

Home economics

On Jane Jacobs: the defender of the city

SASKIA SASSEN

Robert Kanigel

EYES ON THE STREET

The life of Jane Jacobs
496pp. Knopf. \$35.
978 0 307 96190 7

Samuel Zipp and Nathan Storrington, editors

VITAL LITTLE PLANS

The short works of Jane Jacobs
544pp. Random House. \$28.
978 0 399 58960 7

Jane Jacobs is a major figure in urbanism. Her books are milestones of the discipline. As she lived her long life she never stopped expanding her research and honing her analysis of how cities work, notably embracing debates about the environment when they were still only emergent. Jacobs is generally considered a visionary and – by those who knew her from the barricades – a fighter, obstinate in her defence of cities from the onslaught of a legion of developers. Her duels in the mid-twentieth century with New York City’s master planner, Robert Moses, are the stuff of urban legend. One of Moses’s projects was to build a four-lane highway through a good stretch of Lower Manhattan – a rational project for someone concerned with enabling traffic flows, but a crime for someone concerned with preserving well-functioning neighbourhoods.

Two recent books take very different approaches to Jacobs’s work and life. *Vital Little Plans*, edited by Samuel Zipp and Nathan Storrington, is a collection of her short pieces of writing and interviews, beginning with Jacobs’s first publications in *Vogue*, *Architectural Forum* and *Fortune*. Robert Kanigel’s *Eyes on the Street* is a long and detailed biography, which takes us step by step across the various phases of Jacobs’s life, starting with a young Jane contesting her third grade teacher and ending with her in old age, still hard at work and signing a contract for a new book. As an activist, Jacobs made a knowledgeable case on whatever the issue of concern was and mobilized others. As a writer, she exposed cities’ inner workings. In her later, lesser-known books, she also turned to nature as an extension of her mission to protect the environment.

Yet it is the economy of cities that unites Jacobs’s work and connects her most famous trio of urban studies – *The Death and Life of American Cities* (1961), *The Economy of Cities* (1969) and *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (1984). “It doesn’t matter what else cities have”, she argued, “what grand temples they have, what beautiful scenery, wonderful people, or anything else – if their economy doesn’t work.” To understand how radical a proposition this was, we must recall that, at the time, cities were not the type of entity they are today – a point that Kanigel does not make emphatically enough. Most cities in the 1960s and 70s were poor – New York was bankrupt, and major cities abroad, from Paris to London and Tokyo, were broke. Mass manufacturing and the development of infrastructures took place elsewhere. Especially in the US, the draw was to live in the suburbs – which in large part explains Moses’s highway, intended as a gift to commuters. Jacobs succeeded in stopping its construction, which would have razed to the ground Washington Square Park and Lower Fifth Avenue, besides brownstones and small urban-style green spaces.

Even though Jacobs did not engage directly with the global economy, her focus on the economy of a city shows how well she understood their DNA beyond the way they looked. When the global economy got going in the

1980s, some cities became strategic assets for major corporations, even as manufacturing cities (for example, Detroit) became poorer. What made some cities rich was that they became, in my view, international intermediaries: when firms go global, they need access to a broad range of highly specialized services, often spread around the world. The big corporations had formerly produced most of these services in-house, but the new global era made this increasingly difficult: a firm that operates in seventy countries needs specialized information regarding the legal, accounting and financial features of each country. There comes a point when it is more efficient

book but it is here that Jacobs takes on economics as a discipline and economies as complex systems subject to laws and dynamics not fully captured in standard economic models (particularly environmental destruction). The intellectual struggle in her book is the attempt to reconnect to nature while maintaining the specificity of the “man-made world”. She does this not by providing a treatise-treatment of the subject but rather by making us party to fictional conversations, modelled on platonic dialogues, between a group of friends as they challenge each others’ ways of thinking about certain interrelated issues. The need to stop focusing “on things and shift attention to the processes that generate the things”, for example, should, in turn, blur the distinction between nature and economy. Thus aeroplanes are made by engineers and in that regard they are not nature; yet engineers use the laws of nature to make planes. As do winemakers and bakers. And nature tells us that money is similarly a feedback information mechanism. Jacobs is at pains to situate economies in a broader set of possibilities and limits, laws and contingencies, and to show the many ways in which economics has got stuck on a very narrow range of ideas – namely the production of goods – and failed to consider the extent to which such product growth rested on the destruction of often non-replaceable natural resources.

