

## JANE JACOBS: “WHO IS THIS CRAZY DAME?”

NICHOLAS J. HEALY SR.

It is difficult today to recognize how radically city planning and architecture have changed from their heyday in the late 1940s to the early 1960s. In that era, under the catchword of “urban renewal,” cities and towns across America vied for federal funding to achieve “slum clearance” and construct new buildings emphasizing landscaping, light, and air, which were typically high-rise apartments separated by extensive lawns and shrubbery. They were designated exclusively for low-income families (to justify the billions of dollars in taxpayer subsidies) and rapidly themselves became slumlike in terms of crime, dilapidation, and garbage-strewn walkways. Indeed, they today often represent the worst areas

of our inner cities, having become islands of “permanent slums” and inhibiting the revival of neighborhoods where they are located.

The leading intellectual force in city planning in the mid-twentieth century was Le Corbusier, a Swiss-French architect who disdained traditional notions of beauty and emphasized modern concrete buildings that were fully utilitarian. In the 1920s he proposed his “Plan Voisin,” which would bulldoze a large section of Paris and replace its narrow streets, monuments, and houses with a series of giant sixty-story cruciform apartment buildings surrounded by park-like greens. Fortunately, this was never adopted, but it demonstrated a complete lack

of appreciation of what made Paris so attractive to residents and visitors alike. Le Corbusier, a pioneer in modern architecture, influenced an entire generation of architects and city planners, including those at the forefront of city renovation in America.

One of the few early sources of criticism of urban renewal was from the African-American communities that had rapidly expanded, especially during World War II, and became the focus of city planners. African-American leaders decried “urban renewal” as “negro removal.” It is true that many of the slum areas targeted for clearance were largely African-American, and it seems likely that at least some developers and some politicians saw urban renewal as a means of replacing a population they considered undesirable. Their criticism was largely ignored.

What was less appreciated at the time was the effect of these large-scale projects on the commercial and community life of the neighborhood. Often the clearance of “blighted” areas resulted in the destruction of hundreds of shops and small businesses which furnished employment opportunities and often added

both conveniences and interest for neighborhood residents. Moreover, large-scale projects often meant eliminating whole streets, and replacing them with megablocks, thus effectively ending an intense and lively street life.

Jane Jacobs (1916–2006)—visionary, courageous, indomitable—was an exceedingly unlikely challenger to the reigning orthodoxy in urban planning. She was born Jane Butzner in Scranton, Pennsylvania, of a Protestant family in a heavily Catholic city. She studied for two years at Columbia University but never earned a college degree. She moved to Brooklyn, New York with her sister in 1935, but then relocated to Greenwich Village which she liked because it was different from the city’s typical grid structures. She supported herself for years as a stenographer and freelance writer. In 1944 she married Robert Jacobs Jr. and began a family of two sons and one daughter. Still attached to city living, she and her family continued to live in Greenwich Village. In the early 1950s she took a job at *Architectural Forum*, a Henry Luce publication. After a promising start in writing articles, she was assigned to cover a new

urban development in Philadelphia. Although her editors expected a positive story, Jacobs was highly critical of the project, both because of its lack of concern for the poor African-Americans who were affected by it and the way the development seemed to end all community life on the street.

Thus began her full-blown critical analysis of the dominant principles of urban planning. When in 1956 she was asked to stand in for Douglas Haskell, the editor of *Architectural Forum*, to give a lecture at Harvard, she addressed an assembly of architects, urban planners, and intellectuals and spelled out the severe shortcomings of the current practices in urban renewal. Despite her iconoclasm, many received her message with enthusiasm. Her next “coming out” was when she was invited by William H. Whyte (author of *The Organization Man* and then editor of *Fortune*) to write a piece on urban planning for *Fortune*. The resulting “Downtown Is for People” article was something of a sensation. In it she criticized Robert Moses and the placement of Lincoln Center, which so enraged C. D. Jackson, the publisher of *Fortune*,

that he demanded of Whyte: “Who is this crazy dame?”<sup>1</sup>

Yet Jacobs’s penetrating logic and common sense impressed others, including some senior officials at the Rockefeller Foundation. This ultimately led to her receiving a large grant to undertake a study of how the design of cities might serve community life and culture. This research led to her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), a tour de force by an amateur in a field dominated by overly-credentialed architects and city planners. The *New York Times* calls this book “perhaps the most influential single work in the history of town planning.”<sup>2</sup> In typical fashion she pulls no punches, and the book’s introduction makes her goals plain:

This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding. It is also, and mostly, an attempt to introduce new principles of

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1. Alice Sparberg Alexiou, *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 62.

2 Robert Fulford, “When Jane Jacobs Took on the World,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/08/specials/jacobs.html>.

city planning and rebuilding, different and even opposite from those now taught in everything from schools of architecture and planning to the Sunday supplements and women's magazines. My attack is not based on quibbles and rebuilding methods or hairsplitting about fashions in design. It is an attack, rather, on the principles and aims that have shaped modern orthodox city planning and rebuilding.<sup>3</sup>

This "attack" was stupendously successful. Indeed, in the decades since the book's publication most, if not all, of her findings have been adopted in urban planning and architecture, even when her contributions are not applauded or even acknowledged.

