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Commentary

The Death & Life of Great American Cities, by Jane Jacobs

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City Planning and Urban Realities¹

American Intellectuals have begun to rediscover the city. Not since the days of the muckrakers has there been so much interest in local politics and in the “physical” features of the city—the problems of slums and urban renewal, middle-income housing, the lack of open space, the plight of the down-town business district, and the ever-increasing traffic congestion. The new concern with questions usually relegated to architects and planners has been stimulated especially by two recent changes in city life. The rapid influx of Negro and Puerto Rican immigrants has created slums in some neighborhoods where intellectuals live, forcing them to choose between fighting for neighborhood improvement or joining the rest of the middle class in flight. At the same time, the postwar building boom—in office buildings as well as residential projects—is altering and destroying some favorite intellectual haunts like New York’s Greenwich Village and Chicago’s Near North Side.

This change has provided new material for one of the basic themes of the ongoing critique of American society—the destruction of tradition by mass-produced modernity. During the 1950’s, the critique centered on the ravages produced by mass culture and by suburbia. In the 1960’s it is likely to focus on the destruction of traditional urbanity by new forms of city building.

Many of the ideas behind the new urban critique have come from the writings of Jane Jacobs, an associate editor of *Architectural Forum*. Now she has put her ideas into a book which seems destined to spearhead the attack, just as another book by an editor of another Luce magazine—I refer to William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man*—spearheaded the attack on suburbia. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is a

thoughtful and imaginative tract on behalf of the traditional city, an analysis of the principles that make it desirable, an attack on the city planner—whom Mrs. Jacobs takes to be the agent of its transformation—and a program of new planning principles that she believes will create vital cities and vital neighborhoods.

The vital neighborhood—and vitality is Jane Jacobs' central aim—should be diverse in its use of land and in the people who inhabit it. Every district should be a mixture of residences, business, and industry; of old buildings and new; of young people and old; of rich and poor. Mrs. Jacobs argues that people want diversity, and in neighborhoods where it exists, they strike roots and participate in community life, thus generating vitality. When diversity is lacking, when neighborhoods are scourged by what she calls the great blight of dullness, residents who are free to leave do so, and are replaced by the poverty-stricken, who have no other choice, and the areas soon turn into slums.

According to Mrs. Jacobs, the most important component of vitality is an abundant street life. Neighborhoods that are designed to encourage people to use the streets, or to watch what goes on in them, make desirable quarters for residence, work, and play. Moreover, where there is street life, there is little crime, for the people on the street and in the buildings which overlook it watch and protect each other, thus discouraging criminal acts more efficiently than police patrols.

The abundance of street life, Mrs. Jacobs argues, is brought about by planning principles which are diametrically opposed to those practiced by orthodox city planners. First, a district must have several functions, so that its buildings and streets are used at all times of the day, and do not (like Wall Street) stand empty in off-hours. The area should be built up densely with structures close to the street and low enough in number of stories to encourage both street life and street watching. Blocks should be short, for corners invite stores, and these bring people out into the streets for shopping and socializing. Sidewalks should be wide enough for pavement socials and children's play; streets should be narrow enough to prevent intensive and high-speed automobile traffic, for the automobile frightens away pedestrians. Small parks and playgrounds are desirable, but large open spaces—especially those intended only for decoration and not for use—not only deaden a district by separating people from each other but also invite criminals. Buildings should be both old and new, expensive and cheap, for low rents invite diversity in the form of new industries, shops, and artists' studios.

Neighborhoods which are designed on the basis of these principles—and which provide Mrs. Jacobs with concrete evidence for her argument—are areas like New York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's Telegraph Hill (where residences of all types, prices, and ages mix with small business, industry, and cultural facilities), and low-income ethnic quarters like Boston's North End and Chicago's Back-of-the-Yards district

The new forms of city building, Mrs. Jacobs says, discourage street life, and create only dullness. High-rise apartment buildings, whether in public housing or private luxury flats, are standardized, architecturally undistinguished, and institutional in appearance if not operation. They house homogeneous populations, segregating people by income, race, and often even age, and isolating them in purely residential quarters. Elevators, and the separation of the building from the street by a moat of useless open space, frustrate maternal supervision of children, thus keeping children off the street. Often there are no real streets at all, because prime access is by car. Nor is there any reason for people to use the streets, for instead of large

numbers of small stores fronting on a street, there are shopping centers containing a small number of large stores—usually chains—each of which has a monopoly in its line. The small merchant, who watches the street and provides a center for neighborhood communication and social life, is absent here. In such projects, the residents have no place to meet each other, and there is no spontaneous neighborhood life. As a result, people have no feeling for their neighbors, and no identification with the area. In luxury buildings, door-men watch the empty streets and discourage the criminal visitor, but in public housing projects, there are no doormen, and the interior streets and elevators invite rape, theft, and vandalism. Areas like this are blighted by dullness from the start, and are destined to become slums before their time.

