

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Good Grief! Jane Jacobs!

c/o 201 East 28th Street
New York 10016
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Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte,

It's ironic, but almost simultaneously a popular anti-Establishment champion of urban diversity has analysed The City and come up with an explanation that is one dimensional and simplistic, while a committee of Establishment members has taken one statistical projection and soberly recommended radical diversification of urban life.

Jane Jacobs has decided that cities grow because innovation produces new work, and that is the message of her new book, The Economy of Cities. The Message is at once as true and as meaningless as saying, for instance, "in order to survive, men must breathe oxygen." Absolutely true, but meaningless if it's too hot, or too cold, or any number of other conditions are not met simultaneously. Of course cities grow because new work and new divisions of labor are introduced, but it isn't quite so simple or profoundly mystical as Mrs. Jacobs thinks. Nevertheless she has rooted out some interesting examples to prove her theory.

The opening chapter is a humorless but fascinating rewrite of the dawn of history in the form of the tale of a mythic prototypic city called New Obsidian. The purpose of imagining New Obsidian is to "prove" that, contrary to what lots of scholars and historians think about chickens and eggs, cities came first, and divided labor and the demands of divided labor, in this case the obsidian trade (obsidian is natural volcanic glass) provoked men into agriculture to trading crops for goods. The idea is that cities preceded and in effect, caused agriculture. It's an interesting idea, the reverse of common belief and not important to the rest of the book except to warn the reader that Mrs. Jacobs has left the haven of Hudson Street in New York's Greenwich Village, the scene and proof of her first book, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, for world historical truths.

The Economy of Cities is an irritating book, full of good intentions, but with individual examples so simplified that when used as proofs they are seriously misleading. Take Mrs. Jacobs' first and favorite illustration of innovation leading to new work--the uplifting saga of Mrs. Ida Rosenthal, seamstress, inventor and mother of the modern brassiere. It's a marvelously provocative but unsuitable example. To improve the fit of the clothes she custom tailored in the early 20's Mrs. Rosenthal dreamed up the solution of the maiden's form; it was so successful, eventually she raised the capital to begin manufacturing brassieres, gave up dressmaking and became a tycoon in ladies underwear. Along the way she used the diversified resources of the city in production and marketing

of her new product, created new divisions of labor, indeed a whole new division within the garment industry. But, despite its charming endowments the bra industry, indeed, the rag trade itself, cannot support a general economic theory. The garment industry characteristically has low capitalization and development costs, the simple $D + A \rightarrow nD$, Division of Labor + new activity yields new Division of Labor, in basic industries or heavy manufacturing are on a different, and increasingly less flexible scale.

There are a variety of other quarrelsome points in the book, but far be it from me to defend the likes of John Kenneth Galbraith, who is well able to take care of himself.

The "case study" which best fits Mrs. Jacobs' new holistic view of how it all works is a comparison of Manchester and Birmingham as they were in the early 19th century and as they are today. Mrs. Jacobs thinks inefficiency is, often as not, innovation's muse. Manchester was a perfect company town efficiently organized around the textile mills, and it stagnated. Birmingham was a hodge-podge conglomeration of odd jobs and factories, with no single industrial base and it flourishes today as Britain's second largest city.

I'd like to think that Mrs. Jacobs is right when she argues that "solutions to most of the practical problems of cities begin humbly. When humble people, doing lowly work, are not also solving problems, nobody is apt to solve humble problems." Unfortunately, I think she's terribly wrong; humble people are totally unable to solve the practical problems of cities: housing, pollution, noise, waste, and transportation.

