

Turning Conventional Thinking on its Head ... Jane Jacobs

At 88, Jane Jacobs has a new book out and is in the midst of writing her next one. There are few if any other thinkers in Canada today so original in their ideas, so influential in their legacy, and so vindicated by subsequent trends.

Jane and her work is the subject of Tamarack's new online workshop.

Jane's interest in public issues started in the 1930s when she helped run a community centre in a poverty-stricken region of North Carolina. She moved to Toronto in 1969 and has been well known as an activist and thinker ever since.



Photo by Carl Hiebert

Though for more than fifty years she lived and worked in the United States, it is here in Canada that she has made a name for herself. She was already well known when she arrived, thanks to her 1961 classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. With this revolutionary book, it is no exaggeration to say that Jane turned a half-century of thinking within the field of urban planning on its head.

She showed that, instead of trying to turn cities into futile planners' paradises, it is necessary to recognize the creative benefits that arise when cities are allowed to evolve as diverse, living organisms.

With *Death and Life*, Jane prompted a shift in the whole area of urban planning – this by someone with virtually no formal training in the area. Hers were the insights of a perceptive outsider, whose own postsecondary education had centred on the study of stenography at a business school, and then several years of general studies at Columbia University, until she developed a passionate interest in the problems associated with urban redevelopment and taught herself what she needed to know to become an expert.

As a visionary, Jane has also never been shy to immerse herself in everyday activism including a leadership role in Toronto's urban renewal movement during the 1970s and continuing on to the present day. As an activist, Jane has never been afraid to court political opposition. She has always spoken her mind no matter who might object. Nor is she in the least constrained by political ideology. In fact, she has made it very clear just how harmful she considers ideology to be.

Another characteristic that marks Jane's thinking is her endless inquisitiveness and intellectual energy. She could easily have stopped with her contributions to urban planning, and her subsequent work as an activist, and still achieved a formidable public reputation. But starting in the 1960s she chose to extend her work into

theoretical economics. Her interest was spawned by a desire to understand how it is that cities contribute not just to human creativity, but to prosperity as well. The answers, she found, were comparable to those she had devised in her work on urban planning. It is individual creativity and market diversity that drive cities' prosperity.

More recently, Jane extended her vision again into ethics and their social context. To this topic she brought a finely tuned morality. It was in a book she published in 1992, *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics*, that she first set out her startlingly provocative theory about what underlies the moral tensions we find in human societies throughout history. Like her previous books, *Systems of Survival* managed to upset conventional thinking at every turn.

Now, over ten years later, she has continued in this same path with the just-published *Dark Age Ahead* – her ninth book, and unlikely to be her last. This new book brims with dismay, and even occasional rage, at what Jacobs sees as present-day lapses of ethical judgment in contemporary society.

Jane Jacobs's journey as a visionary continues. One thing is already abundantly clear – there are few if any other thinkers in Canada today so original in their ideas, so influential in their legacy, and so vindicated by subsequent trends.

By: Helen Walsh



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