What Jane Jacobs did was observe in city after city, neighborhood after neighborhood, what makes some neighborhoods interesting, lively, and thriving, while others are dull, unattractive, and dangerous. Her foundational prin-

ciple is that what matters most in the city are not buildings or highways or parks as stand-alone structures, but how their design, function, location, and appearance affect the way people live together, interact, and develop extensive social networks. These networks create a deep "social capital" which was then little understood, but critically responsible for stability and safety in neighborhoods. The concepts she advances even today, long after they have been incorporated by urban planners, still have a ring of novelty: eyes on the street; the advantage of short blocks; the ballet of the sidewalk; mixed primary uses; the need for old buildings. Someone had finally figured out and cogently explained why some neighborhoods, such as Greenwich Village in Manhattan, with its jumble of residences, businesses, shops, artist studios, and factories, were such attractive places to live in and visit; why despite having a much older than average housing stock, people preferred it to new high-rise apartments; and why, over time, "gentrification" was a natural development.

The upheaval she sparked in city planning inevitably pitted Jacobs against Robert

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3. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Book Edition, 1992), 3.

Moses, the extraordinarily powerful “czar” of city, state, and federal construction in and around New York City. It is difficult to conceive just how dominant Moses was from the 1930s until well into the 1960s. At one time he held twelve CEO titles in crucial government agencies, including Chairman of NYC Parks Commission, Chairman of Long Island Parks Commission, and Chairman of the Triborough Bridge Authority (a source of enormous toll revenue, which he controlled). He can be credited with building Jones Beach, the Long Island parkway system, most of the tunnels and bridges linking Manhattan to the other boroughs of New York, and the campus for the 1939 World’s Fair. He was a key mover behind the construction of Shea Stadium, Lincoln Center, and the United Nations buildings. He was also responsible for the construction of 28,000 units of public housing, utilizing the “towers in the park” concept that had prevailed in urban planning since Le Corbusier, which cleared hundreds of acres of city neighborhoods designated as “slums.” This was the epitome of what Jane Jacobs criticizes as valuing new buildings with little regard to

how they affect the community life of the neighborhood.

The clash of vision between Moses and Jacobs became focused on a major project that directly impacted Jacobs’s beloved neighborhood of Greenwich Village: the Lower Manhattan Expressway or LOMEX. This was a plan, initiated and heavily backed by Moses, to construct a ten-lane elevated highway across lower Manhattan to funnel car and truck traffic from the Williamsburg Bridge and Manhattan Bridge to the Holland Tunnel. The highway would demolish more than 800 businesses, displace almost 2,000 families from their homes, and ruin Washington Square Park. By bisecting the neighborhoods of Soho and Little Italy (a section of Greenwich Village), LOMEX was the ultimate expression of giving undue priority to the automobile in city planning. Robert Moses, who had utterly dominated New York public building, infrastructure, and highway projects for three decades, probably never imagined the ferocity and tenacity of the opposition this “housewife” was capable of generating. Using her newly established credibility, Jane Jacobs not only led the opposition to LO-

MEX, but was able to enlist the support of such luminaries as Margaret Mead, Eleanor Roosevelt, Lewis Mumford, and Charles Abrams (a leading public figure in New York housing). Rallying the public against what she called a “monstrous and useless folly,” Jacobs succeeded in mobilizing sufficiently numerous and passionate public opposition that the project was first delayed and then finally ended. It also effectively ended the career of Robert Moses, who never again possessed the clout to push through projects over popular objection.

Today the residents of Little Italy, Soho, and Tribeca enjoy some of the most desirable real estate in the city, if not the world. One has only to compare the neighborhoods adjoining the Cross Bronx Expressway—a comparable project to the LOMEX that Moses succeeded in building—to learn what might have been the fate of the neighborhoods in lower Manhattan. Because of the Cross Bronx Expressway, entire stable neighborhoods in the Bronx—which were predominately Jewish and Irish—were uprooted and bisected by an elevated expressway, effectively destroying them as desirable places to

live. The South Bronx went into a long decline. Whether it can recover its former stability and viability is questionable.

Following the success of her first book and the vanquishing of Robert Moses, Jacobs’s continuing passionate interest in city life led her to explore more general issues involving cities. Again using common sense, keen observation, and willingness to challenge long-established principles, Jacobs wrote another astonishing book, *The Economy of Cities* (1969). In it she addresses the fundamental question of how cities arose. Again she overturns the long-established view that cities grew from agricultural settlements: first villages, then towns, and finally cities. She argues that this view has it exactly backwards. Cities, she maintains, arose first as trading centers; agriculture began in cities and only subsequently was extended outward to more rural areas. Jacobs does not simply put forth a new theory, but buttresses her revolutionary ideas with an astounding array of facts, detailing the comprehensive nature of cities from prehistory through the era of Rome; from the dark ages through the late medieval period; finally, from the industrial revolution to modern times.

By example after example she shows that it was cities, not agricultural settlements and villages, that initiated the great advances in agricultural productivity. Nor are her conclusions of mere historical or academic interest. By analyzing the nature of city economics—and why some cities decline and others thrive—she caused policy makers to rethink prescriptions for improving cities and fostering development and growth. By her analysis, the decline of Detroit, as a city dominated by one industry, was inevitable; while the success of Los Angeles, as a city with an extraordinarily diverse economy, was equally inevitable.

Other books followed. While Jane Jacobs herself believed that her understanding of city economics was her most important intellectual contribution, she continues to be remembered for the incomparable originality, imagination, and sheer courage of her first book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. A pleasure to read, it is even more a guarantee that the reader will never again look at a city street in the same way. □

**NICHOLAS J. HEALY SR.** is president emeritus of Ave Maria University and cofounder of Newman College Ireland.