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History Session 11 Who Was Jane Jacobs What Did She Do of Importance Sept 10, 2017
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Jane Jacobs (1916-2006)

Jane Jacobs was a key figure in postwar debates on public housing and urban renewal; a writer and an activist whose appreciation of older city center neighborhoods helped transform the way we think about urban space. At a time when planners and politicians were eager to rebuild aging cities, Jacobs argued that density and diversity of buildings and people—both signs of obsolescence in the eyes of the postwar planners—were in fact cities' greatest strength. In an era of high rises, superblocks, and expressways, she celebrated the sidewalk and the street as the building blocks of socially and economically viable neighborhoods and urban districts. Her popular writings signaled a new approach to housing and planning that emphasized context, participation, . . . small-scale, incremental change [and defense of what was good in existing housing and neighborhoods.].

Jacobs is closely associated with New York City, where she lived and worked for more than thirty years. A native of Scranton, Pennsylvania, where she got her start in journalism at the age of seventeen, Jacobs moved to New York in 1934 and wrote for several trade magazines before finding a position as an editor at *Architectural Forum* in 1952. Working at the *Forum* at a time when cities were tearing down older neighborhoods for public housing, redevelopment projects, land infrastructure, she found herself increasingly skeptical about the claims that architects and planners made about the value of these new spaces. . . .

She also encountered the disruption of postwar planning closer to home, in Greenwich Village, where she and her husband, the architect Robert Hyde Jacobs, had owned a house on Hudson Street since 1947. Alongside Village activists, the couple fought plans to open Washington Square to traffic and to widen Hudson Street.

To Jacobs, the city's proposals invariably threatened the very things that made her neighborhood appealing: the small scale, the mixture of stores and houses and cars and pedestrians, and the broad expanses of sidewalk that accommodated a multitude of activities. Generations of reformers, including Mary Simkhovitch at Greenwich House had associated these qualities with slums; Jacobs believed they made a good neighborhood.

Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961, billed itself as "an attack on current city planning and rebuilding." . . . Criticism of public housing and redevelopment programs was not new, but Jacobs was among the first to attack these liberal programs from the left, arguing that they hurt the very residents that they were intended to help.

Her view of public housing was particularly grim. Drawing on research conducted by social workers in East Harlem, she pointed out that the clearance and assembly of dozens of blocks of tenements had not only displaced tens of thousands of residents, but it also had decimated the

local economy by condemning thousands of small businesses. Where an older generation of housers like Mary Simkhovitch believed that modern high-rise housing set in superblocks would form the basis of a new community—and that blight could be stemmed only by creating neighborhoods large enough to stave off future encroachment and eradicating all traces of the old—Jacobs observed extreme income segregation, few local job prospects, and ill-defined common areas that seemed destined to attract crime. She also objected strongly to the way that public housing . . . isolated and stigmatized its inhabitants. "It is wrong to set one part of the population, segregated by income, apart in its own neighborhoods with its own different scheme of community," she wrote. "Separate but equal makes nothing but trouble."

Death and Life was also distinguished from other writing of its era by its clear vision of what planners overlooked in their rush to modernize: the very qualities that made existing neighborhoods and cities work well. Greenwich Village had taught Jacobs the value of short blocks, older buildings, and mixed uses, all of which generated social, economic, and visual diversity. She also emphasized how, in her experience, high densities sustained the city's underlying social order, including neighborly trust. [Jacobs saw streets busy with all sorts of people were safer than streets in luxury neighborhoods. The "eyes on the street" insured that safety.]

She was critical of Modernism's "doctrine of salvation by bricks": the assumption that new housing would lead to improved social conditions, which she branded paternalistic. She dismissed purely formal, architectural solutions, but her vivid descriptions of the Village's small scale, welcoming storefronts, and bustling sidewalks, and her insistence that social and economic diversity were closely linked to urban form, suggested that nineteenth-century tenements and sidewalks offered an antidote to [the artificialness of much of]Modernism.

Written just as the first "brownstoners" were moving into the Upper West Side, Chelsea, and Park Slope, and as popular critiques of postwar suburbia reached the national press, *Death and Life* marked the beginning of a middle-class back-to-the-city movement that continues today.

Many of the key concepts behind housing and redevelopment legislation of the 1930s and 1940s had been formulated by previous generations of activists who had watched the middle class depart for the suburbs, while immigrants were trapped in substandard housing in working-class districts. To these men and women, only government intervention would reverse the process of slum formation. Writing at a time of economic expansion, Jacobs assumed instead that cities contained the seeds of their own regeneration. In thriving neighborhoods like her own, or Boston's North End, she saw evidence of a spontaneous self-organization that would help aging working-class neighborhoods gradually "unslum" themselves. Like the early brownstoners, she saw the value in old tenements and row houses that could be rehabilitated. [She did not foresee the degeneration of diverse neighborhoods that gentrification was going to threaten and the need for governmental intervention to protect those neighborhoods from gentrification.]

