"The Uses of City Neighborhoods"

from *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961)

Jane Jacobs

Editors' Introduction

Contemporary urban sociology owes much to the legacy of Jane Jacobs, a staff writer at *Architectural Forum* and a community activist who helped change our views about architectural modernism and urban renewal policy in postwar America. She assaulted the misguided policies of slum clearance bureaucrats who devastated vital urban neighborhoods in favor of expressways and oppressively dull housing blocks surrounded by seas of indefensible open spaces. Dense networks of lively streets and sociologically diverse neighborhoods are important touchstones to urban quality of life for Jacobs. She championed the cause of neighborhood preservation and helped save Greenwich Village from the bulldozers of New York power broker Robert Moses and his plan for an urban expressway through Lower Manhattan.

This chapter is excerpted from her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. In this book she also describes the lively daily ballet of life on Hudson Street where she lived, the significance of public characters, and the informal surveillance networks of "eyes on the street" that helped regulate public security for residents living among urban strangers. She celebrated the messiness and spontaneity of urban street life that was so full of serendipitous encounters. She sought to shift urban planners away from slum clearance toward a more enlightened policy that promoted rather than destroyed neighborhoods.

In this selection she urges us to understand and better mobilize the powers of neighborhoods as mundane "organs of self-government" that comprise the larger city. She warns us from sentimentalizing neighborhood preservation into nostalgic evocations of town life. Neighborhoods are not introverted or self-contained simulations of the rural village life, but better understood as naturally extroverted constituent units of urbanity. City planners cannot revive neighborhoods simply through location of streets, parks, and housing. Jacobs says city planners also need to create a social life and local identity through additional use of public buildings and landmarks. Community assets and social fabric were destroyed in many urban neighborhoods by urban renewal.

But Jacobs says we must also learn the secrets of self-governing neighborhoods that are able to mobilize assets and resources for their constituent residents. Effective urban planning and governance structures for the good and just city can be built out of mobilizing communities of interest into effective political districts. She warns against island-like fiefdoms that cater to insular interests in favor of joint committees and organizational coalitions of leaders from inside and outside the district. She identifies a range of civic, neighborhood improvement, and protest organizations from which the leadership of neighborhood districts may be drawn. A network of leaders with "hop-and-skip" links to a variety of organizations forms the core of effective neighborhood districts, including key cross-link communicators that are efficient mobilizers of trust and reciprocity. These are the kinds of social networks and social capital that were lost in many inner city communities devastated by slum clearance, depopulation, and disinvestment.

She also speculates on the proper size of neighborhood districts, and finds that smaller districts like the North End are common in smaller cities like Boston, while larger districts prevail in larger cities like Back of the Yards in Chicago and the Lower East Side in New York. She also cites the common incidence of socially cohesive ethnic neighborhoods, although she thinks they are more powerful if made more sociologically diverse by newcomers and networks of cross-link leaders. She believes that sameness can handicap residents from access to more opportunities.

Jane Jacobs moved from New York City to Toronto, Canada in 1968, where she was just as influential in the cancelling of the Spadina Expressway. She published several more important books in urban studies, including *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1969) and *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Vintage, 1984). She died in 2006. In addition to leaving an intellectual legacy, her city planning ideas had a significant impact on the architecture and urban planning movement known as the New Urbanism. This movement promotes many city planning principles that Jacobs celebrated, such as pedestrian walkability, neotraditional architecture, mixed-uses, civic identity, local heritage, and "smart growth" versus urban sprawl.

Neighborhood is a word that has come to sound like a Valentine. As a sentimental concept, "neighborhood" is harmful to city planning. It leads to attempts at warping city life into imitations of town or suburban life. Sentimentality plays with sweet intentions in place of good sense.

A successful city neighborhood is a place that keeps sufficiently abreast of its problems so it is not destroyed by them. An unsuccessful neighborhood is a place that is overwhelmed by its defects and problems and progressively more helpless before them. Our cities contain all degrees of success and failure. But on the whole we Americans are poor at handling city neighborhoods, as can be seen by the long accumulations of failures in our great gray belts on the one hand, and by the Turfs of rebuilt city on the other hand.

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.

