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# The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety

From the Death and Life of Great  
American Cities

Introduction to Urban Design  
and Planning- ARCT 421

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## Introduction:

Jane Jacobs (1916-2006), a neighborhood activist and associate editor of *Architectural Forum*, wrote about the life in the city and urban planning. Jacobs was more concerned in her writings about the personal safety issues associated with the everyday life of people more than the overall state urban art-planning techniques. Furthermore, Jacobs wants to restore dignity to streets and sidewalks by understanding the kinds of activities and relationships they support, while re-evaluating parks and open space, including their dependence on streets and sidewalks for their vitality, interest, and safety.\*

Her first published book "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" (see figure 1), was clearly seen as an attack on the planning establishment and on the massive urban renewal projects. Her book went in contrast to what most articles of faith suggest, that parks were good and crowded sidewalks were bad, instead she mention that crowded sidewalks were the safest place for children to play and that parks were dangerous. Moreover, the book encouraged many college- educated people to seek out neighborhoods such as Greenwich Village to live.

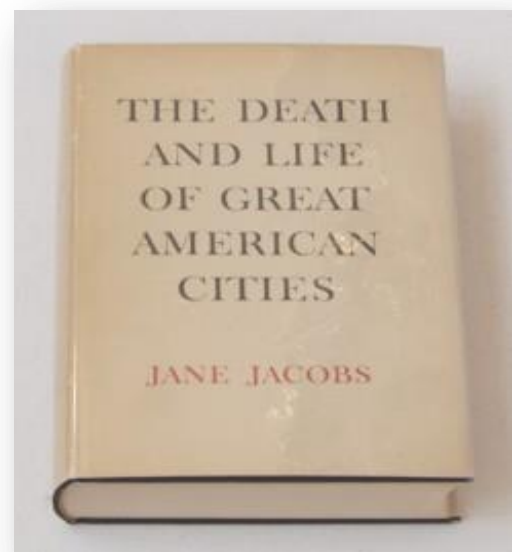


Figure 1: cover page of the book

\* The Maryland Institute College of Art. (2008, February). An introduction to Jane Jacobs,. Retrieved from <http://>

## Contextual Information:

### Geographical:

The books talks about some famous streets in great American cities such as the Hudson Street in Greenwich Village, New York. And Los-Angeles, California

### Urban:

#### Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>:

1. Surrounded by the Pacific Ocean from south
2. Various climatic conditions. The main weather influence is the warm, moist Pacific air.

#### New York<sup>2</sup>:

1. Most culturally diverse, and the most attractive urban center in the country.
2. Greenwich Village means alternative lifestyles

### Time Period:

1950's late modernism.

### Author Background<sup>3</sup>:

- Born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, 1916
- Moved to Greenwich Village in New York City, 1928
- Associate editor of Architectural Forum, 1952
- Wrote *The Death and Life of American Cities*, 1961
- In 1962, she was Chairperson of the Joint Committee to Stop the Lower Manhattan Expressway.
- Protesting the Vietnam War, she and her family emigrated to Toronto, Canada in 1968, where she continued to work as an urban activist.
- She died in Toronto, in 2006 at the age of 90.



Figure 2: Jane Jacobs

1 New York City (New York, United States). (n.d.). Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved, from <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/412352/New-York-City>

2 Los Angeles: Geography and Climate. (n.d.). Los Angeles: Geography and Climate. Retrieved, from <http://www.city-data.com/us-cities/The-West/Los-Angeles-Geography-and-Climate.html>

3 Jane Jacobs. (2014). The Biography.com website. Retrieved 10:54, Apr 14, 2014, from <http://www.biography.com/people/jane-jacobs-9351679>.

## Planning Theory: SAFETY as an important sidewalks' characteristic

### Purpose of Streets:

City streets serve many purposes like landscape, circulation, vehicles traffic and parking, as well as pedestrian sidewalks. (See figure 3)

The pedestrian sidewalks have so many uses beside carrying pedestrian, with the conjunction of buildings and other uses that surround it, or surround any sidewalks very near it; they become more of a main public space of a city. Moreover, a city's streets and sidewalks reflect the city itself. In other words, if the streets look interesting so does the city.



Figure 3: a street in US in the 1950's

### Benefits of Sidewalks:

Sidewalks serve not only as pedestrian walkways, but also have some benefits including safety, mobility, and healthier communities.

Jacob's exact words were, that if someone said that a city "is dangerous" than he/she probably means that he/she did not feel secure or safe when walking in the sidewalks of its main streets. Therefore, we understand that Jacobs linked the safety of the sidewalk to the safety of the entire city itself.

*"We all have been through neighborhoods with sidewalks that are unused. We also have all been through neighborhoods with sidewalks full of people..... Jacobs proposes that neighborhoods with active sidewalk life are typically the safe neighborhoods" (Eaker, 2008)\**

\* Eaker, C. (2008, October 18). The Art of Place making.  
Retrieved from <http://placemaking.wordpress.com/2008/10/18/the-use-of-sidewalks-safety/>

### Problems regarding city and street safety:

**First:** the city is said to be safe of barbarism and fear, only if its streets are safe from barbarism and fear. This is mainly because, when people say that they feel safe or dangerous in a certain city, they probably mean that they feel safe or dangerous on the sidewalks of the city's streets. Therefore, and in Jacob's own words "to keep the city safe is a fundamental task of a city's streets and its sidewalks" (Jacobs, 1961)

**Second:** the other issue is that great cities, unlike towns, are large and full of people, they are full of strangers. When a person feels safe and secure on the streets between all these strangers, then a city district by definition is successful.

