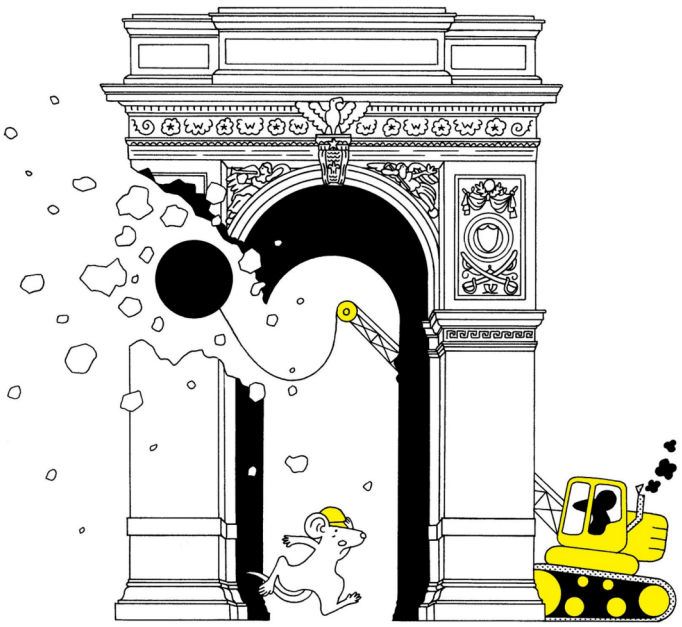
Where the Sidewalk Ends

To have Jane Jacobs, we need to go beyond Jane Jacobs.

ANDY BATTLE



PETE GAMLEN

never sat down and read cover-to-cover the book that, for many lay readers and not a few specialists, constitutes the first and last word on the subject. Over and over, students in the classes I teach would invoke the marquee ideas from this text, less as argument than as *doxa*, settled points upon which no agreement need be solicited. In a way that permitted the appearance of great wisdom, I would nod calmly, ecumenically. My serene visage, I imagined, communicated a kind of benevolent omniscience. *Of course there is room in me for all of this*. But—and I wonder if anyone noticed—I would take no real position. Inwardly, I would shrug my shoulders. Something in me didn't want to go there.

Self-conscious about this charade and mindful of the compulsory entrepreneurialism of our times, I decided to make self-improvement pay. I would assuage my conscience, *become one of the good ones*, by offering a short course that would obligate me to conduct a thoughtful reading of this text. And so I marched to a bookstore I am embarrassed to patronize to purchase a book I was embarrassed not to have read. And yet, plunked down in a coffee shop for which I harbor an ambivalent kind of love, accepting its blank identity and appalling playlist (Bruno Mars, Maroon 5, whatever that music is where people play ukeleles and sing in babytalk) delivered at organ-shifting volumes in exchange for the assurance that I will *always* get a seat, I found myself faintly discomfited at the prospect of being seen reading it. It wasn't just the guilt of imposture, of being a middle-aged scholar who hasn't read one of the key texts in their ostensible field. That I can live with. It was that as I made my way through the opening chapters, strands of memory began to awaken. I began to squirm. It wasn't just the uptown funk "giving it to me" over and over again. It was the text itself. My feigned indifference, maintained over the preceding decade and a half, had masked other feelings. I had tried to read this book once, I remembered, and put it down in boredom, which is another name for anger.

preference. And there is little awareness of the geographical reorientation of federal spending that was shifting the country's economic center of gravity away from the older cities and toward the Sun Belt. Instead, Jane Jacobs walked the streets, looked at the symptoms, and imagined a cause: "Planners," possessed of a seemingly occult power, cast their "hex signs" and zap—the city is ruined, drained of "vitality," a Jacobsian shibboleth that you can, it seems, feel but never define.

