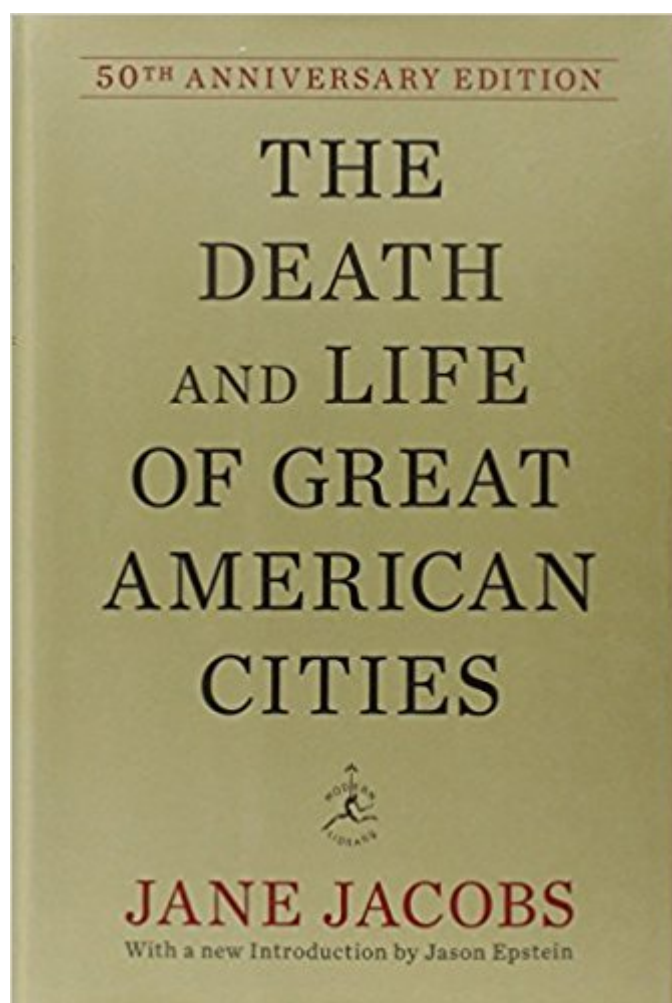


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The Death And Life Of Great American Cities: 50th Anniversary Edition (Modern Library)



Synopsis

Published to coincide with the 50th anniversary of its initial publication, this special edition of Jane Jacobs's masterpiece, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, features a new Introduction by Jason Epstein, the book's original editor, who provides an intimate perspective on Jacobs herself and unique insights into the creation and lasting influence of this classic. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was described by *The New York Times* as "perhaps the most influential single work in the history of town planning. . . . [It] can also be seen in a much larger context. It is first of all a work of literature; the descriptions of street life as a kind of ballet and the bitingly satiric account of traditional planning theory can still be read for pleasure even by those who long ago absorbed and appropriated the book's arguments." Jane Jacobs, an editor and writer on architecture in New York City in the early sixties, argued that urban diversity and vitality were being destroyed by powerful architects and city planners. Rigorous, sane, and delightfully epigrammatic, Jane Jacobs's tour de force is a blueprint for the humanistic management of cities. It remains sensible, knowledgeable, readable, and indispensable.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Refreshing, provocative, stimulating and exciting . . . It fairly crackles with bright honesty and common sense."—*The New York Times* "One of the most

remarkable books ever written about the city . . . a primary work. The research apparatus is not pretentious—it is the eye and the heart—but it has given us a magnificent study of what gives life and spirit to the city. • William H. Whyte, author of *City: Rediscovering the Center*

Jane Jacobs (1916–2006) was a writer and activist who championed new approaches to urban planning for more than forty years. Her 1961 treatise, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, became perhaps the most influential American text about the inner workings and failings of cities, inspiring generations of urban planners and activists. Her efforts to stop the building of downtown expressways and protect local neighborhoods invigorated community-based urban activism and helped end Parks Commissioner Robert Moses's reign of power in New York City. • Jason Epstein is the recipient of many awards, including the National Book Award for Distinguished Service to American Letters, the Lifetime Achievement Award of the National Book Critics Circle, and the Curtis Benjamin Award given by the American Association of Publishers for enriching the world of books. For many years he was editorial director of Random House. He is the author of *Book Business: Publishing Past, Present, and Future* and *Eating*.

