

Review

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THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES. By Jane Jacobs.\* New York: Random House, 1961. Pp. 458. \$5.95.

America has entered upon a great task—the purposeful rebuilding of its cities. I say “purposeful” because in some degree cities are always being rebuilt, but the task is now being undertaken as major public policy with the purpose of raising our urban environment to a level commensurate with both the potentials of our economy and the ideals of our society.

Into this task barely begun comes a screeching critic, Jane Jacobs, decrying the efforts in loose language and offering the most intriguing and dangerous corrections—oversimplified solutions. To say that the results thus far have all been good would be fatuous. But to say that they have all been bad, particularly because they have been executed by “orthodox city planners” operating in the rubric of a mythical theory called “radiant garden city beautiful,” is demagoguery. And to assert that the efforts are to a considerable degree responsible for urban crime is a cruel and irrational way to account for that serious social problem.

Mrs. Jacobs is angry, and because she is angry she makes some rather extravagant charges. It is useful I think to define the area of her concern. Her interest is in the reconstruction of certain old mixed (but primarily residential) areas which lie within the large central cities of the eastern urban regions. And, although she wants certain kinds of business activity in these old mixed areas, she is not interested in the economic machinery of urban regions. She is not really concerned with the suburbs, though she does take a few swipes at them. In short, she is interested in only one part of the problem of a few cities.

In these particular areas to which she devotes her attention, she is concerned, first of all, that people be safe. This need for safety leads to the kind of physical composition which she likes, and which has much to be said for it: an area of mixed uses, small blocks, intensive development, and old, new and middle-aged structures. “The need for these four conditions is the most important point this book has to make,”<sup>1</sup> says the author.

In areas of this type she stresses an underlying order, a web of sensitive relationships which holds the area together. Clearly the only way in which the existing web can be retained through a rebuilding process is by slow gradual building-by-building rehabilitation or replacement. Thus she abhors “projects” and the way in which they are destroying the communities she loves. And the worst projects are the public housing projects which enclose by law a definable segment of the population.

When pamphleteering, the circumstances that condition a solution are best omitted because their introduction weakens the sharpness of the attack. But

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1. P. 151.

when evaluating the pamphleteer's attack the reviewer must consider the context, particularly when the issue lies in the domain of public policy.

What is the context within which this rebuilding job is being initiated? It is the most complex that any urban civilization has ever faced. First, the politico-economic philosophy at the base stresses individual right, and therefore individual choice and decision, private enterprise, and private property. In the large cities of the country, ownership of land and improvements is distributed among hundreds of thousands of parcels whose owners make a wide range of decisions in the use and disposition of their property. Second, the governmental structure at the regional and local level is a collection of spotty and disparate devices for dealing with the urban problems of today and the immediate tomorrow, let alone the longer future of thirty to fifty years. Third, the volume of growth (and population exchange) being experienced by our urban areas (and indeed by many of those across the face of the globe) is unprecedented. Fourth, the machinery of our civilization is changing at an unprecedented rate. A city is a framework for man's activities, carried out with a variety of tools and machinery. When this machinery changes rapidly, the obsolescence of the urban framework increases, not just in the facilities and buildings themselves, but in the very scale and pattern of spatial relationships. Most of these characteristics are well known. The point is simply to establish a picture of the context in which the rebuilding task is being undertaken.

Let us place the rebuilding job in the context, for example, of total quantitative demand. In the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area, new construction annually in this decade will run at least at the level of 20,000 new dwelling units, and, depending on various factors, including rates of demolition, replacement, conversion, and new demand, it may reach 30,000 a year. In the New York Metropolitan Region, new dwelling construction over the past several years has been about 100,000 per year and will certainly be continuing in that range. In New York City alone, building permits were issued in 1960 for 47,000 new dwelling units, almost half the 103,000 units authorized for the region as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Some of these units will be inhabited by families migrating into the area, but a significant number will be inhabited by families moving within the region, in response to such factors as rising incomes, changes in family composition, and shifts in job location. Our objectives are to meet such quantitative demands without producing repetitive dullness, to meet this demand at prices families can afford, to provide new opportunities for changing families, to avoid radical population shifts in existing communities, to build and rebuild with sensitivity, to anticipate the desires of the public and at the same time to provide the public with new opportunities from which to choose, to foresee technological change and its effects on our urban structure, and to retain the health and strength of our central cities. I set these down, not as apologia for clumsy work done, but because we can meet these objectives only by looking at them and their implications squarely. It is well to be pricked by the

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2. REGIONAL PLAN ASSOCIATION, INC., *NEW HOMES* 1960, RPA BULL. 97 (1961).

angry man. But it is well also to put in perspective the task which confronts the "orthodox city planner" who, according to the author, has been to blame for all our mistakes so far. And it may be useful to mention others engaged in this construction job: architects, builders, engineers, bankers, city councils and mayors, HHFA officials, to name a few.