loved spending time with friends and Kanigel describes the door to her home as always open, ready to receive. But she could also be irritable. One episode recounted here took place in the Lion’s Head, a restaurant and pub in New York well described by Kanigel as a sort of headquarters for the battle against urban renewal. Diane Arbus, early in her career, was sent by *Esquire* to photograph Jacobs. This was a significant assignment for Arbus, but not so for Jacobs, who lost patience with Arbus’s need to get the right pose, the right setting, the right angle. (The White Horse, another fixture of Jacobs’s and of Greenwich Village which still exists, but is not mentioned by Kanigel, was where she would have a quiet martini. Usually, she was the only woman in the bar.)

Many of the pieces collected in *Vital Little Plans* capture Jacobs’s relentless pursuit of what she considered crucial at specific times and places – for example, her emphasis on the misalignments that make history. She comments that at the time the *Titanic* was built, metallurgy had not advanced as much as engineering; engineers were able to design the largest man-made movable object, but the steel available could not withstand the stress of the ship’s size, so it cracked under low impact with an iceberg. Yet it was the best steel of its time. And this shows why things do not stay the way they are.

The editors’ introduction is a feast of details and insights. One learns not only about Jacobs and where she stood vis-a-vis this or that critique of her own work, but also about the contexts (cities, the natural world) within which her contributions played out – something that traditional economists did not do. That “she saw the city as akin to an ecosystem with many moving parts, each with its own relationships to the others” was a “touchstone of her later work”, but the editors suggest radical ideas such as this were already present in her first writings for *Vogue* and other early publications in the 1960s. The way in which the editors have organized this trove of short pieces works beautifully: “A City Naturalist, 1934–1952”; “City Building, 1952–1965”; “How New York Begins, 1965–1984”; “The Ecology of Cities, 1984–2000”; and “Some Patterns of Future Development, 2000–2006”. These sections underline her consistent commitments, and give us nearly a century of urban history.

Towards the end of her life, Jacobs began work on a new book, “Uncovering the Economy”, but death interrupted her. Zipp and Storrington have included the first section in *Vital Little Plans* and tell us it “reveals her final understanding of how economic growth unfolds”. Jacobs argues that healthy cities are where new work springs up, where the “dense fabric of interdependencies incubates economic expansion and innovations at large”. “Cultivating vibrant urban centers with small, diverse commercial and industrial enterprises”, she writes, “is the linchpin of any meaningful strategy to combat decline.” This has become a widely accepted notion today. It wasn’t when Jane Jacobs invoked it in her battles to save downtown Manhattan.



Jane Jacobs, New York City, 1961

to buy in such services rather than expanding one’s staff to produce them in-house. This type of demand requires a highly networked concentration of specialized services for corporations and the financial sector: we can think of it as a sort of “silicon valley” deep inside major cities for inventing and developing these types of services.

Jacobs’s later books were more daring still, both in terms of her ideas and the means through which she shared them. *The Nature of Economics* (2000) is barely discussed in Kanigel’s

Some of the most enjoyable passages in Kanigel’s book capture Jacobs’s mixture of cool enthusiasm and determination when coming up with new book ideas. Those who spent time with her in later years – from the journalist and urban consultant Roberta Gratz to her niece Lucia Jacobs – speak of her ever-ready disposition to write. Jason Epstein, her longtime editor, stands out for his intelligent understanding of Jacobs as a writer, in particular his willingness to wait (Jacobs’s concept of time ranged rather widely). Jacobs welcomed distractions – she