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To hunt for city neighborhood touchstones of success in high standards of physical facilities, or in supposedly competent and nonproblem populations, or in nostalgic memories of town life, is a waste of time. It evades the meat of the question, which is the problem of what city neighborhoods do, if anything, that may be socially and economically useful in cities themselves, and how they do it.

We shall have something solid to chew on if we think of city neighborhoods as mundane organs of self-government. Our failures with city neighborhoods are, ultimately, failures in localized self-government. And our successes are successes at localized self-government. I am using self-government in its broadest sense, meaning both the informal and formal self-management of society.

Both the demands on self-government and the techniques for it differ in big cities from the demands and techniques in smaller places. For instance, there is the problem of all those strangers. To think of city neighborhoods as organs of city self-government or self-management, we must first jettison some orthodox but irrelevant notions about neighborhoods which may apply to communities in smaller settlements but not in cities. We must first of all drop any ideal of neighborhoods as self-contained or introverted units.

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Whatever city neighborhoods may be, or may not be, and whatever usefulness they may have, or may be coaxed into having, their qualities cannot work at cross-purposes to thoroughgoing city mobility and fluidity of use, without economically weakening the city of which they are a part. The lack of either economic or social self-containment is natural and necessary to city neighborhoods – simply because they are part of cities . . .

But for all the more innate extroversion of city neighborhoods, it fails to follow that city people can

therefore get along magically without neighborhoods. Even the most urbane citizen does care about the atmosphere of the street and district where he lives, no matter how much choice he has of pursuits outside it; and the common run of city people do depend greatly on their neighborhoods for the kind of everyday lives they lead.

Let us assume (as is often the case) that city neighbors have nothing more fundamental in common with each other than that they share a fragment of geography. Even so, if they fail at managing the fragment decently, the fragment will fail. There exists no inconceivably energetic and all-wise "They" to take over and substitute for localized self-management. Neighborhoods in cities need not supply for their people an artificial town or village life, and to aim at this is both silly and destructive. But neighborhoods in cities do need to supply some means for civilized self-government. This is the problem.

Looking at city neighborhoods as organs of self-government, I can see evidence that only three kinds of neighborhoods are useful: a) the city as a whole, b) street neighborhoods, c) districts of large, subcity size, composed of 100,000 people or more in the case of the largest cities.

Each of these kinds of neighborhoods has different functions, but the three supplement each other in complex fashion. It is impossible to say that one is more important than the others. For success with staying power at any spot, all three are necessary. But I think that other neighborhoods than these three kinds just get in the way, and make successful self-government difficult or impossible.

The most obvious of the three, although it is seldom called a neighborhood, is the city as a whole. We must never forget or minimize this parent community while thinking of a city's smaller parts. This is the source from which most public money flows, even when it comes ultimately from the federal or state coffers. This is where most administrative and policy decisions are made, for good or ill. This is where general welfare often comes into direst conflict, open or hidden, with illegal or other destructive interests.

Moreover, up on this plane we find vital special-interest communities and pressure groups. The neighborhood of the entire city is where people especially interested in the theater or in music or in other arts find one another and get together, no matter where they may live. This is where people immersed in specific professions or businesses or concerned about particular problems exchange ideas and sometimes start action.

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A city's very wholeness in bringing together people with communities of interest is one of its greatest assets, possibly the greatest. And, in turn, one of the assets a city district needs is people with access to the political, the administrative, and the special-interest communities of the city as a whole.

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When Greenwich Village fought to prevent its park, Washington Square, from being bisected by a highway, for example, majority opinion was overwhelmingly against the highway. But not unanimous opinion; among those for the highway were numerous people of prominence, with leadership positions in smaller sections of the district. Naturally they tried to keep the battle on a level of sectional organization, and so did the city government. Majority opinion would have frittered itself away in these tactics, instead of winning. Indeed, it was frittering itself away in these tactics, instead of winning. Indeed, it was frittering itself away until this truth was pointed out by Raymond Rubinow, a man who happened to work in the district, but did not live there. Since Rubinow helped form a *Joint* Emergency Committee, a true district organization cutting through other organizational lines. Effective districts operate as Things in their own right, and most particularly must their citizens who are in agreement with each other on controversial questions act together at district scale, or they get nowhere. Districts are not groups of petty principalities, working in federation. If they work, they work as integral units of power and opinion, large enough to count.

