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Jane Jacobs, Urban Activist, Is Dead at 89

By [DOUGLAS MARTIN](#)

Jane Jacobs, the writer and thinker who brought penetrating eyes and ingenious insight to the sidewalk ballet of her own Greenwich Village street and came up with a book that challenged and changed the way people view cities, died today in Toronto, where she lived. She was 89.

She died at a Toronto hospital, said a distant cousin, Lucia Jacobs, who gave no specific cause of death.

In her book "Death and Life of Great American Cities," written in 1961, Ms. Jacobs's enormous achievement was to transcend her own withering critique of 20th-century urban planning and propose radically new principles for rebuilding cities. At a time when both common and inspired wisdom called for bulldozing slums and opening up city space, Ms. Jacobs's prescription was ever more diversity, density and dynamism — in effect, to crowd people and activities together in a jumping, joyous urban jumble.

Ms. Jacobs's thesis was supported and enlarged by her deep, eclectic reading. But most compelling was her description of the everyday life she witnessed from her home above a candy store at 555 Hudson Street.

She puts out her garbage, children go to school, the drycleaner and barber open their shops, housewives come out to chat, longshoremen visit the local bar, teenagers return from school and change to go out on dates, and another day is played out. Sometimes odd things happen: a bagpiper shows up on a February night, and delighted listeners gather around. Whether neighbors or strangers, people are safer because they are almost never alone.

"People who know well such animated city streets will know how it is," Ms. Jacobs wrote. "I am afraid people who do not will always have it a little wrong in their heads, like the old prints of rhinoceroses made from travelers descriptions of rhinoceroses."

Some critics used adjectives like "triumphant" and "seminal" to describe the book. Wolf Von Eckardt, writing in The Washington Post, observed that it had "proved more important than all the statistical studies of all our myriad urban centers."

Others, not a few of whom had an ax to grind, were less kind. Lewis Mumford, the eminent critic and social historian whom Ms. Jacobs eviscerated in the book, suggested in a review in The New Yorker that she had displayed "esthetic philistinism with a vengeance."

Lloyd Rodwin, a professor at [Harvard](#) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, writing in The

New York Times Book Review in 1961, praised the book as "a brashly impressive tour de force" but saw "transparent gaps and blind spots, such as her blasé misunderstandings of theory."

The battles she ignited are still being fought, and the criticism was perhaps inevitable, given that such an ambitious work was produced by somebody who had not finished college, much less become an established professional in the field. Indisputably, the book was as radically challenging to conventional thinking as Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," which helped engender the environmental movement, would be the next year, and Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique," which deeply affected perceptions of relations between the sexes, would be in 1963.

Like these two writers, Ms. Jacobs was able to summon a freshness of perspective. Some dismissed it as amateurism, but to many others it was a point of view that made new ideas not only thinkable but suddenly and eminently reasonable.

"When an entire field is headed in the wrong direction, when the routine application of mainstream thinking has produced disastrous results as I think was true of planning and urban policy in the 1950's, then it probably took someone from outside to point out the obvious," Alan Ehrenhalt wrote in 2001 in *Planning*, the magazine of the American Planning Association .

"That is what Jane Jacobs did 40 years ago" he said.

Ms. Jacob's critique of the nation's cities is often grouped with the work of other writers who in the 1960's shook the foundations of American society: Paul Goodman's attack on schooling; [Ralph Nader's](#) barrage against the auto industry, and Malcolm X's grim tour of America's racial divide, among others.

Ms. Jacobs did not limit her impact to words. In 1961, she and other screaming protesters were removed by the police from a City Planning Commission hearing after they had leapt from their seats and rushed the podium. In 1968, she was arrested on charges of second-degree riot and criminal mischief in disrupting a public meeting on the construction of an expressway, which would have sliced across Lower Manhattan and displaced hundreds of families and businesses. The police said she had tried to tear up the stenographer's transcript tape.

Ms. Jacobs moved to Toronto in 1968 out of opposition to the Vietnam War and to shield her two draft-age sons from military duty. But she quickly enlisted in Toronto's urban battles. No sooner had she arrived than she led a battle to stop a freeway there.

Ms. Jacobs became a beloved intellectual pioneer characterized by a dumpling face, sneakers, an impish smile, bangs and owlsh glasses. But Roger Starr, a former New York City housing administrator and sometime opponent of Ms. Jacobs, keenly noted the steel just beneath her folksiness.

"What a dear, sweet character she isn't," he said.

After she was removed from the city council hearing in 1961, her own words underlined her feistiness. "We had been ladies and gentlemen and only got pushed around."

But fighting with government, even being arrested with [Susan Sontag](#) and [Allen Ginsberg](#) in an anti-draft protest, was something she said she had repeatedly been forced into by "outrageous" governmental actions.

"I hate the government for making my life absurd," she said in an interview with the journal *Government Technology* in 1998.

