

Jane Jacobs the Torontonion¹

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Jane Jacobs At Home in Toronto

Just before Jane Jacobs' death in April 2006, I walked by her house and smiled. While I always smile when I go by on my walk to work, there was more reason this time. Parked only a few meters away was a pickup truck with the Ontario vanity plate: "US Vet". The phrase was doubly ironic:

First, Jane and family had moved to Toronto at the end of the 1960s in large part to avoid their sons being drafted into the U.S. Army to fight in Vietnam – so that they wouldn't become US vets. Why Toronto? Her son, Ned Jacobs, says that they wanted a big city, but didn't speak French (*City Pulse* 24, 2006).

Second, Jane herself was a US vet. *Death and Life* had made famous her hymns to active U.S. neighborhoods, and she had helped stop a New York expressway just before migrating to Toronto.

Like some other expatriate New Yorkers I know (Wellman, 1998), she loved Toronto's combination of livability and urbanity.

As a relatively recent transplant from New York, I am frequently asked whether I find Toronto sufficiently exciting. I find it almost too exciting. The suspense is scary. Here is the most hopeful and healthy city in North America, still unmangled, still with options. (Jacobs, 1969).

In central Toronto, I routinely walk down short Jacobsean blocks. There are small parks serving dogs, kids, sunbathers, laptoppers, and the homeless. Her block, like others in our neighborhood, is filled with densely-packed old and new buildings. The streets have many intersections and opportunities for alternative routings. Toronto's main Bloor Street is a block from her house, with two stories of apartments and offices sitting atop of family-owned retail stores and restaurants. Always lively with pedestrians, Bloor's mixed uses serve shifting populations: workmen, shoppers and mothers with carriages by day; restaurant, movie and concert goers by night; and students 24/7.

I often saw Jane walking on Bloor Street. I would also run into her selling brownies at the neighborhood association's fairs. She died at Toronto Western Hospital, about 15 blocks from her house.

Jane practiced what she preached. Jane – no one who knew her said "Ms" or "Mrs. Jacobs" – lived almost her entire time in Toronto in a sturdy, three-story brick, semi-detached house built in the early twentieth century in the central Annex neighborhood, a short two-block walk from the Bathurst subway station. She would often sit on her large shaded porch, keeping her eyes on the street, and smiling as she watched the world go by. Sociology graduate student Bernie Hogan recalls how they would wave at each other as he walked to school. Despite her advice in *Death and Life*, we never saw a frying pan in her hand, ready to use as a peacekeeper. But there was a rooftop vegetable garden for many years.

¹ My thanks to Larry S. Bourne, Frank Cunningham, Bernie Hogan, William Michelson, Beverly Wellman and Natalie Zinko for their stimulating comments on earlier drafts.

I have been amused that American obituaries treated Jane as a New Yorker, despite having lived half of her adult life in Toronto. Their American chauvinist myopia reminded me of the prominent sociologist who in April 2006 proclaimed that the only two schools of urban thought were Chicago-style and LA-style.² Jane's American obituaries (such as Douglas Martin's in the *New York Times*, 2006a) usually had a paragraph near the end saying she moved to Canada in 1969, as if she had dropped into a black hole. The only exception I have found is Glenn (2006).

The one British obituary I read (Simon Jenkins in *The Guardian*, 2006) never got beyond New York City either, although it praised *Death and Life* profusely:

In a single, devastating book Jane Jacobs crammed insights in human behaviour as deep as any by Freud, Keynes or Hayek. I cannot read her *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* without constantly slamming it shut, hurling it to the floor and shouting, "Yes!" Jacobs stepped out of her New York front door sometime in the late-1950s and became the Charles Darwin of the city. She observed. She watched her street, her neighbourhood, her city, how they moved, breathed, changed over time. Like Darwin she tore up the rule book. Unlike him, her message was acclaimed - and then ignored. The urban "creationists" survive on all sides, with themselves as creators.

Jane Jacobs: Toronto Activist and Policy Advisor

In spring 2006, Toronto grieved and remembered *their* Jane: her activist work to apply *The Death and Life's* precepts and her intellectual work to build on its insights. As I write (May 3, 2100), a local TV station (City Pulse 24 – even the name is Jacobsean) is hosting an hour-long live memorial from Dooney's bistro/coffee house: a local hangout on Bloor Street, down the street from Jane's house. On the show, Toronto Mayor David Miller and former mayor David Crombie are talking about how they have applied Jane's precepts to their work. (Jane had advised Crombie and worked on Miller's post-election transition team.) Could New York mayors Rudolph Giuliani or Michael Bloomberg have said that? In April, 2005, Jane had written to Mayor Bloomberg opposing plans to build 400 foot towers in Greenpoint and Williamsburg. As part of this letter, Jane points out, "I am not a resident of New York although most of what I know about cities I learned in New York during the almost half-century of my life here." Bloomberg never replied.

