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April 20, 2011, Urbanspace Gallery, Toronto
Hosted by Centre for City Ecology

JANE TODAY

Until Jane Jacobs' *Death and Life of Great American Cities* was published 50 years ago, Lewis Mumford was America's leading historian/ commentator on all things about cities. Through many books and a much-read column, entitled "Skyline" in *The New Yorker* magazine, Mumford was THE urban critic everyone turned to.

Mumford and Jacobs met as participants on a 1956 Harvard panel about cities. Here, Jane first articulated early observations about urban developments of the time. Mumford took notice. They corresponded and Mumford encouraged Jane to write *Death and Life*.

It is difficult today to realize what a bombshell *Death and Life* was at the time. Essentially Jane was saying that government officials and professional planners had it all wrong – "this is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding," she wrote in the introduction. From that moment on, Jane Jacobs changed the way we look and think about cities.

This must have been quite a threat to the dean of urban

commentary. And while he and Jane were in sync on such things as highways through cities, Mumford was a planning advocate and defender. He was miffed and he wrote a scathing review of the book in *The New Yorker* titled, “Mother Jacobs’ Home Remedies.” Well, that was the end of that.

Years later, in fact at the *Ideas That Matter* conference here in Toronto in 1997, I asked Jane why she thought he had turned on her. At first she was uncharacteristically resistant to saying anything, but I pressed. Finally, she said: “He was a hypocrite. He expected me to be a sycophant.” To this day, many people unknowingly speak of them both in the same breadth, unaware of the differences in their points of view.

THE GREAT PUSHBACK

So I recently asked a wise friend of mine: Why do you suppose there is so much critical pushback on Jane Jacobs today and no reconsideration of Lewis Mumford?

"Mumford didn’t have an impact. Jane did," he said.

Actually Mumford, more the suburbanist than the urbanist, actually did have an impact, advocating the decentralization of cities

and the spread of new suburbs, like Radburn, New Jersey.

Nevertheless, my friend does make an interesting point. Jane had an enormous impact. And since the blush has been off the suburban rose for awhile, Jane's ideas are more relevant now than ever. This can be threatening to those whose long careers were grounded in the post World War II ideas that devalued old neighborhoods and de-densified cities. Threatening as well to those who think they know best how to plan and design for the future of cities, rather than the stakeholders that Jane empowered.

The citizen groups fighting to preserve, protect and rebuild cities have never stopped finding Jane relevant and continue to use the ammunition from what they learned both intuitively and from her writing.

Instead, the Great Pushback seems to be mostly coming from professionals and academics who impose on Jane their own standards of measurement, none of which Jane was interested in measuring up to. And for their own purposes, as well, they choose to misappropriate and misinterpret her teaching.

Now let me stop here for a moment to say that Jane needs no one to rise to her defense. Her ideas still resonate around the world,

strongly enough to continue to make a huge impact. But I feel passionately that attempts to distort those ideas still need to be challenged.

Jane would probably admonish me today because I have used many forums to address some of the erroneous ideas being put forth. “Stop swatting at flies,” she might say. However, she’s not here to admonish me – she had done that, by the way, over the years – and I feel there is good reason to swat. It is not just that Jane’s ideas are being twisted or distorted; it is that the validity of the ideas are still so relevant to today’s challenges that their strength should not be allowed to be undermined.

THE GLAESER CRITIQUE

Let me address first the most recent outrage which comes from Ed Glaeser who, with the credentials as The Great Harvard Economist, is getting a lot of attention for his new book, *Triumph of the City*. A lot of good ideas are in this book – the importance of density, the value of small and medium size businesses, cities as places for the cross fertilization of industries, for the exchange of ideas, innovation, the culture of entrepreneurship, to name a few. And

he acknowledges that he learned a lot from Jane. He is a dynamic speaker. In March he spoke here in Toronto at the Rotman School of Management. Last week he dazzled a New York audience of close to a 1,000 at the Regional Planning Association's annual meeting at the Waldorf Astoria. In his summary, he articulated what is in his book. Jane Jacobs got so many things right, he said, but here's where she got it wrong. We have to keep old buildings, he said she said, and we can't build on top of them.

