

This month, in recognition of the appearance of Jane Jacobs's ninth book, *Dark Age Ahead* (published by Random House), we at the LRC thought that more than a regular review was in order. It seemed an excellent opportunity to look at Jacobs's contribution to North American thought over the past 43 years. What we found, though, was that the extraordinary breadth of her ideas required appreciation and evaluation from more than one essayist. Eventually we settled on three: an architect and urban planner to deal with Jacobs's revolutionary work on cities, an economist to meet head-on her ideas on the organic nature of economic systems and an ethicist to examine her approach to society as a whole and its "systems of survival."

Adopted Brilliance

Jane Jacobs came to Canada 36 years ago and has been challenging us ever since.



Essay

The Avenger of Cities

Where others saw chaos, Jane Jacobs saw organized complexity.

KEN GREENBERG

Jane Jacobs is not reticent about aging and death as part of life and renewal. The titles of her 1961 masterpiece, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, and her latest book, *Dark Age Ahead* (2004), are straightforward about this fact. But she is not a pessimist, and is certainly not morbid. She simply thinks deeply about cycles of existence. Her broad reading of history, economics, environment and culture is all about ascending and receding patterns, about fragility and toughness, about the fact that things that cannot adapt are more vulnerable and likely to fail. Jacobs reminds us matter-of-factly that things do go wrong, that there are historical dead ends, that countries, whole civilizations and even cities can and do atrophy and even disappear.

We have just lived through an excruciating period in Canadian urban history that brings this fragility into sharp relief. Intense fiscal pressures and the ensuing chain reaction of federal and provincial downloading in the 1990s revealed a uniquely Canadian Achilles heel. In the 19th-century process of Confederation, municipalities were designated as powerless fiefs of the provinces. This constitutional anomaly has never been rectified in a country where more than 80 percent of the population now lives in large urban centres. As the paroxysm of budget slashing occurred, it was the powerless cities that bore the brunt, including ill-conceived shotgun mergers saddling them with vast responsibilities but few resources. This has produced a rapid and highly visible decay of physical and community infrastructure, widespread homelessness and cuts to education, health care and social services. It has been alarming, shaking to the core a false

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Canadian sense of security and even smugness in recent decades vis-à-vis American cities.

This is the backdrop against which *Dark Age Ahead* was written. There is a powerful sense of déjà vu here, both in the egregiousness of the errors and in the passion of Jacobs's advocacy. There is the same profound indignation that impelled her in 1961 to write *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which was a brilliant response to Robert Moses's plans to eviscerate Lower Manhattan and, more generally, to the widespread devastation wrought by bad urban renewal visited on post-war cities by the planning and design establishments.

Jacobs's motivation was then—and still is—to unmask unhelpful dogma, to debunk myths and to show that there are other modes of thought. Her arguments in *Death and Life* were built from the ground up, with in-depth observations of everyday places—streets, blocks, parks and buildings. Her appreciation for complex "self-organizing" survival mechanisms was coupled with frustration with the kind of institutional wrong-headedness—bureaucratic, political and pseudo-scientific—that impedes the creative process of human adaptation. When I first read the book, I was a student in that critical in-between period when the planning and design professions did not know what to make of Jacobs. Many of my teachers still considered her to be a dangerous heretic. Still, I was profoundly attracted to her ideas, because what I read fit with what I could see and experience with my own eyes.

Jacobs followed that historic book with explorations of the economic underpinnings of cities, trade, import replacement and the generation of wealth in *The Economy of Cities* (1969) and *Cities and the Wealth of Nations: Principles of Economic Life* (1984), of the ethical underpinnings of the commercial and guardian structures in *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics* (1992), and of the great synthesis of economic, social and natural systems in *The Nature of Economies* (2000). And now *Dark Age Ahead*.

Jacobs's books are in constant dialogue; they refer to each other and help each other develop arguments, anticipate major objections and counter them. With each iteration, the tapestry of her ideas and concepts gets stronger and denser. More of the gaps fill in; there are more examples to prove the points.

Jane Jacobs has now lived in Toronto for more than 35 years. During that time, the city has gone

through a number of momentous swings, initially positive and most recently extremely painful, which have provided much of the impetus for this latest work. While her influence is in no way limited to this particular city, she clearly has had an extraordinary impact there through all these ups and downs. When she arrived with her family in 1968, the city was hanging on a cliff, poised for the full program of anti-city urban renewal measures. Major planned demolitions

habit. Jacobs was, and still is, very sparing in her public appearances and pronouncements, yet gradually and almost imperceptibly, the Jacobs set of ideas came close to being conventional wisdom for a time, both in her adopted city of Toronto and in many other places—not universally but significantly, not in a precise scholarly sense, but as a loosely integrated but coherent philosophy. This happened through a process of infiltration and testing, with confidence-building

the city has shifted its attention from road widening for cars to sidewalk widening for pedestrians, in an annual retrofitting tied to modest capital programs. The city's Public Works Department has adopted new details and standards that pay equal attention to walkers and cyclists. St. George Street, through the heart of the University of Toronto campus, has proven the value of this re-calibration, which Jacobs has long advocated.

