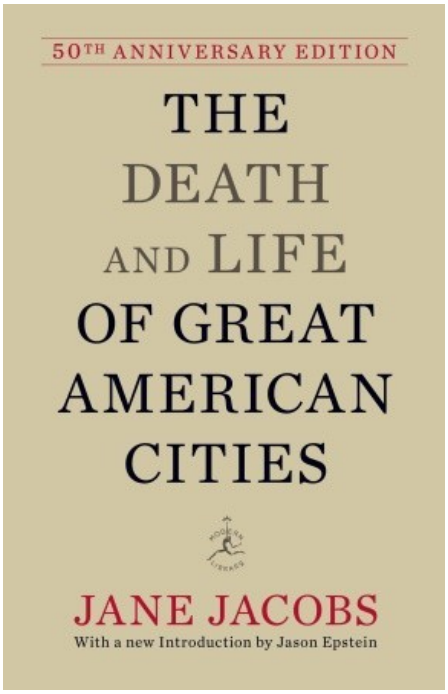

The Death and Life of Great American Cities

Jane Jacobs , Jason Epstein

The Death and Life of Great American Cities

Jane Jacobs , Jason Epstein

The Death and Life of Great American Cities Jane Jacobs , Jason Epstein
Published to coincide with the 50th anniversary of its initial publication, this special edition of Jane Jacobs's masterpiece, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, features a new Introduction by Jason Epstein, the book's original editor, who provides an intimate perspective on Jacobs herself and unique insights into the creation and lasting influence of this classic.

The Death and Life of Great American Cities was described by *The New York Times* as "perhaps the most influential single work in the history of town planning. . . . [It] can also be seen in a much larger context. It is first of all a work of literature; the descriptions of street life as a kind of ballet and the bitingly satiric account of traditional planning theory can still be read for pleasure even by those who long ago absorbed and appropriated the book's arguments." Jane Jacobs, an editor and writer on architecture in New York City in the early sixties, argued that urban diversity and vitality were being destroyed by powerful architects and city planners. Rigorous, sane, and delightfully epigrammatic, Jane Jacobs's tour de force is a blueprint for the humanistic management of cities. It remains sensible, knowledgeable, readable, and indispensable.

The Death and Life of Great American Cities Details

Date	:	Published December 4th 2012 by Modern Library (first published 1961)
ISBN	:	9780679644330
Author	:	Jane Jacobs , Jason Epstein
Format	:	Hardcover 598 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Architecture, History, Cities, Urban Planning, Sociology, Urbanism

From Reader Review The Death and Life of Great American Cities for online ebook

Samantha Brockfield says

Jane Jacobs is brilliant. Her insights on urban planning are both practical and exciting.

Anna says

I was prompted to read this book, which had sat on my shelf for a little while, by its inclusion in an essay reading list. As I needed to mark the essays, it was time to read the thing. I enjoyed the majority of it, although naturally some chapters have aged better than others. That in itself is interesting, though, and at times sad. Jacobs writes to challenge the utopian, modernist, grand-scale, top-down, social engineering approach to planning that prevailed (I over-generalise) between the early 20th century and the late 1970s in the Western world. She published this book in 1961, when critique of the dominant approach (or paradigm, if you can stomach the word) was starting to gain ground. It would be the 1980s that staked utopian planning through the heart and buried it, though. Unfortunately, the subtle, community-scale suggestions put forth by Jane Jacobs were not then adopted. Instead, planning reacted against former interventionism with a hands-off presumption that the market knew best. Europe never took this as far as the US, but has ended up with a legacy of urban problems that the market has somehow failed to magically fix. This was of course tangled up with wider political trends, the fall of communism, etc. One thing that Jacobs never mentions is that planning has always been a battleground for political ideology. The oppositional planning vs market narrative that still prevails now is refreshingly lacking.

Anyway, Jacobs book is dense with ideas and thoughtful analysis that I won't attempt to fully summarise. Even a single chapter isn't readily reducible to simple maxims (although naturally my students did just that, with varying levels of success). Jacobs repeatedly points out that all characteristics of cities are relative; for a district to become vital and diverse, density needs to be high-ish, but not too high, and the level will vary depending on many other factors. Quite late in the book, Jacobs notes that urban problems involve 'organised complexity', meaning that multiple variables are at play and each interacts with each of the others. Although she doesn't use the terminology of complexity theory, as it didn't really exist in 1961, she is in some ways prefiguring a much more recent development in planning literature. This considers emergent effects, based on many interactions, social learning, and no automatic rationality assumption. Such thinking has yet to diffuse into planning practise, though, as far as I know. Probably because agent-based modelling of complex urban problems remains computationally intensive and economics has taken over the social sciences. To economists, planning is just a useless block to development, a system that should probably be replaced by taxation of social costs. ...OK, this review is rapidly turning into a planning rant, for which I apologise.

The detailed discussion of urban diversity is perhaps the most striking element of the book and still has considerable relevance. Probably more so in the US, though. The chapters on 'unslumming' are depressing for how little seems to have been learned in the intervening 53 years. Large-scale housing projects these days tend towards demolishing 1960s tower blocks and moving their inhabitants, and thus pockets of poverty, elsewhere. Jacobs' savaging of the mere concept of public housing is to my mind too extreme, as her proposed replacement for it is essentially UK housing benefit. As well as being challenging to administer, housing benefit has to rise with rents. In a situation of housing shortage, it is probably more effective for the

public sector to also supplement private markets by developing housing. I was bitterly amused by one of the problems she states that slums need to overcome - blacklisting (now known as redlining) by mortgage lenders. These days, you could probably observe more damage to the US urban fabric from over-lending than lack thereof.

