

REVIEW ESSAY

THE DEATH AND LIFE
OF A RELUCTANT URBAN ICON

Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary. By Alice Sparberg Alexiou. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. 2006. American edition by Rutgers University Press.

WHEN THE NEWS BROKE that urban theorist and activist Jane Jacobs (1916–2006) had died in a Toronto hospital two weeks shy of her ninetieth birthday on April 25, 2006, the attending media coverage in much of English-Canada (although this was perhaps an artifact of its Toronto-centric nature) soon became comparable in its scale to the treatment usually reserved to the departure of formerly prominent politicians, athletes, and artists. As the journalist Alice Sparberg Alexiou points out in her unauthorized biography, the American-born Jacobs had attained almost Pythia-like status in her adopted country and, like an old sage who could do no wrong, was by then immune to public criticism.¹ “Our Jane,” as another Canadian icon, CBC broadcaster Peter Gzowski, once called her, had come to embody our human-scale civic virtues.

While there is little disagreement on Jacobs’s status as the most influential writer on cities in the last half-century (Klemek 2007), perhaps the most remarkable aspect of her work is its widespread

¹Other Canadian characterizations of Jacobs include “all-seeing urban sage” and “Yoda of city planning” (Kingwell 1993; reprinted in Allen 1997, p. 162). Here is the citation that accompanied her 1996 appointment as an “Officer of the Order of Canada,” the second highest distinction of Canada’s Honours System:

Her seminal writings and thought-provoking commentaries on urban development have had a tremendous effect on city dwellers, planners and architects. A social activist and a proponent of the principle of thinking globally and acting locally, she has left her indelible mark on the Toronto landscape. By stimulating discussion, change and action, she has helped to make Canadian city streets and neighbourhoods vibrant, liveable and workable for all. (LeBlanc 1996)

appeal, with admirers ranging from “peak oil” anti-sprawl critic James Howard Kunstler to conservative writer and publisher William F. Buckley. Among other important factors in her favor are the limpidity of her prose, her no-nonsense approach to significant social problems, her fearlessness in the face of credentialed expertise, and her refusal to be associated with any school of thought or ideology, including libertarianism.² As a result, Jacobs’s numerous fans, including some libertarians, see enough value in some of her insights to overlook her contradictions or whatever aspect of her work they disliked (see, for instance, Husock 1994; Richman 2006). Gene Callahan and Sanford Ikeda thus observed that, despite her inductivist methodology, theoretical errors and willingness to tolerate limited uses for regulations, Jacobs’s books “are full of arguments and insights on the economic nature of communities, on central planning, and on ethics” that libertarians and Austrian economists would find “original and enlightening” (2003). This fact was not lost on Murray Rothbard who described her second book, *The Economy of Cities*, as a “brilliant, scintillating work celebrating the primacy for economic development, past and present, of free-market cities” (1970, p. 4). Indeed, Jacobs’s compelling writings on markets as complex adaptive systems turned this once left-of-the-center writer into a spontaneous order devotee long before I had heard of Austrian economics and libertarianism.

²Here are excerpts of what Jacobs had to say on the latter subject in a 1985 interview:

Q: Increasingly . . . I have seen people starting to identify you with libertarianism. Would you accept that characterization or is it just another label?

J: That’s another label . . . I’m highly in favor of helping the poor and of giving everybody as good an education as they want and can use—not what they can pay for. I think health care, not tied to money, is terribly important . . . The libertarians would say, “Look, we shouldn’t even have laws about drugs. That’s up to people to be responsible about themselves. We shouldn’t have lots of laws about things that aren’t harmful to people. I’m not so sure about that. I think people do need help of various kinds. It has to be empirical, pragmatic, you have to see what happens. You have to try to recognize mistakes, not just keep on doing them because you don’t know what else to do. I don’t have a sentimental notion that all human beings would be marvelous if they weren’t deprived—it’s not true. But as for not wanting to help the poor or saying “let everyone stand on their own feet,” no, I don’t believe that at all.” (quoted in Keeley 1989, pp. 17-18; see also Jacobs 2004, pp. 113-15)

It was inevitable that a biography of Jacobs be published at some point in time, despite her opposition to the idea on the grounds that she would rather devote her efforts to writing books or that she was only a writer who hadn't done much. Fortunately for Alice Sparberg Alexiou, many close collaborators and acquaintances of Jacobs seem to have been more welcoming. Building on these conversations, Jacobs's own writings and archives now stored at Boston College, and newspapers articles and other works documenting her various civic struggles and achievements,³ the Long Island journalist has penned a readable, if flawed, biography that should be of interest to libertarians who are already familiar with and appreciative of her subject's writings.