What she most hated was taking time away from her writing, which she said was her way of thinking. And in at least five distinct fields of inquiry, she thought deeply and innovatively: urban design, urban history, regional economics, the morality of the economy and the nature of economic growth.

Her major books followed a logical progression, each leading naturally to the next. From writing about how people functioned within cities, she analyzed how cities function within nations, how nations function with one another, how everyone functions in a world of conflicting moral principles, and, finally, how economies grow like biological organisms.

A small book in 1980 arguing for Quebec separatism created a stir in Canada, while a memoir, which she edited, of her great-aunt's experience as a school teacher in rural Alaska impressed reviewers with its homespun wisdom in 1996.

But it is "Death and Life," published by Random House, that rocked the planning and architectural establishment and continues to influence a third generation of students who can still find the book in college bookstores.

On one level, it represented the first liberal attack on the liberal idea of urban renewal. At the same time, *The New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson saw an old-fashioned vision of community that he compared to Thornton Wilder's fictional Grover's Corners. Ms. Jacobs herself thought the book's continuing appeal was that it plumbed the depths of human nature like a good novel.

Herbert Muschamp, *The Times*'s chief architecture critic at the time, wrote in 2003 that Ms. Jacobs's book was "one of 20th-century architecture's most traumatic events," in part because Ms. Jacobs was dismissive about the importance of design. In recent years, she had become an inspiration to architects and planners who espouse what they call the "New Urbanism," an effort to promote social interaction by incorporating such Jacobean features as ground-floor retail in suburban developments.

Patrick Pinnell, an architect associated with this school, said "Death and Life" represented almost the last expression of optimism about American cities. As early as 1974, John E. Zuccotti, then chairman of the New York City Planning Commission, called Ms. Jacobs a prophet and himself a "neo-Jacobean" when he announced a smaller-scale, more sensitive urban planning approach.

Ms. Jacobs, whose father was a family physician and mother a schoolteacher, was born Jane Butzner on May 4, 1916, in Scranton, Pa., in what she described as a stagnant anthracite-coal-mining region. She remembered being something of a troublemaker in school,

engaging in pranks like blowing air into paper bags in the lunchroom and loudly popping them. She preferred to read books surreptitiously to listening to the teacher.

In an interview in *Azure* magazine in 1997, Ms. Jacobs recounted her habit of carrying on imaginary conversations with [Thomas Jefferson](#) while running errands. When she could think of nothing more to tell Jefferson, she replaced him with Benjamin Franklin.

"Like Jefferson, he was interested in lofty things, but also in nitty-gritty, down-to-earth details," she said, "such as why the alley we were walking through wasn't paved, and who would pave it if it were paved. He was interested in everything, so he was a very satisfying companion."

Years later, she realized that she had developed her talent of working through difficult ideas in simple terms by practicing them on her imaginary Franklin. She also acquired another inner companion through Alfred Duggan, an English historical novelist. He was Cerdic, a Saxon chieftain. Years later, she continued to chat with him while doing housework.

"There were only two things in the entire house that were familiar to him," she wrote, "the fire (although he didn't understand the chimney), and the sword," a Civil War souvenir. "Everything else had to be explained to him."

She did not want to go to college, and took an unpaid position as assistant to the women's editor at *The Scranton Tribune*. In 1934, she moved to New York to join her sister who was six years older and had a job in the home furnishings department at the Abraham and Strauss department store in Brooklyn. The sisters lived on the top floor of a six-story walkup in Brooklyn Heights.

Each day, Ms. Jacobs got on the subway and arbitrarily chose a stop to look for a job. Because she liked the sound of Christopher Street, she got off there and found an apartment in Greenwich Village and soon after a job, as a secretary in a candy manufacturing company.

She worked as a secretary for five years. The sisters did not have much money and sometimes lived on pablum, the baby formula, and bananas, Ms. Jacobs said in an interview with *Metropolis Magazine* in 2001.

She began writing articles right away, first for a metals trade paper. She sold a series of articles to *Vogue* about different areas of the city, like the fur district, earning \$40 for each at a time when she was making \$12 a week as a secretary. She wrote Sunday feature stories for *The New York Herald Tribune* and articles for *Q Magazine* on manhole covers, among other things.

While working fulltime, Ms. Jacobs attended [Columbia University's](#) School of General Studies for two years and took courses in geology, zoology, law, political science and economics. In 1944, Ms. Jacobs, who was working for the Office of War Information, and her two roommates had a party in their apartment. One of the guests was Robert Hyde Jacobs Jr., an architect who specialized in hospital design. They met in April and married in May.

Ms. Jacobs told *Azure* that she would have written no books without her husband's encouragement. It was he who decided that the family should move to Toronto in 1968 after both their sons said

they would go to jail rather than serve in Vietnam. Mr. Jacobs died in 1996. Ms. Jacobs is survived by her sons James, of Toronto, and Ned, of Vancouver; her daughter, Burgin Jacobs, of New Denver, British Columbia; and one granddaughter. In 1952, Ms. Jacobs got a job as an editor at Architectural Forum, where she stayed 10 years. This gave her a perch from which to observe urban renewal projects. In a visit to Philadelphia, she noticed that the streets of a project were deserted while an older, nearby street was crowded.