Gradually, in the years before the 1998 amalgamation of Toronto and its post-war suburbs, the city relearned how to make urban buildings and spaces, framing its streets with pedestrian-friendly building edges and active uses where possible, occasionally producing good new urban buildings, often in a fresh and contemporary idiom particular to Toronto and very different from the sentimental pastiche of historic styles so often seen south of the border. In what sadly turned out to be a budget-starved effort, the city began to enrich its repertory of urban parks, squares and trails, responding to the new recreational needs of a mixed city with an expanding downtown population. Toronto became a quoted example, a research lab on urbanism.

It would be a mistake, however, to view this pre-megacity period as a kind of Golden Age. It was more like a continuous struggle, with some forward motion. While a large portion of the population may have internalized some of Jacobs's concepts, such as "eyes on the street," for example, it was much more challenging to apply her thinking when the focus shifted from saving and preserving existing neighbourhoods to creating new places on large obsolescent industrial tracts, such as the railway lands, in the heart of the city, on sterile arteries in the first-ring suburbs and, particularly, in the emerging fringes of the Greater Toronto Area where sprawling suburbia proceeded apace.

Even here, though, the GTA had begun to understand that there was a big and rapidly growing city region beyond the gates of the pre-war city. In 1995, the Office for the Greater Toronto Area began work that led to the provincial Greater Toronto Task Force, overseen by Anne Golden, stressing the broad themes of shaping regional growth tied to integrated transportation networks, preservation of green space, social services, health care, waste management, and so on. But all of this became an unfinished agenda, hijacked and sidetracked by the megamess of the megacity and the events that surrounded its creation.

By then, the dark clouds had begun to gather. In 1996, the newly elected Ontario government of Mike Harris Tories had forced the issue of amalgamation against the democratically expressed will of 73 percent of the Toronto population, out of the blue, with little research, study or debate. It was a symbolic reckoning of political scores and a demonstration of hostility against the City of Toronto. Even taking its thin veil of rationale at face value—that there were service duplications, too many tiers of governance, a need for better coordination of resources—it was ham-fisted and ill conceived. The real solutions, as the Golden Report had suggested, lay in creating a functioning city region. Fearing exactly that, the provincial government chose to draw a confrontational line between city and suburbs as a divide-and-conquer strategy. But the most serious problems occurred as a result of the economic pillaging.

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included such treasures as Old City Hall, Union Station and St. Lawrence Market, along with the destruction of downtown neighbourhoods such as the area south of St. Jamestown. Toronto's streetcars were slated for removal and more urban expressways were on deck, not just the infamous Spadina, but also the Cross-town and the Scarborough.

On November 1, 1969, Jacobs told *The Globe and Mail*: "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 unmingled, still with options. Few of us profit from the mistakes of others, and perhaps Toronto will prove to share this disability. If so, I am grateful at least to have enjoyed this great city before its destruction."

The remarkable thing was that Jane Jacobs's ideas almost immediately resonated with people who were uneasy about all this. It was already possible to see the impact of destructive policies and actions in U.S. cities. Toronto maintained a stubborn commitment to downtown neighbourhoods with small-c ratepayer conservatism; local municipal politics were still within citizens' reach and, in three successive elections, the strength of the Jacobs-inspired reformers grew until they controlled City Hall. Decision makers and even some developer converts began to acknowledge Jacobs's closely observed truths.

Armed with a body of empirical evidence, city advocates were able to challenge a still potent set of anti-urban values and pervasive imagery whose twin origins and credentials can be traced back to two great 20th century crusades against the city, one led by Frank Lloyd Wright (*Broadacre City*) and the other by LeCorbusier (*The Radiant City*)—crusades based on overly simplistic mechanical models. In contrast to these, Jacobs convincingly demonstrated that there were sophisticated processes at work in the city as a perpetually unfinished, intensely interactive web of relationships. Her great forte was to identify what the French call the *version sauvage* of crucially important phenomena that, if understood, could be nurtured. She applied the concepts of organized complexity, self-organization, and mix and diversity to explain what was wrongly perceived as chaos.

It was one thing to articulate these ideas, but quite another to make real change in the way things work. After all, these ideas challenged deeply enshrined practices (legal, administrative, financial) and decades of indoctrination and

feedback as things were seen to work and be successful—when the downtown did not collapse without the Spadina Expressway, when mixed-income housing in the St. Lawrence neighbourhood produced a highly sought-after address.