Like most American commentators who wrote about Jacobs following her death, however, Sparberg Alexiou is mostly interested in her upbringing, major urban planning writings, and New York City activism. Indeed, despite what was probably an honest effort on her part, she ultimately cares little for her subject's Canadian years and doesn't write much about the details of her ideas, choosing instead to circle around them by telling us stories and anecdotes about her family, friends, mentors, collaborators, kindred spirits, critics, and foes.⁴

EARLY LIFE AND WORK

Because of her name and association with New York City, people unfamiliar with the details of Jane Jacobs's life often assume that she must have been an urban Jewish dweller by birth. As Sparberg Alexiou tells her readers, however, Jane Butzner was not only born on May 4, 1916, in the Pennsylvania anthracite coal-mining city of Scranton, but came from old Protestant stock. Indeed, her family roots in the New World ran so deep that an ancestor on her mother's side served as a captain in the French and Indian War. Interestingly, the future inspiration of so many anti-sprawl activists grew up in a "McMansion" size suburban home,⁵ and her father, a prominent physician, was one of the first Scrantonians to own a car. (We are

³The most important in this respect being a collection of Jacobs's early writings and later responses to her most influential books that amounted to, in the words of its editor, a "kind of biography-without-a-biographer" (Allen 1997, p. xi).

⁴For a recent and more academic overview of Jacobs's work, see Taylor (2006).

⁵A picture of Jacobs's childhood house can be found in Allen (1997, p. 35).

told, however, that he only used it for making his rounds and that the Butznern used the extensive electric streetcar system to go downtown.)

As the future Mrs. Jacobs would later fondly recall, her parents brought her up to believe that there was no virtue “in conforming meekly to the dominant opinion of the moment” (p. 33); that “simple conformity results in stagnation for a society;” that American progress “has been largely owing to the opportunity for experimentation, the leeway given initiative, and to a gusto and freedom for chewing over odd ideas” (p. 13); and that the “American’s right to be a free individual, not at the mercy of the state, was hard-won and that its price was eternal vigilance” (p. 13). Her family background also included several educated and independent women. Her mother was trained as both a nurse and a teacher. One female cousin became a college professor in Georgia; another, the director of a sanatorium. Another relative was a Quaker who believed in “women’s rights and women’s brains” and published her work under her own name, refusing to use a masculine *nom de plume* as was then customary. A maternal great-aunt completed a degree in anthropology and lived among Native Americans in the US Southwest and in Alaska, teaching in, among other places, fishing camps and a reindeer station (Jacobs 1995).

After graduating from high school, where she mostly taught herself by reading books hidden under her desk, the young Miss Butzner attended a trade school for six months in order to learn shorthand and stenography. She then worked for a year as an unpaid journalist for a local newspaper as assistant to the women’s page editor, and afterwards spent six months in the mountains of western North Carolina with an aunt who ran a community center for the Presbyterian home missions.⁶ The appeal of New York City, which she had first visited at age twelve, then proved irresistible and she left her economically declining region for good in 1935 to join her older sister who was already established there.

Finding any job in the middle of the Great Depression was a constant challenge. After being unable to secure the newspaper or magazine appointment she was looking for, she fell back on a variety of stenographic and secretarial jobs working for, among others, businesses involved in drapery hardware, clock making, steel distribution,

⁶Jacobs would later use her recollection of this time to illustrate how societies or smaller groups of people could regress technically when isolated from trading networks (1984). See also Jacobs (2004, p. 168).

and candy manufacturing. Being frequently unemployed and looking for work, she wandered extensively across the metropolis and began to write short articles about some of the local working districts that fascinated her. Using the money her parents had set aside to give her the opportunity to attend college, she enrolled at Columbia University's School of General Studies when she was twenty-two and studied mostly natural sciences (especially geology and zoology), while taking a few courses in law and political science, along with a course in economic geography. As she would later recall, this time period taught her much about the social and economic dynamics of city life.

After working for three years for the trade journal *Iron Age*, she took a job as a feature writer with the Office of War Information and ended up working nine years as a writer and editor for the State Department and Overseas Information Agency's *Amerika*. In the meantime, she met and married the architect Robert Hyde Jacobs, Jr. In 1947, the couple bought a dilapidated three-story building on Hudson Street in Greenwich Village, renovated it, and eventually raised three children there. Following the transfer of her government position to Washington in 1952, Jacobs took a position with the magazine *Architectural Forum* to which her husband subscribed. She was first appointed "School and Hospital Expert" and was utterly baffled by the rolls of working drawings and plans being sent her way. Fortunately, her husband came to the rescue and every night for months taught her how to read drawings, to watch for the unusual, and to discover what other information was needed—and soon after decided to specialize his practice in hospital design. In time, Jacobs was assigned stories on city planning and, despite her bosses' enthusiastic support of modernist ideas, quickly became disillusioned with the bulldozer-driven "urban renewal" policies of the time.

