

Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review

Volume 28

Issue 4 A Symposium: *Jane Jacobs & The New Urban Ecology*

Article 8

1-1-2001

Jane Jacob's Moral Explorations

Sam Bass Warner, Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/ealr>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sam B. Warner, Jr., *Jane Jacob's Moral Explorations*, 28 B.C. Envtl. Aff. L. Rev. 609 (2001),
<http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/ealr/vol28/iss4/8>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at Digital Commons @ Boston College Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Boston College Law School. For more information, please contact nick.szydowski@bc.edu.

JANE JACOBS'S MORAL EXPLORATIONS

SAM BASS WARNER, JR.*

Abstract: This essay reviews Jane Jacobs's three major books: *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, and *The Nature of Economies*. It traces her development of a hierarchy of places from neighborhoods to city regions to nations and the earth. All her places are defined by their predominant social activities, not by geographical boundaries. The themes of diversity, experimentation, adaptability, and democracy inform all her writings and form the basis of her moral analysis. Jacobs's methods are contrasted to those of Lewis Mumford and the similarities of their moral concerns noted. Her latest book, a review of the basic hypotheses of ecology, successfully presents the idea that through self-correction, differentiation, and diversification, humans and their fellow organisms can best find sustainability.

Some decades ago when I was a graduate student in an American History department I found my calling by following the then-new path of urban history. I found this specialty through reading Lewis Mumford's *The Culture of Cities*.¹ Later, as I was working on my dissertation,² Jane Jacobs thrust herself upon my consciousness with her chapter "Downtowns Are for People" in Holly (Wm. H.) Whyte's *The Exploding Metropolis*.³ Three years later she brought out her wonderful book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.⁴ Since then Ms. Jacobs has nourished my career as a historian by means of her subsequent urban explorations.

At the outset let me say that I think there is currently a good deal of loose talk about Ms. Jacobs. Because of today's conservative mood she has been labeled as an apologist for nineteenth century economics and as the scourge of the art of city planning. To me she is an iconoclast, a wise teacher, and a person who has been using her con-

* Visiting Prof., Dept. of Urban Stud. & Planning, Mass. Inst. Tech.; Ph.D. History, Harvard U.; M.S. Journalism, Boston U.; A.B., Harvard U.

¹ See generally LEWIS MUMFORD, *THE CULTURE OF CITIES* (1938).

² See generally SAM BASS WARNER, JR., *STREETCAR SUBURBS* (1962).

³ See generally Jane Jacobs, *Downtowns Are For People*, in *THE EXPLODING METROPOLIS* 157 (Editors of Fortune, 1958).

⁴ See generally JANE JACOBS, *THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES* (1961) [hereinafter JACOBS, *DEATH AND LIFE*].

cern for cities as a device to discover a moral base for modern society. In her three books that I want to discuss, she attacks city officials and planners for being ignorant of their cities⁵ and she reviews the state of macroeconomics to conclude, "economics is no use to us."⁶ She views the New Deal as the starting point of stagflation in the American economy;⁷ she attacks our foreign aid policies as a misreading of the Marshall Plan lesson, and she views with alarm the destructive nature of nations and empires who fritter away their own productivity with military adventures and subsidies to quiet disaffected regions and peoples.⁸ To me this is an impressive blast of intellectual fresh air.

The Death and Life is her best teaching book. In my years as a professor it never failed to give students a fresh outlook. I have assigned it to seventeen-year-old suburban freshmen, to adults in high school equivalency programs, and to graduate students in urban history. As I did so, I accompanied my assignments with the admonition to the students to get out, to look around, whether their home place was rural, suburban, or urban. No student who both read and looked ever returned without a fresh and enlivened curiosity. *Death and Life* is a wonderfully stimulating mirror that Jane Jacobs has held up to us all.

I think the success of that book rests upon Jacobs's method of study. She is not an academic, and therefore she does not think she must begin her work by a search of the literature in the hope of discovering some topic that might attract the attention of other academics. Instead, she looks about her, takes note of what the city presents to public view, and thereby finds her topics. Observation leads to the library, but the library is neither the beginning nor the end of her tasks. This method was Lewis Mumford's also. He was an inveterate city walker. He was not a professor either.

For this symposium I returned to Mumford's severe 1962 attack on *Death and Life* because I wished to reconcile my two intellectual heroes.⁹ My sense is that in Mumford's disagreements can be found the secret to Jane Jacobs's moral explorations. Mumford was at his best as a speculative historian. He had a wonderfully imaginative eye for material culture and its symbolic meanings. Like Jane Jacobs, he

⁵ *Id.* at 406.