This web of ideas has continued to provide credibility, inspiration and guidance for a generation (of which I am part) and the generation that has come after. Jacobs was the scientist and we were the engineers, finding new ways to test and apply her concepts. The old (pre-amalgamation) Toronto may be the city where Jacobs's ideas were physically most in evidence. It became denser without destroying its neighbourhoods. Jacobs admonished us to not be afraid of "density" (an abstraction), but to see how it could be introduced while strengthening the grain and structure of the city.

Local terminology evolved with this learning curve. In the 1960s, block-busting had replaced existing neighbourhoods wholesale with crude towers and slabs. But by the 1970s and '80s, new medium-density mid-rise infill developments began to appear on smaller parcels, along with mixed-use developments. Affordable housing started to appear on scattered sites throughout the city. Living over shops on main streets emerged as an idea, although it never delivered its real potential. Industrial lofts and converted office buildings then led the way, as downtown itself became more of a neighbourhood. And then, of course, there was the condo boom, unfortunately more about quantity than quality as the megacity took over. But still, with a mix of successes, and partial successes, Toronto produced one of the most vibrant lived-in city centres on the continent. A great testament to Jacobs's teachings was the "Kings" initiative, in which the city allowed 400 acres in former industrial districts flanking downtown to develop organically, eschewing traditional land use controls for an organic and self-defining mix of uses and simple building form controls.

On the human side, we became more diverse. Indeed, an incredible mix, which many embrace beyond tolerance, has become our distinguishing characteristic and greatest strength. Jacobs's vitally important message was that the glue that binds us is the public realm of streets, parks and squares and a social infrastructure of health care, education (public schools) and active community life.

Toronto the dull became Toronto the interesting as the neighbourhood streets came to life. Now recognizing those streets are not just traffic arteries but are a vital part of the public realm,

Prior to 1996, survey after survey had identified Toronto as one of the most livable cities on the planet. But the megacity was accompanied by an unbearable withdrawal of financial resources, from which Toronto and other Canadian cities in similar situations have not recovered, and things began to unravel quickly. Two things became immediately apparent. First, the city had no real powers to defend itself. Despite its inherent economic vitality, its role as net generator of wealth and growth for the country, and its human resources and sheer numbers, it and other Canadian cities were politically impotent and totally at the mercy of this assault. Second was the striking vulnerability and interconnectedness of the complex web that supported the city's health and vitality and its ability to maintain its physical plant, deliver basic services and provide the necessities of daily life for its inhabitants.

Enter *Dark Age Ahead*, at a time when, in both Canada and the U.S., we are lurching from crisis to crisis with ever shorter attention spans and fewer long-term ideas about how to staunch the hemorrhaging. A neo-conservative fascination with privatization has raised new issues of accountability and ethics, challenging the long-established mutually correcting guardian and trader "syndromes" that Jacobs described in *Systems of Survival*. New and deeper threats to urban sovereignty and solvency have provoked Jacobs to dig deeper and once again play a key role in encouraging Canadian mayors to rally in defence of their cities. Her latest work is an attempt to take a step back from the obvious urban ills—the growing gap between rich and poor, environmental degradation, voter distrust—and grapple with a number of viciously entwined downward spirals that may lie at the root of the unhappy events that have overtaken us.

In *Dark Age Ahead*, Jacobs identifies five jeopardized pillars of our culture as community and family ("Families Rigged to Fail"), higher education ("Credentialing versus Educating"), the effective practice of science-based technology ("Science Abandoned"), taxes and governmental powers directly in touch with needs and possibilities ("Dumbed-Down Taxes"), and self-regulation by the learned professions ("Self-policing Subverted"). A chapter is dedicated to each of these threatening downward spirals. Yet *Dark Age Ahead* is not a prediction of doom, but an inspiration to rise to these new challenges, to return to the places where we are stuck, where the free flow of learning and feedback has been frozen and amnesia has set in. It is a new wake-up call.

In this positive vein, the chapter entitled "Unwinding Vicious Spirals" advances an intriguing prediction about how a particularly perplexing issue—the seemingly relentless sprawl around our cities—may ultimately be resolved. Suburbia has always seemed to be the phenomenon most impervious to Jacobs's influence. Even as downtowns added significant numbers and appeared to be newly popular with a growing cohort of the population—and notwithstanding sometimes heroic "new urbanist" efforts beyond the city core—the advancing wave of low-density suburbs has pushed on unabated, with its highways, dependency on cars, and attendant energy and pollution problems.