A CHALLENGE TO MODERNIST PLANNING

Jacobs often said that her most influential work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was ultimately most useful in terms of giving legitimacy to what numerous city dwellers already knew and that the demise of urban renewal owed more to its own internal contradictions than to her writings (Jacobs 1993a; Klemek 2007). While she may have been too modest in this respect, she did greatly benefit from the support of two mentors who would prove instrumental in helping her articulate her ideas and find an audience.⁷ She met the

⁷As another reviewer has suggested, however, it is most certainly the case that Jacobs's thinking on urban issues had been evolving for decades before she met Kirk and that it was influenced by academic writings (Laurence 2007).

first, William Kirk, an ordained Episcopal minister who was then running the Union Settlement in East Harlem, in 1955. Kirk told her and other *Architectural Forum* editors about the devastating results that slum clearance had brought to his section of the city and about a study conducted by one of his social workers of three hundred local families that had been forcibly relocated in the Washington Houses, a massive public housing project. As Sparberg Alexiou puts it:

The new high-rises, it turned out, were making the environment worse than it had been before “slum clearance.” Tenants told [the Union Settlement social worker] that they were afraid to walk the streets at night, that the new projects were being quickly defaced by vandalism, that police protection within the projects was inadequate. The high-rise design, with its elevators and empty public areas, was only increasing the opportunities for crime. The projects were incubating grounds for teenage gangs, who terrorized the other residents. On the old block, which was now being obliterated, one felt a lot safer. People were on the sidewalks, watching their neighbors and also their neighbors’ children. So high-rises made life more difficult for mothers, who could no longer watch their children playing in the street from their windows. (pp. 45–46)

But these were only some of the negative consequences generated by the heavy boot of governmental planning. Institutions that contributed to the fabric of the neighborhood, such as at least fifteen hundred small businesses (bakeries and candy stores, grocery and hardware stores, barber shops, little clothing stores, etc.) employing more than forty-five hundred people and numerous social and political clubs and storefront churches, had simultaneously been pushed out of East Harlem without any compensation from the city. Despite his best efforts, however, Kirk wasn’t able to get city politicians and bureaucrats to listen to him.

Jacobs and Kirk took an instant liking to each other. He invited her to visit East Harlem and the pair spent several afternoons walking through the neighborhood. Impressed by the work being conducted by the Union Settlement’s staff, she joined the board of the organization and became an active member. Jacobs would later credit Kirk for teaching her how to understand “the intricate social and economic order under the seeming disorder of cities” (1961, p. 15).

Jacobs met her second mentor in 1956 when she was sent to Harvard University to speak on urban design on behalf of her *Architectural Forum* superior, then on vacation. There she gave a speech on what she had learned in East Harlem and put a particular emphasis on the importance of stores as social institutions that could

not be replicated in public housing projects.⁸ According to Sparberg Alexiou, “her underlying assumption [was] that individual freedom is life’s natural state. In the end, her thinking [implied], no higher power can stop people from doing as they will” (pp. 58–59).

Sitting in the audience that day was the urban historian and critic Lewis Mumford (1895–1990), but, more importantly for Jacobs, William H. Whyte, Jr. (1917–1999), then an editor of *Fortune* magazine who was about to publish his best-selling *The Organization Man*. Whyte was then planning a series of articles on cities and asked Jacobs to contribute a piece on downtowns—a topic about which she said she knew nothing at the time. After some tribulations, and despite widespread opposition from his colleagues and superiors, Whyte eventually published in April 1958 her fourteen page essay “Downtown is for People” in which she criticized, among other things, the plans for Lincoln Center—which she would later label a “piece of built-in rigor mortis” (p. 62). The response to Jacobs’s article was one of the most enthusiastic in *Fortune*’s history.

A few months later, Jacobs received a phone call from an official of the Rockefeller Foundation who offered her a grant to expand on her article’s main themes.⁹ After turning down the help of Harvard and MIT academics who, she would later say, “didn’t have the slightest interest in how cities really worked,” Jacobs began working on a book manuscript in the fall of 1958, but soon expanded her scope. As she would write more than three decades later:

When I began work on this book . . . I expected merely to describe the civilizing and enjoyable services that good city street life casually provides—and to deplore planning fads and architectural fashions that were expunging these necessities and charms instead of helping to strengthen them. Some of Part One of this book: that’s all I intended.

But learning and thinking about city streets and the trickiness of city parks launched me into an unexpected treasure hunt. I quickly found out that the valuables in plain sight—streets and parks—were intimately mingled with clues and keys to other peculiarities of cities. Thus one discovery led to another, then another. Some of the findings from the hunt fill the rest of this book. Others, as they turned up, have gone into four further books. (Jacobs 1993a)

⁸The speech is reprinted in Allen (1997, pp. 39–40).

⁹Laurence (2006) is a more detailed history of the relationship between Rockefeller Foundation officials and Jacobs.