The major responsibility for the new forms of city building Mrs. Jacobs places on the city planner and on two theories of city form: Ebenezer Howard's low-density Garden City, and Le Corbusier's high-rise apartment complex, the Radiant City. The planner is an artist who wants to restructure life by principles applicable only to art. By putting these principles into action, he is methodically destroying the features that produce vitality. His planning theories have also influenced the policy makers, and especially realtors, bankers, and other sources of mortgage funds. As a result, they refuse to lend money to older but still vital areas which are trying to rehabilitate themselves, thus encouraging further deterioration of the structures until they are ripe for slum clearance, redevelopment with projects—and inevitable dullness.

Anyone who has ever wandered through New York's Greenwich Village or Boston's North End is bound to respond to Mrs. Jacobs' conception of a vital city. Her analysis of the mechanics of street life, and of the ways in which people use buildings, streets, and vacant spaces in such areas is eye-opening. The principles of neighborhood planning which derive from her observations—she is herself a resident of Greenwich Village—are far more closely attuned to how people actually live than are those of orthodox city planning. It would be easy to succumb to the charm of the neighborhoods she describes, and to read her book only as a persuasive appeal for their retention. But since Mrs. Jacobs is out to reform all of city planning, it is necessary to examine her central ideas more closely.

Her argument is built on three fundamental assumptions: that people desire diversity; that diversity is ultimately what makes cities live and that the lack of it makes them die; and that buildings, streets, and the planning principles on which they are based, shape human behavior. The first two of these assumptions are not entirely supported by the facts of the areas she describes. The last assumption, which she shares with the planners whom she attacks, might be called the physical fallacy, and it leads her to ignore the social, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to vitality or dullness. It also blinds her to less visible kinds of neighborhood vitality and to the true causes of the city's problems.

Ethnic neighborhoods like the North End, or the Italian and Irish sections of Greenwich Village, are not diverse, but quite homogeneous in population as well as in building type. The street life of these areas stems not so much from their physical character as from the working-class culture of their inhabitants. In this culture, the home is reserved for the family, so that much social life takes place outdoors. Also, children are not kept

indoors as frequently as in the middle class, and since they are less closely supervised in their play, they too wind up in the streets.

If such districts are near the downtown area, they may attract intellectuals, artists, and bohemian types, who also tend to spend a good deal of time outside their apartments, contributing further to the street life. The street life, the small stores that traditionally serve ethnic groups and other cultural minorities, and the area's exotic flavor then draw visitors and tourists, whose presence helps to make the district even livelier. The resulting blend of unusual cultures makes for a highly visible kind of vitality. It helps if the district is old and basically European in architecture, but traditional-looking front-ages can be superimposed by today's clever builder.

In other working-class neighborhoods, especially those far away from the down-town area, street life is also abundant, but the people and the stores are neither ethnic nor esoteric. In middle-class neighborhoods, there is no street life, for all social activities take place inside the home, children play less often on the sidewalks, and the street is used only for transportation. Such neighborhoods look dull, notably to the visitor, and therefore they seem to be less vital than their ethnic and bohemian counterparts. But visibility is not the only measure of vitality, and areas that are uninteresting to the visitor may be quite vital to the people who live in them.

This possibility must also be considered for the new luxury and middle-class housing projects. Since they are largely occupied by childless middle-class people, they look even duller than other areas, just as their newness makes them seem more standardized to the visitor than older areas in which the initial homogeneity of buildings has been altered by conversion or just covered by the accretions of dirt and age. It is clear that we need to learn how residents live in such projects before we can be sure of the validity of Mrs. Jacobs' charges.