This unreflective attitude extends to the book's epistemology, its theory of how you come to know the city. There is only one real way to know the city, says Jacobs, and only one real scale at which it can be known. Anything that you cannot see simply by taking a walk and noting your impressions, she suggests, doesn't matter. There are no illustrations in the book, she explains, because all you have to do is hit the sidewalk and "look closely." There you will find what is "real." *Death and Life* is remarkable for its derisive attitude toward the possibility of any knowledge that is not immediate, intuitive, impressionistic, rooted in what you, and presumably everybody else—those "normally prudent, tolerant and cheerful people who show

what is just about human society. "It is part of the beauty of this order," Jacobs writes, "that success for the mixture in itself, and success for the peculiar and specific elements of the mixture, are apt to be in harmony rather than contradiction." Noncontradiction, for Jacobs, is the way of the world, if we'd just stop trying to fiddle with what is already perfect.

I've never enjoyed this trust in my own intuition, given how many times it has crumbled and been rebuilt. In moments of sufficient reflection, the only thing that is obvious to me is that what I once assumed was natural, evident, and right—last decade, last year, last week—now presents itself as groaningly inadequate. According to Theodor Adorno, to think is to "come to recognize how everything which is given to us so 'naturally' that we have no doubts about it is not for its part something natural." Hegel was even harsher: Common sense represents the "self-renunciation of reason," a style of thinking where "*knowledge* has lapsed into *opinion*." There is a kind of defensive arrogance about common sense, a cruelty even, in its haughty certitude, the way it anxiously cuts off inquiry, brooks no questions, denies history, inflates our power to domesticate the world. There is a conservatism to it, a kind of nihilism, even, in the way it posits truth as eternal, unchanging. Everything is exactly as it seems, and what you see is all there is.

The way to move beyond this, toward understanding how what feels

cannot see on the street? What if my on-the-spot evaluation of that experience—what my intuition responds to, what *feels* good—is not the expression of a universal consensus secretly shared by all humans? What if it's not even mine? What if, instead, it is partial, particular, loaded, given to me by the tangles of the class, race, and gender position into which I have been reared?

> "Planners," possessed of a seemingly occult power, cast their "hex signs" and zap—the city is ruined, drained of "vitality," a Jacobsian shibboleth that you can, it seems, feel but never define.

Shake the tree and more falls out. What if what I see, that to which I react, is not what was intended by its designers? What if it is instead the result of bewildering and painful compromise borne of a determination to do *something*, however imperfect, instead of nothing? What if, for example, the undesirable aesthetic and social conditions in the public "projects" I see are the result of an infernal confluence taking in, at a minimum, the power of the real estate industry to strangle competition from the public sector and wrest the momentum of urban renewal toward private gain; the flight of Black Americans and Puerto Ricans from the state-sponsored collapse of their agricultural economies to the state-sponsored joblessness of a deindustrializing New York; the historical weakness of the US labor movement and of its left parties, then suffering from renewed paroxysm under the boot of postwar McCarthyism; and the paradoxes of the New Deal state itself, namely the power of Southern Democrats, inflated since the time of slavery by the politics of white supremacy, to set sharp limits on any politics of redistribution? What if, in other words, what planners could do in New York was curtailed by political conditions that are simply not addressable at the privileged Jacobsian loci of the sidewalk and the individual human being?

in New York, and in particular its left flank, had been sounding the alarm about deindustrialization since at least the 1930s. And some of the planners Jacobs so derided, such as Catherine Bauer, worked boldly and delicately to wrest some kind of social good from the political and aesthetic morass of a housing market shaped by dynamics of exploitation at scales well beyond the sidewalk. But in the world of *Death and Life*, it's as if the Great Depression, the New Deal, the Second World War, the Black freedom struggle, and the bitter suppression of left alternatives in the postwar years never happened. This is all the more puzzling given that Jacobs had been a member of the left-liberal American Labor Party during the 1940s and had even been investigated for imagined Communist ties (she most definitely was not a communist of either the big or a small c variety). I have an unprovable supposition that the narrow politics of *Death and Life* are an artifact of the Cold War, the result of a silent prohibition on talking about issues of class, race, and labor during a period in which speaking in unapproved ways about these subjects could cost you your job, or at least your grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. But the bigger problem for the book is that this absence of connective tissue leads the analysis to careen back and forth between two unsatisfactory poles—the first a kind of galaxy-level abstraction, consisting in hopelessly vague categories such as "safety" (for whom? of what kind?), "vitality" (I am alive but am I "vital"?) or, most troublingly, "civilization" and "barbarism" (two notions whose repeated, uncritical deployment carries, let's say, significant risks); the second a kind of crude, "common sense" positivism that overvalues the undigested subjective experience of the street. This tendency to leap over the middle, this unwillingness to acknowledge realities that could give meaningful, if complicated, substance to a notion like "safety," helps Jacobs avoid questions that can't be answered by appealing to common sense. In place of a meaningful engagement with these problems, *Death and Life* substitutes fantasies. Like all fantasies, they came from somewhere, and their origins tend to become occluded in their expression.