The Death and Life of Great American Cities was finally completed in January 1961 and published by Random House in November of that year, deliberately timed for the Christmas “recommended reading” lists. It had been preceded by an aggressive marketing campaign that had included the publication of advanced excerpts in *Harper’s*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Vogue*. In Jacobs’s now familiar “no prisoner” style, the author first told her readers that the book was not only “an attack on current city planning and rebuilding,” but also

an attempt to introduce new principles of city planning and rebuilding, different and even opposite from those now taught in everything from schools of architecture and planning to the Sunday supplements and women’s magazines. (1961, p. 3)

And so, after dismissing the “pseudoscience” of city planning, the uncredentialed writer recommended the mixing of primary functions such as housing, shops, and offices; higher population densities; shorter blocks; a mixture of old and new buildings; and the abandonment of public housing projects that took the form of prison towers surrounded by “grass, grass, grass.” *Death and Life* also introduced to the world expressions such as “social capital,” “mixed primary uses,” “cataclysmic money,” “eyes on the street,” and “new ideas need old [ordinary and low-value] buildings,” that would soon become core concepts in urban studies. More than anything, however, Jacobs insisted that diversity was natural to large cities and that it was crucial for their future growth.

Jacobs’s book was not a major best-seller but, because its publication coincided with a couple of prominent civic fights that she was about to become a part of, turned its author into a celebrity. The first was an attempt by New York authorities to “renew” her section of Greenwich Village that she and her neighbors, who had already defeated previous attempts to build a roadway through Washington Square Park and to widen Hudson Street, would bitterly oppose. Jacobs soon found herself Chairman of the Committee to Save the West Village and became a journalists’ favorite because of her constant supply of juicy quotes. The activists were in time successful in defeating the scheme, thanks in large part to some friendly “moles” working in the city government and a public official, Lester Eisner, who at the time headed the office in charge of the federal urban renewal programs in New York and New England. Eisner taught the Villagers how to fight the planners by compiling statistics proving that their neighborhood was not a “slum” and by never telling anybody in city or state government what they

wanted—not even planting a tree!—other than a removal of the slum designation.¹⁰

It was soon after having saved her block that Jacobs learned of a plan to build a federally funded¹¹ elevated expressway across Lower Manhattan that would rip apart neighborhoods such as SoHo, Chinatown, and Little Italy. This proposal was hardly a new idea, as it had been on the mind of New York City's most powerful unelected figure, the Parks Commissioner (but perhaps better described as planning czar) Robert Moses (1888–1981), since before World War II. This time, however, the activists could count on the support of several local elected officials and the project was dropped after only a few months, although it would be resurrected—and defeated again—in following years, in one occasion leading to Jacobs's arrest after a public meeting got out of control.

By that point in time, Jacobs's activism was also aimed at the Vietnam War and would eventually result in her permanent move to Canada in 1968. Although she always invoked her desire to protect her sons from the draft as the main reason for her departure, Sparberg Alexiou suspects that Jacobs was also tired of fighting bureaucrats and politicians and wished to be able to devote herself to her writings.¹² The former Villagers eventually settled in Toronto's Annex neighborhood, a streetcar-era suburb (but, by this point in time, viewed as being part of the city's core) located a stone's throw away from the University of Toronto's main campus. Unbeknownst to the Jacobs family, however, their new home would soon find itself in the path of a proposed downtown highway, the Spadina (or William R. Allen) Expressway. Jacobs once again joined the fight and helped defeat highwaymen—although the fact that the expressway was going to run through some of Toronto's wealthiest neighborhoods and most prominent academic enclave certainly did not help its supporters. Jacobs quickly became a local icon consulted by every mayor—including a stint as co-chairman of the transition advisory team of Toronto's current mayor, David Miller—while the

¹⁰As Sparberg Alexiou (p. 101) explains, having told officials anything other than removing the slum designation would have amounted in effect to turn the Villagers into “participating citizens” and given officials “the green light” to do whatever they wanted to their neighborhood.

¹¹To be accurate, New York State would have contributed 10 percent of the total budget.

¹²As Jacobs told a *Village Voice* reporter in 1972, “It’s absurd to make your life absurd in response to absurd government” (p. 151).

Ontarian capital would turn out to be the city most receptive to her urban vision (Danieri 2000; Wellman 2006).

JACOBS AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THEORIST

Many people somewhat familiar with Jacobs's life and writings, including those who might have read Sparberg Alexiou's biographical account, might be surprised to learn that Jacobs's own favorite work was not *Death and Life*, but her second book, *The Economy of Cities* (1969). Indeed, Jacobs even stated that her contribution to economic theory would prove more significant than her writings on urban planning. Be that as it may, from the moment she quit *Architectural Forum* for good in 1962, Jacobs devoted most of her research effort to issues related to economic development and commercial life. As she explained in a 1967 speech delivered at a meeting of the Royal Institute of British Architects, her work in this area was a natural offshoot of her criticism of urban planning and stemmed from her desire to understand the stagnation of once thriving American cities such as Detroit and Pittsburgh whose problems "piled up faster than they [could] be dealt with" (quoted in Allen 1997, p. 90).