Going back to the era of 1950's Jacobs stated:

"today, barbarism has taken over many cities or people fear it has..." (Jacobs, 1961). She

also mentioned few examples from her personal life; her friend who lived in a lovely, quiet residential area, as she would say. "The only

**disturbing thing is the scream at the middle of the night of someone being mugged**". This

forced her to look for another house in another neighborhood. Another example, an

incident that took place in Hudson street (see figure 4). A crazy, drunk young man from the suburbs roaring dreadful language at two girls, at midnight.



Figure 4: Hudson Street in 1975

### Principles of Peace and Safety of Sidewalks:

**First:** The first thing to understand is that the public safety and peace of sidewalks as well as streets can't be kept primarily by the Police. It is primarily kept and enforced by people themselves.

**Second:** The second thing is that the issue of unsafety cannot be solved by scattering people more finely. A great well known example is the sidewalks of Los Angeles (see figure 5), which stands so pre-eminent in crime, crime associated with personal attacks, that makes people more scared of streets.



Figure 5: Los Angeles in the 1950's

**Third:** it is well known that a well-used and a busy sidewalk tend to be safer than deserted, unused sidewalk.

**Forth:** in her book, Jacob stated that sidewalks must have what she calls "an eye on the street" a sidewalk must have users on it continuously. These users are known as shop owners. Indeed, sellers and owners of the shops bonding the streets and its sidewalks can serve as street guards -eye of the street- 24 hours a day. Moreover, the many activities that can take place in these shops can attract more people to use it. Therefore, when the sidewalk is being used intensely by large amount of people, people will feel safer.

### How do shops and store owners abet sidewalks safety?

Stores, bars and restaurants (see figure 6), located along the edges of the sidewalks, work in many ways to ensure and abet sidewalks' safety:

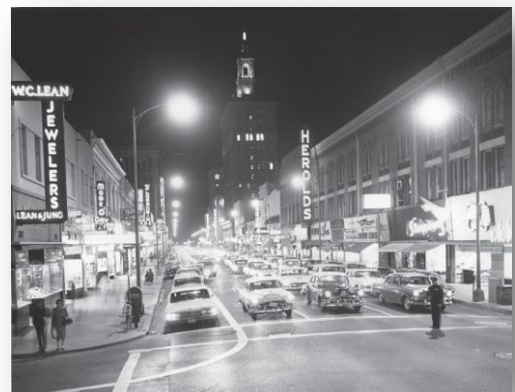
1. They give both residents and strangers strong reasons for using the sidewalks on which these enterprises face.

2. Storekeepers and other shop owners are usually strong organizers of peace and order in sidewalks.

As an example of that, shop owners hate broken windows, they also hate having costumers made nervous about safety. This makes them a great street and sidewalk watchers and guards.

3. Activities which are generated by people themselves aiming for food or drinks, are more like an attraction to other people. This means that the sight of people attract other people. Instead of observing and using an empty sidewalk, people like to watch sidewalks that are full of people and activities. An example of that, what Jacobs stated about her observing the people and their daily activities in Hudson Street where she used to live.

*"While I sweep up the wrappers I watch the other rituals of morning: Mr. Halpert unlocking the laundry's handcart from its mooring to a cellar door....."* (Jacobs, 1961)



**Figure 6: a sidewalk in New York, 1950's bonded by shops and stores**

4. Activities bonding the edges of sidewalks tend to attract children to play in the sidewalks rather than in off sidewalks areas such as rear yards or a playground. By doing so, the sidewalks help in making the children more secure and safe. In other words, children playing in the sidewalks are observed by many, and are less likely for any stranger to hurt or assaulting them\*.

### Sidewalks in the city of Doha, Qatar today:

What is happening now in Doha the capital city of Qatar is the same as what happened before in the great cities of America back in the 1950's. With great and fast urban development's taking place in many separated locations in the city of Doha. We, as citizens and residents living in Doha, are suffering from the lack of security and safety in the sidewalks of the main streets of the city. This problem prevented us from playing, walking, or using the streets in any other way except passing by it with our cars. Some of the reasons are:

**First:** over the last few decades, many people from different nationalities and countries around the world have immigrated to Qatar, especially to Doha; due to that lack of safety and security occurred, as there are many strangers from different nationalities around us.

**Second:** sidewalks are not being well taken care of. You can hardly find any shops, restaurants or stores bonding the sidewalks. And as Jacobs mentioned in her text that no one like to watch or use an empty street with no activities.

**Third:** the bad condition of most roads and sidewalks, due to the continuous road repairs, prevent people from using it comfortably. Therefore, prevented people from using it at all.

**Forth:** not to mention the extremely hot and sunny weather throughout the year, and the lack of shaded sidewalks, makes walking in the street like walking in hell!!!!



## Conclusion:

To sum Up, through her books and especially her first published book " *The Death and Live of Great American Cities*" Jane Jacobs was more concern about the daily life of the great cities, and how urban planning and the design of public spaces such as sidewalks affected the daily life of the citizens of that city. This is in fact due to her being a user of the public space more than the designer of it. She knew and understands what people felt and how they reacted toward public spaces, as she was one of them, one of the users.

Her Constant argument through her book was that urban renewal did not respect the needs of most city-dwellers.

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1. Eaker, C. (2008, October 18). *The Art of Place making*. Retrieved from <http://placemaking.wordpress.com/2008/10/18/the-use-of-sidewalks-safety/>
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