In proposing that cities be planned to stimulate an abundant street life, Mrs. Jacobs not only overestimates the power of planning in shaping behavior, but she in effect demands that middle-class people adopt working-class styles of family life, child rearing, and sociability. The truth is that the new forms of residential building—in suburb as well as city—are not products of orthodox planning theory, but expressions of the middle-class culture which guides the housing market, and which planners also serve. Often the planners serve it too loyally, and they ignore the needs of a working-class population. Thus, Jane Jacobs' criticism is most relevant to the planning of public housing projects, for its middle-class designers have made no provision for the street life that these particular tenants probably want.

But middle-class people, especially those raising children, do not want working-class—or even bohemian—neighborhoods. They do not want the visible vitality of a North End, but rather the quiet and the privacy obtainable in low-density neighborhoods and elevator apartment houses. Little of their social life involves neighbors, and their friends may be scattered all over the metropolitan area, as are the commercial and recreational facilities which they frequent. For this, they want a car, expressways, and all the freedom of

movement that expressways create when properly planned. Middle-class people tend to value status over convenience, and thus they reject neighborhoods in which residence and business are mixed—or in which there is any real diversity in population. Having no love for walking or for riding public transit, they have brought shopping centers into being. Nor does their life style leave much room for the small merchant. Since their tastes are no longer ethnic but not yet esoteric, they prefer the supermarket to the small store, for it does provide more choice—if only among prosaic items—and its wider aisles facilitate gossip with neighbors.

One can quarrel with some of these tastes, but the fact is that the areas about which Mrs. Jacobs writes were built for a style of life which is going out of fashion with the large majority of Americans who are free to choose their place of residence. The North End and the Back-of-the-Yards district are not holding their young people, who tend to move to the suburbs as soon as they have children to raise. Even in Europe, the old working-class districts invariably empty out when prosperity reaches the blue-collar workers.

The middle-class visitor does not see these cultural changes. Nor does he see that the houses in these traditional districts are often hard to maintain, that parking is often impossible, that noise and dirt are ever-present, that some of the neighbors watch too much, and that not all the shop-keepers are kind. Because the traditional districts are so different from his own neighborhood, and because he is a visitor, he sees only their charm and excitement. He therefore is most understandably reluctant to see them disappear.

But for the planning of cities, the visitor's wishes are less important than the inhabitant's. One cannot design all neighborhoods for a traditional style of life if only a few people want to live this way. Nevertheless, areas like the North End and the Village are worth saving. They provide low-rent housing for people with low incomes; they give pleasure to visitors, and may even attract tourists; and they are appealing reminders of our European heritage and our pre-automobile past. The city would be a poorer place without them.

Even so, the future of the American city is not going to be determined by the life or death of the North Ends and the Greenwich Villages. The real problems lie elsewhere. Mrs. Jacobs' concentration on these areas diverts her from properly analyzing the more fundamental problems, even while she makes some highly pertinent comments. This can best be illustrated by examining her discussion of slums and her proposals for urban renewal.

As noted earlier, she argues that slums are caused ultimately by lack of diversity. Homogeneous and dull areas are deserted by residents who have the resources to go elsewhere, and are replaced by people who have no other choice, and who, for reasons of poverty and racial discrimination, are forced to live in overcrowded conditions. She suggests that if these areas could be made more diverse, the initial occupants might not leave, and owners would then be able to rehabilitate the buildings.

This analysis is too simple. People leave such areas not to seek diversity but to practice new life styles, and additional diversity would not persuade them to stay. It is true that some areas occupied by non-mobile ethnic groups, notably the North End and Back-of-the-Yards, hold their residents longer than other areas. It is

also true that these areas are not slums; they are low-rent districts, and Mrs. Jacobs is right in insisting on the distinction. Slums (she calls them perpetual slums) are areas in which housing and other facilities are physically and socially harmful to the inhabitants and to the larger community, primarily because of overcrowding. Low-rent areas (which she calls unslumming slums) may look equally dilapidated to the casual observer—and planners sometimes base their decisions only on casual observation—but they are not overcrowded and they are not harmful. Mrs. Jacobs criticizes urban renewal—and rightly so—for confusing such areas with real slums, and clearing them needlessly with grievous hurt to their inhabitants. She proposes that they can be rehabilitated by providing home and tenement owners with easier access to mortgage funds, and by planning for greater diversity. This proposal has merit, although landlords probably would not undertake as much rehabilitation as she envisages unless the area were attracting middle-class people with quasi-bohemian tastes—as in the case of the Village and Philadelphia's West Rittenhouse Square district.