Jacobs had by this point developed a rather unique inductive research methodology that she described in the last chapter of *Death and Life*, in a lengthy personal letter which was later reprinted in both Lawrence (1989) and Allen (1997), and through the voice of her character Kate in her 1992 book *Systems of Survival*. Consistent with her approach, she first got into the question without knowing "where to begin," but soon made the hypothesis that "a city that is not stagnating economically is a city that is continually casting forth new kinds of economic activity" (quoted in Allen 1997, p. 91). From this insight followed a series of questions, such as "Why do some cities produce these new things?" and "Why are some cities creative only for a time, and then halt?" She then decided that perhaps the best way to shed some light on these problems was to learn more about the history of successful businesses "in the hope that some patterns of what was important would emerge" (ibid).¹³ The strangest universal and unexpected pattern that she came across was "that new economic activities come out of the internal economies of cities" (ibid).

¹³Jacobs's connections with *Fortune* magazine proved most valuable in this respect as she had easy access to the magazine's business history archives (personal communication with Jane Jacobs, Spring 2003).

The results of her economic inquiries were a series of books, the first of which, *The Economy of Cities* (1969), being in my opinion the most remarkable. Her other writings on the topic are an essay on the importance of cities for national economies, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (1984), and a short dialogue that drew parallels between the evolution of biological and economic systems, *The Nature of Economies* (1998). One can also find various economic issues discussed in *The Question of Separatism: Quebec and the Struggle over Sovereignty* (1980); in *Systems of Survival* (1992), a dialogue on the moral foundations of commerce and politics; and in *Dark Age Ahead* (2004), an uncharacteristically erratic and pessimistic piece of writing in which she warned of “ominous signs of [social] decay.”¹⁴

While Jacobs’s economic writings cannot be discussed in detail here, suffice it to say that her basic and most controversial insight is that cities are not simply the spatial expressions of economic growth, but are in and of themselves the main engines of economic development (Polèse 2005). Readers familiar with Austrian economic theory will find much to like in these books, but also a number of shortcomings (Bauer 1985). Callahan and Ikeda have perhaps best summed up the likely reaction of most spontaneous order theorists by pointing out that Jacobs’s gaps in her knowledge of economic theory and economic thought ultimately “enabled her considerable powers of observation, intelligence, and good common sense to paint the nature of social processes in ways that are for economists in particular fresh and perhaps even inspiring” (Callahan and Ikeda 2003). Writing at a time when big businesses were all the rage and foreign aid was viewed as a critical ingredient to break the vicious cycle of poverty in which less advanced economies were supposedly trapped, Jacobs emphasized the importance of entrepreneurship and business start-ups, reminded her readers in vivid detail that development is a process rather than a collection of capital goods, and that large-scale government spending programs came with significant opportunity costs and perverse incentives.

Jacobs, however, was not simply rediscovering ideas that had long been familiar to Austrians and kindred spirits. Among other

¹⁴Indeed, Jacobs’s last book will probably be viewed as especially appalling by her libertarian fans. Perhaps one possible explanation for the tone and content of what would turn out to be her last essay is her profound antipathy toward a conservative Ontario provincial government dominated by small-town dignitaries that forced a merger between the city of Toronto and its adjacent suburbs. For a perceptive review of the book in light of her previous writings, see Laurence (2005).

highly original insights, she suggested a scenario according to which one could be a hunter-gatherer and live in a city and that agriculture might have been developed in cities rather than the countryside (Bender 1975). There can also be little doubt that her economic case on behalf of local diversity added much to previous arguments to that effect (Desrochers 2001) and that what could be termed her dynamic structural theory of technological change was a significant improvement over mainstream economic thinking on the topic (Warsh 1992, p. 398).

Jacobs's economic writings, however, are only alluded to by Sparberg Alexiou, who is clearly biting off more than she can chew on the topic—although it must be admitted that Jacobs's books are so idiosyncratic that they cannot be easily pinned down in a few pages. Instead, although she alludes to the fact that Jacobs's writings have had some influence at the World Bank,¹⁵ the author focuses most of her attention on growth economists' recent fondness for "Jacobs externalities." As she tells her readers, this story began with Robert Lucas's highly influential article "On the Mechanics of Economic Development" (1988) in which he assessed the prospects of constructing a neoclassical theory of growth that would be consistent with unequal development. One of the key sections of Lucas's piece dealt with the external effects of "human capital," i.e., the ways by which improvement in individual skills raised the productivity levels of other individuals without being adequately compensated. The Chicago economist, however, had no idea as to how his theoretical concept worked in practice. His solution was to direct his readers to Jacob's "remarkable" *Economy of Cities*, which he reinterpreted in this light by arguing that the only plausible explanation for the existence and persistence of urban agglomeration was that people are willing to cluster geographically and pay high rents to be near other people in order to learn from them. Lucas, however, said virtually nothing about the content of the book, nor, for that matter, of what Jacobs had to say about the processes conducive to knowledge spillovers. Indeed, one gets the impression that Lucas's readers who were not

¹⁵According to former World Bank staffer David Ellerman, however, her influence at the World Bank was in the urban development group, not in the economic development group. In that sense, it is more Jacobs the planning critic than Jacobs the economic development theorist who was discussed by a few people at that institution. Ellerman (2004; 2005), however, kept expanding on her ideas after his retirement from this institution (Personal communication with David Ellerman, September 2006).

already familiar with Jacobs's work probably assumed that her only insight was to argue that cities are places where learning occurs on a large, but geographically limited, scale.

