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RANDOM COMMENTS

JANE JACOBS

Abstract: To commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review* and the Carroll School of Management invited Jane Jacobs to a symposium in her honor. To accommodate Ms. Jacobs, the symposium participants were divided into two panels. After each panel's presentations, Ms. Jacobs offered her comments, and she and the panel members responded to audience questions. This essay, in part, reflects some of the comments Ms. Jacobs made both after the panel presentations and in response to audience questions. Her candor at the symposium was as refreshing as it is in her writing.

What I think of as phonyms—false transcriptions of sounds—can be mystifying: for instance, “the wits of rogues” which popped into the transcript of my comments at the symposium. I didn't say it, but what had I said?

That puzzle was set aside while I pondered another: how to fulfill a request from the editors that I compose my transcribed remarks into an essay or else incorporate them into a previously written speech for a different event. The trouble that these suggestions were helpfully meant to overcome is the chaotic nature of my symposium remarks. They are intractably disjointed, having been either ad hoc responses to random questions or ad hoc comments on the comments of others.

Rather than trying to conjure up a semblance of coherence that is intrinsically absent, I'm choosing to retain the occasion-driven nature of my symposium participation, merely cleaned up and somewhat amplified. At this point, however, I'm reminding readers that cities and suburbs are vast and varied laboratories of trial and error, natural wealths of information and potential information, from which we can take more useful knowledge than we commonly do. If any valid thread actually does link the remarks that follow, that is the thread; occasionally it is made explicit, more often it is left implicit or temporarily disappears. I don't intend to exploit this wayward thread by hanging unwarranted weight on it retroactively. I suggest that readers, if they wish, might keep the laboratory image in the back of their minds to apply when it seems appropriate.

As for “the wits of rogues,” context resolved it into “the widths of roads.” A mundane comedown.

A. *Perspective*

You ask what cities tell us now that is different from forty years ago. Much of their information is the same, but more dependence on automobiles has brought changes. Except for dense parts of lively cities, sidewalks now are mostly deserted. During the drive through Newton this morning, from the hotel to the law school, I saw four or five women jogging in their exercise clothes, but otherwise not one soul, man, woman, or child on several miles of sidewalk. This occurred along pleasant streets during the busy morning rush hour. An accompaniment to the disappearance of American pedestrians is the disappearance of destinations for pedestrians at fairly short intervals.

Still another change is the larger number of householders seemingly engaged on weekends and after work in either minor or ambitious do-it-yourself repairs and renovations in previously dilapidated parts of some cities. These are symptoms, usually, of gentrification, also indications that rich people aren't pricing everyone else out from such neighborhoods, at least not yet. Accessibility by automobile to big box stores like IKEA and Home Depot obviously encourages this activity, so we might jump to the conclusion that cars, in these cases, have enabled their owners to exchange one kind of physical exercise for another. But it isn't that simple. A big attraction of gentrifying old neighborhoods in my own city, Toronto, and also Richmond, Washington, Brooklyn, San Francisco—and from what I read, Chicago, Portland, and Seattle—is the flourishing pedestrian destinations and sidewalk life they include.

B. *The Importance of Public Transportation*

Now that it is becoming acknowledged that sprawl, with its wastes of land, energy, and time, can't continue indefinitely, we begin to hear of hope in large, encompassing public transportation plans. We surely do need more and better public transportation service, for many reasons. But I shudder at the thought of these big schemes in the hands of planners who don't—perhaps even can't—know where routes should go or what kinds of routes putative traffic will justify. Already enough small, and yet also expensive, mistakes have recently been made in such places as Buffalo, Toronto, Atlanta, and Chicago, to be worrying.

Back in the 1950s when plans started to appear for one-story, spread-out high schools instead of three or four storied traditional buildings, architects for one of these first new schools—in Connecticut if I remember correctly—weren't sure where to locate walks for students and staff criss-crossing outdoor grounds between classrooms and other facilities like gyms, auditoriums, and cafeterias. Should they rely on guesswork? Or depend on neat geometric schemes? Should perhaps everything be paved? The architects let the problem stand unsolved until the school had been in use throughout its first winter, during which they mapped the paths which users had made in the snow. The architects let users inform them where paths should go.

The closest approach I've ever seen to use of this strategy for public transportation has been on several little Caribbean islands where my husband and I used to vacation. For tourists, there were taxis and rental cars. For local people, however, there were little jitney buses, actually station-wagons, owned by their drivers who were free to take passengers along whatever routes drivers pleased, on whatever schedules the demand justified, for whatever fares they set in free competition. Although we were tourists, the jitneys interested us as they took people to markets, jobs, entertainment spots, and back home, so that's what we used. We became not only admiring but envious of the flexibility and true economy of this self-organized system, dictated to providers by needs of users.

In America, the terrain for effective new public transportation is now almost as blank as that Connecticut schoolyard's new-fallen snow because in so many places public transportation has not yet developed at all, while in others it has all but dwindled away or grown inconvenient. Rather wistfully, I wish we could experiment as freely as Caribbean islanders, but for historical and other ingrained causes that seems improbable. But at least we should be able to hope that schemes will develop incrementally and as flexibly as possible, not become rigid prematurely, and certainly not become the responsibility of highway and automobile traffic engineers, whose educations and assumptions are inappropriate for this other task.