Our cities possess many islandlike neighborhoods too small to work as districts, and these include not only the neighborhoods inflicted by planning, but also many unplanned neighborhoods. These unplanned, too small units have grown up historically, and often are enclaves of distinctive ethnic groups. They frequently perform well and strongly the neighborhood functions of streets and thus keep marvelously in hand the kinds of neighborhood social problems and rot that develop from without. They are shortchanged on public improvements and services because they lack

power to get them. They are helpless to reverse the slow-death warrants of area credit-blacklisting by mortgage lenders, a problem terribly difficult to fight even with impressive district power. If they develop conflicts with people in adjoining neighborhoods, both they and the adjoining people are apt to be helpless at improving relationships. Indeed, insularity makes these relationships deteriorate further.

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If the only kinds of city neighborhoods that demonstrate useful functions in real-life self-government are the city as a whole, streets, and districts, then effective neighborhood physical planning for cities should aim at these purposes:

First, to foster lively and interesting streets.

Second, to make the fabric of these streets as continuously a network as possible *throughout* a district of potential subcity size and power.

Third, to use parks and squares and public buildings as part of this street fabric; use them to intensify and knit together the fabric's complexity and multiple use. They should not be used to island off different uses from each other, or to island off subdistrict neighborhoods.

Fourth, to emphasize the functional identity of areas large enough to work as districts.

If the first three aims are well pursued, the fourth will follow. Here is why: Few people, unless they live in a world of paper maps, can identify with an abstraction called a district, or care much about it. Most of us identify with a place in the city because we use it, and get to know it reasonably intimately. We take our two feet and move around in it and come to count on it. The only reason anyone does this much is that useful and interesting or convenient differences fairly nearby exert an attraction.

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Differences, *not duplications*, make for cross-use and hence for a person's identification with an area greater than his immediate street network. As for Turf, planned or unplanned, nobody outside the Turf can possibly feel a natural identity of interest with it or with what it contains.

Centers of use grow up in lively, diverse districts, just as centers of use occur on a smaller scale in parks, and such centers count especially in district identification if they contain also a landmark that comes to stand for the place symbolically and, in a way, for the district. But centers cannot carry the load of district identification by themselves; differing commercial and cultural facilities, and different-looking scenes, must crop up all through. Within this fabric, physical barriers, such as huge traffic arteries, too large parks, big institutional groupings, are functionally destructive because they block cross-use.

How big, in absolute terms, must an effective district be? I have given a functional definition of size: big enough to fight city hall, but not so big that street neighborhoods are unable to draw district attention and to count.

In absolute terms, this means different sizes in different cities, depending partly on the size of the city as a whole. In Boston, when the North End had a population upward of 30,000 people, it was strong in district power. Now its population is about half that, partly from the salutary process of uncrowding its dwellings as its people have unslummed, and partly from the unsalutary process of being ruthlessly amputated by a new highway. Cohesive though the North End is, it has lost an important sum of district power. In a city like Boston, Pittsburgh or possibly even Philadelphia, as few as 30,000 people may be sufficient to form a district. In New York or Chicago, however, a district as small as 30,000 amounts to nothing. Chicago's most effective district, the Back-of-the-Yards, embraces about 100,000 people, according to the director of the district Council, and is building up its population further. In New York, Greenwich Village is on the small side for an effective district, but is viable because it manages to make up for this with other advantages. It contains approximately 80,000 residents, along with a working population (perhaps a sixth of them the same people) of approximately 125,000. East Harlem and the Lower East Side of New York, both struggling to create effective districts, each contain about 200,000 residents, and need them.

Of course other qualities than sheer population size count in effectiveness – especially good communication and good morale. But population size is vital because it represents, if most of the time only by implication, votes. There are only two ultimate public powers shaping and running American cities: votes and control of the money. To sound nicer, we may call these "public opinion" and "disbursement of funds," but they are still

votes and money. An effective district – and through its mediation, the street neighborhoods – possesses one of these powers: the power of votes. Through this, and this alone, can it effectively influence the power brought to bear on it, for good or for ill, by public money.