"So, I got very suspicious of this whole thing," she said in an interview with The Toronto Star in 1997. "I pointed that out to the designer, but it was absolutely uninteresting to him. How things worked didn't interest him.

"He wasn't concerned about its attractiveness to people. His notion was totally esthetic, divorced from everything else."

Her doubts increased after William Kirk, the head worker of Union Settlement in East Harlem, taught her new ways of seeing neighborhoods. She came to see prevalent planning notions, which involved bulldozing low-rise housing in poor neighborhoods and building tall apartment buildings surrounded by open space to replace them, as a superstition akin to early 19th-century physicians' belief in bloodletting.

"There is a quality even meaner than outright ugliness or disorder," she wrote in "Death and Life," "and this meaner quality is the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be served."

William H. Whyte, editor of Fortune and author of books about urban life as well as his celebrated "The Organization Man" in 1956, asked Ms. Jacobs to write an article for Fortune on urban downtowns in 1958. Her essay, which was reprinted in "The Exploding Metropolis" (Doubleday, 1958), turned out to be a trial run for her book.

"Designing a dream city is easy," she concluded. "Rebuilding a living one takes imagination."

The Fortune article caught the attention of the Rockefeller Foundation, which offered a grant in 1958 to write about cities. Two grants and three years later, she produced her manuscript on the Remington typewriter that she used until her death.

"Death and Life" made four recommendations for creating municipal diversity: 1. A street or district must serve several primary functions. 2. Blocks must be short. 3. Buildings must vary in age, condition, use and rentals. 4. Population must be dense.

These seemingly simple notions represented a major rethinking of modern planning. They were coupled with fierce condemnations of the writings of the planners Sir Patrick Geddes and Ebenezer Howard, as well as those of the architect Le Corbusier and Lewis Mumford, who championed their ideal of graceful towers rising over exquisite open spaces.

Mr. Mumford held his fire for a year before replying in a New Yorker article that he later considered too mild. Either he or his editors gave the article the sardonic title, "Home Remedies for Urban

Cancer."

Mr. Mumford wrote, "Like a construction gang bulldozing a site clean of all habitations, good or bad, she bulldozes out of existence every desirable innovation in urban planning during the last century, and every competing idea, without even a pretense of critical evaluation."

Her complete dismissal of zoning in cities caused Robert Fulford, a columnist for The Financial Times of Canada, to observe in The New York Times Book Review that single-use zoning was the principal activity of city planners.

"It was as if she had somehow tried to persuade dentists that filling teeth did more harm than good," he wrote.

Even the architecture critic Paul Goldberger, while expressing profound admiration for Ms. Jacobs in a Times article in 1996, suggested that she may have overstated the importance of the physical form of cities.

"Sometimes big, ugly high-rise towers work just fine," he wrote.

Ms. Jacobs's next book, "The Economy of Cities" (Random House, 1969) challenged the ideas that cities were established on a rural economic base; rather, she suggested, rural economies have been built directly through city economies. The New Yorker called the book "radiant with ideas," while National Review praised it for formulating "a badly needed urban myth."

Her next work was a small book, "The Question of Separatism: Quebec and the Struggle for Sovereignty" (Random House, 1980). It argued that Canada and Quebec would be better off without each other, on the general grounds that small is better.

In 1984, she delved more deeply into economics and cities with "Cities and the Wealth of Nations: Principles of Economic Life" (Random House, 1984). She contended that national governments undermine the economy of cities, which she sees as the natural engines of economic growth.

Her "Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics" (Vintage, 1994), looks at the moral underpinnings of work by examining different value systems. "The Nature of Economies" (Modern Library, 2000) likens economic activity to an ecosystem. Her last book, "Dark Age Ahead" (Random House, 2004), argues that North American culture is collapsing, then suggests ways to avert that result.

In her last years, Canadians held conferences to honor Ms. Jacobs, and Maclean's magazine, the Canadian newsweekly, hailed her as "a lioness in winter." For New Yorkers, she lived on in the famous photo of her with a beer and cigarette in the White Horse tavern in Greenwich Village, as well as memories of her plotting municipal mischief at the Red Lion, another Village hangout. To generations of planners, architects and students of cities, Ms. Jacobs remains a seminal influence.

She perhaps perceived of herself as an intellectual adventurer ready and able to follow her quixotic, often brilliant instincts into ever more fascinating terrain. In "Systems of Survival," one of her

characters worries that he is not qualified.

"Why not us?" replies the man who has invited the group together. "If more qualified people are up to the same thing, more power to them. But we don't know that, do we?"

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