more precisely a book about one neighborhood. In 1935, Jacobs moved to Greenwich Village with her sister. In 1944, she married the architect Robert Hyde Jacobs, and later in the decade the couple bought and restored a nineteenth-century brick town house at 555 Hudson Street, placing themselves among the earliest specimens of a then-unidentified species of renovator now known, synecdochically, as the "Brownstoner." It was there that Jacobs formed her ideas and fought her most famous battles, including the successful effort to defeat the Lower Manhattan Expressway, which threatened to raze significant portions of the neighborhood in the name of circulation and speed. Nearly all of the attributes Jacobs posits as the timeless essence of the urban are in fact features of the Greenwich Village in which she lived, rhetorically stripped of their roots in a specific time and place. Short streets; a mix of older and newer buildings; an urban fabric, both material and social, that permits only gradual redevelopment; the outsized social weight of small business owners. In truth, Greenwich Village has always been a place a bit apart, beginning with its roots as an independent polity during the first decades of the nineteenth century; its role as a refuge from yellow-fever epidemics for those wealthy enough to shelter there; and its begrudging incorporation, during the 1820s, into the metastasizing city. During this process, its grandees managed to successfully resist subordination to the street grid, a victory that inhibited breakneck development while fostering the lively irregularities of visual order Jacobs so prized. The neighborhood that emerged became the preserve of craftsmen, what Mike Wallace and Edwin Burrows called a "house-and-shop stronghold" populated by carpenters, masons, and painters living above the shops where they worked the raw materials coming in through the Christopher Street Pier—a nineteenth-century version of the "live-work" dream advertised by contemporary developers, for whom a thinned-out Jacobsianism has become so much marketing copy.

Jacobs's prose wills together a kind of urban

the small-scale and the irregular, an attitude that places her in a recognizable tradition of romantic urbanism. In fact, hers was not the first generation to see in the neighborhood a kind of urban hamlet, one that combines density, the commingling of social classes that generates the distinctive frisson of urban life, and a restrained scale that permits a sense of ownership over the territory, one boosted by the possibility of actual ownership for those who could afford it. Christine Stansell's *American Moderns* (2000) dates the neighborhood's christening as "The Village" to its turn-of-the-century settlement by middle-class bohemians, most of whom were not raised in Greenwich Village or even in New York City. (Working-class residents are reported to have called the neighborhood "The Ward" or the "Lower West Side.") As Suleiman Osman points out in *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn* (2011), symbolic renamings often accompany such colonizations. In the '60s, working-class residents of what was then called "South Brooklyn" might have been puzzled to hear the new monikers—Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill, and Boerum Hill—rolling off the educated tongues of the area's new homeowners, who appropriated for the north and east parcels of this territory the elevating suffix *Hill*, though neither is a hill in any defensibly topographic sense. These patterns iterate with successive waves of middle-class resettlement. The "Village" appellation, for instance, crept eastward during the 1960s, lopping off a portion of what used to be called the Lower East Side. I recall people self-consciously referring to Ridgewood in 2014 or so as "the hamlet." There are a fair number of parallels between early twentieth-century Greenwich Village and today's Ridgewood—sexual iconoclasm; the search for a radical politics appropriate for the middle class; stabs at masking the odor of generational wealth in a murky, provisional egalitarianism; a partiality to work wear; little boutiques that don't sell anything. During the nineteenth century, parts of Greenwich Village were known as "Little Africa," home to Black residents pushed out of the Five Points (part of today's Chinatown) by Irish immigration. But the nonconformists who arrived at the turn of the

