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In 1949 the Title I slum clearance provision of the Federal Housing Act had empowered urban administrators and public housing bureaucrats—epitomized by Robert Moses, Public Works Commissioner of New York City—to meet postwar housing needs by building superscale high-rise apartment blocks. By the early 1960s, the degraded incarnations of the Radiant City, first idealistically proposed by Le Corbusier in the 1920s, were being so ruthlessly implemented under the pragmatic imperatives of "urban renewal" that architecture journalist **Jane Jacobs** was driven to direct political action in order to defeat a Housing and Redevelopment Board plan that threatened to bulldoze her neighborhood in downtown Manhattan. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, written earlier the same year, she had lovingly portrayed the same West Village streets as a counter to the "blight of dullness" of present-day planning. Incorporating sociological insights, economic analysis, and persuasive prose to challenge the orthodoxies of professional planners, Jacobs optimistically endorsed the pluralist city, spelled out in phrases like "exuberant diversity" and "planning for vitality." Her "realistic" prescriptions for civic-minded behavior and safe street life—"eyes on the street"—were directed against the single-use zoning that was then normative practice in urban planning, a legacy of CIAM's functionally compartmentalized urbanism. Yet the problem with functionalism was more than a matter of good intentions gone awry for Jacobs. Her book unequivocally indicted the entire modernist tradition of the designed urban utopia as "statistical."

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The response to Jacobs's passionate book was enormous and none of it neutral. Touching a receptive chord among those in both the profession and the lay public seeking amelioration for urban decay, rampant inner-city crime, and the middle-class's flight to the suburbs, the book was widely reviewed in both the popular and architectural press. The professional readership, stung by her idolatrous assault on modernism's "sacred cows" (as *Progressive Architecture* put it in a feature of April 1962), faulted the uncredentialed author for amateurism and adherence to a single model as a panacea—low-rise high-density housing on mixed-used streets—even while acknowledging the thrust of her argument. Lewis Mumford, whose book *The City in History* was published the same year, was provoked by Jacobs's attack on the Garden City ideal, of which he had been a career-long proponent. In Jacobs's view, the planned suburbs of Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes, and others were simply the horizontal and antiurban correlates of Le Corbusier's towers-in-the-park. Mumford responded with a twenty-page review in the *New Yorker* (December 1, 1962) entitled, with some sexism, "Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies." "If people are housed in sufficiently congested quarters—provided only that the buildings are not set within superblocks—and if there is a sufficient mishmash of functions and activities," he wrote sarcastically, "all her social and aesthetic demands are satisfied."

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Yet Jacobs's book helped unleash the community activism of the 1960s. It is often credited with more. A decade later, when the authorities in St. Louis dynamited the notorious Pruitt-Igoe public housing block—an award-winning design by Minoru Yamasaki of the mid-1950s later plagued by a high incidence of crime ascribed to its anonymous corridors and unsafe open spaces—many saw it as the auto-da-fé of modern architecture and a symbolic confirmation of Jacobs's diagnosis. The impact of design on urban crime would be studied in greater depth by Oscar Newman in his widely read *Defensible Spaces* (1972).

The following excerpt comes from the introduction to Jacobs's book. She would return to the economics of housing in *The Economy of Cities* (1969).

*From Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities (Random House, 1961), pp. 4-6. Copyright © 1961 Jane Jacobs. Courtesy Random House, Inc.*

**from *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*  
Jane Jacobs**

[ . . . ] There is a wistful myth that if only we had enough money to spend—the figure is usually put at a hundred billion dollars—we could wipe out all our slums in ten years, reverse decay in the great, dull, gray belts that were yesterday's and day-before-yesterday's suburbs, anchor the wandering middle class and its wandering tax money, and perhaps even solve the traffic problem.

But look what we have built with the first several billions: Low-income projects that become worse centers of delinquency, vandalism, and general social hopelessness than the slums they were supposed to replace. Middle-income housing projects which are truly marvels of dullness and regimentation, sealed against any buoyancy or vitality of city life. Luxury housing projects that mitigate their inanity, or try to, with a vapid vulgarity. Cultural centers that are unable to support a good bookstore. Civic centers that are avoided by everyone but bums, who have fewer choices of loitering place than others. Commercial centers that are lackluster imitations of standardized suburban chain-store shopping. Promenades that go from no place to nowhere and have no promenaders. Expressways that eviscerate great cities. This is not the rebuilding of cities. This is the sacking of cities.