I could write a full-blown essay on ‘The Death and Life of Great American Cities’, but technically planning isn’t my research area so I won’t. This book remains a fascinating and important work on urban policy, in some ways ahead of its time, in other ways redolent of a future that planning never realised. It is written in a lucid, very readable style which reminded me of Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World For the 21st Century. In fact, Kunstler made very similar points about density and diversity 35 years later. The careful and balanced tone of Jacobs' arguments counterbalances the nature of her supporting evidence, which is overwhelmingly anecdotal. But as she sensibly comments, 'A numerical answer means less than a functional answer'. That should be the new motto of the social sciences.

John says

My friend Todd’s finishing up his PhD in Urban Planning at Louisville this year, and he’s been telling me since he started the program that I should read this book, especially since I live in New York City.

I bought the book awhile ago, but never got around to reading it; it just didn’t seem to be my kind of thing. “It’s more your thing than mine,” Todd said. I didn’t know what he meant until I decided to incorporate it into a freshman orientation class I teach on the history and mystery of New York City. After reading it, I’d say that anyone living in New York City (or any other major metropolitan area, “Great American City” in Jacobs’ words) should not just read but ingest it.

The introduction states her thesis, which is essentially that traditional urban planners (as of 1961, the original date of publication, but most of her points about NYC planners remain valid today), instead of addressing cities on their own terms with their own distinctly, well, “city” relationships and problems, try to make them fit into smaller-town prototypes. This, she argues, is by nature destined for failure.

She divides the book into four sections. The first section, The Peculiar Nature of Cities, lays out what makes cities function, specifically:

* Interrelated primary functions – In other words, the reasons people are commingling on the streets, and how those functions work off of each other. She uses a beautiful passage on pp50-54 to describe the “ballet of Hudson Street,” where through the course of every day the strete remains alive with people putting out the trash, kids going to school, local vendors setting up shop, mothers walking their babies, kids acting crazy on the streets after school, night workers stopping by the bodegas to pick up their lunch, the local taverns picking up the night crowds, lots between and after.

* Limited privacy – Her argument is essentially that people don’t want to have long, drawn-out interractions with strangers, but they want to feel safe that if they need help they’ll receive it.

* Uses of sidewalks – She devotes three chapters to the way that sidewalks socialize (or don’t socialize) people, and how decreased sidewalk usage is directly related to reduced street safety.

* Uses of parks – She’s not big on them, at least in and of themselves, as she sees many city planners

following the “Garden City” plan of simply producing open green spaces on the assumption that people naturally flock to them to get away from the streets. They often achieve the opposite of their intention, she argues, as the primary group to flock to them are criminals and the indigent if the parks are simply put in and left alone.

* Uses of neighborhoods – I thought this was the best chapter of the section. She dismisses forthright the notion of neighborhoods as self-sufficient within a city, and sets out the hierarchy of neighborhood-district-city that, if connected, keeps neighborhoods functional and not simply warring “turfs.”

The second section, and in her words the most important, The Conditions for City Diversity, points out specific necessities to maintain diversity. I must state here that by diversity, she doesn’t necessarily mean cultural diversity (although that contributes to the diversity she speaks of) but rather a more universal diversity, including functional, economic, educational, cultural, and other forms. These conditions include:

* Mixed primary uses – By “primary” she means the reasons a street, block, building, or other landmark is a destination rather than simply a place to pass through; these include work, residence, education, entertainment, and recreation. The needs for there to be a variety of primary uses goes back to her earlier statement on the need for interrelated activity to keep a street/block/neighborhood alive.

* Small blocks – This is a relatively short and succinct point, essentially that the longer a block is, the less spontaneous traffic it will have, and thus the less interactivity of uses.

* Aged buildings – This to me was one of the most elucidating chapters of the entire book. My first thought while reading was that she would address the historic and aesthetic value of older buildings; instead, she spends the majority of this chapter dealing with their role in generating economic diversity. The argument is simple, actually – older buildings are the only lodging that smaller, riskier, and/or newer enterprises can afford, so essentially they are the incubators of small business, which in turn stimulates economic diversity. She is positively prophetic in her use of Brooklyn as a prime example on pp196-198; she writes – in 1961, mind you – of Brooklyn’s potential as an incubator of small industry with its surfeit of huge industrial buildings. Living and running my business out of a factory loft in Bushwick with a vibrant, hipster-enterprise-filled community all around me, I can vouch for the wisdom of this assessment.

* Concentration of population – Here is her argument, which has become a pretty standard one in liberal urban planning circles, against suburban sprawl. One thing she makes clear early – by concentration (and density) she doesn’t mean overcrowding. In fact, she argues, overcrowding usually occurs when the conditions for diversity aren’t met, and additionally the most dangerous areas of most cities are the ones with densities low enough that there is little community surveillance.

In the third section, Forces of Decline and Regeneration, Jacobs focuses her energy on the forces that encourage, sustain, defer, and/or destroy diversity and vitality in a city:

* The first force for decline in a city or a neighborhood is the most ironic – a neighborhood made successful by its diversity and dynamism self-destructs by allowing one or two industries or purposes dominate it. She mentions banks, insurance companies, and high-end office buildings as prominent diversity destroyers, as they are economically conservative, investing usually only in established successes, and that they have the financial resources to supplant any other industries in the near vicinity. Once again I’ll use my beloved Brooklyn as an example: Williamsburg, over the last 5-7 years, has found itself an apex of hipster, artistic, and industrial uses; the city, in response to the increased desirability of the area for residential yuppie traffic and the attendant increase in financial resources, has rezoned both Williamsburg and the riverfront-area

Greenpoint to encourage high-rise and condominium construction. Already, every inch of Greenpoint's riverfront has been bought and sold, never to be used by anyone but the proprietors and renters. The waterfront is boarded up invisible from land, and with the housing market the way it is I haven't seen many lights on in the buildings that have been put up.

