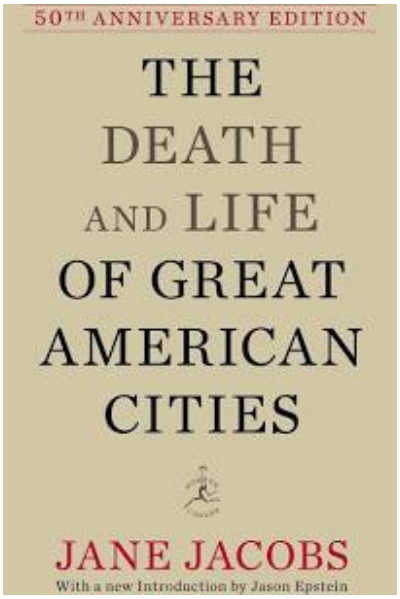
Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

The Death and Life of Great American Cities

By Jane Jacobs

The Death and Life of Great American Cities is 448 pages, with 22 chapters in four sections, including an introduction. It was published in 1961.

Jane Jacobs was a writer who lived in New York and Toronto. In addition to *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she wrote six books, two of which dealt with cities and their economies. There are more than a dozen books by other authors about Jacobs' life and her ideas. She died in 2006.



Death and Life (as it's commonly called) caused a sensation in its day and lit a long fuse that resulted in the New Urbanist movement of the 1980s. Jacobs wrote the book to warn city leaders they were destroying their cities under the illusion that they were saving them, and to offer a new approach of city building, one focused on the street, the neighborhood and the city as a whole.

In *Death and Life*, Jacobs comes out swinging. Her first sentence is: "This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding." And she never lets up, calling city planning theories of the 1950s and 1960s a "pseudoscience" based on "a foundation of nonsense."

The nonsense, Jacobs said, included an unquestioning belief in the separation of land uses, urban renewal programs that demolished low-income neighborhoods, public housing projects that warehoused the poor, highways that emptied cities and created soulless suburbs, redlining policies that robbed urban neighborhoods of bank credit, parks that were placed in such a way as to make their failure inevitable, "civic center" concentrations of cultural institutions, biases against older buildings . . . and much more.

In fact, Jacobs wrote, the opposite of all these things was correct. Mixed uses strengthened neighborhoods, low-income neighborhoods suffered from urban renewal and public housing, people were happier in cities than suburbs, urban neighborhoods were wealth creators and small amounts of bank credit would help them flourish, parks succeeded not because of their design but due to location and adjacent uses, older buildings helped neighborhoods attract entrepreneurs, and cultural institutions (such as museums, theaters, concert halls and galleries) needed to be in neighborhoods.

And this is just the start of this remarkable book. In some parts, Jacobs writes like an ecologist studying a forest, as she takes us to the streets, sidewalks, apartments and stores of New York, Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia and Baltimore to see how neighborhoods worked or no longer worked —and why. In each case, the reason for success or failure, she said, was people.

Neighborhoods that thrived had lots of people on their sidewalks or watching the street from stores, restaurants, bars and apartment windows. It is these "eyes on the street," she wrote, that made neighborhoods safe.

And not just residents. Visitors who come to a street for its bars, restaurants and shops brought additional eyes on the street, she wrote. In most suburban subdivisions and some urban neighborhoods, outsiders are feared. But along streets already made safe by residents and shopkeepers, Jacobs wrote, "the more strangers the merrier." After all, these outsiders support the businesses that make living nearby so rewarding.

This image of "eyes on the street" is what most readers remember of Jacobs' book. Other lessons that stick with people: the need for short blocks and the value of old buildings.

These are important ideas but they often overshadow Jacobs' most important messages: Lively, thriving neighborhoods make cities successful, and you cannot understand what makes neighborhoods succeed from a distance. You must observe them close up. Planning theories learned in universities won't help.

So if you want to more people on a neighborhood's sidewalks, how do you do that? With two kinds of diversity, Jacobs believed: diversity of land uses, so you had residences mixed with shops, bars, restaurants and offices; and "commercial diversity," by which she meant different kinds of businesses.

Land-use diversity is important because it puts people on the street at different times. Residents leave their houses and apartments in early mornings to work or walk a child to school, while shops greet their customers after 10. Restaurants put people on the street at noon and in early evening hours; bars put them there in later hours. Schools send children home in mid-afternoon. Churches, parks and playgrounds have people coming and going on weekends.

Memorably, Jacobs described this procession of pedestrians as "a marvelous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city." It's like a dance, she went on, but like not a chorus line where everyone kicks at the same time. Rather, she said, it's like "an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole."

Commercial diversity is important to a larger form of neighborhood, which Jacobs called "the district." Here she focused not so much on public safety as the city's economy, particularly its ability to start and grow businesses. In "street neighborhoods," businesses like grocery stores and pharmacies, restaurants and bars are important, as they serve residents and visitors. But in districts, you need businesses that support the economy, making goods and services for people elsewhere.