Mrs. Jacobs is a polemicist, a fighter and a causist. I subscribe to a view of her which a friend of mine summarized as "Ninety-five per cent of what she says is either garbled or wrong, but Thank Goodness for the rest." Her first book came out at about the time it was becoming obvious that urban renewal in the United States was a catastrophe--not only was it not solving any problems it wasn't even decently housing as many people as it was displacing. Mrs. Jacobs went loudly against all manner of conventional wisdom and planning mores. She argued vigorously for the heady urbanism of mixed use neighborhoods like her own. The book was exciting although her approach and evidence was seriously flawed: she dealt with existing populations in center cities and gave short shrift to the growth of suburbs; she ignored the economic scale of the nation, even the city, in favor of the charming, albeit anachronistic West Village and, most importantly, she fell prey to the easy trap of prescribing physical solutions for social and economic problems. Short blocks and mixed use of buildings, however pleasing, will not solve real problems festering in city slums: joblessness, welfare, racism. Nevertheless, the book was read, and read by people who, in large number, didn't read books about cities and city problems, at least not then. Eight years ago was the distant past in America's urban memory, it was the beginning of the New Frontier, before the War on Poverty, the War on Vietnam, before Watts, Newark, Detroit, assassinations, backlash. There was a lot of popular non-fiction around, and Jane Jacobs' readers fit in somewhere between The Lonely Crowd and The American Way of Death. Those who became seriously interested in urban problems eventually figured out Mrs. Jacobs' peculiar pugnacious myopia and continued to find her both endearing

and a splendid ally in civic battles against some of the more ill considered plans for urban reconstruction. She also reached into the activist college generation who moved back into the cities and are now carving urban careers in new advocacy roles.

Throughout The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs slashed away at Ebenezer Howard and his followers. The founders of the Garden City movement also set forth most of the principles of modern physical city planning, which Jane Jacobs opposes, therefore they became the philosophic enemy. Most of her criticism of Howard, Louis Mumford, Raymond Unwin and LeCorbusier, were true as far as they went' they were anti-urban, paternalistic, health and fresh air fiends, authentic "goo-goos"--righteous protagonists of good government. In the last chapter, "The kind of problem a city is," Mrs. Jacobs summarized her previous attacks on the late 19th century New Towners, and patronizingly dismissed them because those well-meaning bumblers had tried to approach city planning with the tools of physical science and had reduced the complex matter to a problem of two variable simplicity. The variables were housing (or population) and jobs. This pathetic and dangerous approach, she advised her readers, "was probably derived, as the assumptions behind most thinking are, from the general floating fund of intellectual spores around at the time."

The new book seizes on the spores of the intellectual fund of our era--the social sciences--specifically economics, then goes those early goo-goos one better and reduces the variables to that single equation $D + n \rightarrow nD$. It is done in exactly the same righteous spirit which led Howard and his followers to use rudimentary popular scientism to preach their cause, world view and value system. Mrs. Jacobs uses her readings in economics not for an economic explanation of the phenomena but to justify her social values. Unfortunately, I think she just confuses herself, and may confuse her fans.

A polemicist never cedes any points to the other side. Mrs. Jacobs' total preoccupation is with getting "power to the people" in existing urban communities. I understand that, admire her vigor, and share her belief in the goal. But her unreasoned damnation of New Towns and the development of any systematic policies for the handling of continued urban growth, is needlessly vindictive and deliberately misleading. There is no specific discussion of new towns in The Economy of Cities, although Mrs. Jacobs makes it quite clear that she believes only in enormous cities, and suburbs are probably imaginary. However, in a pre-publication publicity interview in the New York Times Sunday Magazine, the question was deliberately set:

Q. Are New Towns a promising solution to the urban crisis?

A. Look at all the stagnant, dying little towns there are now. Why should we expect New Towns to be any more vital? Just because the buildings, roads, playgrounds and community halls are new? New Towns--in this country or anywhere else--depend on industries spun off from cities. They don't create their own economic base the way cities do. When the cities are decaying, in time there is no growing economic base for New Towns. Most of what are called New Towns are really only suburbs of cities, in any case.

If we were to pour available capital and effort into New Towns instead of starting to solve our many acute city problems, New Town building could actually reinforce the country's ominous stagnation.

Good Grief Jane Jacobs! One of the charms of a publicity interview is that the subject can see to it that a question is phrased so the answer can't miss being a virtuoso trill. Just as there is no single urban crisis there is no single solution, in the United States or any other nation. Jane Jacobs conditioned herself to the idea of new towns by reading about the first Garden Cities, and she continues to react against the idea accordingly. She has not apparently, been confused by any recent post war examples, statistical trends, or proposals. Until very recently many professional big city administrators, planners, and nearly all politicians in this country shared Mrs. Jacobs' view of New Towns, although for varying different reasons. They associated New Towns with creeping socialism, fancy utopian architects, and flaccid uneconomic do-goodism. It was fairly explicitly assumed that the sum of public money available for the solution of urban problems was so small, even before the explosions of the 60's and the war, that it should be devoted exclusively to the solution of core city problems. Whether anyone really thought they were soluble problems is another matter entirely.