But such neighborhoods—and purely working-class ones like the North End—are numerically unimportant in most cities. It is also no coincidence that they are occupied almost exclusively by whites. Their improvement cannot solve the problem of the real slums. These slums are not caused by dullness—they are often similar in plan and architecture to low-rent areas—but by the overcrowding of buildings already old by poverty-stricken and otherwise deprived non-whites, who have no other place to go. To be sure, such people usually move into areas being deserted by their previous residents, but even when the older residents are not leaving, the same thing can happen. Chicago's Hyde Park district was not being deserted by its middle-class residents, but portions of it became a slum because the Negro Black Belt to the north simply could not accommodate any more migrants.

Once an area becomes an overcrowded slum, rehabilitating the structures is no solution. The crucial step in rehabilitation is the uncrowding of the buildings. But slum structures are owned by absentee landlords who have no incentive to rehabilitate because they reap immense profits from over-crowding. Even if they were willing to convert rooming houses back to apartments, most of the slum dwellers who would then have to move would not be able to do so. They cannot afford to pay the rentals demanded for an apartment, and since they are non-white, other districts of the city are unwilling to accept them even if there are vacant apartments, which is rarely the case.

The slums cannot be emptied unless and until there is more low-cost housing elsewhere. Private enterprise cannot afford to build such housing. The traditional solution has been to rely on public housing, but thanks to the opposition of the real-estate men and the private builders, it has never been supplied in large enough amounts. Even then, it had to be located in the slums, because other city districts were unwilling to give over vacant or industrial land. In order to minimize clearance, public housing has had to resort to elevator buildings, and in order to protect itself from the surrounding slums, it has constructed fenced-in projects. In order to satisfy its powerful opponents that it was not wasting tax money on ne'er-do-wells, it has had to impose institutional restrictions on its hapless occupants, and in order to avoid competition with the private housing market, it has been forced to expel tenants whose income rises above a certain level.

Mrs. Jacobs suggests that the government stop building public housing, and instead subsidize builders to make their units available to low-income tenants. This is a useful suggestion, and one that has been

proposed by planners and public housing advocates before. But earlier attempts to scatter low-income housing in other ways have been rejected by the recipient neighborhoods. Mrs. Jacobs' scheme has more merit than some earlier ones, but I doubt whether middle-class areas in the city and suburbs will make room for the large number of non-white poor who need to be taken out of overcrowded slums.

The sad fact is that until we abolish poverty and discrimination—or until the middle class becomes tolerant of poor non-white neighbors—the government is probably going to have to build more low-income ghettos.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Jacobs' anger with the planners is so intense that she blames them for the sins of private enterprise and the middle class, and she is eager to return functions to private enterprise which it has shown itself unable and unwilling to perform. She also forgets that private enterprise—acting through the well-heeled builder and realtor lobby in Washington—is responsible for some of the more obnoxious features of the urban renewal laws, and for hamstringing public housing in the ways I have indicated. Her blanket indictment of planners detracts from the persuasiveness of her other proposals, and antagonizes people who might agree with her on many points. More important, it is likely to win her the support of those who profit from the status quo, of the nostalgic who want to bring back the city and the society of the 18th and 19th centuries, and of the ultra-right-wing groups who oppose planning—and all government action—whether good or bad.

Orthodox city planning deserves considerable criticism for its anti-urban bias, for giving higher priority to buildings, plans, and design concepts than to the needs of people, and for trying to transform ways of living before even examining how people live or want to live. But not all the planners think this way—actually, much of the theory Mrs. Jacobs rejects was developed by architects and architecturally-trained planners—and some of her ideas have in fact been set forth by planners themselves.

No one, it is true, has stated these ideas as forcefully as she, or integrated them into an over-all approach before. The neighborhoods with which she is most concerned cannot serve as models for future planning, but the way in which she has observed them, the insights she has derived, and the principles she has inferred from her observations can—and ought to be—adapted for use in planning cities and suburbs in the future. Her book is a pathbreaking achievement, and because it is so often right, I am all the more disappointed by the fact that it is also so often wrong.

Footnotes

¹ A review of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, by Jane Jacobs (Random House, 458 pp., \$5.95).

About the Author

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