Even as *Death and Life* was in press, the West Village was threatened by an urban renewal designation that Jacobs and her neighbors defeated by demonstrating that the West Village was not, by any measure, a slum.

One morning in February 1961, shortly after she had sent the manuscript for *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* to the publishers and returned to work at the *Architectural Forum*, Jane Jacobs opened her morning newspaper to discover that the neighborhood where she lived, the West Village in New York City, had been designated [as "blighted", therefore eligible] for urban renewal. "Now, having written about a lot of urban renewal for the *Architectural Forum*, I knew at once what that meant— that we were designated to be wiped out," Jacobs later recalled. She began organizing her neighbors immediately.

Between February 1961, when the designation was announced, and the following January, Jacobs and her neighbors fought the urban renewal plans for the West Village. Within days, she and a group of Village residents had successfully delayed progress on the project by convincing local politicians to postpone a request for federal funding. By the end of the next week, she had helped organize the Committee to Save the West Village (CSWV) to oppose the city's plans. Jacobs, who was increasingly active in neighborhood politics and had been involved in two protests against Village planning proposals in the previous two years, was appointed the group's co-chairman and took on a central role in the campaign.

Jacobs proved to be a brilliant organizer, resourceful and aggressive. Like Saul Alinsky, the pioneering community organizer whose approach she admired, Jacobs believed in empowering the neighborhood in its own defense. The CSWV worked closely with existing West Village institutions in the neighborhoods; it mobilized local leaders, from parish priests to small business owners; and it prepared local residents to speak out against the project in public hearings. Like Alinsky, Jacobs cultivated her enemies carefully. The CSWV attacked local groups supporting the renewal project as puppet organizations and kept pressure on elected officials. To cast doubt on the motivations of the City Planning Commission and the Housing and Redevelopment Board, the CSWV argued that City had denied the neighborhood due process and demonstrated bad faith when they placed a blight designation on the neighborhood without holding a legally required public hearing. When Mayor Wagner attempted to compromise, pledging that "the bulldozer approach is out" and that "any contemplated new improvements shall be in keeping physically and aesthetically with Village tradition," Jacobs replied that these were "pious platitudes." The CSWV wanted the West Village proposal "killed outright."

On the eve of the primary election in September 1961, under pressure from Jacobs, the CSWV, and Village residents, Mayor Wagner withdrew his support for the plan. After another contentious public hearing, the Housing and Redevelopment Board, the agency responsible for the renewal project, dropped its plans for the neighborhood in October. Finally, in January 1962,

the City Planning Commission removed the designation of blight, thus ensuring that the West Village would no longer be considered for renewal. Jacobs and the CSWV had won their battle against the city.

Shortly after the publication of *Death and Life*, Jacobs left her job at *Architectural Forum*. By the early 1960s she had become a public figure in New York, as well known for her activism as her writing. More battles, large and small, followed. She was involved in many 1960s-era protests including those against the Lower Manhattan Expressway, the destruction of Penn Station, and against the Vietnam War. With two sons facing the draft in 1968, Jacobs and her family moved to Toronto, where she remained active in local planning politics. She died there in 2006 a month short of 90 years old.

Jacobs's hostility toward the planning profession is very much a product of the 1950s and 1960s, and her unshakeable faith in neighborly trust in public places and the self-regulating, regenerative qualities of cities can seem naive. Gentrification has eroded the diversity that she observed in successful neighborhoods like Greenwich Village, and racism has concentrated poverty in neighborhoods that are unlikely to spontaneously "unslum." But her ideas remain relevant today. Her advocacy of diversity—a mixture of buildings old and new, a range of uses and activities and schedules, "so many people . . . so close together, and among them . . . so many different tastes, skills, needs, supplies, and bees in their bonnets"—has inspired many, including preservationists, developers, community activists, and policymakers. Her greatest contribution may be her emphasis on participation and local knowledge. In a period obsessed with the abstractions of physical modernization, Jacobs urged her readers to look around rather than accept the advice of experts, a suggestion that still resonates today.

Most of the above is taken from two articles by Jennifer Hock, "Jane Jacobs (1916-2006)" in *Affordable Housing in New York*, Nicholas Bloom and Matthew Lasner, editors, 2016 pages 207-209 and "Jane Jacobs and the West Village: The Neighborhood against Urban Renewal" in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (March 2007), pp.16-19.
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