⁶ JANE JACOBS, *CITIES AND THE WEALTH OF NATIONS: THE PRINCIPLES OF ECONOMIC LIFE*, 27-28 (1984) [hereinafter JACOBS, *CITIES AND WEALTH*].

⁷ *Id.* at 207-08.

⁸ *Id.* at 183-201.

⁹ Lewis Mumford, *Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies for Urban Cancer*, *THE NEW YORKER*, Dec. 1, 1962, at 38 [hereinafter Mumford, *Mother Jacobs*].

did not confuse change with progress. He recorded much destructive change, *abbau*, or unbuilding as he called it. These were his moral equivalents to Jacobs's federal slum construction and highway disasters. Mumford was no admirer of militaristic nations and empires either. In his later years the great question for him became the intermeshing of business corporations and the military to destroy democracy.¹⁰ I think Jane Jacobs has arrived at this point too, but by a very different path than Mumford's.

Mumford's group—Patrick Geddes the biologist and planner, Benton MacKaye the regionalist, and Clarence Stein the wonderful architect—together suffered from an over-specificity of architectural remedies to urban problems.¹¹ Their regional plans, new towns, residential super blocks, and neighborhood units pinned them down. The defense of these particulars animated Mumford's hostility in his *New Yorker* review, "Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies for Urban Cancer."¹²

In *The Death and Life*, Jacobs does not specify the remedies. Rather, she argues for standards, sets goals, and then criticizes from that platform. Her material is gathered from a very careful observation of the details of the city. She ends the book with a speculation about "The Kind of Problem the City Is."¹³ It is this open question that led to her subsequent explorations.

Let me now pick up her work twenty-three years later with *Cities and the Wealth of Nations: Principles of Economic Life*.¹⁴ Pervasive stagflation in the United States and Europe gave rise to this study of economies and their relationships to cities, regions, and nations. In her analysis she did not believe that economies were predictable: when you see a successful one, you can comprehend its workings, but you cannot know if success will continue. The future for both man and nature is indeterminate.

In this book Jacobs perfected her list of places. Each one differs from the next according to the social activity that takes place there. The significant places are the streets, the neighborhoods, the city dis-

¹⁰ LEWIS MUMFORD, *The Pentagon of Power*, in 2 THE MYTH OF THE MACHINE (1970) [hereinafter LEWIS MUMFORD, *Pentagon of Power*].

¹¹ See generally HELEN ELIZABETH MELLER, PATRICK GEDDES: SOCIAL EVOLUTIONIST AND CITY PLANNER (1994); BENTON MACKAYE, THE NEW EXPLORATION: A PHILOSOPHY OF REGIONAL PLANNING (1991); CLARENCE S. STEIN, THE WRITINGS OF CLARENCE S. STEIN: ARCHITECT OF THE PLANNED COMMUNITY (Kermit Carlyle Parsons ed., 1998).

¹² Mumford, *Mother Jacobs*, *supra* note 9, at 38.

¹³ JACOBS, *DEATH AND LIFE*, *supra* note 4, at 428–48.

¹⁴ See generally JACOBS, *CITIES AND WEALTH*, *supra* note 6.

tricts, and the center cities of her first book, to which she added city regions, nations and empires. These places are not strictly defined. Jane Jacobs is not interested in drawing boundaries and defining municipal units of government. Rather, she distinguishes her areas by their predominant functions.

Her neighborhoods are not the areas on street maps that city planners have been forced to create in order to delineate the boundaries for formal neighborhood consultation. For her the neighborhood is a place of overlapping networks created by the habits of nearby residents. Some residents range at some distance, theirs is a large embrace, others move just along a single street. The residents' sense of neighborhood is thus an ever-shifting definition.

The city district is also an amorphous area, something less than a municipality, larger than a neighborhood. She imagines it as an area where some politician takes on the role of advocate and deal-maker, someone who can get essential tasks done that the municipal bureaucracy is either not doing, or doing poorly.

The center city municipality, again, is of no specified size. It may be a small fraction of the surrounding urban agglomeration, like Boston, or it may embrace much of it, like Indianapolis. Its distinction lies in its being the social and economic center of its surrounding area.¹⁵

These less than national, mostly non-governmental categories, are her units for social and economic analysis. Any subsequent researcher is free to follow her suggestions by setting the geographic boundaries that might be appropriate to the research question at hand. I am particularly grateful for her concept of the city region. I have used it three times in my books, each time with somewhat different boundaries.¹⁶ In my forthcoming book, *Greater Boston*, the Boston city region encompasses all of eastern Massachusetts and the southern tier of New Hampshire towns.¹⁷

The city region, the centered and polynucleated regions of urban and rural living, are Jane Jacobs's most valued social places. She prizes them because in such a setting it is possible for the residents to become "the primary developers and primary expanders of economic

¹⁵ Andrew Sancton, *Jane Jacobs on the Organization of Municipal Government*, 22 J. URB. AFF. 463, 463-71 (2000).