Lucas's essay inspired a then Chicago Ph.D. student, Edward L. Glaeser, to assess the respective importance of various types of "dynamic externalities," i.e., knowledge spillovers from one person or group to another. In a highly influential paper, Glaeser and his colleagues (1992) defined "Jacobs externalities" by contrasting them with two other hypotheses. The first, known as the MAR (or Alfred Marshall, Kenneth Arrow, and Paul Romer) hypothesis, stresses the importance of spillovers between companies in the same sector. This mechanism is thought to apply in environments with little local competition, and therefore dominated by a few large players, so that firms are willing to share their knowledge. Harvard University Professor and "cluster" proponent Michael Porter is associated with the second hypothesis. In his view, knowledge spillovers in the same industry are crucial for urban economic growth, but are more likely to occur when there is fierce local competition between a large number of small firms. Jacobs is finally seen as supporting both competition and knowledge spillovers between industries, which are more likely to occur in an urban economy which is more diverse than average.

It seems fair to say that the vast literature based on the Glaeser et al. (1992) framework, beginning with the original piece, has generally supported the greater importance of "Jacobs externalities." According to critics, however, these studies rely on location quotients and similar measures of sectoral concentrations or diversity that are then correlated (or not) with "outputs" such as innovations or new product advertised in the technical literature, patent data, answers to questionnaires inquiring about the adoption/introduction of new technologies, or employment, income and productivity growth. Researchers then invoke localized knowledge spillovers when commenting upon their results, but these studies do not document them or even prove their existence (Breschi and Lissoni 2001a, 2001b; Hansen 2002). Indeed, it may be the case that most mainstream economists who have written on the topic are still clueless as to how knowledge actually "spills over" between different lines of work.¹⁶

¹⁶For a more detailed introduction to this issue, along with a discussion as to how these things might occur in practice, see Desrochers (2001).

In the end, as Sparberg Alexiou rightly points out, “standard economic textbooks do not mention Jane Jacobs”¹⁷ and, with the exception of a few influential figures such as Lucas and Glaeser, most of the economics profession only knows her for a peculiar type of knowledge externalities and has never read her (p. 187). Following in Callahan and Ikeda’s footsteps, I would nonetheless urge Austrian economists to pay more attention to her work, especially *The Economy of Cities*.

AFFORDABILITY, SUBURBIA, AND RACE

Like many Jacobs admirers, Sparberg Alexiou exhibits several politically correct traits and a strong belief in the necessity of big government. Unlike most Jacobseans of this persuasion, however, she does not ignore her subject’s libertarian leanings, such as the fact that, at least until the publication of her last book, she was more of a free-market advocate than most university-based economists. She also makes some valid criticisms of Jacobs’s writings, such as her tendency to oversimplify the views of authors she disagrees with or that her last two books lack focus and “do not in any way measure up” to her previous work (p. 198).

Sparberg Alexiou further observes that the people attracted to Jacobsean neighborhoods are now overwhelmingly retirees and young professionals rather than families with young children. Although she doesn’t address the issue, she could have pointed out that Jacobs could never come to terms with the fact that her frequent opposition to the replacement of low-rise buildings with high-rise apartment towers kept people of lesser means out of more central locations. As I can attest for having raised the issue in her presence,¹⁸ she simply could not see the people—such as my wife and I who were then sitting right in front of her—who were negatively affected by her stance, nor could she acknowledge that established home

¹⁷Although urban economics textbooks, such as Mills and Hamilton (1997) and O’Sullivan (2003), briefly do.

¹⁸This discussion, which took place in the Spring of 2004, also confirmed that, as former New York City housing administrator Roger Starr once stated, “What a dear, sweet character she isn’t” with people who disagreed with her. To be fair, however, this was after a discussion that had already lasted several hours in which Jacobs had been a wonderful host. I should also add that if she was sometimes attacked for her arrogance, she was certainly not worse in this respect than many prominent academics.

owners in desirable locations subjected to restrictive zoning rules actually belong to an “incumbent club” that ultimately benefits from the resulting increased property value.¹⁹ Interestingly, she didn’t feel the same way toward homeowners living in more recently built suburbs.²⁰

Although she doesn’t refrain from voicing her opinions, Sparberg Alexiou is particularly outspoken on car-oriented development and Jacobs’s lack of emphasis on racial issues, in both cases repeating remarks and complaints frequently heard in urban planning departments. Although she doesn’t say anything out of the ordinary on these topics, I believe she missed Jacobs’s most important comments on both subjects.

