



CHAPTER 6: CURRICULUM: ART/ARCHITECTURE

Jane Jacobs



There is something compelling and exciting about cities that makes many of us love (and some of us dread) them. They are full of bright attractions, intriguing strangers and endless, unimaginable possibilities. Yet despite a great migration towards city living in the modern era, we haven't quite got cities figured out. Some parts of them are full of delightful surprises, and others are dreadfully boring; or worse, dangerous. One of the most instrumental people in understanding how urban areas work was a woman who spent her life explaining just how complex and vital cities really are.

Jane Jacobs was born in 1916 in Scranton, Pennsylvania to a doctor and a nurse. As a young girl, she disliked school, which bored her, but liked telling her imaginary friend, Benjamin Franklin, about the world around her and why it was built the way it

was. As she explained it, Franklin “was interested in lofty things, but also in nitty-gritty, down-to-earth details, such as why the alley we were walking through wasn’t paved, and who would pave it if it were paved.” This kind of thinking would later make her a great writer about practical ideas for a less imaginary audience.

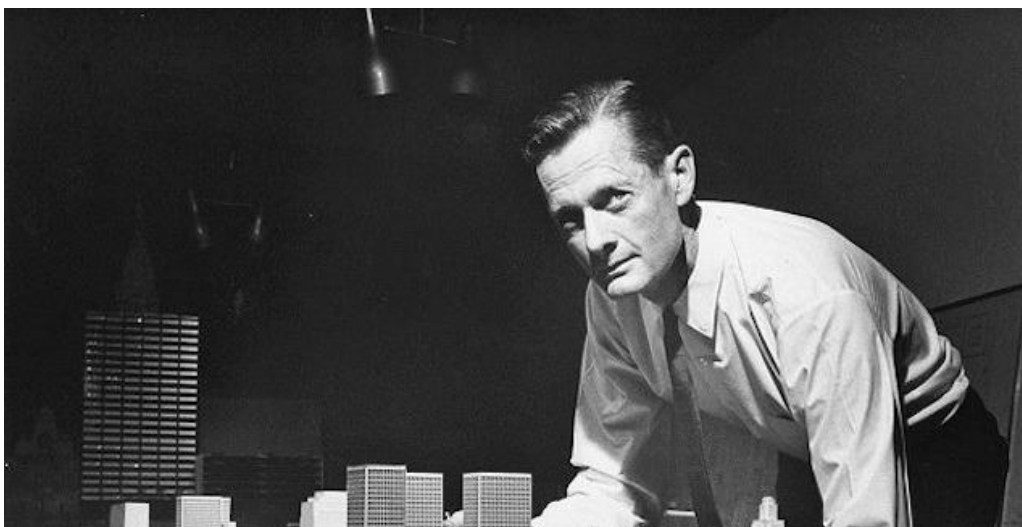
After graduating from high school and briefly working as an unpaid assistant at a newspaper, she moved with her sister to New York City during the height of the Great Depression. Looking for jobs, Jacobs liked to choose a different subway stop to get off at each day, and thus she discovered a new neighbourhood each time. One day she got off at the Christopher Street stop in Greenwich Village and fell in love with the tree-lined, winding streets. The sisters decided to move there.



In New York, Jacobs worked first as a secretary for a candy factory and later as a freelance writer and journalist for several magazines. She also took classes in various topics at the School of General Education at Columbia University, refusing to conform to any undergraduate curriculum. (Fortunately, she would always explain, her grades were too low for the undergraduate colleges to accept her, and so she was left alone to get an education.)

During the Second World War, Jacobs worked for the Office of War Information and then the Department of Defence's magazine, *Amerika*. There she met her husband, Robert, an architect, and married him a month later. They would have three children.

After the war, Jacobs switched to working for another magazine, *Architectural Forum*. She was assigned to write about a new housing development in Philadelphia designed by Edmund Bacon. Bacon, like many architects at the time, wanted to make American cities hubs of modernity, encircled with freeways that would bring thousands of automobiles and trucks through the city, and crowned with impressive, towering skyscrapers. Such projects were very well funded by the government and considered enormously important (Bacon himself would grace the covers of *Time* Magazine for his contributions).