Fundamentally, Mrs. Jacobs is opposed to a system of urban reconstruction which is any more extensive than the removal of carefully selected buildings over a given period of time. Her objective is to preserve interpersonal linkages and communications which make the area a neighborhood or a community. She states in cogent terms an issue that has also concerned seriously most city planners engaged in the job. What she says is really not new; most observant people are aware of these kinds of social relationships. Some projects have been undertaken in the manner she prescribes: the Morton Redevelopment Area in Philadelphia, the Wooster Square Area in New Haven, for example. This kind of renewal activity, if it is to be greatly expanded, requires an allocation of manpower much in excess of present staffs.

But let us look a little more closely at these communities of diversity. Their origins vary. In some cases the houses were built for a population group for whose modern analogue the location is obsolete and the building design inappropriate. In other cases the houses were poorly built initially and have long since completed a useful life. In others the houses continue to be useful. In many of these kinds of areas, corner buildings were built with first floor store space. Additional local stores developed as houses went through their first cycle of use, and were converted. As the buildings aged and passed through still later cycles of use and ownership, additional non-residential activities moved in, activities that in their early stages of life could accommodate themselves to almost any physical space if the rent were cheap enough—retail and wholesale trade, repair, service, and even manufacturing activity; church, school, and community uses. Many of these changes took place as the location became increasingly obsolete for its use as a residential community. At some point in the cycle, Mrs. Jacobs wants to freeze it. It cannot be done.

She lays great stress on her assertion that her "orthodox city planner" does not understand the city. She really means that there are aspects of the older, primarily residential areas that the planner does not understand. And she makes some telling points, not the least of which is her emphasis on the need for observation of "what is." But in her zeal to emphasize the "underlying order" which she has observed, she neglects to mention those old residential areas that apparently have no such order, that are funnels for people moving into the city, and mixers of people moving up, or down, the scales of the city. Places where the school population, for example, changes almost completely through the course of one year. Mrs. Jacobs does not appear to understand either the modern city in the total sense of that word, nor the broad politico-socio-economic context in which it is growing, changing, and being rebuilt.

At some point in time in a city, any particular area has some use or range of uses that are in reasonable balance with the total pattern or structure of the

urban community. As the city and the society change, the use in that location becomes obsolete, and this obsolescence becomes one of the factors underlying physical deterioration. When such an area becomes blighted or slum, what is the best public policy in that area? It may well house a closely interdependent human community. But in the changing city it is a residential community in the wrong place. The conundrum facing the policy-maker is how to direct the readjustment of the development and activity pattern of such a neighborhood into a more reasonable one in relation to the total urban structure and yet not destroy, where it exists, the sensitive web of social relations that have developed. Mrs. Jacobs' answer is to keep it there, rebuilding it slowly. But for a use in the wrong location this is not a satisfactory answer.

One of the great smoke screens that blinds all of us in this business to a greater or lesser degree is nostalgia. Unfortunately, it blinds the critics, too. It is a form of the philosophical riddle of separating sentimentality from compassion and true understanding. The automobile may not be here to stay, but the horse as a work unit in cities is surely gone. If our efforts at reconstruction are poor, they cannot be improved by attempts to create a stage set of the past. One of the great problems of city rebuilding is to identify the direction of the future and to devise a means of reconstruction that will help displaced families along the road to their own growth. In many instances this does mean a sensitive and careful rebuilding within the present framework; but in many cases it does not. And this is one of the important social issues of the day. Neither the social, the economic, nor the physical problems of North Central Philadelphia can be resolved by the panaceas of Jane Jacobs.