Despite her justly-deserved American fame, Jane made an even more sustained, active and varied contribution to Toronto's urbanity. When she arrived, she plunged into the ongoing fight to stop the building of the Spadina Expressway. This was similar to her battle in New York City against Robert Moses' Lower Manhattan Expressway, except more important. The Spadina Expressway would have dumped a great deal of traffic into the heart of many Toronto residential neighborhoods. It was wanted by provincial and Metro Toronto politicians, suburban commuters, downtown office magnates, Moses-mesmerized planners, and even by Toronto's planning guru, Hans Blumenfeld (a pacifist professionally oriented towards the centralizing, modernist left: see Blumenfeld, 1979). In response, a mass movement developed, led by academics and professionals whose neighborhoods would bear the brunt of traffic. Several years of struggle led

² See for yourself, if you are a Community and Urban section listserv member, at the section listserv archives: https://email.rutgers.edu/mailman/private/comurb_r21/

to new Ontario “Red Tory”³ premier William Davis killing the project with a Jacobsean pronouncement:

If we are building a transportation system to serve the automobile, the Spadina Expressway would be a good place to start. But if we are building a transportation system to serve the people, the Spadina Expressway would be a good place to stop. [June 3, 1971]

Jane also plunged into a long term fight against replacing low-rise buildings with high-rise apartment towers. Toronto’s most radical recent mayor, John Sewell recalls that when he was a city alderman, Jane ordered him to tear down the hoarding around a demolition project because she knew that it was against the law to demolish a building unless a hoarding surrounded it. “I can’t,” he said. “You must,” she replied. And he did (recounted in Fulford, 1995; Martin, 2006b).

As I walk down Bloor Street, I recall that Jane helped stop the Starbucks coffee shop chain from ousting Dooney’s, a neighborhood café and hang-out. I recall that it was at Dooney’s where I told Jane in 2002 that she had won the Outstanding Lifetime Achievement Award of the American Sociological Association’s Community and Urban Sociology section. It was the first time that a non-sociologist had ever been given this annual award, but the wonder is that it took so long to take place. The 2002 Dooney’s occasion was a sad one. We were having a wake for urban sociologist Alan Powell. He had been the organizational leader of the Stop Spadina movement, in tandem with Jane as its ideological leader and spokeswoman.

Now, in May 2006, Dooney’s café is where I go yet again for a memorial – to present condolences for Jane’s death on behalf of the ASA’s Community and Urban Sociology section, and where Jane’s family, Toronto’s mayor, and past mayors gather for a remembrance. At Dooney’s, former mayor Barbara Hall recalls how she asked Jane to work on planning the revitalization of two downtown neighborhoods: King-Parliament and King-Spadina. (Barbara is probably the only mayor, in office or out, to host a reception for the Community and Urban Sociology section, treating us at City Hall to wine, veggies, and a long lecture on what it is like to run a big city.) Paul Bedford, Toronto’s chief planner during Mayor Hall’s term said that Jane kept encouraging him to take risks and to experiment:

We abolished the density numbers, the land use designations and put in place an urban design framework. Really it was about encouraging re-use of buildings and opening up the uses to allow residential.... She gave me the notion as chief planner that I had to take the lead, be visible, communicate with the people on all fronts. It was to bring planning to the people and demystify it. It gave me the courage to be an agent of change rather than an agent of the bureaucracy. (Quoted in Gerard, 2006b).

Stopping Spadina was a great event for Toronto, but it was basically a rerun of the Lower Manhattan Expressway battle (and a companion struggle with the Embarcadero fight in San Francisco, the Cambridge expressway fight in Massachusetts, and others.)

What made Jane’s Toronto activities special is that she not only fought things, she also worked actively to build things. Early in her Toronto career, she was even utopian, working with

³ Red Tories are Canadian conservatives committed to a social policy that is more concerned for the common good than individual rights. They are similar to many European Christian Democrats, and markedly different from American conservatives. See Grant (1970); Adams (2003).

the Red Tory government to plan a medium-density new neighborhood on waterfront lands with high-tech light rail running high aboveground. Alas, when budget cutbacks came, Ontario Place got built only as an amusement park, albeit with a giant IMAX screen in a Bucky dome.

She had a more successful collaboration in getting the St. Lawrence neighborhood built on derelict lands near the waterfront: high-density, medium-rise, mixed-use, moderately-priced buildings with short streets, and small, safe and accessible parks (Klemek, 2004, Chapter 6). Her activism and pronouncements reflected and amplified the zeitgeist of 1970s' Toronto, to be an urbane, livable city with a vibrant downtown (Caulfield, 1994; Lemon 1996). Or as Peter Ustinov is reputed to have described it, "New York, run by the Swiss."

Jane continued her arguing, lecturing and consulting for thirty-five more years. Consider two of her last major fights: One was a battle against amalgamating central Toronto with its most immediate suburbs (1996-1997). Jane argued that the human scale would be lost in the "megacity". She won the argument – metropolitan Toronto voted in a referendum to reject amalgamation – but she lost the battle – the conservative provincial government ignored the referendum and imposed amalgamation anyway.