In sum, the attitude toward New Towns here was exactly that of the Fabians toward Ebenezer Howard in 1898 when they put him down with a whack, saying "The Author has read many learned and interesting writers, and the extracts he makes from their books are like plums in the unpalatable dough of his Utopian scheming. We have got to make the best of our existing cities, and proposals for building new ones are about as useful as would-be arrangements for protection against visits from Mr. Well's Martians." Lately, however, reasonable men have begun to realize that the protection that is needed, is, in fact, not from "Mr. Well's Martians," but from our own kind. It is precisely in order to "make the best of our existing cities" that New Cities are needed.

With the financial sponsorship of the Ford Foundation and the spiritual encouragement of the National Association of Counties, the National League of Cities, the United States Conference of Mayors, and Urban America, Inc., the purposively created National Committee on Urban Growth Policy, went to Europe last fall to look at New Towns, and talked to a good many interested people in this country when they came back. The composition of the committee was pedigreed Establishment: two United States' Senators, six Congressmen, two Governors, two mayors and two county commissioners--but, very encouraging in itself--all politicians and administrators well-versed in the ways of the real world and the practicalities of creating a climate for legislation. They had no hanky panky with the spiritualism of urban versus rural life, the relationship of architecture to happiness, or the morality of planning. Basically the committee took a good brisk look at where our urban nation is now, with its increasing inequities and frustrations, it accepted a common population projection--that there will be 100 million more Americans at the end of this century than there are now, and then in a few sentences they made some radical recommendations which guaranteed the report a front page story in the New York Times. Specifically,

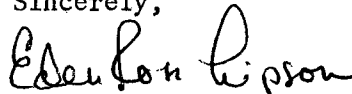
they suggested that by the end of the century there ought to be at least 100 new communities of 100,000 and ten with a population of a million. Although that sounds like an enormous undertaking it would only accomodate 20 per cent of the projected increase in the population.

Even if that population projection is off by half, and the population only grows by 50 million, new cities will be needed to provide housing and jobs. (Those two variables the Garden City boys played with are terribly important especially when you ain't got 'em!) The Committee analysis lists some of the factors which are already tearing our existing cities apart--including the proliferation of governmental units, the increasingly rigid physical patterns of segregation by race, and jobs, and the economic inability of cities to satisfy their obligations. Continued unmanaged growth in existing cities will not bring any economy of scale in the solution of those problems, indeed, it seems in some cities that the "inefficiencies" that once contributed to greatness have now taken over. Part of the very notion of urban life is choice--in order to choose to live decently in our cities we must build new ones.

The committee's brief report, along with some of the testimony essays it considered and several photographic essays is being published for Urban America, Inc., by Praeger. Most of the text is refreshingly well written and avoids the twin pitfalls of technical terms and florid rhetoric. I found the photo essays on New Towns rather boring mostly because I've seen all those pictures dozens of times, although the other photo sections are quite handsome. The brief chapter on the English New Towns is sadly dull but stresses the economic investment of building new cities. The chapter on "America's Neglected Tradition," was commendably complete and interesting. The most abstract but useful chapters by Henry Bain and William Slayton turned to the mechanistic question--how do you change the governmental systems to build new cities? The introduction, by the way, is by the Vice-President.

The New City is the most readable introduction to the possibilities for new communities in the United States. I wish it could be widely circulated, outside the public service-foundations-university orbit and read by businessmen, union leaders, city council and county zoning board members as well as frustrated urbanites. But the subsidy money for the report must have run out before publication because, unfortunately, the price is pegged at \$12.50 in hardback, which will effectively restrict its circulation to institutions. I am, however, considering taking up a collection and sending a copy to Jane Jacobs.

Sincerely,



Eden Ross Lipson

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