* Another negative force is what Jacobs terms "border vacuums," areas in cities and neighborhoods where a buffer zone forms between different uses and/or demographic groups. These areas, she states, tend to form "gray zones" where few people from either side go, and end up the most dangerous places in the area. She includes railroad tracks, waterfronts, campus edges, expressways, parking lots, and large parks as obvious physical barriers, but emphasizes that these areas can form anywhere there is little overlap in activity between the groups of people who occupy and/or work there. Her solution is to turn borders into what she dubs seams, "a line of exchange along which two areas are sewn together." To offset the negative Williamsburg-Greenpoint example I used in the last point, I'll bring up a successful "seam" area on the Brooklyn waterfront, the pier off Owl's Head Park. When I lived in Sunset Park I would run down there frequently, and I found there the closest approximation of the Old New York I imagined before moving here – skaters ramping, fishermen fishing, teenagers flirting, runners running, parents strolling, and all of this with freighters meandering by on the water and the Verrazano Bridge in the distance; a complete diversity of uses, with each peacefully sharing a relatively small space.

I couldn't finish this review on GoodReads as it's over the character limit - if you want the rest, you can go to my blog at:

http://johnproc.blogspot.com/2008/06/...

Ryan Holiday says

This is one of the most important books about cities ever written. It's what helps you understand why cities work, why they don't work, what makes a neighborhood, what destroys neighborhoods and how almost everything city planners and governments think matters, doesn't. Seth Roberts is probably the biggest Jane Jacobs fan there is. He's what she calls an insider-outsider (insider in terms of understanding, outsider in terms of career). She was an activist and a student who understood the system but wasn't wedded to it or dependent on it for a living. It was this unique position that gave her the freedom and the perspective to explain the concept of American cities (and what's killing them) in a way that no one had ever done before. I also think that a lot of Jacobs' ideas about diversity, mixed uses, isolation, wealth and government can be applied to other parts of our lives. The way she gets to the core of neighborhood, passing up the easy or obvious signs that others are mistakenly distracted with, is impressive. There is a great Malcolm Gladwell article where he tries to use some of her ideas to dissect office culture-it's a good start and example about other canvases for her ideas.

---

ambyr says

An odd thing happened to me while reading this book: the narrator was male, but because I'd recently watched a documentary about Jane Jacobs that included a lot of contemporary audio footage and had her voice in my head, I *remember* it in her voice. Brains are funny that way; they make assumptions and fill in

gaps with what they think they know. Jacobs's talent is in *not* doing that, in looking at and describing things exactly as they are--from big, philosophical things, like what privacy means in an urban environment, to small, practical things, like how traffic signal timing that eases the way for cars by its nature simultaneously slows buses (and vice versa). (She also has a secondary talent of being quite funny; I laughed out loud far more often than I expected while reading this book.)

She does have some blind spots, particularly around gender (she seems incapable of imagining a day when the majority of women are *not* stay-at-home mothers) and sexuality (there is exactly no mention of gay people in this book, unless you count a reference to a "pervert park"), and her thoughts on finance are often outdated. But over and over she says obvious things--clearly, simply, and straightforwardly--that more than fifty years later we somehow, inexplicably, are still failing to hear.

Conor says

You know that feeling you get when someone expresses a political belief that you share, but explains the position using arguments that you find unavailing, anecdotal, or specious? That's what this book felt like. It was like de Tocqueville takes on modern American cities: inductive reasoning applied selectively to undergird a set of beliefs and proselytize for their superiority.

I had such high hopes for this one, but it dragged on relentlessly. I made it about halfway through this book before abandoning the effort. How many pages can Jacobs expect us to endure being browbeaten about the preferability of short blocks over long ones? About how people misjudge Greenwich Village and Boston's North End to be slums (ha! I guess this *was* kinda true somewhat recently)? And what would Jane Jacobs have to say about our current tony and healthy urban neighborhoods, which thrive despite the (certainly lamentable) absence of any type of coherent community structure, Jacobs' *sine qua non* for healthy neighborhood dynamics? It's almost as if Jacobs thinks her own Sesame Street cast of characters is a prerequisite for every healthy urban biome, because without the proper complement of kibitzers shouting unsolicited weekend bus route information to strangers and Joe Cornacchia, delicatessen-proprietor-and-premonitory-glance-giver-extraordinaire, anomie would prevail!

I'm happy that New York looks more like Jacobs' vision than like Moses', but this feels like it could have been adequately conveyed in pamphlet form.

---

ilknur a.k.a. iko ? says

.
Bumin'in Görünmez Kentler yorumunu görünce akl?ma geldi kitap.
okudum say?l?r m? bilmiyorum. okulda 'okuyun s?nav yapçaz' dediler, biz de bölümleri payla?t?r?p özet ç?kart?p özetleri bi araya getirmi?tik.
dayatmalara gelemem.
asl?na okuyabilirdim, ki okumas? da zevkli.

illa ?ehir planc?s?, mimar, peyzajc? vb olman?z gerekmiyor okumak için, hatta okuyun ki çevrenizdeki her fiziksel de?i?imde "hep gökçek'in i?leri", "hükumet mahvediyor kentleri" demeyin. okuyun ki mekan?n sizin bildi?inizin ötesinde bir uzam oldu?unu, planlama kavram?n?n sizin sand???n?zdan çok farkl? bi disiplin

oldu?unu görün. sizin, mekan? kullanman?z, kullanmaman?z ve nas?l kulland???n?zla, ileriki planlarda politikac?lar?n, i? adamlar?n?n, belediyelerin nas?l stratej izledi?ini bilin. arz-talep i?te bunlar hep. mekan derken sadece starbuckstan veya 3. bo?az köprüsü veya sizin evin kentsel dönü?üme girip girmedi?inden bahsetmiyorum.

burada Jacobs ba?l?ktaki gibi Amerikan ?ehirlerini olumlu olumsuz, geçmi? günümüz kar??la?t?rmas? yaparak fiziksel, sosyal, kültürel ve ekonomik olarak inceliyor. özellikle fiziksel de?i?imin kültürel ve sosyal etkileri a??r kitapta, veya tam tersi. küresele de?inse de ulusal ve bölgesel anlat?m? var ancak özellikle, en az?ndan benim zevk ald???m k?s?mlar, birey ve topluluklara indirgenerek anlat??m?? yerel ve noktasal mekanlar oldu.