Every person living in a city should read this book. Most of us who have studied Jane Jacobs are either architects, urbanists or simply interested in how cities work. However Jane Jacobs as an ordinary citizen that was worried about how modern urbanism has been destroying humanity's natural tendency to produce living spaces according to our social norms, and not because of our addiction to automobiles. The more people read this book, the closer we will be to fixing what modernism in urban design has done to enslave us to the use of autos, and how our lives have changed in a negative way by such design.

A nice, civilian look at urban life, specifically on the city sidewalk. Jacobs is informed, but not expert, and her writing reflects this. This is not a bad thing, as it gives a very human account of living in a city that architects and planners sometimes forget. Note: this does not do a great job of showing how people relate to spaces as they move. The perspective of urban spaces is mostly static with characters coming and going. For this reason, it pairs well with Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City*, which focuses on the connections between locales to create a single, broad image. This is required reading to participate in conversation on contemporary city planning and design.

This book will change the way you look at any city, including your own neighborhood. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the book is its use of common sense observations of patterns we have all seen, and participate in, but rarely pay attention to - after all, that's just the way it is, right? Turns out, what we experience as members of any neighborhood, and what the city planning and architects of our communities have in mind are all too often entirely different models. What makes a successful community? What does it mean for a community to be successful? How does diversity come into play, why is it important, and how do we design our cities for it? Why do the planned communities feel so devoid of any sense of, well, community? How do you know if your neighborhood is on the decline? Jane Jacobs tackles all of the above, and much more. You don't have to be an engineer, an architect, or a planner to appreciate the arguments - after all, given the meteoric rise and growth of cities, most of us today live in one. Well written, and very educational.

I was a key part of efforts in the 1960s in Detroit to implement the Urban Renewal and Model Cities programs. How little we actually knew!!! It is mind-blowing to know that Jane Jacobs even then had such significant insights into all that we were mindlessly doing wrong. This is a must read for anyone and everyone who has a stake in city-building. It is sometimes long, and sometimes tedious, but it is always on point.

Not that urban planning is as important as the foundations of physics, but Jacobs strikes me as the urban planning equivalent of Isaac Newton. Neither invented their subject matter in a void. Instead, they built upon the knowledge accumulated by their predecessors. But neither accepted the prevalent interpretations of that knowledge. Both sought to find new and more accurate explanations, Newton by well-constructed experiments and Jacobs by careful observation of the vast examples offered by New York City. Both were criticized for taking credit for work that had been done by others, but history has vindicated both and recognized their achievements. Jane Jacobs came to urban planning through a side door, which may explain why she blazed new trails. An indifferent high school student, she began her working life doing clerical work for journalists. Gradually finding her passions in life, she continued her education at a college level, taking a wide range of courses. She was also given opportunities to write, mostly about the neighborhoods of New York City. Her enthusiasm for city life led to attendance at several national conferences on urban planning issues. But Jacobs was dissatisfied with what the others at the conferences expounded. She felt a persistent skepticism about the theories of that were behind the urban planning decisions of the 1950s. She retreated to her home in Greenwich Village, observed the street life below,

formulated alternative theories, and looked further in the city to see if her theories held up. They did. A scan of her table of contents can get the urban planning adrenaline flowing. "The uses of sidewalks: assimilating children", "The need for primary mixed uses", "The need for small blocks", "The curse of border vacuums". Any of those is enough to cause an urban planning junkie into an avid page-turner. A couple of years ago, I was in New York City on a vacation. Early one morning, two friends and I walked in Greenwich Village. For me, a required stop was Jacob's former home at 555 Hudson Street. It was in good repair, but showed no evidence of Jacobs having lived there. Nonetheless, I found it moving to look at the window from which she made her profound observations more than fifty years ago.

Just as meaningful as when it was written. Highly recommended

For anyone who wants to understand what keeps cities vibrant, must read this book. Although I enjoyed the story of Jane Jacobs defeating the mighty Robert Moses, *Wrestling with Moses*, this book describes in a lively fashion the elements that go into a dynamic city. In view of the fact that Jane Jacobs had no formal training as a city planner, she understood the importance of understanding the human aspects of change and development of urban life that kept cities alive or condemned them to death. One of the best examples is the effect the Cross Bronx Expressway had on the decline of the south Bronx.

The phenomenon Jacobs wrote of over 50 years ago is one we sadly see continuing today. Refreshing to have activists like Jane Jacobs speaking out against that.

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