Well, where did she ever say that? Being against tall buildings is not the same as being for them where appropriate and against them where not. And certainly this is not the same as, for good reason, acknowledging that old buildings can be useful and that certainly a mix of old and new within a balanced context is appropriate. In fact, Jane wrote: "Old buildings will still be a necessity when today's new buildings are the old ones."

Glaeser uses the brilliant chapter in *Death and Life* called "The need for old buildings" to rant against historic preservationists who, he argues, prevent the new skyscrapers a city needs to make a city affordable.

SKYSCRAPERS AND AFFORDABILITY

Glaeser's affordability argument is a shocking mis-statement of fact, especially as it applies to New York City which he targets in particular. I know this because I have just spent almost eight years on New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission, the appointed body that designates and then regulates individual landmarks and historic districts. Ironically, Jane discouraged me from accepting this mayoral appointment after Michael Bloomberg's election. I did concede that it was probably going over to the dark side, but I had been writing about and advocating preservation for so long, I thought it was time to try to have some influence from the inside. So, after I accepted the appointment, what did Jane do? She urged, let's say ordered, me to make sure that more of the West Village be designated, noting that when it was designated the 2nd historic district in the city, important areas were left out for potential urban renewal redevelopment. The commission, I'm pleased to say, did expand the district. (Although I had told Jane that it was definitely happening, the actual designation occurred a few days after her death.)

My point here is that the Preservation Commission was an interesting place to view incremental change occurring all over the

city – new buildings added strategically in districts, conversions of industrial buildings to the popular loft housing, upgraded storefronts for new businesses, modest rooftop and backyard additions. All these seemingly small adjustments added up to big change.

I left the commission last November. Frankly, my insights and independence were not universally appreciated. But, after almost eight years, I can report that (a) some of the most interesting new buildings are being built in historic districts, enthusiastically approved by the commission, (b) many new, ugly skyscrapers are going up at the outside edges of those historic districts, cashing in on the historic district's value but adding nothing to it, and (c) those new towers are more expensive than any of the old buildings.

Furthermore, until the economic downturn, New York had seen years of tower building around the city and, unless Glaeser knows something I don't, the city has not ceased getting increasingly more expensive for 20 years at least, even with an endless number of new skyscrapers. So much for the affordability potential of building more and more skyscrapers. For another discussion, we might explore the many reasons New York is becoming what he calls a "boutique city" but I assure you, none of those reasons relate to historic preservation

as Glaeser claims.

Jane wrote: “Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings.” In light of cities like New York becoming so expensive and in light of the assumption that cities are still the birthplace for new ideas, I’ve pondered this seeming contradiction. The fact is that Jane’s observation is still true, but with an interesting variation.

The old buildings now are very often IN historic districts but they are no longer inexpensive which they were in the 1950s when Jane observed them as the vessels of innovations. Increasingly, old buildings are being creatively divided up into smaller spaces – just like the one we’re in here at 401 Richmond. Those smaller spaces, inexpensive like the old buildings Jane was referring to 50 yrs ago, are today’s birthplaces for new ideas and innovation. So the old buildings are now expensive but still of value in their subdivided format for the very same reasons Jane described.

CHANGE AND CONTEXT

It is 50 years since *Death and Life* was published, 42 years since *The*

Economy of Cities. Change is a given. Jane's writings provide insights into how change occurs for the better or worse. What so many commentators miss is that one can't be totally literal in applying Jane's ideas to today. Take Greenwich Village as an example.

Too many people make the mistake of defining Jane's observations of Greenwich Village as advocacy for the replication of its small scale and 'quaint' mixtures or, as some would say, "the preservation of the urban village." This could not be further from the truth. It was not about tall buildings versus short, Modernist versus Federalist, loft versus residential, small business versus large. The Village was her laboratory to observe the larger truths about urban life. Hers was not a prescription of what *should* happen but an observation of what *does* happen when certain genuine urban conditions exist.