disiplinler aras? muazzam bir ara?t?rma yok, hatta planlama disiplini için bile öyle. Jacobs anlat?yor yaln?zca. benim için olumsuz yan? Jacobs'?n fazla "eski"yi övmesi oldu (asl?nda övmüyor, daha pozitif gibi gösteriyor). o mahalle kültürü, soka??n ya?am olgusu, kentler için mazi diyebilece?iniz ne varsa. ben sevmiyorum. ya?as?n modernizm, ya?as?n betonla?ma, ya?as?n apartman, ölsün kom?ular.

türkiyeyle elbette örtü?üyor çünkü her ne kadar herkes "dünyan?n 50 y?l gerisinden geliyoruz" dese de birlikte büyüyoruz arkada?lar. hele ?u ça?da bu iddia ancak bir tak?m ekonomik ve sosyokültürel istatistikler için geçerli. ülkeden kente, kentten k?rsala, kentliden sokak köpe?ine kadar "fiziksel" de?i?imler ve bunun ç?kt?lar? ayn?, girdiler farkl? olabilir.

> ya?as?n kapitalizmin dikey uzant?lar?
> xoxo
> iko

Stephanie Sun says

My favorite quotes from my re-read of this book last week (with city eye candy):

> On TRUST:
> "The trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts... Most of it is ostensibly trivial but the sum is not trivial at all." (p. 56)

> On PRIVACY:
> "A good city street neighborhood achieves a marvel of balance between its people's determination to have essential privacy and their simultaneous wishes for differing degrees of contact, enjoyment or help from the people around." (p.59)

> On the need for CASUAL CONTACTS and PUBLIC SPACE:
> "Under [a well-compartmentalized local] system, it is possible in a city street neighborhood to know all kinds of people without unwelcome entanglements, without boredom, necessity for excuses, explanations, fears of giving offense, embarrassments respecting impositions or

commitments, and all such paraphernalia of obligations which can accompany less limited relationships. **It is possible to be on excellent sidewalk terms with people who are very different from oneself...**" (p. 62)

"Here it is necessary to take issue with a common belief about cities—the belief that uses of low status drive out uses of high status. **This is not how cities behave...** People or uses with more money at their command or greater respectability can fairly easily supplant those less prosperous or those of less status... **The reverse seldom happens.**" (p. 97)

On ENGINEERING SOCIAL TURNAROUND:
"It is fashionable to suppose that certain touchstones of the good life will create good neighborhoods—schools, parks, clean housing and the like. **How easy life would be if this were so! How charming to control a complicated and ornery society by bestowing upon it rather simple physical goodies.** In real life, cause and effect are not so simple." (p. 112)

On CROWDS and MORALITY:
"People gathered in concentrations of big-city size and density can be felt to be an automatic—if necessary—evil. **This is a common assumption: that human beings are charming in small numbers and noxious in large numbers...** On the other hand, people gathered in concentrations of city size and density... are desirable because they are the source of immense vitality... **a great and exuberant richness of differences and possibilities, many of these differences unique and unpredictable and all the more valuable because they are.**" (p.220)

On the BEAUTY of "CHAOS":
"Intricate minglings of different uses in cities are not a form of chaos. On the contrary, they represent a complex and highly developed form of order." (p. 222)

On the UGLINESS of "ORDER":
"Homogeneity... poses very puzzling esthetic problems. If the sameness of use is shown candidly for what it is—sameness—it looks monotonous. Superficially, this monotony might be thought of as a sort of order, however dull. But esthetically, it unfortunately also carries with it a deep disorder: the disorder of **conveying no direction**. In [such] places... you move, but in moving you seem to have gotten nowhere. North is the same as south, or east as west... It takes differences—many differences—cropping up in different directions to keep us oriented." (p. 223)

On DESIGNING FOR HUMANS:
"Genuine differences in the city architectural scene express... [Jacobs quoting Eugene Raskin:] *'the interweaving of human patterns. They are full of people doing different things, with different reasons and different ends in view, and the architecture reflects and expresses this difference... **Being human, human beings are what interest us most.** In architecture as in literature and the drama, it is the richness of human variation that gives vitality and color to the human setting... **Considering the hazard of monotony... the most serious fault in our***

zoning laws lies in the fact that they <u>permit</u> an entire area to be devoted to a single use.'" (p. 229)

"[Jacobs quoting Paul J. Tillich:] *'Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, **and only when**, they are created by everybody.*'" (p. 238)

Why LASTING SUCCESS IN CITIES IS HARD:
"A diversified mixture of uses at some place in the city becomes outstandingly popular and successful as a whole. **Because of** the location's success, which is invariably based on flourishing and magnetic diversity, ardent competition for space in this locality develops. It is taken up in what amounts to the economic equivalent of a fad." (p. 243)

"[Slum clearance and project-style urban renewal] fails because it tries to overcome causes of trouble by diddling with symptoms... Conventional planning approaches to slums and slum dwellers are thoroughly paternalistic. **The trouble with paternalists is that they want to make impossibly profound changes, and they choose impossibly superficial means for doing so.**" (p. 271)

On ASSIMILATING NEWCOMERS:
"People are accomodated and assimilated, not in undigestible floods but as gradual additions, in neighborhoods capable of accepting and handling strangers in a civilized fashion... They quickly assimilate into the public street life and are lively and competent at holding up their end. These very same people could hardly act as they do within the community, nor would they be likely to stay put as long, were they part of a tumultuous replacement throng..." (p. 283)

"When we deal with cities we are dealing with life at its most complex and intense. Because this is so, there is a basic esthetic limitation on what can be done with cities: **a city cannot be a work of art**." (p. 372)

-

PREVIOUSLY:

The Death and Life of Great American Social Networks

"To understand cities, we have to deal outright with combinations or mixtures of uses, not separate uses, as the essential phenomena."