¹⁶ See generally SAM BASS WARNER, JR., *GREATER BOSTON: ADAPTING REGIONAL TRADITIONS TO THE PRESENT* (2001) [hereinafter *GREATER BOSTON*]; SAM BASS WARNER, JR., *THE PROVINCE OF REASON* (1984); SAM BASS WARNER, JR., *THE WAY WE REALLY LIVE, SOCIAL CHANGE IN METROPOLITAN BOSTON SINCE 1920* (1977).

¹⁷ See generally *GREATER BOSTON*, *supra* note 16.

life."¹⁸ In her city region analysis, she alters the conventional measures of economic growth from the usual summing of goods and services. For her, human insight, imagination, and adaptive imitations are the keys to a prosperous society. The city region with its many different complementary urban and rural settings is the spatial arrangement that best fosters such well being and that makes a flourishing culture possible.

In her latest book, *The Nature of Economies*, Jacobs has added the issue of our relations to non-human natural environments to her urban studies.¹⁹ Here, I think, she is seeking a secular moral platform upon which we might all stand. In this book she is trying to balance two contradictory characteristics basic to the processes of nature. The first characteristic is the opposition between competition and cooperation. The second characteristic is the contradiction of purposeful activities planned for the future which go forward within the realm of universal unpredictability. Here she draws on her earlier work on cities to celebrate the processes of differentiation and inventiveness of natural processes. "The practical link between economic development and economic expansion . . . is economic diversity. Here's the principal that applies to both ecosystems and the economies of settlements: Diverse ensembles expand in a rich environment which is created by the diverse use and reuse of received energy."²⁰ Nature, she wisely observes, abhors both monocultures and monopolies.²¹

Although nature is unpredictable: "In any ecosystem," she writes, "plants and animals pursue what amounts to plans for the future. . . . They construct nests, put down roots, germinate fruits."²² In thinking through this certitude of uncertainty, she offers a very attractive analogy between natural processes and human language.²³ Language, like human economic life, continues in a state of ceaseless invention. It is not a game without rules, but its speakers continually make changes. No one in Shakespeare's time could have imagined the English we speak today, nor could the nineteenth century compilers of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. We are a chatting organism who only finds stability

¹⁸ JACOBS, CITIES AND WEALTH, *supra* note 6, at 173.

¹⁹ See generally JANE JACOBS, THE NATURE OF ECONOMIES (2000) [hereinafter JACOBS, NATURE OF ECONOMIES].

²⁰ *Id.* at 63.

²¹ *Id.* at 79.

²² *Id.* at 138.

²³ *Id.* at 129.

in ceaseless change. Like language, she says, “economic life permits us to develop cultures and multitudes of purposes.”²⁴

For a time like ours when we are fascinated by genetics and natural selection, Jacobs canvasses the attributes of the human animal in a search for what might assure us of sustainable relations to the planet. Her list includes the universal human habit of aesthetic appreciation of nature, our superstition, and our sense of awe. We are, as well, a curious and tinkering species, and these habits help us to learn of the consequences of our actions. Perhaps most important of all, we are chatty animals, and this propensity to talk and to socialize may be our best defense against our prevalent destructive ways.²⁵

On the dangerous side, we humans are given to crime of all kinds, and especially to “ruthless and exploitive governments . . . the horrors of which they’re capable could be expanded indefinitely: deadly weapons, germ warfare, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and campaigns to mobilize hysteria and hatreds that make the other horrors practically possible.”²⁶

She concludes her latest book with the idea that through self-correction, differentiation, and diversification, humans and their fellow organisms can best find sustainability.²⁷

Let me close with an admonition: Jane Jacobs’s books are not prescriptions for particular economic measures or specified planning practices. They are an inductive way to arrive at goal statements. Jacobs leaves to us all the discovery of the means that might best help us toward those goals.

²⁴ JACOBS, *NATURE OF ECONOMIES*, *supra* note 19, at 147.

²⁵ *Id.* at 7, 126–30.

²⁶ *Id.* at 132.

²⁷ *Id.* at 145.