

A PROFOUND VIEW OF MODERN CITY PLANNING PRINCIPLES

The Death and Life of Great American Cities

Jane Jacobs

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Review by *Hira Qureshi**

The early 1900s, witnessed that cities' character helped to understand the larger process of urban planning. When this role was lost half a century later, it was Jane Jacobs who provided a visionary insight into the complex nature of cities.

"The Death and Life of Great American Cities", since its first publication in 1961 provides a comprehensive insight into the complex nature of cities' growth, predominantly the modern urban planning principles. This book can be considered the standard to deliberate on the current practice within the domain of urban planning. This monumental work also provides an essential framework for assessing how cities work in real life and how they can become socially and economically viable. Furthermore, reflecting on the arguments about the existing planning principles, Jacobs effectively claims to introduce some revolutionary principles of city planning and rebuilding.

Jane Jacobs had no professional training as a city planner. She based this first publication on personal observation of life in large cities, reinforced by indicating how the biological sciences were developing at that time. She lived in New York but frequently travelled to Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago where she met scores of people whose unending support shored up her endeavors. Jacobs acknowledges her husband, Robert Jacobs and generously claims that the offered ideas in the book are either his or hers. Jacobs's book describes the real factors affecting cities and recommends strategies to enhance actual city performance.

Built on an analytical prose, Jacobs's book significantly defines the urban space as the key building block of a city. It briefly explains the influential ideas in Orthodox planning, starting from Howard's Garden City which was a set of self-sufficient small towns and ideal for



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

all but those with a plan for their own lives. Concurrently, City Beautiful was developed to sort out the monuments from the rest of the city and assemble them in a unit. Later, Le Corbusier devised the Radiant City, composed of skyscrapers within a park. Considering all these planning styles as irrelevant, Jacobs's concept of achieving a sense of place by identifying the real working of cities crucially structures this entire book into four sections.

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The book starts with a section on the “peculiar nature of cities”. It appears that Jacobs noticeably contributes the design of a successful neighborhood to radically viable cities. She further explains her claim by mentioning sidewalks and streets as places for movement within a city, and also functional parks for play and relaxation. Elaborating on the fact that pavements can clearly mark a public/private separation to create safe streets, the spontaneous watch of both pedestrians and those gazing at the continual flux of pedestrians from buildings can render streets to become accessible and visible. Well used streets are safe which can be made possible by integrating small neighborhood businesses to attract public, as more people mean more safety. Moreover, the quality of life can be further improved as more functional parks are planned and used by a diverse set of users.

The set of intellectual views in the first part sequentially unfold into the second part, where Jacobs upholds “diversity” as the most rudimentary component of a healthy city. Diversity is an accepted phenomenon of big cities and the conditions for city diversity or the economic mechanism that produce lively cities advocate the central idea of this section of the book. Jacobs argues that diversity is not the root cause of city degradation. Instead, her opinion that diversity forms the core of viable cities emphasizes on four essential generators. The first generator up fronts that mixed land uses would largely generate enterprises to benefit social and economic diversity. The creation of short blocks with readily accessible opportunities at small distances is discussed as the second generator, which aims to control sporadic development. The third generator considers that an attractive mix of different periods of construction should be able to direct economic sustainability. Lastly, the interaction of dense concentration of people, including residents of buildings must productively create economically and socially congenial places for diversity to generate itself.

The discussion on causes and consequences of diversity leads into the third section of this publication which examines four interrelated forces that can influence city decline and its regeneration. Analyzing these forces categorically, Jacob takes the position that “successful diversity can also become self-destructive”, suggesting that “some districts might attract more diversified businesses because of their location while leaving the less profitable areas to stagnate and decay”, as in the case of erosion from the city center and spillover in

the multiple neighborhood districts. “Massive single facilities such as railroad tracks, public parks and school campuses can create borders with adjoining areas and terminate the generalized uses within a city”. The resulting population instability increases the growth of slums that predate on the city’s resources and even the public and private money having its limitations is incapable of buying instinctive success for livable environment in cities. Therefore, Jacobs recommends that dwellers should seek to stay and develop neighborhoods.

For pursuing the above stated situations, the book concludes with a series of specific suggestions to essentially improve city performance. This last part specifically addresses city planners and architects at large. Jacobs suggests subsidized dwellings should be offered to those who cannot afford standard housing. She proposes that the government should guarantee a rent to the landlords so that in the case that tenants’ incomes increase, they are not forced to leave and their rents would be adjusted. Therefore, “diversity would be enhanced by encouraging those wishing to live at locations of their choice”. Similarly, Jacobs insists that accessibility of city transportation at those locations should persuade the compact city development. Further on, the author also suggests tactics for providing opportunities to other desired land uses such as widening sidewalks for street displays and more pedestrian traffic to effectively restrict the vehicular roadbed to minimize traffic.

In the light of present cities’ circumstances, this book is worth reading to re-evaluate the existing city character and revisit on significant parameters to increase city livability and viability. Although, a very old work of literature, the essence of its intricate blend of events and experiences on how and why compact development should be promoted, unlocks and triggers the thinking of a common man as well as professionals to explore various ground realities of a city’s development in a coherent progression. Urban sprawl is a daunting reality today, which invades the core city resources. Likewise, it destroys the natural land cover to accommodate accelerated population growth and is thus, observed as an unsustainable development. This in turn, thwarts the capacity building of cities and proposes greater challenges for city planners, architects and other technical professionals in the field. In the wake of this dilemma, the assertive reputation of this publication dictates diversity, which forms the most valuable section

of this book. The book initiates an analytical foundation for the rest of the reading and delivers a sequential inquiry into the inherent physical nature of a city, which is controlled by overarching forces, to the core of how crucially the citizens can impact their environment. While presenting a comprehensive overview, the author has cautiously aimed to outline some relevant planning principles too, which fall right on target. This book serves well as a tool for students, academics, researchers, decision makers as well as citizens. Any reader can easily identify with the author's claims and arguments, but those unfamiliar with the geography of United

States need to refer to maps and photos every now and then. Least to mention, it's been nearly fifty seven years since its first publication and the time of the illustrations and descriptions then and now, has induced a followup analysis of the impact of this book and changes in urban planning over the period of time. The author's own interpretation on a city's evolution, in addition to the critiques of whom she generously recognizes as her utmost support and description of individual experiences of urban spaces positively, makes this book a useful read.