Nevertheless, despite my challenge to some of the author's points, her charges do illuminate some of the great technical problems facing city planning today. Perhaps the term "urbanism" should be substituted for "city planning," for they are problems to all persons concerned with the functioning of cities. One of these problems is to identify those areas, of whatever primary use, that are obsolete or approaching obsolescence in their original use. Just because an area is physically deteriorated does not mean that the use is obsolete. A somewhat different aspect of this problem that concerns an increasing number of people is to retard deterioration before it sets in. Sharpening our ability to identify obsolescence of location should help us predict where it may set in before it has become manifest. Running through this kind of question are others. What do I mean by "use"? Even the average city planner thinks "residential-industrial-commercial-etc." in response to the term "use." But in referring to a location as being obsolete for its use, one may more precisely mean that it is obsolete for the kind of residential or industrial use for which it was originally built, but that another pattern of development for another kind of population is highly suitable.

"Expressways . . . eviscerate great cities,"<sup>3</sup> says the critic. A large city has only one advantage over a small town—a greater range of opportunities. If these opportunities cannot be reached physically within a reasonable time,

then the great city cannot exist. The author herself says, "The point of cities is multiplicity of choice. It is impossible to take advantage of multiplicity of choice without being able to get around easily."<sup>4</sup> She then goes on to pose the critical question, "How to accommodate city transportation without destroying the related intricate and concentrated land use? . . . Or, going at it the other way, how to accommodate intricate and concentrated city land use without destroying the related transportation?"<sup>5</sup>

Mrs. Jacobs proceeds to discuss the issue in the neatly turned phrases of "erosion of cities" and "attrition of automobiles." But she doesn't really get anywhere. She refers favorably to Victor Gruen's plan for downtown Fort Worth and to New Haven's deliberate discouragement of traffic on local streets. In regard to Gruen's plan, although it provides for a staging of construction, I do not find it consistent with the gradual kind of change and rebuilding earlier established as a critical criterion by the author. Further, it depends for its workability on a major assumption, "absorbing a far higher ratio of downtown users than is now served by public transportation."<sup>6</sup> Yet, Mrs. Jacobs does not climb on the public transit bandwagon as the traffic solution for cities.

Another of the technical problems of city planning is transition from scale to scale. Certainly the laying down of expressways in built-up areas constitutes a radical change in the city. Many of them have been poorly located with reference to the sensitive relationships in neighborhoods (business as well as residential) through which they pass. The resolution of the conflict between regional demand and local need is not easy and does require the exercise of considerable ingenuity, sensitivity, and the strength to take a position where the issue cannot be resolved by technical means.

The author's problem is how to accept the automobile and at the same time to avoid its effects. Thus she praises efforts to discourage traffic on local streets. But she is not willing to discard the expressway as a facility, so she suggests that "expressways could serve as bypass routes only."<sup>7</sup> For the smaller cities the expressway may be primarily a bypass, but for the large cities it is an integral element in the intraregional transportation system, a transportation device for taking advantage of "the point of cities, multiplicity of choice."

In fact, the expressway cannot be fitted into Mrs. Jacobs' scheme for cities for two reasons. First, it must be built in substantial segments which connect into a complete system; thus it cannot be fitted into a small unit, gradual building process. Second, as the system develops, it changes a whole pattern of spatial relationships, the author's "underlying order," but at the regional scale, not the neighborhood scale.

Not very many years ago, when the case for renewing our cities was first being made, the arguments were that only radical surgery could recapture the health of cities; palliatives were not enough. As the rebuilding program got

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4. P. 340.

5. *Ibid.*

6. P. 345.

7. P. 367.



under way, the rebuilding process was attacked as a piecemeal project-by-project approach that lacked an overall strategic framework. Now comes a critic who says it must be done continuously and overall but by a multiplicity of small separate undertakings. The difficulties with the former approach include many that Mrs. Jacobs enumerates in her book (destruction of neighborhood relationships, sterile new developments, etc.) and the criticism (which she does not voice) that too frequently the project did not fit into a total plan. But awkwardly as the process was being executed in many instances, limited by the range of the power granted by the legislatures, the old point of view did recognize that the underlying structure of cities was changing radically. Mrs. Jacobs does not recognize this. In effect, she advocates a retreat into accepting the present development pattern of our cities and working to provide improvement with a multiplicity of small efforts scattered in space to provide gradual improvement.

Although many of her criticisms are valid in themselves, her solution is no solution. But she has touched some sensitive chords and her point of view cannot be sloughed off. It is unfortunate that an issue of such importance to all Americans is posed in the kind of uncritical pamphleteering language that it is. But there it is; however clumsily it got there, the issue is on the table.

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