Cities, she argued, were natural places for business creation, but only if they made it easy for new businesses to get started. One way was by offering commercial buildings of all kinds, sizes—and all ages. Why are older buildings important? Rents are cheaper in old buildings, and companies starting out need cheap rents, as well as the rich business ecosystems that urban neighborhoods offer. "Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings," Jacobs wrote. "New ideas must use old buildings."

These are the most important messages of *Death and Life*, but hardly all of them. Here's a sampling of Jacobs' other ideas:

Complementary neighborhoods: We need to think in terms of three neighborhoods, Jacobs said: "the street neighborhood," the larger "district" (think Buckhead or Collier Heights), and the city as a whole, which she called "the neighborhood of the entire city." "The three (types) supplement each other in complex fashion," she said.

Authentic neighborhood revival: It doesn't involve "slum clearance" followed by massive public housing projects, which were popular ideas in the early 1960s. Rather, she wrote, it involves low-income neighborhoods that hold on to residents as they earn more. The problem with most low-income neighborhoods isn't that the residents are poor but that "too many people move out of (them) too fast." Modest loans for businesses and home improvements could keep these upwardly mobile people in place.

Gradual change is better than rapid change: We need longtime neighborhood residents because they know how things work. They are the "people who have forged neighborhood networks." For this reason, Jacobs liked change that happened so gradually it is almost unnoticed.

The problems with public housing: Public housing had three fatal flaws, Jacobs believed. First, the projects were designed in ways that made them unsafe and unsustainable. Second, they forced out people when their earnings rose too high. Finally, public housing was unnecessary. "Perfectly ordinary housing needs can be provided for almost anybody by private enterprise," she wrote. What was needed wasn't government-built housing but rent subsidies.

Putting cars in their place: Jacobs wasn't anti-automobile. Living in cities with cars was better than living with horses, as big-city residents did in the 1800s. The problem wasn't the cars, she wrote, but their numbers—and the demands these cars placed on cities. What was needed, she believed, was gradual "attrition" of automobiles—"making conditions *less* convenient for cars." How? Widening sidewalks, adding crosswalks, extending parks to create dead ends, and so on. But even here, Jacobs urged caution. There's no need, she wrote, "to foist such improvements where they are not wanted. Streets and districts where appreciable numbers of people want and will enjoy such changes should get them; not streets or districts whose people will give them no support."

The need for short blocks: Jacobs bemoaned one feature of the automobile era, the long block. Reason: Long blocks make it difficult to walk from, say, home to a bus stop or a store. (She included illustrations to make her point.) The results, she said, were isolated and sterile neighborhoods, fewer stores and pedestrians, less demand for transit and fewer "eyes on the street."

The missing element in local government: Street neighborhoods (that is, the few blocks around where people live) are good for making human connections. Big cities are good at marshaling resources for change. What's missing is something in the middle, which Jacobs called "the district." "The chief function of a successful district," Jacobs writes, "is to mediate between the indispensable but inherently politically powerless street neighborhoods and the inherently powerful city as a whole." Few serve this purpose. "We have plenty of city districts in name," she says. "We have few that function."

Jacobs believed that districts (again, think of Buckhead or Collier Heights) could be more than advocates; they could act like mini-governments in some cases. Some services needed to be citywide, like water and sewer, jails, and pollution control, she wrote. But others, like street sweeping, business licensing, planning, police and fire services, would benefit from coordination at the district level.

Don't advisory groups like Atlanta's Neighborhood Planning Units serve this function? Jacobs' answer is characteristically blunt: ". . . In real life, advisory bodies lacking authority and responsibility are worse than useless for district administration. They waste everyone's time and inevitably succeed no better than anyone else in threading the impossible labyrinths of fractionalized bureaucratic empires."

Sixty-four years later, this book still packs a punch. And with the change of a few outdated terms ("slumming" and "unslumming," etc.), it stands the test of time. A few things have changed for the better since Jacobs wrote *Death and Life*. Public housing has changed forever. Cities are no longer as threatened by crime as they were. A movement has grown up around Jacobs' belief in mixed-use, mixed-income places.

But cities still wrestle with discredited ideas about neighborhoods, mobility, public safety and zoning. In our discussion, we'll ask what ideas from this 1961 book Urban Atlanta should focus on today.

Footnote: Among the books the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group has read, a number echo themes Jacobs first explored. Here are some of these books:

Vital role of sidewalks: Walkable City
Importance of mixed uses: Arbitrary Lines
Problems with cars: Paved Paradise, Right of Way
How neighborhoods work: Palaces for the People, The 15-Minute City
How low-income neighborhoods can improve themselves: Arrival City

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we'll discuss Jane Jacobs' book about cities and neighborhoods. And we'll look for ideas in this book that could make Urban Atlanta better.

Our meeting will be **Sept. 3., 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at **1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307**.

There's more information about this discussion at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website.

Preparing for the discussion

Here are some questions we'll consider in our discussion:

1. What are "big ideas" in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta? Are there assets that would help with their adoption?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles, using our assets?

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- You can download an e-book edition from the Amazon, Barnes & Noble or Apple websites.
- You can buy a paperback edition at Virginia-Highland Books.
- You can borrow a copy from the DeKalb County Public Library.