Robert Moses, whose genius at getting things done largely consists in understanding this, has made an art of using control of public money to get his way with those whom the voters elect and depend on to represent their frequently opposing interests. This is, of course, in other guises, an old, sad story of democratic government. The art of negating the power of votes with the power of money can be practiced just as effectively by honest public administrators as by dishonest representatives of purely private interests. Either way, seduction or subversion of the elected is easiest when the electorate is fragmented into ineffective units of power.

On the maximum side, I know of no district larger than 200,000 which operates like a district. Geographical size imposes empirical population limits in any case. In real life, the maximum size of naturally evolved, effective districts seems to be roughly about a mile and a half square. Probably this is because anything larger gets too inconvenient for sufficient local cross-use and for the functional identity that underlies district political identity. In a very big city, populations must therefore be dense to achieve successful districts; otherwise, sufficient political power is never reconciled with viable geographic identity.

This point on geographic size does not mean a city can be mapped out in segments of about a square mile, the segments defined with boundaries, and districts thereby brought to life. It is not boundaries that make a district, but the cross-use and life. The point in considering the physical size and limits of a district is this: the kinds of objects, natural or man-made, that form physical barriers to easy cross-use must be somewhere. It is better that they be at the edges of areas large enough to work as districts than that they cut into the continuity of otherwise feasible districts. The fact of a district lies in what it is internally, and in the internal continuity and overlapping with which it is used, not in the way it ends or in how it looks in an air view. Indeed, in many cases very popular city districts spontaneously extend their edges, unless prevented from doing so by physical barriers. A district too thoroughly buffered off also runs the danger of losing economically stimulating visitors from other parts of the city.

Neighborhood planning units that are significantly defined only by their fabric and the life and intricate cross-use they generate, rather than by formalistic boundaries, are of course at odds with orthodox planning conceptions. The difference is the difference between dealing with living, complex organisms, capable of shaping their own destinies, and dealing with fixed and inert settlements, capable merely of custodial care (if that) of what has been bestowed upon them.

In dwelling on the necessity for districts, I do not want to give the impression that an effective city district is self-contained either economically, politically or socially. Of course it is not and cannot be, any more than a street can be. Nor can districts be duplicates of one another; they differ immensely, and should. A city is not a collection of repetitious towns. An interesting district has a character of its own and specialties of its own. It draws users from outside (it has little truly economic variety unless it does), and its own people go forth.

Nor is there necessity for district self-containment. In Chicago's Back-of-the-Yards, most of the breadwinners used to work, until the 1940s, at the slaughterhouses within the district. This did have a bearing on district formation in this case, because district organization here was a sequel to labor union organization. But as these residents and their children have graduated from the slaughterhouse jobs, they have moved, into the working life and public of the greater city. Most, other than teenagers with after-school jobs, now work outside the district. This movement has not weakened the district; coincident with it, the district has grown stronger.

The constructive factor that has been operating here meanwhile is time. Time, in cities, is the substitute for self-containment. Time, in cities, is indispensable.

The cross-links that enable a district to function as a Thing are neither vague nor mysterious. They consist of working relationships among specific people, many of them without much else in common than that they share a fragment of geography.

The first relations to form in city areas, given any neighborhood stability, are those in street

neighborhoods and those among people who do have something else in common and belong to organizations with one another – churches, PTAs, businessmen's associations, political clubs, local civic leagues, fundraising committees for health campaigns or other public causes, sons of such-and-such a village (common clubs among Puerto Ricans today, as they have been with Italians), property owners' associations, block improvement associations, protestors against injustices, and so on, ad infinitum.

To look into almost any relatively established area of a big city turns up so many organizations, mostly little, as to make one's head swim . . . Small organizations and special-interest organizations grow in our cities like leaves on the trees, and in their own way are just as awesome a manifestation of the persistence and doggedness of life.

The crucial stage in the formation of an effective district goes much beyond this, however. An interweaving, but different, set of relationships must grow up; these are working relationships among people, usually leaders, who enlarge their local public life beyond the neighborhoods of streets and specific organizations or institutions and form relationships with people whose roots and backgrounds are in entirely different constituencies, so to speak. These hop-and-skip relationships are more fortuitous in cities than are the analogous, almost enforced, hop-and-skip links among people from different small groupings within self-contained settlements. Perhaps because we are typically more advanced at forming whole-city neighborhoods of interest than at forming districts, hop–skip district relationships sometimes originate fortuitously among people from a district who meet in a special-interest neighborhood of the whole city, and then carry over this relationship into their district. Many district networks in New York, for instance, start in this fashion.

