

Example of critical thinking on death and life of great american cities

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Jane Jacob wrote the book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961 at a time when most of the American cities were overwhelmed with immense development projects. The book provides Jacob's opinion on what makes these cities work as well as a critique of modern planning theory. This book can be considered to bear dual significance. While on one end the book is specific in offering critique of the urban planning, it is general since it lies in the degree to which Jacob calls into question the concepts of central planning and bureaucratic expertise concepts. Specifically on cities, the author was a prophetic early warning voice that echoed that being billed as urban renewal was actually destroying the American neighborhoods creating more problems than the responsible authorities thought they would solve. Building big houses, highways, as well as the creation of business districts among others were some of the things that Jacob indicated in her book to constitute the downgrading effects of urban planning theory. Following the subsequent events of the years following her publication – about 50 years – such as the increasing housing projects that blight the American urban landscape, Jacob's argument that planners were killing cities have come to pass; she was truly prescient in her writing. While reading this book, the other books that seem to accompany Jane Jacob's idea include *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and The Fall of New York* by Robert Caro. In the latter publications, the authors demonstrate detail that the civil servants have used the urban plans to exercise their power instead of helping the people living in the cities. This paper seeks to argue on Jacob's thesis, which is that despite the original intentions of the city planners, the bureaucrats of the American society wasted billions of dollars to pursue ruinous policies that

have only left ruin in their wake. Even though the publication was written several years ago, the author's thesis seems to have been fulfilled.

Regarding life or death of a city, the author asserts that it is like providing great real life examples, and shared her ideas in her great book.

The drive for more inclusive planning regions, redevelopment of central areas, low density peripheries, open space and highways, more parks, public housing, contemporary environs with big blocks facing interior territories aimed at reducing traffic dangers as well as achieving economies of scale among several others may suggest to an innocent observer that our cities might become more cordial and efficient. A deliberation of these projections fills the *Death and Life of Great American Cities*' author with disgust. She says in her book that big American cities are full of strangers. She argues that both the strangers and the citizens in these cities must enjoy security alike, which she insists cannot come from a watchful police force. She maintains that it require a complex social system that involuntarily achieves this desired goal. She states in her book that in order to achieve this security, the urban settlers should rely on " public actors," from habitual street watchers, such as storekeepers, doormen and interested neighbors, and from more or less constant use at different hours, which is possible only if there is a rich mixture of activities in buildings of varying age and character (pp. 23-33). Mrs. Jacobs believe that people do not like being in neighborhoods, they like living in lively neighborhoods. Both the young and the elderly require such neighborhood for coexistence. However, she mocks at our understanding of such requirements since we continually put up low-density residential housing projects that rely on income segregation, and

civic centers. She complains that all these developments merge to form harmonized cores that generate traffic for limited periods and then slip afterwards into dead and dangerous districts. To explain her point further, she maintains that the new buildings with the increasingly high rental fees squeeze out the original activities. The small entrepreneurs just starting up their businesses, the colorful shops with strange and alien waves, the little bars and restaurants, almost everything unusual, bohemian, intellectual or weird (pp. 45-50). The author uses these words in her book to indicate her belief that they lend spice, vigor, and charm to an area.

Urban renewal has proved to be one of the aspects of liberal efforts of the bureaucrats that have sustained assault on the poor families of the great American cities. Similarly, interventionists in their deleterious effect were ideas like sexual revolution and welfare among other issues. The entire array of supposedly compassionate government programs of the period preceding the depression era all had seemingly unintended, though wholly foreseeable, unfavorable consequences for their hypothetical beneficiaries. Jane Jacobs' encompasses the central government planning and its devastating effects on the poor members of the great American cities. She offers an alternative vision of more organic development that allows free market forces to function within the society, which evidently prevails in the present day's economy either directly or rhetorically. The entire book 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities' can be applied to the education system in the American great cities such as New York City, which has come about under the Republican leadership, and where there are great disparities within the income groups in America.