"Characteristically, the larger a city, the greater the variety of its manufacturing, and also the greater both the number and the proportion of its small manufacturers."

Why did housing projects fail?

Why do we avoid city parks at night?

Why did pizza by the slice originate in New York, not Peoria?

If not for the actions and leadership of an ordinary New York resident, Jane Jacobs, what is now 80 of the most valuable acres of real estate in the world (but was then a somewhat seedy bohemian ghetto) would in 1958 have been split in two, with Washington Square Park razed wholesale, to build a big, clean, new, expensive highway. Additionally, as a result of an associated luxury condo development project, 300-400 West Village residents would have been made homeless and 1,000 small businesses displaced, but at the time Jacobs was in the minority in thinking this was a bad idea. (**The Village Voice** sided with Jacobs, but **The New York Times** sided with Robert Moses.) Why? Because project- and workflow-oriented professionals had talked each other into thinking their work was not about serving New York on its own chaotic, seedy, obnoxious terms, but about meeting some ideal, objective end that existed only in their heads, design manifestos, and PowerPoint presentations.

(Or whatever people used in the ancient times of 1958 instead of PowerPoint.)

In July 2011, StackExchange board member and ThinkUp creator Anil Dash floated the idea that online social networks should be looking to the urban planning discipline for guidance on how to manage the diverse interests of their user bases and conflicts arising from their roles as public forums. And yet, no major social network seems keen to add Urban Planning B.A.'s to its recruitment pipeline. (This, of course, does not preclude many social networks, big and small, arriving at Jacobs-like principles of community design through trial and error or chance.) Indeed, Dash's own recommendations in the linked post either have no intellectual relation to or contradict directly the hard-earned wisdoms that, thanks to Jacobs, drive most, if not all, urban planning efforts in America today.

Dash's recommendations and rhetoric also seem ignorant of the damned indigenous nature of so-called "bad behavior" to virtual communities, as described by Clay Shirky in his November 2004 essay encouraging engineers to rethink whom the "user" is when designing social software:

> *"The user of a piece of social software is not just a collection of individuals, but a group."*
>
> *"Flame wars are not surprising; they are one of the most reliable features of mailing list practice. If you assume a piece of software is for what it does, rather than what its designer's stated goals were, then mailing list software is, among other things, a tool for creating and sustaining heated argument."*
>
> *"Flaming is one of a class of economic problems known as The Tragedy of the Commons... The group as a whole has an incentive to keep the signal-to-noise ratio high and the conversation informative, even when contentious. Individual users, though, have an incentive to maximize expression of their point of view, as well as maximizing the amount of communal attention they receive. It is a deep curiosity of the human condition that people often find negative attention more satisfying than inattention, and the larger the group, the likelier someone is to act out to get that sort of attention."*
> -Clay Shirky, Group as User: Flaming and the Design of Social Software

So the laws of nature underlying good faith social network policy and software features that treat the entire

community (not individuals) as the user are not an unknown unknown or even a known unknown.

Unfortunately, now as then, we have project- and workflow-oriented professionals talking each other into trying to meet ideal, objective ends that exist only in their heads, design manifestos, and PowerPoint presentations instead of serving their communities on their own chaotic, seedy, obnoxious and ultimately quite valuable terms.

VC bias is a powerful passive force in society right now. What kind of legacy will the power brokers on Sand Hill Road leave? Do they even care about anything but the lowest hanging fruit?

Jane Jacobs' parting words suggest that power sequestered away from the complexity and diversity of real human society is inherently unstable:

> *"Does anyone suppose that, in real life, answers to any of the great questions that worry us today are going to come out of homogeneous settlements? Dull, inert cities, it is true, do contain the seeds of their own destruction and little else. But lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves."*

Michael Siliski says

I don't use the term "tour de force" often, but...

This is an incredible book. Written in 1961, it dissects the urban planning trends of the first half of the 20th century, and then proceeds to convincingly tear them to shreds. Rather than rely on abstract aesthetic principles concocted on a draft board, Jacobs starts from first principles and street-level, observational data, constructing a revolutionary view of how cities work and what makes them great -- liveliness, activity, opportunity, diversity. And she shows using simple, relatable examples from her own experience how the design of cities -- the streets, sidewalks, parks, buildings, monuments, districts, etc. -- conspires to create or destroy these things.

Jacobs identifies four key requirements for a successful City district: mixed primary uses, short blocks, varied building ages, and population density.

This book explains many phenomena I've observed myself and wondered about, like why San Francisco's Civic Center is the way it is and what makes it such a miserable ghost town. Or why certain cities have such life to them. I feel like my eyes have been opened to the theoretical underpinnings of much of what's going on around me.

It's the kind of book which can only be written once, since the point of view is so new and refreshing. That Jacobs does it with such a fully realized theory, in such a well structured and written book, is awe inspiring.

Siler says

An urban classic that remains applicable.
Jacobs makes a strong case and repeats it over and over.

Pam says

This took me a while to read because it was easy to put down. This book is famous for being one of the first sources of critique of American city planning, and many of her arguments seem to hold water even today. This said, I constantly asked myself "where is the science?" while reading this. I wonder if it had been published in this decade, would she be allowed to draw so many conclusions based almost entirely on personal observation and opinion. My assessment of this book mirrors my judgment of the urban planning discipline in general. I am not very familiar with the more rigorous side of urban planning, but my impression is that it is wrought with stylistic trends that gain their popularity from some source other than studies which prove that one decision is actually better than any other.

Malcolm says

It is easy to write Jacobs off as a utopian, but this book, derived from a women's-eye view of living in New York's Greenwich Village in the late 1950s gives us a great sense of what the city could be and her recurrent struggles with and voer Robert Moses's attempts to redesign NYC in the 1960s privide us with a model of urban struggle and defencs of urban space. It remains a blistering critique of the impacts of urban design, of the inadequacies of design-from-the-top, and a powerful case of the usefulness of ethnographic participant observation - not that she set out to be an ethnographer, but to be a polticial advocate from her locality. Superb.