To her credit, Sparberg Alexiou first recognizes that most Americans “both at the time when Jacobs was writing *Death and Life* and now, aspire to live in the suburbs, not in the crowded city neighborhoods that Jacobs so adores” (p. 141). This is also true of Toronto, where two-thirds of the population now lives in suburbs which occupy 95 percent of the metropolitan area (p. 198). And yet, like most urban *aficionados*, she cannot help but view suburban sprawl as blighting the landscape “with monotonous office parks and empty suburban streets lined with cookie-cutter homes, pushing us toward inevitable ecological disaster as we consume ever more fossil fuels in our SUVs” (p. 198).

Jacobs’s assessment of suburbia and cars, however, was not always negative. Indeed, while her first writings and speeches on the topic usually emphasized her dislike of homogeneity and isolation, she generally acknowledged that America was large enough to

¹⁹Interestingly, a few weeks after her death, Jacobs’s semi-detached ivy-covered Annex house was put on the market at the (no irony intended) “bargain price” of \$850,000 (Gray 2006). At the time, the median house price in the Greater Toronto area was \$290,000 (Cox 2006a). For a more detailed discussion of the current incumbent club (although he doesn’t use this term) of Greenwich Village and the legacy of Jacobs, see Halle (2006).

²⁰Anticipating the burst of the current housing market bubble, Jacobs (2004, p. 148) wrote that “most owners of suburban lots who [will feel the pressure to sell] will no doubt sell their land and buildings to developers who plan to put them to more intensive use by building apartment houses, low-cost condominiums, and spaces for small businesses – or for whatever other market promises to be most remunerative.” She then went on to speculate about novel and more intensive land uses of suburban lots. Such logic, however, didn’t apply to her own neighborhood, where Jacobs was part of a movement that opposed the conversion of a school parking lot into a gymnasium.

ensure that the issue was, in the end, a matter of personal taste (p. 118). The same can be said of her thinking on cars. Here are, for example, some positive comments on the topic in *Death and Life*:

But automobiles are hardly inherently destroyers of cities. If we would stop telling ourselves fairy tales about the suitability and charm of nineteenth-century streets for horse-and-buggy traffic, we would see that the internal combustion engine, as it came on the scene, was potentially an excellent instrument for abetting city intensity, and at the same time for liberating cities from one of their noxious liabilities. (Jacobs 1961, p. 343)

Toward the end of her life, however, her analysis of car-oriented development had become as strident as those of the most radical “smart growth” theorists. Although she had long complained about their “costs in energy waste, infrastructure waste, and land waste” (Jacobs 1993a) and described Toronto’s massive postwar suburbs as “quite as baffling physically and incoherent socially as their counterparts anywhere, and fully as ecologically destructive and as ill-suited to service by public transportation” (Jacobs 1993b, p. x), in *Dark Age Ahead* she went so far as writing that “not TV or illegal drugs but the automobile has been the chief destroyer of American communities” (p. 37)²¹ and that among suburban sprawl’s most abject results were its “murders of communities and wastes of land, time and energy” (p. 169). And yet, one suspects that many suburban dwellers perfectly happy with their community (such as my immediate family and more distant relatives), might be surprised to learn that their community had been “murdered” by their beloved cars. Had she lived a little bit longer, she might have also learned that people living in sprawling suburban areas tend to have more friends, better community involvement, and more interactions with their neighbors than urbanites crammed in densely settled older neighborhoods. Or, in other words, that social interaction often goes down as density goes up (Brueckner and Largey 2006).

Be that as it may, Jacobs, was nonetheless critical of “smart growth” proponents who invoked her intellectual legacy (Steigerwald 2001). She had also recognized that there were “foot people,” who lived or wished to live in the kind of neighborhoods she liked, and “car people” who would have nothing to do with

²¹Jacobs then launches a pre-emptive strike against free marketeers who argue that Americans have spoken with their dollars and voted for cars by rehashing mythical anti-public transit conspiracy theories, such as GM plotting to destroy America’s beloved streetcars to replace them with buses. For a classic libertarian take on the issue, see Slater (1997).

them and were quite pleased with having their main residence outside of the urban core (Jacobs 1993a). Indeed, she even began to appreciate the increasing diversity and uniqueness of some of Greater Toronto's suburban cities, such as Brampton, Mississauga, and York (Jacobs 2004). Despite this, however, she viewed it as absolutely essential to increase both the density and diversity of people living in those places. Not surprisingly, her thinking on these issues was influential on some local politicians, the prime example being my hometown of Mississauga whose elected officials are currently struggling to implement her vision.²²

As could be expected, however, Sparberg Alexiou's adds a number of currently fashionable arguments that Jacobs didn't invoke in her anti-sprawl tirade, such as the assertion that Portland (Oregon) serves "as a model for planners with its densely populated mixed residential and commercial center, and public transportation that people actually use instead of their cars" (p. 198). And yet, as libertarian economists such as Peter Gordon and Randall O'Toole have painstakingly detailed, land-use restrictions have turned Portland from one of the most affordable American housing markets into one of its most expensive,²³ while its heavily subsidized rail transit system carries only 0.9 percent of the region's passenger traffic (cars still account for over 90 percent of travel in the area!). One similarly suspects that Sparberg Alexiou would be shocked to learn that the entire urban and suburban American population could be housed comfortably into Wisconsin at suburban densities (Bruegmann 2006, p. 19).

