

Jane Jacobs

By Amanda Clark, Growing Democracy Project Program Manager (2019)

Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) was an American-Canadian journalist and urbanist who focused her research on community-based approaches to city planning. In 1961 her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, changed the way a generation of urban planners envisioned how cities could or should work. Jacobs was known for her passion for protecting urban neighborhoods through the concept of placemaking.

Background:

Jacobs was born in Pennsylvania and moved to New York City in the 1930s. There, she became the associate editor of *Architectural Forum*. Jacobs began to study city planning and the ways in which projects were selected, designed, and implemented. She was unimpressed with theories of urban planning, which were not focused enough on the voices and needs of the current residents.

Jacobs became an outspoken critic of car-centered planning in New York in the 1960s and in Toronto in the 1970s, where she moved in protest of the U.S.'s involvement in Vietnam.

Significance to Civic/Political Engagement:

Jacobs is known for several concepts that have become integral in activism surrounding urban renewal and planning.

- mixed-use development- the idea that different types of buildings should be integrated together to create a more vibrant community: residential space mixes with commercial space, older buildings are maintained and co-exist next to newer buildings with different uses
- bottom-up planning- local expertise is vital for community building; only relying on outside experts diminishes the ability of plans to function in real-life
- urban ecosystems- cities are living beings, each with their own personalities, purposes, and responses to change; standardization of urban planning does not respect the lived experiences of the residents or the city

Select Quotes:

“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”

“Lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves.”

Further Resources:

Books:

Eyes on the Street: The Life of Jane Jacobs, by Robert Kanigel (Vintage, 2017)

Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took on New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City, by Anthony Flint (Random House, 2009)

Websites:

Project for Public Spaces, <https://www.pps.org/>

Jane Jacobs Walk, <http://www.janejacobswalk.org/>

Center for the Living City,

<https://centerfortheivingcity.org/janejacobs#jane-and-the-center>

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