Chris Herdt says

The Death and Life of Great American Cities was both a frustrating and an illuminating book.

It was frustrating because it was long, and in many parts dull: I was yawning at 3 o'clock in the afternoon while drinking coffee and reading this. This book is a fabulous soporific and I recommend it heartily to insomniacs everywhere.

It was also frustrating because it is showing its age. Jacobs longs for diverse neighborhoods with fruit stands and butcher shops that aren't coming back, filled with bored housewives that can spend their time staring out windows and scolding naughty children playing with marbles. The supermarket is here to stay, and stay-at-home moms (or dads) are uncommon. Jacobs also has a ridiculous idea of what people enjoy about city life--I, for one, would not find it charming to hear a midnight bagpipe serenade!

It was also frustrating because it offered up far more problems with contemporary city planning than it did solutions for city problems. She was antagonistic towards contemporary city planning, and for good reason: their actions inevitably led to a reduction in neighborhood diversity, one of Jabobs' key elements for a successful city neighborhood. But her solutions were few (other than to stop practices that had proven failures, but that continue to be implemented today, 50 years later) and the few solutions she had struck me as nearly as inherently flawed as the practices she despised.

It was illuminating because it revealed the many reasons why low-income housing projects failed time and time again. I had always thought of it as a failure of modernist architecture, which in part it was, but there were many more reasons. Entire neighborhoods were torn apart, pulling apart existing social orders, and put into a new neighborhood completely lacking in diversity (in terms of businesses, dwelling types, and people). Anyone who lived in the projects who improved their financial situation was forced to move out, thus insuring that the projects would always remain poor (and lacking in economic diversity). There were parks and common areas, but possibly too many: parks and common areas that are underutilized become dangerous. This is one area where Jacobs' recommendations were possibly useful, as the federal government has incorporated many of her ideas to subsidize low-income tenants in private housing, rather than in monolithic government-owned housing sites.

(Frankly, the talk about projects reminded me very much of the University of Michigan's Bursley Hall. It feels wrong for a middle-class suburbanite to complain about his college dormitory in relation to low-income housing projects, but I hate that place with a passion, and I will celebrate when that building is torn down. Housing 1200 college students together in an isolated location cut off from town or the rest of campus is an abominable idea.)

Naturally I enjoyed the chapter about the automobile, and found her commentary interesting. Every time we make a concession to automobile traffic to reduce congestion, or increase parking, we are taking away the very things that make a city pedestrian friendly. Traffic and parking concessions happen slowly and over time, so she argues that taking them back for sidewalks and storefronts can only happen slowly and over time as well.

Some other illuminating points: it revealed the danger of "cataclysmic money" (large, irregular investments), something I've already read about regarding science funding. Slow and steady investment over time is the best way to encourage perpetual growth. Vertical silos of city management often cause the departments to overlook unique differences in individual neighborhoods--this made me appreciate the structure of large universities more, where each school operates with a large amount of independence.

I finally read this book after I was publicly complaining about Birmingham, Ala., and attributed its flaws primarily to a lack of population density. Although Jabobs does cite density as a necessity for a vibrant city, Murph, a friend and city planner, recommended I read this book. Indeed, Jacobs ties things together in the last chapter and reveals that thinking about city issues in terms of one or two variables, such as population per square mile, is unproductive. Jacobs says the following in regards to city parks, but I think the statement can be applied much more broadly to avoid reductionist strategies:

"This is a far cry from the simple problem of ratios of open space to ratios of population; but there is no use wishing it were a simpler problem or trying to make it a simpler problem, because in real life it is not a simpler problem."

If you've made it to the end of this overly long review, I'll give you the one-sentence summary: Utopian city planning leads to urban Dystopias, and urban diversity--in its buildings, in its uses, in its people--is the best way to achieve a vibrant city.

Katy says

I know some people who will balk at my 3-star rating, so I will explain myself. As a body of work, it is

amazing and I adore Jane Jacobs. However, a good portion of this book still manages to be dull, despite being very important. (I can't help it!) I dig nonfiction, and I think 3 stars for a non-fiction book means it's pretty darn good, because who ever finished a cruddy non-fiction book unless they were taking a class? So, I read it voluntarily and give it 3 stars on the highly-sensitive and mysterious non-fiction rating system.

Tricia says

Genius woman!

Jeremy says

I've never read anything about city planning or urban studies before, so this was all quite new to me. Jacobs creates a vivid, wide ranging critique of the dominant forms of city planning, which are driven as she compellingly points out, by stupidly reactionary, romantic notions about how people should be made to live. I'd never really thought in a concerted way before about how things like sidewalk width, the ages of buildings, the the location of public buildings etc. would effect how people move, interact and live within a city. Her method of simple, direct observation reveals an entire strata around us which shapes our lives, our culture and our municipal policies, usually without much notice on our part. Whenever I drive around the not-quite-great American city I live in, I now find myself trying to determine if the blocks are too long, if the road-bed is too wide, and noticing how the space around most of the parks is conspicuously empty and dead. And as someone who grew up surrounded by belligerently provincial mid-westerners, it's really refreshing to have someone vehemently explain how and why large cities are not only a valid kind of place to live, but can actually be essential. I'd highly recommend this, especially to anyone who like me, is a total newbie when it comes to urbanism.

Roy Lotz says

> *This is a common assumption: that human beings are charming in small numbers and noxious in large numbers.*

I picked up this book immediately after finishing *The Power Broker*, and I highly recommend this sequence to anyone who has the time. The conflict between Robert Moses, czar-like planner of New York City for almost half a century, and Jane Jacobs, ordinary citizen and activist, has become the source of legend. There is a book about it, *Wrestling with Moses*, a well-made documentary, *Citizen Jane*, and an opera, *A Marvelous Order*, with a libretto written by a Pulitzer Prize winner (I haven’t seen it). The two make an excellent hero and villain. Moses, the autocratic, power-hungry city-planner who eviscerates neighborhoods and bulldozes homes. Jacobs, the underdog autodidact, community organizer, defender of Greenwich Village and Washington Square Park.