In all her writing, she used specific examples to illustrate observable truths, never intending them to be prescriptive for other places. The specific truth she illustrated was always found only in the context of that specific place. And, of course, she offered observations from many other places, such as Harlem, Upper West Side, St. Louis, Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia and others.

She might in particular be referring to the Village but she applies those ideas to many urban areas that look nothing like the Village. She saw in the Village the lessons that are applicable to authentic urban neighborhoods everywhere.

COST: THE WEST VILLAGE HOUSES

The re-considerers say that the Village is now just an expensive, gentrified outpost without the diverse population and mixture of businesses she observed. This is myopia on steroids. Well, yes, dockworkers no longer live there. There are no docks. But here are two missing points.

Almost all of New York City today is an expensive, gentrified outpost; the Village is no exception. The real challenge is to understand why, worthy of a whole evening's discussion. In a nutshell, I believe it is essentially because New York has committed the cardinal sin that Jane wrote about - New York is increasingly less and less a diversified economy. New York is all about real estate, Wall Street, tourism with a small surviving garment industry stubbornly resistant to the upzoning that is pricing out other industry around the city. I have devoted a whole chapter to this phenomenon in my new book, *The Battle for Gotham*, and it's a serious issue.

The other missing point is the phenomenon of the West Village Houses, developed by the West Village Committee led by Jane that successfully fought off the Robert Moses Urban Renewal Plan that would have wiped out 14 blocks of mixed uses. The Committee's architect designed a modest-scale apartment-house configuration to fill the vacant lots and not demolish anything, the true definition of infill development.

The planning establishment hated this proposal because it was initiated by the community and left intact the organically evolved mixture of residential and commercial uses. The city head of housing did everything he could to sabotage it, causing endless delays and imposing cost-cutting measures that stripped all manner of design elements. The result after 12 years was bare bones architecture, five storeys of plain red brick housing.

This was a limited-income complex built under a state program meant to address a shortage of low and middle-income apartments. And here is the best part: West Village Houses still retains that character. When the city and state allowed thousands of city apartments built under this program to go market rate in recent years, the tenants of the West Village Houses fought the owner and won the

right to buy the buildings from the landlord. They converted it to a cooperative and rental mix and guaranteed no evictions for tenants, a 12-year period of rent restraints and the right of tenants to buy their apartment at the insider price. The owner gained the right to sell the 10 vacant units at market rate out of the 420 total and a guarantee that new buyers would meet the federal middle-income standard. Other sensible terms were provided, but suffice it to say the owner made a reasonable profit and at least 420 Village apartments were secure for middle-income tenants.

The reason I offer these details, as an example of Jane's relevance today, is twofold. First, this is one of the few such longterm affordable apartment complexes surviving in Manhattan. So much for the Village only being for the rich.

Second, about 4,000 such units around the city have been converted to strictly market-rate, losing their affordable character. Instead of letting these units be totally lost, the city could have used the West Village model to retain the affordable status of a large portion of them. In particular, this model could have been applied to the 9,000 unit Stuyvesant Town comples at East 14th Street and First Avenue when it was privatized a few years ago. Of course, for

the city to use this model, officials would need to be aware of it, and it would also mean that the city administration considered keeping New York affordable a priority. It doesn't.

THE URBAN REVOLUTION

New York and Toronto experienced Jane very differently. She may have started the urban revolution in New York but, it seemed to me from a distance, it was in Toronto that the revolution was respected and indeed embraced by some elected and appointed city officials. That did not happen in New York.

I noted in the beginning that the pushback seems to come from various groups of professionals. I recently reviewed a new book entitled *Reconsidering Jane Jacobs*, published by the American Planning Association. It is an interesting cross section of just the professionals I'm talking about.

Many academics, for example, refer to her "lack of rigor, her reliance on anecdotal examples, her inconsistency in citing sources, and her apparently cavalier approach to research." Jane was a

journalist, an observer, a commentator. She frustrates academics who abide by different rules, rules that Jane made no attempt to live by. It may be true that she was “ill-equipped, as well as disinclined, to construct a fully documented narrative” but, above all, Jane wanted the reader/observer to determine that proof. One needs to look at Jane’s full body of work in which she outlined from many vantage points how and why cities matter.