Bacon with models of some of his high-rises around 1960

Yet when Jacobs went to see the developments in Philadelphia and interview Bacon, she decided she didn't like his vision much at all. She found, for example, that the projects looked sleek and modern, but the streets around them were empty compared to older streets. People didn't actually want to be around the housing projects, much less live in them. Jacobs decided that the problem with much of modern architecture, and particularly designs like Bacon's, was that they bore no relation to what people actually needed. Instead, too many projects were simply the result of government funding and overzealous "reformers" who really sought to line their pockets or build giant, impressive, but ultimately useless, structures. Cities, in short, were being ruined by top-down planning.

Jacobs surprised her editors with a negative story about the Philadelphia housing project. Nevertheless, her criticism was well received, and in 1956 she was invited to lecture at Harvard University. There she spoke about the foolish and even ridiculous plans for urban renewal underway in American cities, urging famous architects to "respect – in the deepest sense – strips of chaos that have a weird wisdom of their own not yet encompassed in our concept of urban order." Later, she wrote a related piece, 'Downtown is for People', for *Fortune* magazine, emphasising the flaws of many redevelopment plans. "They will have all the attributes of a well-kept, dignified cemetery," she warned.

Impressed by her work, The New School, a research institute in New York City, gave Jacobs a position, while the Rockefeller Foundation gave her a grant to write a critical study of urban planning in America, which would result in *The Death And Life of Great American Cities* (1961). The book was an extended criticism of modernist, nationalist planners and of one architect in particular, Robert Moses (1898-1981).

rationalist planners and on one architect in particular, Robert Moses (1888-1981). Moses had worked his way up through elite connections to become one of the biggest urban planners of the New York City area, cleverly using money from toll roads to fund parks, pools, bridges and highways. His designs can still be seen throughout the city.

Jacobs wrote that Moses and his fellow designers were like children playing with blocks. They made large towers and then cried: “look what I made!”, not realising that what they had made was a social mess. In Jacob’s view, their urban planning theories about the necessity of open space were simply pseudoscience.



The Patterson Houses in New York City, a housing development designed by Robert Moses

Why, then were such terrible projects built? Because they were the result of giant, theoretically efficient government projects that can be easily and simply financed. Such projects are top-down, or designed by a few elite people, speculating on the needs of those who will actually use them. Most of all, they lack charm and originality, which Jacobs believed was good for the soul. Of one building in San Francisco she wrote, “A look at this Buddhist Temple is better than a trip to the psychoanalyst.”

Finally, all this was a self-perpetuating social problem in Jacob’s view because the idea that certain areas with old buildings or crowded streets are slums had been absorbed by bankers, who then didn’t invest money in these areas for the minor restorations that might actually improve city life.



Jacobs was upset that bankers wouldn’t lend to districts like Boston’s North End, which was clearly full of promise

In her book, Jacobs offered an alternative to the gigantic and unfriendly designs of architects like Moses. She wrote that the best way to see what a city needs is to look at the way people actually use it. “If you get out and walk,” she wrote, “you see all sorts of other clues. Why is the hub of downtown such a mixture of things? Why do office workers on New York’s handsome Park Avenue turn off to Lexington or Madison

Avenue at the first corner they reach? Why is a good steak house usually in an old building? Why are short blocks apt to be busier than long ones?”

Jacobs suggested that what ultimately makes cities successful is their ‘diversity’, their varied resources and the closeness with which these very different people, businesses, and communities are knit together. Ultimately, Jacobs argued for a city that was meant for people, one that protected their social and economic needs, one that made them happy and comfortable, and one that brought out what people really like about cities. “In short,” she insisted on asking, “will the city be any fun?” A “fun” city, in Jacob’s view, needs all of the four “generators of diversity.” These can be rephrased as guidelines for city planning:

1. Cities should be like ecosystems



A glance at Stockholm reminds us of the many ways in which city dwellers are connected

Jacobs described the ideal city as having “mixed primary uses,” meaning that it was both residential and commercial in any given area, and ideally that each block had activity throughout the day. This is because movement and involvement is what makes cities dynamic, desirable places to live. Cities are almost like the lunch hour of life on earth: they are where all the busy, frenzied, social exchanges take place and new relationships are formed. (And indeed, one of Jacob’s main arguments for why areas need multiple kinds of uses is that an area with, say, both office buildings and theatres supplies restaurants with both lunch and dinner business.) In order for cities to

supplies restaurants with both lunch and dinner business, in order for cities to appropriately capitalise on their potential, different kinds of businesses and people need to be living in close proximity, so that exchanges can happen at all hours of the day.