burgeoning social and political radicalism, Black artists and intellectuals mostly stayed away. They may have felt it a question of survival. As Stansell notes, Richard Wright experienced "bare bigotry" from Village neighbors during the 1940s and James Baldwin was beaten up at a local bar during the 1950s. It is hard to escape the feeling that the elision of Black people, Black life, and Black problems we find in *Death and Life* has been a persistent feature of the middle-class bohemian communities from which the book emerged and with which it tends to resonate. (Today, Black people account for less than two percent of the population of Ridgewood.)

> The power to ignore mass society, to choose to dwell in the small-bore capitalism of bygone eras, has become a luxury good in an era where the political economy of urbanization typically produces very different outcomes.

The Greenwich Village bohemians, Stansell notes, were in some sense the radical wing of a nationwide convulsion of the middle class, seeking some kind of redemption amid the spiritual crises engendered by industrialization, social polarization, and an emerging corporate order—an earlier iteration of the mass society against which Jacobsianism is fundamentally a protest. Some chose Theodore Roosevelt's "Rough Rider" approach, which counseled participation in bloody adventures of imperial domination. The less genocidal, who tended to become journalists and social workers, opted for "vital contact," a notion that emerged at Harvard in the 1910s. This theory proposed a willed proximity and exchange between classes, whereby the enervated middle could recapture its verve through brushes with the rough charm of the proletariat while offering the latter the superior education and know-how of the settlers. In *Death and Life*, this cross-class trafficking is given the name *diversity*, another one of those Jacobsian abstractions that

mirror image of the design fetishism of which she accused her opponents, to the correct physical arrangement of streets and buildings, in fact derived from working-class patterns of sociability, themselves borne in part of the unacceptable housing conditions Jacobs wished away in her zeal to redeem these places from the appellation *slum*. In his February 1962 review in *Commentary*, the sociologist Herbert Gans, whose work on Boston's West End influenced Jacobs, suggested that her rosily counterintuitive view of working-class white-ethnic neighborhoods might reflect the mores of the newly arrived. The middle-class "visitor," having grown up in homes governed by bourgeois notions of privacy, is tempted to see only the "charm and excitement" of their adopted turf, unburdened as they are by any concrete experience of proletarian life that could temper this enthusiasm. (It's easier to go back inside when you don't have to share a bedroom with three people.) This dynamic would soon be parodied, at times ruthlessly, in works like Hal Ashby's 1970 comedy *The Landlord* and L. J. Davis's 1971 novel *A Meaningful Life*. In *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (1982), Marshall Berman, a confirmed if ambivalent Jacobsian, recalls that the goal of the neighborhood kids in the Bronx he eulogized had been to leave, by whatever means necessary.

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EXPLOITATION ISN'T JUST MATERIAL. It can be psychic as well, as when fantasies about a neighborhood and its residents are marshaled to flesh out the self-image of affluent newcomers. These wishful fantasies about class are everywhere in *Death and Life*, lurking beneath the seductive rhythms of Jacobs's prose. The "sidewalk ballet," one of the most famous of her set pieces, is justly admired for its careful observation of the microrhythms of street life and its suggestion that they proceed according to loose, secret scripts that offer a basis for improvisation:

> *Longshoremen who are not working that day gather at the White*

> *strange old man with strings of old shoes over his shoulders, motor-scooter riders with big beards and girl friends who bounce on the back of the scooters and wear their hair long in front of their faces as well as behind, drunks who follow the advice of the Hat Council and are always turned out in hats, but not hats the Council would approve.*

For Jacobs, the subterranean architecture of such encounters is the market—a gathering of individuals, at once boisterous and ordered, in which needs are expressed and met through the negotiated exchange of equivalents. Devotees of the invisible hand argue that this is the process that best transmutes self-interest into collective good. But markets don't operate in a social vacuum. As Søren Mau points out in his book *Mute Compulsion* (2023), they tend to internalize preexisting forms of social domination. Sometimes, as in the case of the labor market, they even presuppose them. Is your exchange with your boss really freely entered into? Would you work the job you have if you didn't need the money?

