

What might Jane Jacobs say about smart cities?

By [Sarah Barns](#)

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This May, urbanists around the world have been celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of [Jane Jacobs](#). The American-Canadian author and activist's spirited defence of inner-city neighbourhoods inspired a generation of urban activists and place-makers. So what might Jacobs have to teach a new generation of urbanists and planners?



Jane Jacobs holds up documentary evidence at a 1961 press conference during the campaign to save the West Village.
[Wikimedia Commons](#)

Much of Jacobs' legacy stems from the successful "David and Goliath" campaigns she led in the late 1950s and 1960s against the development plans of Manhattan's "master builder" [Robert Moses](#).

Her first battle, to prevent an extension of Fifth Avenue that would have torn apart her beloved Washington Square Park, was followed by a series of protracted community campaigns. These ultimately saved some of Manhattan's most iconic neighbourhoods – Greenwich Village, SoHo, Little Italy – from "slum clearance" and demolition.

At this time, many Americans were retreating to the suburbs, and city planners – epitomised by Moses, then head of the powerful Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, which managed vast tracts of land in New York City – imposed their "comprehensive city plans" on neighbourhoods, with scant input from local communities.

Working under the spell of Le Corbusier's vision of the "Radiant City" ([Ville Radieuse](#)), planners like Moses saw themselves playing the heroic role of a city's surgeon. They justified their radical urban plans through appeals to natural or scientific principle. For Le Corbusier, automobiles were machines of circulation, the "lifeblood of the 20th century"; cities needed them to avoid stagnation.

Corbusier's 'Cosmopolitan City for 3 Million Inhabitants', Architectural World, 1922 [World Streets](#)

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In love with the 'sidewalk ballet'

Jacobs resisted this vision. In her first and most influential book, [The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#), Jacobs attacked planners for ruining the cultures of cities. She saw the modernist vision of cities as:

“ ... the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be served. ”

Jacobs wrote:

“ When city designers try to find a design device that will express, in a clear and easy fashion, the ‘skeleton’ of city structure (expressways and promenades are current favourites for this purposes) they are on fundamentally the wrong track. A city’s very structure consists of a mixture of uses ... We get close to its structural secrets when we deal with the conditions that generate diversity. ”

Instead of city spines and clean lines, she asked her readers to look more closely at what makes a street really work. She loved the “intricate sidewalk ballet”, a complex order that helped to maintain public safety and wellbeing through a “constant succession of eyes”.

The complexity of a place made it impossible to replicate.

“ The ballet of the good city never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place it is always replete with new observations. ”

Jacobs’ polemic against urban planning would become its orthodoxy. *Death and Life* has been required reading for students of urban planning for decades. Today they learn of the failed spaces created by modernist planners and the geographies of single-use enclaves and far-flung highways they spawned.

Jacobs’ campaigning inspired urban activists around the world to stage protests in their own cities. This helped usher in a new era of citizen-centric planning frameworks.

As [Saskia Sassen wrote recently](#), it was Jacobs who first urged the need to recognise the value of “place” when considering the implementation of urban policies.

Is Jane Jacobs still relevant or useful?

Although Jacobs is a profoundly influential figure in 20th-century urbanism, in many respects her radicalism can feel like it belongs to another era.

The Manhattan districts she fought to preserve represent some of the most expensive real estate in the world, so it’s hard to disagree that a city’s dense, historic core might be worth preserving. Economist [Edward Glaeser talks about “Jacobs Spillovers”](#) – the transfers of knowledge and activity that help to explain the generation of wealth in cities like New York and London.

Some might even ask: was Jacobs simply one of the first to fly the [NIMBY](#) flag against any developments taking place within the prized neighbourhoods they helped to gentrify?

But if we take a closer look at what Jacobs had to say – and *how she said it* – it becomes clear her ideas remain as radical and important as they were in the 1960s.

This is perhaps no more so than in relation to rise of the “smart city”.

Smart cities and the rise of a new urban science

Today’s smart cities are big business, powered by the potential for [big data](#) and the [internet of things](#) to improve the efficiencies of urban systems. Smart cities offer solutions to improve transport management, make better investment decisions, improve accountability and promote transparent decision-making.

The premise is that with so much data (big data) being produced, planners, governments and researchers can better understand cities as complex systems, and make better decisions about how they are planned and managed.

This explosion of data in cities – from traffic data, through mobile communications data to sensor data capturing the behaviour of natural systems and the everyday uses of infrastructure assets – is giving rise to a new “urban science”.

This incorporates machine learning, predictive analytics and complexity science. Its champions – such as [Mike Batty](#) and [Luis Bettencourt](#) – argue that we are starting to see the emergence of Jacobs’ “sidewalk ballet” in data-driven form.

But while the rise of big data and smart cities opens up possibilities for cities that were previously unthinkable, we should also be wary of the limitations.

The fine arts of urban observation

Jacobs wasn’t simply claiming that cities should be understood as complex systems.

At a perhaps deeper level, Jacobs was arguing against visions of the city over-determined by the technologies that produce them: for LeCorbusier, as for Moses, the view of the city enabled by the innovation of flight helped give rise to new urban utopias like the Radiant City.

‘We are Data Watchdogs’: a video game that explores the implications of data-driven approaches to solve urban problems.<http://wearedata.watchdogs.com/>

In writing *Death and Life*, Jacobs was also resisting the dominance of expert knowledge about a city, in favour of a democracy of lived experiences and everyday insights. She once reflected that:

“ ... *learning and thinking about city streets and the trickiness of city parks launched me into an unexpected treasure hunt.* ”

As a new generation of planners are taught of the possibilities of a data-driven urban science, we need to remember that Jacobs’ love of the sidewalk ballet also gave voice to the multiple languages, meanings, experiences and knowledge systems that underpin a vibrant urban culture.

Not all of these can be rendered by data-driven systems. Hopefully, the best insights into a city’s infinite complexity won’t only be produced by those trained with the skills to generate insights from big data.

Mobile phone data in Portugal show an average urban dweller of Lisbon has approximately twice as many contacts as an average individual in the rural town of Lixa.[Kael Greco, MIT](#)

□ [Senseable City Lab](#)

The “data exhaust” of our daily lives will increasingly shape the way cities are understood. Much work remains to be done

to ensure a cities data infrastructure is valued as a fundamental public asset.

But I can hear Jacobs issuing a word of warning: don't forget to keep taking unexpected treasure hunts through city parks and keep your eyes on the street (not on your phones!). And keep listening out for different lived experiences and ways of knowing a place – not only those that can be rendered real-time as the data flows of complex systems.

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