2. City blocks should be small

Shorter blocks give people more opportunities to turn corners. This is good because it allows them more paths between one point and another, and more opportunities to discover new places and meet people. Shorter blocks also mean more ground-floor spaces for businesses.



Jacobs thought highly of San Francisco's Maiden Lane for its short blocks and diverse shops and businesses

3. There should be a mix of old and new buildings

Because old buildings have already paid off the costs of construction, their rent is lower. This allows poorer people and companies to have places to live and work, rather than forcing them out as in a neighbourhood-wide renovation. A few newer buildings can then be permitted in order to draw in wealthier people and businesses. Jacobs believed that each neighbourhood should have both, preventing areas from simply being “rich” or “poor,” and encouraging people of very different backgrounds to live together.

4. Cities should be dense

Architects like Moses and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, who was better known as Le Corbusier (1887-1965), argued for the benefits of wide open parks and boulevards. But Jacobs disagreed profoundly. In her view, streets should be places for people to encounter one another, to literally and metaphorically run into new things. Enormous plazas or business districts ruin this possibility. Jacobs insisted that in redesigning cities “the whole point is to make the streets more surprising, more compact, more variegated, and busier than before – not less so.”



Jacobs also loved San Francisco's Union Square because it was designed to encourage continual activity

Moreover, Jacobs believed that density was part of how cities remained safe spaces. In dense neighbourhoods with relatively short buildings, she argued, everyone knows each other and they know what is and isn't normal (this knowledge is a form of what she called “social capital”). As a result, the neighbourhood has what Jacobs termed “eyes on the street,” an innate communal awareness and safety mechanism. In a city with giant skyscrapers, Jacobs wrote, “nobody was going to have to be his brother's keeper anymore.” Such urban designs would destroy the very nature of cities, their real lifeblood of sociability and interdependence.

Jacobs was not the first person to have such ideas, but she was one of the people who expressed them most clearly and succinctly. She was an especially fierce opponent of urban development in her own area of New York City, Greenwich Village, during the 1950s and 1960s. Robert Moses and his plans had made their way there, hoping to tear down much of the neighbourhood and convert it to a new highway, the Lower Manhattan Expressway. The project included “slum clearance,” which meant the removal of hundreds of small business and family homes, all to be replaced with high rises. Jacob’s own home, which she had carefully renovated with her husband (even adding a small garden) was also slated for destruction. Consequently, Jacobs recruited a number of high profile figures like Margaret Mead and Eleanor Roosevelt to resist this change. With the support of the community and the media, Moses’s plans were eventually scrapped.



Jacobs holds up documentary evidence at a press conference about West Greenwich Village

Jacobs, who had become a local hero, was arrested in April 1968, after being charged with inciting a riot at a public hearing about the project. Though she was largely

exonerated of her charges, she moved shortly thereafter to Canada. Her decision to leave the US was based partly on her growing frustration contending with the City of New York, and partly to avoid her teenage sons being conscripted during the Vietnam War. Jacobs quickly assumed a similar role in Toronto, becoming a vociferous figure in blocking projects for an expressway (one of her common themes was to ask whether cities were built for people or cars), and campaigning for the regeneration of the St. Lawrence neighbourhood, which has been widely acclaimed as a great success in city planning.



Jacobs, on her bike, fought against designing cities for cars

Jacobs was a woman of strong political convictions. During her lifetime she not only advocated for better urban planning, but also for equal pay for women and the right to unionise. She turned down honorary degrees from almost 30 institutions, always giving credit to the people working the protest lines instead. *Dark Age Ahead*, her final book, published shortly before she died in 2006, is a pessimistic treatise on the decline of North American civilisation, which she saw as endangered by excessive

capitalism and too little emphasis on education and community. She was, in short, always working to defend modern life from ‘reforms’ that actually made life worse. Her work serves to remind us of the vital role that cities play in promoting economic innovation, and of the importance of urban design in fostering inclusive and adaptable communities.



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