This duality has always posed a dilemma for admirers of Jane Jacobs's work. Does the ubiquity of the suburbs speak to the limitations and longevity of her ideas? Is it a reflection of a more

potent competing school of anti-urban thought? In fact, there is no compelling counter-theory—few others think in such broad terms. It is more obliviousness than purposeful disagreement. And yet the suburban paradigm, especially as it has developed in the Golden Horseshoe surrounding Toronto, is remarkably consistent and hard-wired, with little deviation. The current one-size-fits-all formula now barely resembles the older pastoral models with gracious streets and generous lawns. Big houses cram small lots with three-car driveways that barely allow a blade of grass between them; backyards have shrunk to postage-stamp sizes.

Suburbia's consistency derives as an accidental byproduct from an anti-Jacobs cast of mind that removes all complexity, overlap, interaction, friction, competition and proximity. The suburban paradigm deals with each part of the environment in isolation, the big pipe and sewer, the care and feeding of the car, the residential product, and the shopping centres and big box stores. This is a world that is about juggling one ball at a time. It has been standardized by people who are experts in expediting projects in pursuit of relatively narrow goals. All the cloying nomenclature and imagery notwithstanding, it is not about making neighbourhoods or places. And it is arguably not sustainable as a model, especially as it expands over vast territories.

Still, the suburban paradigm has proven to be the hardest nut to crack, and in *Dark Age Ahead*, Jacobs puts forth a fascinating new theory rooted in a longer historical trajectory. Along with slum clearance and rent control, one of the most significant housing remedies to emerge from the Depression and the Second World War was the availability of long-term low interest rates. Coupled with a number of other factors, including, in the U.S., the Interstate Highway program

ing of the housing bubble and the need to capitalize on the real estate, might create just such a circumstance, similar to the irresistible impulse to sell the family farm in the first place. Such a force—and only such a force—would be powerful enough to brush aside objections and rigid zoning regulations.

Sound implausible? This is actually very like the pent-up forces that made initiatives like the Kings possible in downtown Toronto: a comparable large scale and a pressing need to recycle industrial buildings and lots for new purposes. Jacobs anticipates two kinds of suburban conversions—small-scale owner-initiated infill, and conversion and developer assembly. Both phenomena already exist.

Beyond the house, suburban roads have the potential to be transformed into multi-purpose urban streets, the arterials converted into boulevards shared with transit and cycle lanes. In fact, the groundwork is already laid for all of this, and there are pioneering examples in a number of cities. The major impediment is an extraordinary tangle of intractable rules. Jacobs predicts that with an economic and demographic *force majeure* these obstacles would be swept away to allow ingenuity and necessity to operate. Like the natural processes of "unslumming," diversification and "import replacement" in cities that she has previously examined, the groundwork is being laid here so that, when the time comes, the ideas are in place.

Is this all wishful thinking? One by one, the premises seem to check out, subject to certain caveats such as relative peace and prosperity and the ability to make the transformation. This is a classic Jane Jacobs kind of argument. Could it also be wrong? Might something else happen? Of course. But by knowing that it might happen—and to some limited extent is doing so

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and redlining (making urban neighbourhoods ineligible for loans), and the fact that by 1945 only as little as 3 percent of the population was needed for agriculture, an irresistible pressure was created for sprawl. Willing buyers and sellers and a play of market forces created a win/win situation.

What if these conditions could be replicated in a next stage of evolution? Sprawl is still powerful and hard to resist, but what if it were less wasteful and the land more intensively used? In other words, what if there were another win/win situation and the current first-tier suburbs became like the early species in natural plant succession—an interim, phase-in succession leading to a denser and more sustainable pattern?

There would need to be real pressure to make this revolution both feasible and necessary. It could not be an artificial idea like environmentally sustainable development, or Smart Growth, but would need to be deeply rooted in the raw power of a demographic force. Jacobs departs from this premise to hypothesize that the crest of the baby boom, coupled with a threatened burst-

already—we are better prepared to effect changes more gracefully and less harmfully. Once more Jacobs urges us not to confuse means with ends, the product with the goal; she advocates a shift from prescription to performance-based guidelines and codes. At the end of the day, there is a deep cultural value that can work in favour of this kind of transformation, and that is the quest for efficiency.

One of the most poignant and telling sections of *Dark Age Ahead* is the recounting of a dialogue with Paul Martin, then Finance Minister, now Prime Minister. Over the years, Jacobs has developed a complex relationship with national, provincial and municipal leaders at the highest level in Canada, even if they find many of her prescriptions indigestible. What is at stake is no more and no less than a re-framing of our national politics, reflecting the grudging recognition that we are now undeniably an urban country whose entire future hinges on the success of our cities. As Jacobs would say, we now have to wait and find out what will happen. ☐