No efficient schemes, incremental or not, are apt to prosper without two other simultaneous changes: (a) densification, probably largely by infilling our existing sprawls; and (b) an end to adding and widening highways. What is now called smart growth requires all three kinds of change.

C. *We're Not Bowling Alone*

I agree with Robert Campbell and Archon Fung that Americans have not significantly become detached social solitaries, "bowling alone," as Robert Putnam concluded. Rather, as far as I can see, they continue to be wonderfully socially inventive, both in cities and suburbs, and are often concerned constructively with serious local problems—if anything, more so than in the past when fraternal lodges and ladies' auxiliaries flourished.

I'd add, however, that when causes are confrontational, as they often are, some citizens are inhibited by fear of losing their jobs or damaging their careers if they become active or outspoken on behalf of civic causes they believe in but that are in disagreement with their employers' policies. In my experience, universities and hospitals, for instance, are typically vulnerable to implied official or donor blackmail of the variety, "If you support that, you won't get this." They pass along this institutional vulnerability to employees, and dissenting employees shut up. Thus, big institutions tend to make treacherous neighbors within communities: town and gown conflicts are polarized and don't necessarily really reflect opinions. I don't know an answer to this state of affairs. But, I speculate that in hard times people with good jobs in overbearing institutions feel less free to speak out than in good times.

D. *Population and Planning*

Issues of population growth do not significantly intersect with the way cities are designed. Instead, both rural and urban birth rates are greatly influenced by availability of education for women and children, and by mortality rates, especially of infants and children, hence by health measures. This is true in all cultures. With broader chances for education and better health, birth rates drop, not because they are ordered to; this happens even where political or religious authorities forbid birth control.

Nor does city design seem to determine whether a city's population grows or declines from immigration. Shanty towns often burgeon. Many attractive looking little cities stagnate or dwindle; Scranton, Pennsylvania, where I grew up, is an instance. The determining factors, rather, are economic opportunities, or people's hopes that they will find better economic opportunities than in the places they leave. This doesn't mean that good design and facilities are meaningless. They are very good things in themselves—but economic oppor-

tunity or its lack clearly outweighs them in immigrants' calculations and probably in most entrepreneurs' calculations, too.

E. *Idle Land*

Land in potentially lucrative and productive locations that is being kept in low-value parking lots is a symptom of land speculation: land remaining almost idle in hope that its very emptiness will increase its value to some future buyer. But parking lots on the best land in town are ephemeral, even if exasperating, perversities. At any rate, during the thirty-three years I've lived in Toronto, the city I've watched most intimately during that time, so many parking lots and gas stations in valuable locations have been replaced by dwellings, working places, and cultural institutions that it's hard to buy gasoline or park on the surface in the center of the city. When land is valuable, parking goes into multi-story parking garages or basements, such as those in Boston's charming new Post Office Square. Of course if land is not actually valuable for more desirable uses, that's a different, more serious problem.

F. *Promiscuous Eminent Domain*

Mr. Wickersham did not come down too hard on promiscuous use of the powers of eminent domain when he called it arrogant and observed that these powers are typically given poor oversight in the courts. I would add that it invites corruption, and is an intellectually lazy way of bringing about large changes, carrying along in its train cruelty and waste.

Boston affords a famous example: destruction of the former West End community which became a notorious example of the evils of promiscuous eminent domain, partly because some of the outraged people who observed it wrote about it eloquently, and partly because the community was so beloved by its inhabitants that a sort of phantom, dispersed West End community is alive still, keeping in communication through a "local" newspaper, *The West Ender*, a publication I find interesting, but also sad. Promiscuous use of eminent domain gave Boston its loutish City Hall and its Central Artery, a mistake so drastic it has fathered the Big Dig.

Of course it isn't just in Boston that eminent domain powers ran wild. Nor is it only in Boston that they remain a temptation for promoters with big schemes, big egos, little intelligent ingenuity, and less conscience.

G. *Rethinking Regulation*

Two characteristics of Toronto's old downtown were dying: manufacturers had moved out of industrial loft buildings, leaving many vacant, and a general air of morbidity engulfed others. The vacant buildings were good candidates for conversion into loft apartments and living-and-working spaces in the eyes of a number of small developers, but these developers found themselves blocked by existing use zoning. Yet if the zoning were to be changed to permit dwellings, the developers would be blocked by rules applying to apartments, most especially parking requirements. Land coverage was high and parking couldn't feasibly go underneath these sturdy but old buildings. Under the guidance of our very intelligent mayor at the time, these and almost all other regulatory controls were removed, except for fire and building safety codes. One rule was added: a ban against destruction of buildings, to prevent aesthetic and environmental waste.

You would be amazed at how rapidly those dying districts have come back to life and blossomed. The principle at work here has been the addition of what the previous mixture lacked. It still contains industries that hadn't left, and new working places have joined them, but now residents have moved in too. The same principle can work in languishing bedroom neighborhoods, where the missing ingredients are working places. In both cases, all existing regulations need rethinking.