The unique features of Village life nurtured Jacobs's predilection for the small-scale and the irregular, an attitude that places her in a recognizable tradition of romantic urbanism.

At first glance, the sidewalk ballet acknowledges diversity. Here we have CEOs, slaughterhouse workers, unemployed longshoremen, white-collar professionals of Jacobs's ilk, protohippies, street people. But the rhetorical effect of the scene tends to dissolve these differences and freeze them at a moment of relative harmony, or what looks like one from the perspective of the middle-class settler. Anyone who cared to investigate the lives of, say, unemployed longshoremen during the 1950s (there was even a movie about it!) might not have come away with such a pat view. But for Jacobs, what matters is that they complete the scene. Her prose wills together a kind of urban picturesque, one in which unruly social reality is corralled into aesthetic order via the will of the perceiver. The

In Jacobs's book, such pictures remain, etched in language so that they can't fall apart. Off the page, our careful compositions exist in a state of perpetual vulnerability. According to Jacques Lacan's fable of ego-formation, a child looks in the mirror and sees an image of its unified self, a wonderful, uncontradictory whole that it spends the rest of its life trying and failing to embody. In reality, the child—and, to a significant extent, the adult it will become—is a frightening mess of limbs, impulses, and frustrations that it struggles furiously to knit into something like a presentable totality, something that can approach the picture given to it by the mirror. Despite—or maybe because of—the way such impressions detach us from the intractable realities of ourselves, we become so captivated by them, Lacan believed, that we spend our lives projecting them into the world, shoehorning whatever we find that is recalcitrant and unsatisfying into an image that helps us believe we are dealing with something that is unified, harmonious, intact. This hypothesis might help us understand why it is so common to hear complex and discordant social phenomena, like cities, described using metaphors that cast them as somehow organic, somehow akin to a human body.

All bodies, of course, ultimately fail. Countenancing this unbearable reality suggests a less sanguine view. Where one might wish to see wholeness, harmony, cooperation, perfection, it becomes just as easy, if scarier, to see chaos, disintegration, entropy, conflict without resolution. I always suggest to students that they maintain a critical distance when they encounter claims that this or that phenomenon or arrangement is obvious, natural, organic—*whole*. It's not just that they are cheap ways of letting ourselves out of contradiction, of giving ourselves permission to see only what we immediately want to see while helping us avoid what is more troubling, less salubrious. It's that they tend to drift too easily into claims of whole*some*ness, of sentimentality laced with moral judgment, defended with a kind of paranoiac armor. The anxiety that the ligaments of the self will slacken and rot gives rise to a kind of rage that blossoms into cruelty

the world, if we'd just stop trying to fiddle with what is already perfect.

The white knight of the Jacobsian urban romance is the "natural proprietor of the street," a particular kind of hero epitomized in the figure of the small shopkeeper, those "strong proponents of peace and order" whose clear and direct relationship to property turns them into stewards of everyone else. The problem is that Jacobs never asks what peace and order means or whether peace and order for some might mean suffering and disorder for others. Berman points out something crucial about Jacobs's picture—it is "the city before the blacks got there" (in truth, given the history of successive displacements recounted in this essay, it's the city before *and* after the blacks got there). Is it the case that the secret architecture of *Death and Life*, the skeleton holding the body together, isn't just private property (maybe that's not so secret) but whiteness? Is the real outcome of Jacobsian pragmatism—throwing one's hands up at the prospect of confronting "deep and complicated social ills"; resigning oneself to marshaling "whatever workable forces" are lying around; and shying away from critical questions about property, race, and the nature of the "peace and order" to which one's instincts default—the passive acceptance of these invisible structuring currents and the violence they both require and engender? Maybe that's why whenever I hear Jacobs's famous phrase "eyes on the street," I don't think of Greenwich Village. I think of Howard Beach and Bensonhurst, where another kind of neighborhood defense was mounted in the name of a common-sense, grassroots definition of safety—one where white men protect what is theirs. In a telling aside, Jacobs admits that if white supremacy turns out to be a fundamental ordering principle of urban space in the United States, we've got bigger problems than sidewalks. We do.

