

Jane Jacobs, the Torontonion

by Barry Wellman

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1. *Jane Jacobs at home in Toronto*

Shortly before Jane Jacobs's death in April 2006, I walked by her house and smiled. While I always smile when I go by on my walk to work, there was more reason this time. Parked only a few metres away was a pickup truck with the Ontario vanity plate: "US Vet." The phrase was doubly ironic.

First, Jane and family had moved to Toronto at the end of the 1960s in large part to avoid their sons' being drafted into the U.S. Army to fight in Vietnam – so that they wouldn't become U.S. vets. Why Toronto? Her son, Ned Jacobs, says that they wanted a big city, but didn't speak French.

Second, Jane herself was a U.S. vet. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* had made famous her hymns to active U.S. neighbourhoods, and she had helped stop a New York expressway just before moving to Toronto.

Like other expatriate New Yorkers I know, she loved Toronto's combination of liveability and urbanity. In an article published in the *Globe and Mail* in 1969 titled, "A City Getting Hooked on the Expressway Drug," she wrote:

As a relatively recent transplant from New York, I am frequently asked whether I find Toronto sufficiently exciting. I find it almost too exciting. The suspense is scary. Here is the most hopeful and healthy city in North America, still unmangled, still with options.

In central Toronto, I routinely walk down short Jacobsean blocks. There are small parks serving dogs,

kids, sunbathers, lappoppers, and the homeless. Her block, like others in our neighbourhood, is filled with densely packed old and new buildings. The streets have many intersections and opportunities for people to take alternative routes. Toronto's main Bloor Street is a block from her house, with two storeys of apartments and offices sitting on top of family-owned retail stores and restaurants. Always lively with pedestrians, Bloor's mixed uses serve shifting populations: workmen, shoppers and mothers with carriages by day; restaurant, movie and concert goers by night; and students around the clock.

I often saw Jane walking on Bloor Street. I would also see her selling her famous brownies at fairs sponsored by the neighbourhood association. She died at Toronto Western Hospital, about 15 blocks from her house.

Jane practised what she preached. Jane – no one who knew her said "Ms" or "Mrs. Jacobs" – lived almost her entire time in Toronto in a sturdy, three-storey semi-detached brick house built in the early twentieth century in the central Annex neighbourhood, two blocks from the Bathurst subway station. She would often sit on her large shaded porch, keeping her eyes on the street, and smiling as she watched the world go by. Sociology graduate student Bernie Hogan recalls how they would wave at each other as he walked to school. Despite her advice in *Death and Life*, we never saw a frying pan in her hand, ready to use as a peacekeeper. But she did maintain a rooftop vegetable garden for many years.

I have been amused that American obituaries treated Jane as a New Yorker, even though she lived

half of her adult life in Toronto. Their American chauvinism reminded me of the prominent sociologist who in April 2006 proclaimed that the only two schools of urban thought were Chicago-style and LA-style. Jane's American obituaries, such as Douglas Martin's in the *New York Times*, usually had a paragraph near the end mentioning that she had moved to Canada in 1969, as if she had dropped into a black hole. The only exception I have found is the obituary in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

The one British obituary I read (Simon Jenkins in *The Guardian*) never got beyond New York City either, although it praised *Death and Life* profusely:

In a single, devastating book Jane Jacobs crammed insights in human behaviour as deep as any by Freud, Keynes or Hayek. I cannot read her *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* without constantly slamming it shut, hurling it to the floor and shouting, "Yes!" Jacobs stepped out of her New York front door sometime in the late-1950s and became the Charles Darwin of the city. She observed. She watched her street, her neighbourhood, her city, how they moved, breathed, changed over time. Like Darwin she tore up the rule book. Unlike him, her message was acclaimed – and then ignored. The urban "creationists" survive on all sides, with themselves as creators.

2. Jane Jacobs: Toronto Activist and Policy Advisor

In spring 2006, Toronto grieved and remembered *their* Jane: her activist work to apply *Death and Life's* precepts and her intellectual work to build on its insights. As I write on May 3 at 9:00 in the evening, a local TV station called City Pulse 24 – even the name is Jacobsean – is hosting an hour-long live memorial from Dooney's bistro and coffeehouse: a local hangout on Bloor Street, down the street from Jane's house.

On the show, Toronto mayor David Miller and former mayor David Crombie are talking about how they have applied Jane's precepts to their work. Jane had advised Crombie and worked on Miller's post-election transition team. Could New York mayors Rudolph Giuliani or Michael Bloomberg have said that? In

April 2005, Jane had written to mayor Bloomberg opposing plans to build 400-foot towers in Greenpoint and Williamsburg. In this letter, she pointed out, "I am not a resident of New York although most of what I know about cities I learned in New York during the almost half-century of my life here." Bloomberg never replied.

Despite her well-deserved American fame, Jane made an even more sustained, active and varied contribution to Toronto's urbanity. When she arrived, she plunged into the ongoing fight to stop the building of the Spadina Expressway. This was similar to her battle in New York City against Robert Moses' Lower Manhattan Expressway, except more important. The Spadina Expressway would have dumped a great deal of traffic into the heart of many Toronto residential neighbourhoods. It was promoted by provincial and Metro Toronto politicians, suburban commuters, downtown office magnates, Moses-mesmerized planners, and even Toronto's planning guru, Hans Blumenfeld (a pacifist professionally oriented towards the centralizing, modernist left). In response, a mass movement developed, led by academics and professionals whose neighbourhoods would bear the brunt of traffic.