I get a little defensive about this point because I, too, am a journalist, often challenged with the question: “What are your credentials?” I enjoy offering the observation that it has most often been the outsider, and often indeed the journalist, who has changed a profession: Rachel Carson, the environment; Betty Friedan, the womens’ movement; Jessica Mitford, the funeral business; Ralph Nader, the automobile industry; and, of course, William H. Whyte who with Jane turned urbanism upside down.

But in a real sense, it seems to be the planners who have the biggest problem. This is something of a conundrum. On the one hand, they acknowledge the value of Jane’s urban principles and want to claim to apply them. At the same time, however, they argue that her advocacy of community engagement has degenerated into

NIMBYism, is out of control and has undermined the authority of their profession.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This, indeed, is a problem because community engagement was a cornerstone of Jacobs' philosophy. Of course, she meant engagement *before* plans are drafted by the professionals, not after. The former gives stakeholders the chance – no guarantee – to influence the outcome; the latter almost guarantees community resistance. Jacobs' way is not usually the professional planner's way.

The Planners' Lament is well articulated in *Reconsidering Jane Jacobs* by planning professor Thomas J. Campanella, who observed that because of Jane, "the planning baby was thrown out with the urban renewal bathwater" and the profession became "fragmented and balkanized" with a "chronic identity crisis." If planners want to understand their reputation for arrogance, this piece is a must.

"There are times when citizens' self-interest and the greater social good do overlap," Campanella concedes. What a slap in the face of citizens that statement is! Yet, ironically, he proceeds to tell a most interesting story of how a "group of citizens—most with no

training whatsoever in architecture, planning, or design—came up with a very good idea *that planners should have had.*" (Emphais his.) The idea was hatched over a cup of coffee in a local gathering place in Hillsborough, North Carolina. The town should build a train station and persuade Amtrak to stop there, which it had done until 1964. One thing led to another. Local officials, other citizens, and the newspaper all agreed. Campanella's students did conceptual plans. The town proceeded to buy the land for a station and "Amtrak, unprompted, produced a study showing that a Hillsborough stop would be profitable."

This might not have come from "visionary" planners but it is, in fact, exactly the kind of grass-roots, citizen-based planning that Jane was all about. So in the reconsideration of Jane Jacobs, maybe there is room for reconsideration by planners of the value of this bottom-up process that she celebrated, a process that considers both the local and the "greater social good."

Jane never said that citizens should "rule," just that they should be engaged and listened to and, like in this very revealing tale, respected. More often than planners would like to acknowledge, the best ideas for positive change emerge from citizen engagement. It is

so logical that those who live or work in a place understand it best, understand its needs and flaws. In the process, those local ideas, just like the Hillsborough example, improve the larger world, something Campanella seems to think can only come from planners.

Few planners and architects really fully understand Jane's idea of urbanism. They pick and choose elements to include in their designs and plans, but neglect to understand the organic nature of the whole. Jacobs' urbanism can't be "designed," "planned," "codified." It is a process that unfolds over time within a framework of principles and is not developed all at once. There seems to be an insatiable need by many planners to use Jacobs selectively to satisfy their own need to prescribe, codify and control which is antithetical to fundamental Jacobs. The real challenge to the profession is to shift away from having to be controllers and proscriptive experts and toward being better listeners, observers and enablers of authentic urbanism.

All of you here already know the continued relevance of Jane's work. In fact, given your current city administration, her presence would be more valuable than ever. But let me close with this note. For several years before she died, Jane and I talked about some kind of

effort to build on and continue her work. Happily, before she died, she participated in the formation of the Center For the Living City on which both Mary Rowe and Margie Zeidler who are here tonight serve as board members.

The Center is evolving slowly but one of our first major efforts is a book called *What We See*, which brings together 30 very different voices from the fields of urban design, economics, environmentalism, and journalism. If anyone had any doubt about Jane's relevance today, this book puts those doubts to rest. In fact, what this book does instead is to show the breadth of her teaching and depth of her impact and that is, after all, what is most important.

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