Under the surface, these accomplishments prove even poorer than their poor pretenses. They seldom aid the city areas around them, as in theory they are supposed to. These amputated areas typically develop galloping gangrene. To house people in this planned fashion, price tags are fastened on the population, and each sorted-out chunk of price-tagged populace lives in growing suspicion and tension against the surrounding city. When two or more such hostile islands are juxtaposed the result is called "a balanced neighborhood." Monopolistic shopping centers and monumental cultural centers cloak, under the public relations hoo-haw, the subtraction of commerce, and of culture too, from the intimate and casual life of cities.

That such wonders may be accomplished, people who get marked with the planners' hex signs are pushed about, expropriated, and uprooted much as if they were the subjects of a conquering power. Thousands upon thousands of small businesses are destroyed, and their proprietors ruined, with hardly a gesture at compensation. Whole communities are torn apart and sown to the winds, with a reaping of cynicism, resentment, and despair that must be heard and seen to be believed. A group of clergymen in Chicago, appalled at the fruits of planned city rebuilding there, asked,

Could Job have been thinking of Chicago when he wrote:

*Here are men that alter their neighbor's landmark . . . shoulder the poor aside, conspire to oppress the friendless.*

*Reap they the field that is none of theirs, strip they the vineyard wrongfully seized from its owner . . .*

*A cry goes up from the city streets, where wounded men lie groaning . . .*

If so, he was also thinking of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, St. Louis, San Francisco, and a number of other places. The economic rationale of current city rebuilding is a hoax. The economics of city rebuilding do not rest soundly on reasoned investment of public tax subsidies, as urban renewal theory proclaims, but also on

vast, involuntary subsidies wrung out of helpless site victims. And the increased tax returns from such sites, accruing to the cities as a result of this "investment," are a mirage, a pitiful gesture against the ever increasing sums of public money needed to combat disintegration and instability that flow from the cruelly shaken-up city. The means to planned city rebuilding are as deplorable as the ends.

Meantime, all the art and science of city planning are helpless to stem decay—and the spiritlessness that precedes decay—in ever more massive swatches of cities. Nor can this decay be laid, reassuringly, to lack of opportunity to apply the arts of planning. It seems to matter little whether they are applied or not. Consider the Morningside Heights area in New York City. According to planning theory it should not be in trouble at all, for it enjoys a great abundance of parkland, campus, playground, and other open spaces. It has plenty of grass. It occupies high and pleasant ground with magnificent river views. It is a famous educational center with splendid institutions—Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary, the Julliard School of Music, and half a dozen others of eminent respectability. It is the beneficiary of good hospitals and churches. It has no industries. Its streets are zoned in the main against "incompatible uses" intruding into the preserves for solidly constructed, roomy, middle- and upper-class apartments. Yet by the early 1950s Morningside Heights was becoming a slum so swiftly, the surly kind of slum in which people fear to walk the street, that the situation posed a crisis for the institutions. They and the planning arms of the city government got together, applied more planning theory, wiped out the most run-down part of the area and built in its stead a middle-income cooperative project complete with shopping center, and a public housing project, all interspersed with air, light, sunshine, and landscaping. This was hailed as a great demonstration in city saving.

After that, Morningside Heights went downhill even faster.

Nor is this an unfair or irrelevant example. In city after city, precisely the wrong areas, in the light of planning theory, are decaying. Less noticed, but equally significant, in city after city the wrong areas, in the light of planning theory, are refusing to decay.

Cities are an immense laboratory of trial and error, failure and success, in city building and city design. This is the laboratory in which city planning should have been learning and forming and testing its theories. Instead the practitioners and teachers of this discipline (if such it can be called) have ignored the study of success and failure in real life, have been incurious about the reasons for unexpected success, and are guided instead by principles derived from the behavior and appearance of towns, suburbs, tuberculosis sanatoria, fairs, and imaginary dream cities—from anything but cities themselves. [ . . . ]