

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES

JANE JACOBS

"Perhaps the most influential single work in the history of town planning...a work of literature."
—The New York Times Book Review

JANE JACOBS
1916-2006

Jane Jacobs died this April at the age of 89 in Toronto. She had moved north to Canada decades earlier in order to save her sons from being drafted into the Vietnam War. But it was in New York City where she made her name by defending her Greenwich Village neighborhood, and neighborhoods in general, against the large, destructive ideas of urban renewal. Her 1961 masterpiece *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was a seminal book, and its influence on everyone who has thought about cities over the last 45 years has probably been unequaled.

For me, and for many like me, her legacy is particularly intimate, because in her work she defined and ratified the value of our experience as walkers in the city. And in so doing she also managed another enormously important task: She explained the role of a city's strangers.

Jacobs' real realm is not the printed page, but the fully inhabited public street and its sidewalks, which are ends in themselves as well as means—routes and destinations, forums, theaters, and markets. A symbolic site and a ceremonial ground, the street is a political space, in the broadest sense of the word, that has no equivalent.

And it is the city's phenomenal realm, the place where urban reality is most real, in the living scenes of writers such as Dickens and Baudelaire rather than in the theories and ideas of Le Corbusier or Jacobs' great opponent, Lewis Mumford. Moreover, it is on the street that Jacobs gives us the stranger in all his concrete glory. Her strangers are not professional figures like the *flâneur* or the Other.

Jacobs' strangers are the people we meet on every sidewalk in broad daylight, the city's native species, its vast majority, and for Jacobs, its safety patrol.

The urban planners of Jacobs' generation accepted the Enlightenment principle that we are all essentially alike and, therefore, will always behave in the same way for the same rational reasons. Strangers, by their very nature, are unfriendly to such abstractions because they are unknowable; and the strangers we can see for ourselves are merely the leading edge of all the people in the whole, abstract, statistical city whom we never encounter and, in their number, cannot even imagine. These strangers, who hold the city's surprises and its dangers, are its irreducible mystery.

Most important is that this body of strangers includes all of us: we are all strangers. What we present to one another, in the flesh, are the limits of human knowledge that the certitudes of high conceptualization and big urban planning ignore. Jane Jacobs gave each of us, therefore, a kind of authority, a collective individual voice, which was raised most eloquently perhaps after 9/11 by everybody who wanted a say in planning the memorial to be built on the site of the World Trade Center. That this kind of negotiation between people and planners took place in her home city of New York is, perhaps, the best memorial she could receive.

So, may Jane Jacobs rest in peace, with our gratitude, as we try to keep in mind the example of her clarity and the compassion in her sense of scale.
— Terrence Doody



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