H. *Monstrous Hybrids*

As Robert Campbell pointed out, community needs for police stations, libraries, parks, and other public facilities can't be left to private decision-making. Thoughtful placement is a public concern. Current private proposals for the Boston waterfront are weird: a large park in the wrong place; obliteration of a major popular restaurant. The consequence of handing over decisions like these to private developers and backing them up with public powers, is what I've called elsewhere (in *Systems of Survival*) monstrous hybrids.

I. *Re-educating Planners*

My purpose in writing *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was not to challenge expert culture in general. I did challenge specific kinds of "expertise" that I thought were actually quackery, not being grounded in reality. I was trying to spur these quacks into reforming

themselves and was also trying to help protect their victims—both victimized individuals and victimized communities and economies.

Mainly because of generational change, I think, rather than self-reform by those who had become set in their ways, many planners, architects, and other designers are doing better today. Many cities—although not all—are recovering their pizzazz and becoming attractive and vigorous in ways they weren't ten or twenty years ago. Scars of terrible mistreatment remain, but there is also healing.

American culture has many serious flaws that it's foolish to try to load on the shoulders of planners and designers. They can't be held responsible, for instance, for racism, poor educational systems, ubiquity of guns, and so on.

Yet there are things they could be doing that they still aren't doing. Years ago, Robert Campbell wrote a splendid newspaper article, describing his splendidly successful street in Cambridge, and analyzing the reasons for its physical attractiveness and communal workability. He pointed out the shocking fact—I think it's a scandal—that the street's excellent physical attributes had all become illegal since that street was built. Prescriptions for widths of roads, ground coverage, parking, and much more, made building a good street like his illegal. The still bigger scandal is that pointing this out changed nothing. Building a street with the good qualities of Campbell's street would still be illegal. If I didn't know better, I would suppose that city planning staffs were dying to rethink and overhaul the incubus of pointless or destructive municipal, state, and federal planning regulations. But overhaul still doesn't happen. In the case of Toronto's dying districts of downtown that were revitalized by radically overhauling the regulations, the mayor's hardest job was goading and re-educating her own planning department, including the youngish man who then headed it. The overhaul job is badly needed and interesting too, with so much empirical information waiting around to be put to use. Maybe the best bets for taking on this project are bright lawyers who combine a bent for original thinking with a desire to work on behalf of public good.

J. *Knitting Up the Holes*

Average rentals in cities are indeed far beyond the means of poor people, including the working poor. One week's income for one month's rent used to be thought of as the proper budgetary upper limit for shelter. Today, it is all too common for poor people to spend half or even more of their income on shelter. Even Habitat for Hu-

manity, a program in which volunteers contribute building or renovation work without compensation, can't supply shelter that poor families can afford where competition has driven up costs for land that used to be affordable or donated.

One strategy that helped in Toronto was to use scattered, very small sites for assisted housing, which is what public housing is called in Canada. This had the added advantages of taking the social curse off of assisted housing and improving the city itself by knitting up holes in the fabric and adding density. Scattered small infill sites add up, yet one of their beauties is that typically they don't interest big wheel developers with deep pockets.

The infill strategy in Toronto was a big, invisible success—invisible because the assisted housing blended so well into neighborhoods—for some twenty years. But we've become afflicted with a mean-spirited provincial government that is ideologically opposed to assisted housing itself, and has clamped such a tight financial bind on the city that it has no financial resources for assisted shelter. The homeless population has lately grown alarmingly, including, increasingly, homeless families. Some time the city will regain resources and power to build assisted housing again, and we know now from experience how to do it well.

But the scattered infill method is easier for Toronto and its suburbs than for American cities and their suburbs because Toronto doesn't have ghettos, which also bears on another question that has just been asked: Who is responsible for the underclass? Toronto's nearest approach to ghettos, or partial ghettos, is ironically the large old low-income projects. Otherwise, ghettos are missing, even though Toronto and its suburbs have a very high proportion—much higher than almost any American city—of what are called visible minorities because of heavy immigration from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Caribbean.

How can this be? Earlier today we saw a map of neighborhoods discriminated against financially. It applied to Philadelphia. But it could have applied to Boston or almost anywhere else in America. Fortunately, Toronto banks never adopted red-lining—never denied loans on the basis of neighborhood. Neither were neighborhoods victimized by blockbusting. For one brief period in the late 1960s, developers and real estate agents did try to drive inhabitants from the streets they coveted by renting houses to rowdies and encouraging them to be as objectionable as possible, but this was quickly nipped. Blockbusting, whether overt or subtle, didn't work in Toronto as it worked in Chicago and other American cities where real estate people

connived at manipulations to drive out whites where they wanted to establish ghettos. In Toronto, in spite of plenty of different shades of black, brown, and tan in the population, ghettos did not form—I think because institutionalized means of forming them hadn't materialized.

A conclusion I've drawn is that it requires institutional effort, a lot of effort, to make ghettos. They don't simply materialize on their own. Once made, they aren't difficult to maintain. It's the making that takes manipulative effort, like redlining and blockbusting. Maybe "the wits of rogues" does belong, after all, in these comments.