It takes surprisingly few hop–skip people, relative to a whole population, to weld a district into a real Thing. A hundred or so people do it in a population a thousand times their size. But these people must have time to find each other, time to try expedient cooperation – as well as time to have rooted themselves, too, in various smaller neighborhoods of place or special interest.

When my sister and I first came to New York from a small city, we used to amuse ourselves with a game we called Messages. I suppose we were trying, in a dim way, to get a grip on the great, bewildering world into which we had come from our cocoon. The idea was to pick two wildly dissimilar individuals – say a headhunter in the Solomon Islands and a cobbler in Rock Island, Illinois – and assume that one had to get a message to the other by word of mouth; then we would each silently figure out a plausible, or at least possible, chain of persons to whom the message could go. The one who could make the shortest plausible chain of messages won. The headhunter would speak to the headman of his village, who would speak to the trader who came to buy copra, who would speak to the Australian patrol officer when he came through, who would tell the man who was next slated to go to Melbourne on leave, etc. Down at the other end, the cobbler would hear from his priest, who got it from the mayor, who got it from a state senator, who got it from the governor, etc. We soon had these close-to-home messages down to a routine for almost everybody we could conjure up, but we would get tangled in long chains at the middle until we began employing Mrs. Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt made it suddenly possible to skip whole chains of intermediate connections. She knew the most unlikely people. The world shrank remarkably. It shrank us right out of our game, which became too cut and dried.

A district requires a small quota of its own Mrs. Roosevelts – people who know unlikely people, and therefore eliminate the necessity for long chains of communication (which in real life would not occur at all).

Settlement-house directors are often the ones who begin such systems of district hop–skip links, but they can only begin them and work at opportune ways to extend them; they cannot carry the load. These links require the growth of trust, the growth of cooperation that is, at least at first, apt to be happenstance and tentative; and they require people who have considerable self-confidence, or sufficient concern about local public problems to stand them in the stead of self-confidence.

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Once a good strong network of these hop–skip links does get going in a city district, the net can enlarge relatively swiftly and weave all kinds of resilient new patterns. One sign that it is doing so, sometimes, is the growth of a new kind of

organization, more or less district-wide, but impermanent, formed specifically for *ad hoc* purposes. But to get going, a district needs these three requisites: a start of some kind; a physical area with which sufficient people can identify as users; and Time.

The people who form hop–skip links, like the people who form the smaller links in streets and special-interest organizations, are not at all the statistics that are presumed to represent people in planning and housing schemes. Statistical people are a fiction for many reasons, one of which is that they are treated as infinitely interchangeable. Real people are unique, they invest years of their lives in significant relationships with other unique people, and are not interchangeable in the least. Severed from their relationships, they are destroyed as effective social beings – sometimes for a little while, sometimes forever.

In city neighborhoods, whether streets or districts, if too many slowly grown public relationships are disrupted at once, all kinds of havoc can occur – so much havoc, instability and helplessness that it sometimes seems time will never again get in its licks.

Harrison Salisbury, in a series of *New York Times* articles, "The Shook-Up Generation," put well this vital point about city relationships and their disruption: "Even a ghetto [he quoted a pastor as saying], after it has remained a ghetto for a period of time builds up its social structure and this makes for more stability, more leadership, more agencies for helping the solution of public problems."

But when slum clearance enters an area [Salisbury went on], it does not merely rip out slatternly houses. It uproots the people. It tears out the churches. It destroys the local business man. It sends the neighborhood lawyer to new offices downtown and it mangles the tight skein of community friendships and group relationships beyond repair.

It drives the old-timers from their broken-down flats or modest homes and forces them to find new and alien quarters. And it pours into a neighborhood hundreds and thousands of new faces.