In the face of the multiple and interlocking failures of contemporary urban policy to produce adequate living conditions for the majority of people in places like New York, the concrete result of the

the kinds of social relationships it encouraged, has become a luxury good in an era where the political economy of urbanization typically produces very different outcomes. At the very least, it should be clear that the market, to which Jacobs maintained a nonnegotiable commitment not only as a theory of distribution but as an ontological principle, supposing it to reflect human nature itself, has not delivered the world she seems to have wanted for anything like the broad swaths she hoped it might. Here is where one might admit that for at least some of the bureaucrats and planners she scorned, coming to terms with this reality, however compromising or frustrating, trumped the kind of self-serving fantasies that fuel so much Jacobsian thinking.

> What if my experience of the street is determined by forces I cannot see on the street? What if, in other words, what planners could do in New York was curtailed by political realities that are simply not addressable at the privileged Jacobsian loci of the sidewalk and the individual human being?

Subjectively, I like the city proposed in *Death and Life*, one where you can leave your keys with the smiling proprietor of the corner café, a place where you feel safe, possibly even *whole*. The problem is that my subjective enjoyment is not a sufficient criterion for evaluating what is just or possible in a society in which, like it or not, I am inextricably connected to those unlike me, including in relations of exploitation that I did not personally create but in which I am implicated. This is the kind of political problem that a Jacobsian perspective has little capacity to address. In its pragmatism, its commitment to gradualism, and its insistence that what you see is all there is, Jacobs's vision is a properly reformist one—a theory of what might be done to enliven the experience of the urban subject in the absence of broader, redistributive changes that stand a chance of

of the politics it can imagine. To have Jacobs, in other words, we need to go beyond Jacobs.

This, at least, is the closest thing to a Jacobs-style axiom my students and I can land upon in the discussions we have each week. These students, mostly working adults without formal training in planning or social theory, often introduce themselves by emphasizing their status as laypeople and discounting their own expertise. They then proceed to belie such disavowals, mounting generous and sophisticated critical readings that incorporate their subjective experiences but don't stop there, combining these impulses and intuitions with the capacity to reason in the sense that Hegel meant it, to admit the data of the world in a way that takes you outside the present boundaries of yourself. They are committed to tolerating an image that remains fragmented, conclusions that are always provisional, the discomfort of not coming up with an answer. Invariably, their own labors push the thinking of the teacher, the nominal expert, to a less secure but more capacious place. Their work grasps what Jacobs misses and what some of the planners and, yes, even some of the bureaucrats might have realized—that there is no magic leap from alienation, and the only way out is through. There really is something to Jacobs's belief in the capacities of avowedly ordinary people, just not always in the ways that she thought. ●

Andy Battle would like to thank the creators of mynoise.net for helping to drown out the ukeleles.

Mar 20, 2025

WRECKING BALL

#45

Carriegate

And Just Like That ... I had a proposal for a New York City zoning amendment.

GRETA RAINBOW

Paul at Once

THOMAS DE MONCHAUX

REVIEW

Bad Wrap

I'm not sure how I feel about a team many times the size of the New York Philharmonic fine-tuning a formula of Lucinda Williams and Willie Nelson hits with which to drip-feed me throughout the day. Actually, I take that back. I hate it.

NICK MURRAY

SHORTCUT

Canada Fancy

A distinctly Canadian strain of parsimony

CAROLYN BAILEY