²²The densification efforts pursued in the core of this western Toronto suburb of more than 700,000 people take the form of several high-rise condominium development projects clustered around the public library, arts center, and City Hall. As a nearby resident of these new developments, I can attest to the fact that, despite the city planners' best efforts, the vast majority of people moving in these new apartment towers and their friends are definitely car people. Among other unintended consequences of this densification, one can observe a major parking space deficit on Friday and week-end evenings when friends drop by with their cars, along with a reluctance by local residents—often retired people—to cross by foot an eight lane road and open plazas to reach the nearby municipal facilities and shopping center. Indeed, several of them seem more inclined to drive their cars for a few minutes than to walk along huge parking lots. One could argue, however, that they are driving less than they otherwise would.

²³See their respective detailed websites at www-rcf.usc.edu/~pgordon/index.php and www.ti.org. Apart from Gordon and O'Toole's writings on this issue, see the broader assessments of the impact of zoning on housing prices written by Glaeser and Gyourko (2002) and Cox (2006a and 2006b).

Furthermore, and apparently unbeknownst to many critics, agricultural technologies have reduced farmland requirements to such an extent that forests are now expanding in virtually all advanced economies (Kauppi et al. 2006), while suburbia is becoming increasingly diverse as more ethnic groups are looking for cheaper and better housing and to take advantage of “old buildings” such as 1960s shopping malls. As the economist and food critic Tyler Cowen observed in his tract of Northern Virginia suburbs (but which is equally valid for the Greater Toronto area and, I suspect, many other places):

Ethnic eating has gone exurban, tracking the march of immigration and the growth of small businesses from inner city to inner suburb and finally to exurbs that were virtually all-white rural outposts with cornfields just a decade ago. (2006)

As the architectural historian Robert Bruegmann put it, many among the current generation of historians, social scientists, planners, and urban theorists

have been so quick to condemn [car-oriented development] that they’ve never really looked carefully. Aesthetic biases and failures of analysis and fair description of suburbs have created a prejudicial hierarchy that looks down on suburbia as a lower form of urbanity. (2006, p. 19)²⁴

Whether or not Bruegmann intended his critique as a throwback to the opening salvo of *Death and Life*, it is perhaps not unfair to say that, in the end, Jane Jacobs, the highly influential urban expert, suffered from the same lack of intellectual curiosity and prejudices toward an urban form she didn’t understand as the planners and officials she had attacked decades earlier.

Sparberg Alexiou’s main criticism of Jacobs, however, is that she didn’t devote enough attention to the issue of race—an accusation that has been made against Jacobs ever since the publication of *Death and Life*. In essence, she suggests that the “unslumming” neighborhoods praised by Jacobs were populated by solid working- and middle-class whites, but that you couldn’t possibly expect uneducated black people to achieve the same results. Perhaps, however, Jacobs simply respected black people too much to patronize them in this way, although she did recognize that systematic discrimination impeded normal urban improvement processes. This is at any rate the impression one can get from her most explicit passage on the

²⁴For a more detailed look at his argument according to which sprawl is “the grandest and most marvelous work of mankind” (Bruegmann 2006, p. 225), see also Bruegmann (2005), Cox (2006b), and Bogart (2006).

topic, which can be found in the foreword to a book about modern planning in Toronto in which she explained the Ontarian capital's greater success in this respect through a quasi-libertarian rationale:

Although radical prejudices and discriminations infest Toronto too, these evils were not exacerbated and intensified by creation of racial ghettos. Creating ghettos actually requires much deliberate and calculated effort: for instance, redlining; well organized "block-busting" on the part of ruthless developers or real-estate vultures; and contrived property-value panics to empty whites out of ghettos-to-be. These efforts were largely missing in Toronto, and when they were tried they were feeble and ineffectual, perhaps because they were not connived in by the authorities. (Jacobs 1993, p. xi)

CONCLUSION

Alice Sparberg Alexiou tells us in the acknowledgements section of her book that she first heard of Jane Jacobs in Ric Burns's documentary *New York* in which he devoted a segment to the urban passionaria's 1960s activism. One suspects that the journalist was fascinated by Jacobs's portrayal as a "Greenwich Village homemaker and part-time architectural writer" who dared to take on and defeat überplanner and WASP patrician Robert Moses (PBS.org). Sparberg Alexiou then probably realized that Jacobs was a career woman whose interests were much broader and whose worldview was not as politically correct as she had originally thought. Be that as it may, in the end she wrote mostly about what interested her in the first place, i.e., Jacobs's activism in New York City in the 1960s. The result is a book that is an easy read, but doesn't quite deliver the goods if one expects a discussion of Jacobs's ideas—or if one happens to be Canadian. *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary* is nonetheless worth looking up by those who are already appreciative of her subject's writings. Others, though, would be better served by picking up a copy of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, *The Economy of Cities*, or *Systems of Survival*.

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