

BOOK REVIEW

Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary

by Alice Sparberg Alexiou

Rutgers University Press, 2006, 231 pages

Reviewed by Kristin L. Perkins

Believing it would only impede her own writing, urban theorist Jane Jacobs refused to assist her would-be biographers. As a result, journalist Alice Sparberg Alexiou's *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary*, inspired by Jacobs's stands against powerful figures like Robert Moses and commitment to Greenwich Village, is forced to uncover Jacobs's life from her published works. Alexiou situates Jacobs's life in the context of planning and planning history and discusses Jacobs's role in constructing that history.

Befitting the book's title, Jane Jacobs was indeed an urban visionary who worked to convince others of the benefits of city life. Jacobs was born Jane Butzner in 1916 to educated parents in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Even as a young child, Jacobs began to develop ideas about the reciprocity of city economies based on her observations of Scranton's economic decline. Jacobs struggled to graduate from high school but after moving from Scranton to New York City took courses at Columbia University's School of General Studies as a non-matriculating student. Even after two years at the School of General Studies, her application to Barnard was rejected because of her poor performance in high school, marking the end of her formal academic career. In New York, Jacobs first lived in Brooklyn then settled in Greenwich Village, which she soon grew to love. She married Robert Jacobs in 1944, soon after the two were introduced by her sister Betty Butzner. Alexiou notes the Jacobses' decision to remain in Greenwich Village to raise their children, unlike most young families who were leaving the city for Levittown and similar suburban communities. Despite her lack of formal education, Jacobs wrote for *Architectural Forum*, where she further developed her ideas about urbanism. Jacobs and her family vehemently protested the Vietnam War, and once her sons were of draft age, the family moved to Toronto. Although she thought that moving to Toronto would free her from time consuming redevelopment battles in New York, and allow her to return to her writing, she soon became involved in similar struggles in Toronto. Alexiou notes that Jacobs became an unofficial adviser to government officials in Toronto, much more so than she was in New York.

Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary focuses heavily on Jacobs's most famous book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, and gives less attention to Jacobs's later works, *The Economy of Cities*, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, *Systems of Survival*, and *The Nature of Economies*. Alexiou reminds the reader that *Death and Life* influenced a wide variety of people, from police officers to developers to academics. It coined the terms "social capital," "mixed primary uses," and "eyes on the street," and promoted diversity differentiating between density and overcrowding as "high densities mean large numbers of dwellings per acre of land. Overcrowding means too many people in a dwelling for the number of rooms it contains." Alexiou's biography recognizes, but does not expand upon criticisms that Jacobs did not adequately discuss race in *Death and Life* and did not suggest ways in which planners could reverse urban decline.

With particular success, Alexiou creatively develops a conversation between Jacobs and Lewis Mumford by frequently returning to their changing relationship. Mumford first met Jacobs in 1956 after her speech attacking urban renewal at a conference on urban design at Harvard University, where Jacobs was a last minute stand in for a colleague at *Architectural Review*. Mumford enjoyed her speech, and saw some of his own ideas reflected in hers. Their relationship soured in 1961 after both released major books, Jacobs's *Death and Life* and Mumford's *The Culture of Cities*. Mumford's book won the National Book Award, but that was little consolation for the unfavorable reviews he received compared to Jacobs's. In *Death and Life*, Jacobs herself referred to *The Culture of Cities* as a "morbid and biased catalog of ills." In Mumford's 1962 review of her book for the *New Yorker*, he recognized and complimented her ideas, but criticized her research and lack of practical solutions. Despite their criticisms of each other, Jacobs asked Mumford to help fight the Lower Manhattan Expressway in the early 1960s, and Mumford contributed what Jacobs called "a wonderfully effective letter" enumerating reasons why the expressway should not be built.

Alexiou successfully demonstrates Jacobs's prescience about issues affecting planning today. In developing ideas for *Death and Life*, Jacobs recognized that planners were taking her ideas too literally. After her Harvard speech, planners "began talking excitedly about 'the corner grocery store.' But all they got out of it was, 'put in a corner grocery store.' That was not at all what I was saying." This type of mistake continues to this day with a "build it and they will come" mentality, evidenced in mixed-use shopping and residential centers, office parks, and downtown lofts that pencil out but do not attract users. Alexiou describes Jacobs's impression that playgrounds and yards provided through neighborhood redevelopment were not necessarily what residents wanted in place of

stores and other lively neighborhood spots. Planners today still assume that public housing residents want playgrounds and other outdoor amenities despite resident concerns over the loss of what these amenities will replace.

Nevertheless, Alexiou's book has several shortcomings. Sections would be repetitive for planners familiar with 20th century American planning history and Jacobs's work. This is perhaps because of the author's background as a journalist, not a scholar of planning history. Alexiou's description of Jacobs's time in New York includes a superficial survey of planning themes and programs at this time, which would be more appropriate for someone unfamiliar with planning history.

In discussing Jacobs's work, Alexiou is too celebratory. The author champions Jacobs in her battles against redevelopment superpowers, first Edmund Bacon and Society Hill in Philadelphia, then Robert Moses's numerous projects in New York, most notably the Lower Manhattan Expressway. Alexiou's prose seems overdramatic in the sections about Jacobs's battles, especially Chapter Six's 'Save the West Village.' Later on, in 'The Quintessential American,' Alexiou writes "the fact is that among Canadians who know her work, Jane Jacobs is immune to criticism... Leave it for the academics to do the analyses. But for a good read, go to Jacobs."

Aside from its celebratory tone, Alexiou's book has other shortcomings. In defending Jacobs against repeated claims that she was merely an uneducated housewife and had no right to be making sweeping arguments against accepted planning practices, Alexiou cites other female authors who made important contributions in their respective fields by writing against the status quo: Betty Friedan and Rachel Carson. Both Friedan and Carson, however, were well educated; at the time she left graduate school, Friedan was working on her PhD in psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. Carson earned an undergraduate degree from Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham College), a master's degree in zoology from the Johns Hopkins University, and was working towards a PhD when family and financial burdens forced her to leave school. While it could be useful to draw more comparisons among these women, Alexiou stops short of convincing readers of their similarities and fails to effectively defend Jacob's against such claims.

The chapter titled 'Race, Gentrification, and the South Bronx' seems disconnected from the rest of the book. It provides an interesting opportunity for the author to analyze current development through a Jane Jacobs lens, but is not necessary for the comprehension of the rest of the book. It would fit better if it were integrated more fully into the discussion of Jacobs's work and accomplishments.

Alexiou's book is quite interesting and accessible. Given its content and style, *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary* would be a good choice for those unfamiliar with but interested in Jacobs's work and how it intersected with planning history at the time. A reader of this book will not have to know the content of Jacobs's work to understand what she accomplished and contributed to the field of planning. Published one month after Jacobs's death in 2006, the book presents her ideas and convictions to an audience beyond planning, architecture, and urban design academics and practitioners.

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