The two did not only clash in life—with Jacobs leading protests to stop Moses’s highways—but, more importantly, in thought. More diametrically opposed conceptions of the city could hardly be imagined.

Moses was, at bottom, a follower of Le Corbusier, a modernist who put forward the idea of the Radiant City. The idea was to create a city with all the different functions in separate zones—sections for retail, business, manufacturing, residence—and to create as much green space as possible by putting everything in high-rise buildings, freeing up land for parks. These buildings would be connected, not by ordinary roads, but by giant superhighways. In a way, it is a conception of the city that is anti-city: there would be no streets, no corner shops, no neighborhoods. The impulse was, I believe, originally progressive: to erase differences in class by creating uniform conditions for everyone. But in Moses's hands this philosophy became deeply reactionary: isolate the poor people of color in projects and build highways for the car-owning middle class.

Jacobs was absolutely opposed to this model. There are innumerable theoretical differences between Jacobs and Moses, but I think the most essential difference is this: Jacobs loved cities. She loved walking around cities, chatting with neighbors, gazing at street-life, making small-talk at local shops, sitting on stoops and leaning out windows. And so her idea of urban planning is not to pack everyone into high-rise buildings to get them off the street, but the reverse: to get as many people on the street as possible. She loves the messiness of cities. A healthy city is not, for her, a work of art, consciously designed. It is more like a biological organism, shaped by natural selection into a well-functioning, complex, interrelated, constantly-changing whole. Healthy cities are not made by planners but by ordinary people.

Since the publication of this book, Jacobs's ideas have become enormously influential—so influential, in fact, that it is difficult to see anything radical about what she says. One of her basic principles, for example, is that a well-used street is a safe street, because the presence of many bystanders discourages crime. I suspect that this seems obvious to most people. But when you look at the projects that Moses and his ilk built—high-rise buildings surrounded by lawns, with no shops, restaurants, or anything else to attract people to street level—you realize how totally out of touch they were. Indeed, the whole idea of housing projects sounds like a recipe for disaster: pack all the poor into one area, set income limits so anyone successful has to move out, discourage all street activity to eliminate a sense of community. And in practice the projects were disasters—centers of delinquency and despair.

Jacobs's recipe for creating a healthy neighborhood has four ingredients: (1) mixed uses, so that different kinds of people are drawn to the area at different times of day for different reasons; (2) a mixture of old and new buildings, so that there is low-rent space available for small businesses and low-income residents; (3) small blocks, so that streets are not isolated from one another; and (4) sufficient density of residents, to create the necessary amount of economic and social activity. The goal is to produce a neighborhood like her own Greenwich Village: with lots of street life, with successful residents who choose to stay long-term, with local stores and restaurants and cafes, and with a steady influx of immigrants.

To use a metaphor, Jacobs thinks we should try to create an ecosystem with a lot of biodiversity; and to do this we need a lot of biomass and a lot of separate niches. The essential fact about ecosystems—which also applies to cities—is that they are a delicate balance of different elements, deeply complex, shaped by the action of countless individual players over countless eons. This level of complexity is baffling to the human mind, which is why we so often disrupt ecosystems by trying to "improve" them. Urban planning does the same thing with cities.

The Moses approach (to continue the metaphor) is agricultural rather than natural: sweep away the natural environment and create an artificial monoculture. Monocultures never spring up in healthy ecosystems. Lacking biodiversity, they are inherently vulnerable and difficult to maintain. We expend enormous amounts of money and energy defending our wheat fields from vermin and disease. The same principle applies to the housing projects, which need constant police surveillance to remain remotely viable.

This gives a taste of Jacobs's guiding idea, perhaps, but I can hardly do justice to the wealth of thought in this book. Jacobs has convincing sociological insights into what makes streets safe or unsafe, what makes city economies thrive or stagnate, why housing projects fail and slums form, why parks are used and unused, why city governments are so often inefficient and ineffective, and even includes her ideas on the history and progress of science. In a way, this book is a constant rebuke to academe. At the time, academic urban planning was entirely stagnant, relying on ideas and principles that hadn't been modified in thirty years and which were never very good to begin with. It took someone like Jacobs, an autodidact without a college degree, to break up the orthodoxy—and she had to endure a lot of sexism and condescension in the process.

What made her so successful, and what has made this book so enduring, was a rare combination of talents: keen observation, a highly original mind, the ability to think on multiple scales at once, hard-nosed practicality, and a healthy sense of social responsibility. In this book she relies on her wide and somewhat eclectic reading, but even more on her own eyes and ears. She has visited successful and unsuccessful neighborhoods and had talked to their residents. She has led protests and was a frequent visitor of City Hall. When you read this book, it is easy to see why she has become something of a hero for many citizens and academics: she is absolutely unafraid of authority, either intellectual or political, and she had the mental and personal resources to win.

It is, of course, ironic that her ideas, so heterodox, eventually became the new orthodoxy of urban planning. When Jacobs passed away in 2006, there were many who called for an end to her intellectual reign.

The most common criticism, I believe, is that Jacobs did not anticipate gentrification—the gradual takeover of neighborhoods by the affluent. This is the most talked-about problem in New York City today. There's a popular blog, Vanishing New York, which documents all the small business and local establishments being pushed out by big money. Jacobs's own former neighborhood, Greenwich Village, is a prime example: now it is nothing like the bustling, bohemian, working-class place it was in her day. I'm not sure if Jacobs can be fairly blamed for this, however. For one, she anticipates how successful neighborhood can become "too successful" and lose their vitality as more money pours in. What's more, she was very concerned with maintaining housing for low-income tenants within successful neighborhoods, and includes a novel plan to do so in this book.

