

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER ■ FOUNDED 1844 ■ GLOBEANDMAIL.COM ■ WEDNESDAY, APRIL 26, 2006

John Barber

TORONTO -- Was any writer of her generation as influential as Jane Jacobs? The question is intriguing, but impossible.

JANE JACOBS 1916-2006



On the one hand, Ms. Jacobs was generally ignored by the intellectual establishments she assailed throughout her career, making little impact on what such establishments call "the literature." She remained determinedly marginal both in her point of view and her successive homes -- from Scranton to the Lower East Side to Toronto -- and used the vantage to see through the fog of received wisdom that envelops all establishments. Even as she

ascended to the status of iconic iconoclast, Ms. Jacobs remained a consummate outsider.

On the other hand, her most radical early propositions have since become so pervasive and widely accepted, even among those who have never heard of her, that they are now impossible for us to see for what they are: the original ideas of a singular thinker. They are like the molecules of the air we breathe.

Future generations will sort out the puzzle. It is our privilege to savour the memory of a prophet. When she wasn't destroying the academy of urban

planning in a stunning display of the power of ideas, or rewriting world history and macroeconomic theory to reveal the seminal role of cities, she was teaching us how to live in our own.

A refugee who breathed new life into a civic identity battered by the onslaught of modernity, she became the guiding intelligence of Toronto, and we her most earnest disciples.

Appropriately it was in church when Ms. Jacobs moved me most: St. James Cathedral, Feb. 24, 1997, during an address to one of the hundreds of spontaneous protest meetings that swept the city in response to the Harris government's epochal exercise in municipal amalgamation and impoverishment. Scathing, hilarious and clear-eyed as ever, she warned that there was "reason to feel grim" about the future.

"But a battle like this would be intolerable if we didn't have a good time, if we didn't have the joy of battle, if we didn't have a high old time in this fight," she said, as hearts rose and a thousand faces beamed. "Never, never underestimate the power of high hearts when they're combined with principled, unyielding wills."

Ms. Jacobs was an uncommonly effective activist, celebrated in documentarian Ric Burns's epic history of New York City as the woman who saved modern Manhattan from destruction, but she never allowed politics to interfere with her vocation as a writer. And it was her books, especially two 1960s classics, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and *The Economy of Cities*, that changed the world.

The story of how the former overturned the practice of urban planning is well known. But if anything, Ms. Jacobs's economic thinking was even more provocative and far-sighted. At a time when classical economics made no provision for the role of cities -- indeed, took no notice of them at all -- she used a pile of newspaper clippings and her own sharp observations to propose a novel

theory that turned Adam Smith on his head by identifying the creative milieu of a diverse city as an essential prerequisite for economic growth.

It was decades before economists, confronting the same limits to the classic theory identified by Ms. Jacobs, began to read her. But when Harvard economist Edward Glaeser tested the Jacobs model of growth against theories promulgated by world-renowned economists, he concluded hers was the only one that actually worked.

"She pointed us to thinking about the essential empirical issues," Prof. Glaeser said. "And the amazing thing is the extent to which the data bear her out."

Whether documenting the invention of the brassiere, rewriting the history of agriculture as an outgrowth of urban trade or prophesizing globalization decades before it emerged, Ms. Jacobs was always a stunningly original writer whose reliance on her own wits -- and consistent disdain for received wisdom -- created a new canon.

Now that the rest of the world has almost caught up, she has moved on again. But her ideas will continue to animate the hopeful future she did so much to shape.