Jane Jacobs proposes that we do most of the things that the urban planning experts tells us otherwise to brighten neighborhoods, revive the housing projects into fabric of the city, and reweave the slums into better housing projects. She believes doing such activities will attract mixed activities that might generate active cross-use of land; cut the length of blocks; mingle buildings of varying size, type and condition; and encourage dense concentrations of people (pp. 103 - 120). She continually advocates in her book that successful city panning should ensure that every member of the city's society with different unique intentions uses the same spaces in and resources of the city at different times of the day. In her book, she gives four conditions that combine with each other to critically generate such diversities: (a) Mixed land use to facilitate a temporal spread of people (b) Smaller blocks (more corners) to promote more frequent and cross use of the streets. (c) A mix of new and aged buildings as they differ in economic yield to sustain a variety of users (d) Sufficient concentration of people to boost economic activity, sidewalk safety and to lend volume to the district's political voice (pp. 139 - 189). On the dominion of affordable housing projects and slums in the American cities, Mrs. Jacobs criticizes urban renewal programs for their failure to respect the regeneration forces within the slums themselves. She indicates that slums have equal potential to unslum through her indications of examples of North End in Boston, North Beach in San Francisco, and Back-of-the Yards in Chicago. Instead of creating enabling environments, she explains that urban renewal programs run the risk of destroying the social and economic capital that has been accumulated over the years. Additional, affordable housing projects spoil the diversity by

imposing segregation on income basis. In her affordable housing rent-guarantee model, she maintains that the role of the government does not trespass onto the construction process, but subsidizes the portion of the rent that the tenants cannot afford (pp. 207 - 214).

Jacobs additionally advocates for steady release of money to prevent calamitous changes in the spaces in the American cities. She claims that the form in which money is withheld and used are strong incentives that lead to the decline of the cities. The drought of finance denies the people who need money the most. She calls credit blacklisting maps not facts but “ self-fulfilling prophecies”. On the other end, floods of finance are also planning sins albeit committed unwittingly (pp. 217-18). To advance her point, she indicates the example of more than \$300 million of public housing aid that was used to house the poor in East Harlem, which ended up evicting most of the unslumming population through the destruction of more than 1300 businesses and 500 hundred non-commercial dwellings (pp. 240 - 49). This explains her thesis that even though the original intentions of the urban planning were to improve the living standards, the result of the same incentive is evidenced with the problem that it has brought to the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jane Jacob wrote the book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in a prophetic manner that indicated that the things that she indicated in her book about 50 years ago feature in the modern cities of America and other great cities of the world. The double significant book offers the author’s opinion, critique of the urban planning and bureaucratic

expertise concepts. Mrs. Jacobs ideas are echoed in the literature such as *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and The Fall of New York* by Robert Caro where the authors demonstrate detail that civil servants have used the urban plans to exercise their power instead of helping the people living in the cities. In my opinion, after reading this book and considering the events visible from the streets of the American cities, I believe that the assertions in Mrs. Jacobs' book are true and that she prophesied these events with precision. In the view of an observer or an alien reading this book, or viewing the American cities, the drive for more inclusive planning regions, redevelopment of central areas, low-density peripheries, and open space and highways. More parks, public housing, contemporary environs with big blocks facing interior territories aimed at reducing traffic dangers as well as achieving economies of scale among several others may suggest how our cities would become efficient. Mrs. Jacobs' methodology can simply be described as observation as she was not a planning expert, but an architectural magazine editor, who walked and observed her neighborhood. The book begins with critiquing the orthodox city planning theory that rests on the shoulders of Lewis Mumford, Elizabeth Howard, and Daniel Burnham among others. The book is divided into sections, where she makes her thesis that the diversity of cities has both negative and positive effects in the first section. The second section of this book describes how this diversity can be generated. She concludes the last section with recommendations in policy areas such as transport, housing, governance and finance. This section is preceded by the discussions of the forces of decline and regeneration. Very many ideas from the book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

have been absorbed and adopted into the new urbanism design movement that began in America in the 1980s. As I read this book, I noticed that the author's writing style is unpleasant. The book is informative and provides some history of the American cities since the reader can understand the situations during the time when the writer lived. At times, the author's rational for diversity turns into obsession. Nevertheless, she points out several revolutionary examples to expound on her points. After reading this book, I got the impression of seeking more information regarding these cities by walking through them.

Work Cited:

Jacobs Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, 1961.