In any case, this book is not just a recipe for creating neighborhoods. In an oblique way, it presents an entire ideology. Jacobs is a proponent of what you might call progressive decentralism. Normally, decentralism is associated with the right, at least here in the US, but Jacobs make a strong case for leftist decentralism. Large, vertically-oriented government structures simply cannot understand or respond to individual citizens' needs. The answer is to empower local government so that citizens can shape their own neighborhoods. Government must help the disadvantaged, but must do so by cooperating with local forces and private individuals—exploiting economic and social elements that naturally arise, instead of imposing its own cumbrous structure.

This book can be read even more broadly, as an attack on suburbia and modern isolation. Cities are the future, as Jacobs reminds us—hotbeds of ideas and centers of population growth; and cities are natural products, created by the free choice of individuals, places that organically foster their own sense of identity and community. Suburbia is a rejection of cities: artificial products created through the deliberate policies of planners. Not shaped by free choice, they are not organic communities; and even if they escape being unsafe, like the projects, they foster that constant specter of modern life: isolation. When you hear Jacobs describe her own neighborhood in Greenwich Village, you get a sense of what so many places nowadays lack: neighborliness, friendliness, a group of semi-strangers and sidewalk acquaintances who will go out of their way to help each other, a sense of communal ownership and belonging.

In sum, this book is a true classic: ensconced in an intellectual climate that no longer exists, responding to contemporary problems with eloquence and insight, and championing a perspective that is still vital.

Andrew says

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Especially to anyone who's interested in the ways in which cities operate, but also to pretty much anyone else. Ms. Jacobs was hella prescient in her emphasis on cityspace needing to be used more than produced, and goes about demonstrating the failures of modernist planning and drawing a line towards a new method of development in which the city-dweller takes primacy. Also, it warns about the dangers of gentrification years before anyone else was thinking about it, predicts the decline of cities with the building of large expressways, and on and on. Wow!

Matt says

Favorite passages:

To generate exuberant diversity in a city's streets and districts, four conditions are indispensable: The distrct must serve more than one purpose (preferably more than two), the blocks must be short, the buildings must vary in age and condition, and the population must be dense.

Euclid Avenue in Cleveland, which used to be considered by many critics one of the most beautiful of American avenues (it was, in those days, essentially a suburban avenue of large, fine houses with large, fine grounds), has now been excoriated, with justice… as one of the ugliest and most disorganized of city streets. In converting to outright urban use, Euclid Avenue has converted to homogeneity: office buildings again, and again a chaos of shouted, but superficial, differences. (p. 226)

Traffic congestion is caused by vehicles, not by people in themselves. Wherever people are thinly settled, rather than densely concentrated, or wherever diverse uses occur infrequently, any specific attraction does cause traffic congestion… this is tolerable where the population is thinly spread. It becomes an intolerable condition, destructive of all other values and all other aspects of convenience, where populations are heavy or continuous. (p. 230)

… Credit-blacklist maps are identical, both in conception and in most results, with municipal slum-clearance maps. And municipal slum-clearance maps are regarded as responsible devices, used for responsible purposes - among their purposes is, in fact, that of warning lenders not to invest here… Credit-blacklist maps, like slum-clearance maps, are accurate prophecies because they are self-fulfilling prophecies. (p. 300)

… there is a basic aesthetic limitation on what can be done with cities: A city cannot be a work of art… we need art most, perhaps, to reassure us of our own humanity. However, although art and life are interwoven, they are not the same things. Confusion between them is, in part, why efforts at city design are so disappointing. (p. 372)

What if we fail to stop the erosion of cities by automobiles? What if we are prevented from catalyzing workable and vital cities because the practical steps needed to do so are in conflict with the practical steps demanded by erosion?… In that case we Americans will hardly need to ponder a mystery that has troubled

men for millenia: What is the purpose of life? For us, theanswer will be clear, established and for all practical purposes indisputable: The purpose of life is to produce and consume automobiles. (p. 370)

Andrea says

One of the books that all planners are supposed to have read, I know it's a bit shocking that I have only now read it. And regrettable. It deserves every ounce of it's status as a classic (if such status were to be measured in ounces). It's eminently readable (and isn't that a pleasure in a book of this kind), but also incredibly insightful and of course I love how it resonates so brilliantly with my experience living in many different cities while toppling most accepted planning theory. The more diverse cities are, the more people love them. The more people on the street at all different times of day, the safer and more enjoyable those streets are. High foot traffic allows a glorious flowering in the kinds of local businesses to spring up, and those in turn provide stability and attraction to the street. The longer people stay in neighborhoods and the more they feel pride and ownership and love for them, the better those neighborhoods become. It's brilliant to be able to walk out of your door and buy what you need within a few blocks, getting to know the shop owners as you do so. Kids growing up in this environment feel a sense of civic engagement and helpfulness, and are accountable and supervised by a multitude of friendly and known adults. And who could know better the improvements and changes needed for a neighborhood than those who live there?

And yet planning over decades has worked to destroy all this.

This is a practical and eminently sensible account of what makes city neighbourhoods work. I think its weaknesses are highlighted by the fact that it is a rare popular book read by those who are not planners, and accepted as a classic amongst urban planners themselves, and yet, although written in 1961, has had remarkably little effect on how planning occurs or how urban development takes place. This points to the questions that Jacobs answers only superficially -- why exactly planning and development have taken the shape they have. That is truly a tragedy for it is full of brilliant and insightfully practical suggestions on how to improve both. It does look at the process of redlining, it has some analysis of racism and classism and prejudice, but not enough. And ultimately the driving forces of profit and capitalism are left unquestioned. To find those you have read David Harvey and Neil Smith and a host of others. I don't think that makes the insight offered by Jacobs any less, simply incomplete, and highlights the fact that a more fundamental change in how we develop and plan our cities is required, one based upon need and increasing vitality rather than the greatest profit.
