

Example of nyc architecture essay

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Abstract

In Jane Jacobs' 1958 Fortune article, "Downtown is for People," she discusses the impending arrival of modernist architecture to urban renewal projects and redevelopment in major cities. Other concepts that she describes in her article include the advantages of bigger cities for smaller businesses, the benefits of compactness in architecture, and the need to keep the pedestrian in mind when designing roads around and leading to varying structures. Rockefeller Center is cited as a powerful example of what can happen when a dense, unique structure provides plenty of pedestrian options and quick access to facilities, as compared to the coldness and equidistance of the blank monoliths of Sixth Avenue.

In Jane Jacobs' 1958 Fortune article, "Downtown is for People," she discusses the impending arrival of modernist architecture to urban renewal projects and redevelopment in major cities. Jacobs is unequivocal on her opposition to this style and metric of construction and design; "From city to city the architects' sketches conjure up the same dreary scene; here is no hint of individuality or whim or surprise, no hint that here is a city with a tradition and flavor all its own" (Jacobs, 1958). In essence, the modernist school of architecture is argued to rob cities of their unique personality, and therefore offer nothing to the citizen to give back or contribute to the conversation.

The trend that Jacobs was noting in modern architecture at the time was to create open spaces for nonspecific and all-purpose buildings, that could be created to serve potentially any business or architectural need. "Almost without exception the projects have one standard solution for every need:

commerce, medicine, culture, government—whatever the activity, they take a part of the city's life, abstract it from the hustle and bustle of downtown, and set it, like a self-sufficient island, in majestic isolation" (Jacobs, 1958). No part of the city is supposed to interfere with the other, creating discrete units of boredom that served to further alienate and divide the downtown area of a city. This is evidence of a really dangerous idea in the school of architecture, as these buildings are build to a strange, blank concept of the city that is far too practical to inject personality into the area. " This is a vicarious way to deal with reality, and it is, unhappily, symptomatic of a design philosophy now dominant: buildings come first, for the goal is to remake the city to fit an abstract concept of what, logically, it should be" (Jacobs, 1958).

Another of Jacobs' points revolves around the idea that the pedestrian is king in a downtown area, and experiments like Maiden Lane in San Francisco are successful by virtue of the fact that it is cost-effective, aesthetically pleasing and has the potential for spontaneous life and intimacy within a city's downtown area. While Jacobs notes that " there is no magic in simply removing cars from downtown, and certainly none in stressing peace, quiet, and dead space," their removal can certainly pave the way for more compact, and therefore more community-friendly pedestrian downtown areas (Jacobs, 1958). Jacobs also contemplates the idea of bigger cities being more preferable to smaller businesses, as they more desperately need the exposure that a larger city can afford them. " We are apt to think of big cities as equaling big enterprises, little towns as equaling little enterprises. Nothing could be less true" (Jacobs, 1958). Therefore, Jacobs opts for more compact

cities and downtown areas, which grant these smaller businesses the exposure they require.

Jacobs' points regarding the essence of downtown and the importance of character to design and architecture are exemplified in the comparison of Rockefeller Center to its Sixth Avenue neighbors. " Rockefeller Center, frequently cited to prove that projects are good for downtown, differs in a very fundamental way from the projects being designed today. It respects the street" (Jacobs, 1958). Jacobs argues that the unique personality and the unobtrusiveness of Rockefeller Center, despite its large profile, permits the block and the street itself to contribute to the needs of the people.

Rockefeller Center is incredibly dense, making the most of its space - therefore, its own signature mark is acceptable because it does not infect the rest of the area.

The same cannot be said, however, of the western stretch of Sixth Avenue, which is directly adjacent to Rockefeller Center and contains the Time-Life, Exxon, McGraw-Hill and News Corp buildings, among others. These structures are all black, uniform monoliths, bereft of personality or differentiation in space. They are all seemingly equidistant, appearing as though they are all parts of the same whole, though they are owned by different corporations with unique visions, markets and personalities of their own. Looking at them at first glance, one would not strictly know who they belonged to. This is the kind of blandness that Jacobs was referring to - she wanted to make sure that buildings served the city, not vice versa. Instead of creating blank slates that people and businesses could occupy, downtown

areas were meant to provide the essence of what made a city great. While Rockefeller Center does this in its uniqueness and economy of space, allowing pedestrians great road traffic and access, Sixth Avenue presents an intimidating, oppressive segment of buildings that have nothing to say on their own.

In conclusion, Jacobs raises many good points about the need for large metropolitan downtown areas to maintain personality, compactness, and pedestrian friendliness. Rockefeller Center is just one of those places that allows this to happen, its density working toward the advantages inherent to a personality-filled downtown area. The monoliths of Sixth Avenue provide dead, cold and lifeless presentation to the area; instead, cities need to rethink the symmetrical modernism that is en vogue today and opt for a look that unifies the city. The businesses, the people and the culture will be all the better for it as a result.

Works Cited

Jacobs, Jane. "Downtown is for People." *Forbes*. 1958. Print.