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Renewal planning, which is largely aimed at saving buildings, and incidentally some of the population, but at strewing the rest of a locality's population, has much the same result. So does too heavily concentrated private building, capitalizing in a rush on the high values created by a stable city neighborhood. From Yorkville, in New York, an estimated 15,000 families have been driven out between 1951 and 1960 by this means; virtually all of them left unwillingly. In Greenwich Village, the same thing is happening. Indeed, it is a miracle that our cities have any functioning districts, not that they have so few. In the first place, there is relatively little city territory at present which is, by luck, well suited physically to forming districts with good cross-use and identity. And within this, incipient or slightly too weak districts are forever being amputated, bisected and generally shaken up by misguided planning policies. The districts that are effective enough to defend themselves from planned disruption are eventually trampled in an unplanned gold rush by those who aim to get a cut of these rare social treasures.

To be sure, a good city neighborhood can absorb newcomers into itself, both newcomers by choice and immigrants settling by expediency, and it can protect a reasonable amount of transient population too. But these increments or displacements have to be gradual. If self-government in the place is to work, underlying any float of population must be a continuity of people who have forged neighborhood networks. These networks are a city's irreplaceable social capital. Whenever the capital is lost, from whatever cause, the income from it disappears, never to return until and unless new capital is slowly and chancily accumulated.

Some observers of city life, noting that strong city neighborhoods are so frequently ethnic communities – especially communities of Italians, Poles, Jews or Irish – have speculated that a cohesive ethnic base is required for a city neighborhood that works as a social unit . . . these ethnically cohesive communities are not always as naturally cohesive as they may look to outsiders . . . Ethnic cohesiveness may have played a part in the formation of these sections, but it has been no help in welding district cross-links . . . Today many streets in these old ethnic communities have assimilated into their neighborhoods a fantastic ethnic variety from almost the whole world. They have also assimilated a great sprinkling of middle-class professionals and their families, who prove to do very well at city street and district life, in spite of the planning myth that such people need protective islands of pseudosuburban "togetherness." Some of the streets that function best in the Lower

East Side (before they were wiped out) were loosely called "Jewish," but contained, as people actually involved in the street neighborhoods, individuals of more than forty differing ethnic origins.

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Here is a seeming paradox: To maintain in a neighborhood sufficient people who stay put, a city must have . . . fluidity and mobility of use . . . Over intervals of time, many people change their jobs and the locations of their jobs, shift or enlarge their outside friendships and interests, change their family sizes, change their incomes up or down, even change many of their tastes. In short they live, rather than just exist. If they live in diversified, rather monotonous, districts – in districts, particularly, where many details of physical changes can constantly be accommodated – and if they like the place, they can stay put despite changes in the locales or natures of their other pursuits or interests. Unlike the people who must move from a lower-middle to a middle-middle to an upper-middle suburb as their incomes and leisure activities change (or be very outré indeed), or the people of a little town who must move to another town or to a city to find different opportunities, city people need not pull up stakes for such reasons.

A city's collection of opportunities of all kinds, and the fluidity with which these opportunities and choices can be used, is an asset – not a detriment – for encouraging city–neighborhood stability.

However, this asset has to be capitalized upon. It is thrown away where districts are handicapped by sameness and are suitable, therefore, to only a narrow range of incomes, tastes and family circumstances. Neighborhood accommodations for fixed, bodiless, statistical people are accommodations for instability. The people in them, as statistics, may stay the same. But the people in them, as people, do not. Such places are forever way stations.

I have been emphasizing assets and strengths peculiar to big cities, and weaknesses peculiar to them also. Cities, like anything else, succeed only by making the most of their assets. I have tried to point out the kinds of places in cities that do this, and the way they work. My idea, however, is not that we should therefore try to reproduce, routinely and in a surface way, the streets and districts that do display strength and success as fragments of city life. This would be impossible, and sometimes would be an exercise in architectural antiquarianism. Moreover, even the best streets and districts can stand improvement, especially amenity.

But if we understand the principles behind the behavior of cities, we can build on potential assets and strengths, instead of acting at cross-purposes to them. First we have to know the general results we want – and know because of knowing how life in cities works. We have to know, for instance, that we want lively, well-used streets and other public spaces, and why we want them. But knowing what to want, although it is a first step, is far from enough. The next step is to examine some of the workings of cities at another level; the economic workings that produce those lively streets and districts for city users.