framework, written engagingly and with characteristic originality in the form of a dialogue among friends. She bashes standard economic theory, which is based, as she puts it, on a simplistically static “plantation mentality.” Those familiar with the economics of Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, and Israel

Kirzner will find not only an astonishing overlap between Jacobs’s paradigm and contemporary Austrian economics but also a richer and more insightful set of analytical tools. To take just one example, I believe her analysis of what she calls “dynamic stability” is superior to the current Austrians’ analysis of the analogous concept of the “market process.”

In 1992 Jacobs published what is perhaps her most libertarian book, *Systems of Survival*, although she always disliked being ideologically pigeonholed. In it she argues that there is a set of virtues, or system of survival, appropriate to action in the market, the “commercial syndrome,” that is distinct from that of government, the “guardian syndrome.” The former syndrome includes: shun force, be honest, and collaborate easily with strangers and aliens; the latter: shun trading, exert prowess, and deceive for the sake of the task, among others.

She argues that as long as the agents who operate in these two spheres consistently adopt the systems appropriate to their respective areas of activity, especially when they have both market and governmental roles, things will be okay. Mixing the two, as when the government tries to operate according to business practices or when private persons attempt to use political power to achieve private ends, creates what she calls “monstrous hybrids” that result in moral confusion and contradictions.

Warmth, Humanity, Common Sense

When I first met her a few years ago, Jacobs had just published her latest book, *Dark Age Ahead* (2003) and was planning to write at least two more. Besides the common-sense genius of her ideas, what stands out in my memory is her warmth and profound humanity, which in a sense I think grounds all of her writings and activism. It is, for example, the perspective of flesh-and-blood people that serves as the starting point of her explanation of how cities and civilizations work. From the perceptions of ordinary persons emerge the social ties that promote safety, trust, and ultimately dramatic economic development and social change. Casual, informal contact, especially among relative strangers in public spaces, is for Jacobs the small change from which a city’s wealth is built.

As an economist working in the tradition of Mises,

Hayek, and Kirzner, what have I learned from Jane Jacobs? In short: Densely populated settlements that embody a wide diversity of both skills and tastes are the incubators of dynamic social development and entrepreneurial discovery—Density + Diversity → Development and Discovery—and that government intervention tends to undermine the free air of cities in which even ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

Jane Jacobs was no ordinary person, however. She managed through her books to dramatically change the face of the urban landscape. But she was merely preaching what she practiced. Her writings reflect not only her

reading and seeing, but also her doing. Among other accomplishments as an activist, she and other community leaders in the 1960s managed to stop a federally funded project to bulldoze a freeway through what is today one of the most vibrant districts in Lower Manhattan. And this was against one of the most intimidating figures in New York history, the “power broker” Robert Moses.

Although we will sorely miss the two books she had yet to write, those she left behind offer bold ideas to build on and to critique. Her humanistic approach to doing social science continues to inspire activists and intellectuals across the ideological spectrum. 

The Wisdom of Jane Jacobs

“[N]obody, including the planning commission, is capable of comprehending places within the city other than in either generalized or fragmented fashion. . . . They do not even have the means of gathering and comprehending the intimate, many-sided information required, partly because of their own unsuitable structural inadequacies in other departments. Here is an interesting thing about coordination both of information and of action in cities, and it is the crux of the matter: The principal coordination needed comes down to coordination among different services within localized places. This is at once the most difficult kind of coordination, and the most necessary.”

“But automobiles are hardly inherent destroyers of cities. If we would stop telling ourselves fairy tales about the suitability and charm of nineteenth-century streets for horse-and-buggy traffic, we would see that the internal combustion engine, as it came on the scene, was potentially an excellent instrument for abetting city intensity, and at the same time for liberating cities from one of their noxious liabilities.”

—*The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961)

“But I propose to argue that these grave and real deficiencies are necessary to economic development and thus are exactly what make cities uniquely valuable to economic life. By this, I do not mean that cities are economically valuable in spite of their inefficiency and impracticality but rather because they are inefficient and impractical.”

—*The Economy of Cities* (1969)

“Nations are political and military entities, and so are blocs of nations. But it doesn’t necessarily follow from this that they are also the basic, salient entities of economic life or that they are particularly useful for probing the mysteries of economic structure, the reasons for rise and decline of wealth.”

“To rulers who want to know and control, as far as they can, what is going to be produced five years in the future and where it is going to be produced and how, and then five years beyond that, and so on, volatile inter-city trade, forever unpredictably and opportunistically changing in content, represents sheer chaos. Of course it is not chaos. It is a complex form of order, akin to organic forms of order typical of all living things, in which instabilities build up (in this case, funds of potentially replaceable imports) followed by corrections, both the instabilities and the corrections being the very stuff of life processes themselves.”

—*Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (1984)