The second battle in 2003 was more successful: she teamed up with mayoral candidate David Miller to stop improved access to a small island airport located near downtown Toronto. She argued that although businesspeople would get quicker access to Ottawa, Montreal and New York, neighborhood residents would suffer from noise, traffic and pollution. I thought she overstated the dangers, but she prevailed: current Mayor Miller got elected on a stop-the-airport platform.

Whatever the scale – neighborhood, megacity or earth – whatever the date – 1969 or 2003 – I would either see Jane or hear her quoted whenever I went to meetings. She was at the same time a world-famous ideologue; a backroom networker building coalitions, lecturing city councils, and convincing mayors; and a sleeves-rolled up worker in the trenches. As former reform mayor David Crombie recalls:

She really enjoyed the activist part: the strategy, the being on the streets, being at the meetings. She enjoyed meeting people, she enjoyed the vigour of activism. (Gerard, 2006a).

The result has helped central Toronto to be lively and safe, reflecting the hand of Jane. Toronto in no way resembles American doughnut cities, with their ghost town office centers. Toronto has lively, intensified main streets with mixed low-rise commercial and residential uses. There is well-used, widespread public transit. Even when developers build high-rise office towers, they often must commit to building residential homes in the same towers or near-by. This year, the huge 1950s Regent Park high-rise housing project is being torn down and replaced by high-density lower-rise buildings. The downtown and central city are filled with people, 24/7:

Ask many Torontonians why they live in Canada's most populous city and they'll often cite their comfort level amongst a mixture of skyscrapers and diverse neighbourhoods. "(I like) the diversity of the different communities in the city" says carpenter Lane Antinori. "There are little villages ...and you can get anywhere easily" (Atchison, 2006).

Honoring the Canadian Jane

A public intellectual and outspoken pundit, Jane had the rare honor of being listened to by much of the Canadian populace and leadership. Where she had saved one neighborhood in Manhattan, she saved many in Toronto by word, deed and inspiration. Even when she was ignored by mega-project promoters, Canadians felt warmed by knowing we were part of her human-scale country. She received the rare “Order of Canada” award in 1996, the equivalent of a knighthood. As her citation puts it:

A social activist and a proponent of the principle of thinking globally and acting locally, she has left her indelible mark on the Toronto landscape. By stimulating discussion, change and action, she has helped to make Canadian city streets and neighbourhoods vibrant, liveable and workable for all. (Governor General of Canada, 2005).

In action, Jane was interpersonally warm and intellectually tough. She prided herself on being plain-spoken. Sometimes she was just ornery, as when she insisted repeatedly that academics despised her. When Beverly Wellman and I assured her that the sociological award we were presenting was just one symbol of how much esteem scholars had for her, she did not want to hear it. She would not go to anything academic at the University of Toronto, just five blocks from her house, and only relented when sympathizers began in 1997 a “Jane Jacobs: Ideas That Matter” annual symposium that celebrated her work (Allen, 1997). Yet, those in universities who have learned from her views would have profited from more give-and-take with her. Conversely, more contact with scholarly research might have juxtaposed evidence that communities are being transformed with her jeremiad in *Dark Ages Ahead* that community and family are dying. This was Jane’s last published book, written in her nineties, and I have puzzled over the shift from *The Death and Life*.

I’ve often wondered why I – who has built his career on showing that neighborhoods are not the only form of communities – liked neighborhood-focused Jane so much. Partially, it is that we have shared a style and sensibility as fellow New York Canadians. She loved cities and believed that they could be good places – whatever pessimists of the Chicago and Los Angeles schools say. She cared deeply. Instead of resting on her early laurels, she worked to the end: reports say she was writing at least one book at the time of her death.. She made waves and inspired both those around her and those who read her. She preferred to debate directly, New York style, rather than indirectly, Toronto style..

“Once you know about fractals, you know you live in all of them” Jane said (quoted in Roberts, 2006). She saw life as constructed of loosely-connected networks – see her *The Economy of Cities*, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, and *Systems of Survival* For the paradox of Jane is that while she fought for neighborhoods, she was all over Toronto – and the continent – networking for what she believed in. As she walked the neighborhood streets of New York and Toronto, she saw particulars and envisioned universals. Thus, she argued in *The Nature of Economies* that economies must harmonize with nature and not brutalize it through modernist mega-construction. “I live at 69 Albany Avenue in Toronto,” she said at the first Ideas that Matter conference, “but I also live in the universe” (Roberts, 2006). (I walked by 69 Albany two weeks after Jane’s death, and all was as when she had lived there: There was no shrine, no piles of flowers, just a few chairs on a wide covered porch.)

Jane not only talked the talk, she walked the walk, and she lived the life. Tomorrow, I will walk past her home again, look up and smile. I will miss her ideas, her advocacy, her waves – and her brownies.

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