Several years of struggle led to new Ontario premier William Davis killing the project in 1971 with a Jacobsean pronouncement:

If we are building a transportation system to serve the automobile, the Spadina Expressway would be a good place to start. But if we are building a transportation system to serve the people, the Spadina Expressway would be a good place to stop.

Jane also plunged into a long-term fight against replacing low-rise buildings with high-rise apartment towers. Toronto's most radical recent mayor, John Sewell recalls that when he was a city alderman, Jane ordered him to help tear down the hoarding around a demolition project, because she knew that it was against the law to demolish a building unless a hoarding surrounded it. "I can't," he said. "You must," she replied. And he did.

As I walk down Bloor Street, I recall that Jane helped stop the Starbucks coffee shop chain from out-

Toronto activist

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ing Dooney's, a neighbourhood café and hangout. It was at Dooney's that I told Jane in 2002 that she had won the Outstanding Lifetime Achievement Award of the American Sociological Association's Community and Urban Sociology section. It was the first time that a non-sociologist had ever been given this annual award, but the wonder is that it took so long.

The 2002 Dooney's occasion was a sad one. We were holding a wake for urban sociologist Alan Powell. He had been the organizational leader of the Stop Spadina movement, in tandem with Jane, its ideological leader and spokeswoman.

Now, in May 2006, Dooney's café is where I go yet again for a memorial – to present condolences for Jane's death on behalf of the ASA's Community and Urban Sociology section, and where Jane's family, Toronto's mayor, and past mayors gather for a remembrance. At Dooney's, former mayor Barbara Hall recalls how she asked Jane to work on planning the revitalization of two downtown neighbourhoods: King-Parliament and King-Spadina. (Barbara is probably the only mayor, in office or out, to host a reception for the Community and Urban Sociology section, treating us at City Hall to wine, veggies, and a long lecture on what it is like to run a big city.)

Paul Bedford, Toronto's chief planner during Mayor Hall's term, said that Jane kept encouraging him to take risks and to experiment in the King-Parliament and King-Spadina areas:

We abolished the density numbers, the land use designations and put in place an urban design framework. Really it was about encouraging re-use of buildings and opening up the uses to allow residential... She gave me the notion as chief planner that I had to take the lead, be visible, communicate with the people on all fronts. It was to bring planning to the people and demystify it. It gave me the courage to be an agent of change rather than an agent of the bureaucracy (quoted in the *Toronto Star* obituary).

Stopping Spadina was a great event for Toronto, but it was basically a rerun of the Lower Manhattan Expressway battle and a companion struggle with the Embarcadero fight in San Francisco, the Cambridge expressway fight in Massachusetts, and many others.

What made Jane's Toronto activities special is that she not only fought things, she also worked actively to build things.

Early in her Toronto career, she was even utopian, working with the Conservative government to plan a medium-density new neighbourhood on waterfront lands with high-tech light rail running high above-ground. Alas, when budget cutbacks came, Ontario Place got built only as an amusement park, albeit with a giant IMAX screen in a Buckminster Fuller dome.

She had more success in helping to get the St. Lawrence neighbourhood built on derelict lands near the waterfront: high-density, medium-rise, mixed-use, moderately priced buildings with short streets, and small, safe and accessible parks. Her activism and pronouncements reflected and amplified the *zeitgeist* of 1970s Toronto, as an urbane, liveable city with a vibrant downtown. Or as Peter Ustinov is reputed to have described it, "New York, run by the Swiss."

Jane continued her arguing, lecturing and consulting for 35 more years. Consider two of her last major fights. One was a battle against amalgamating central Toronto with its most immediate suburbs (1996-1997). Jane argued that the human scale would be lost in the "megacity." She won the argument – metropolitan Toronto voted in a referendum to reject amalgamation – but lost the battle – the Conservative provincial government

ignored the referendum and imposed amalgamation anyway.

The second battle in 2003 was more successful. She teamed up with mayoral candidate David Miller to stop improved access to a small island airport located near downtown Toronto. She argued that although businesspeople would get quicker access to Ottawa, Montreal and New York, neighbourhood residents would suffer from noise, traffic, and pollution. Although she may have overstated the dangers, she prevailed: current mayor Miller got elected on a stop-the-airport platform.

Whatever the scale – neighbourhood, megacity, or earth – and whatever the date – 1969 or 2003 – I would either see Jane or hear her quoted whenever I went to meetings. She was at the same time a world-famous ideologue; a backroom networker building coalitions,

Toronto builder

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lecturing city councils, and convincing mayors; and a sleeves-rolled-up worker in the trenches. As former mayor David Crombie recalls:

She really enjoyed the activist part: the strategy, the being on the streets, being at the meetings. She enjoyed meeting people, she enjoyed the vigour of activism (quoted in the *Toronto Star* obituary).

The result has helped make central Toronto lively and relatively safe. Toronto in no way resembles American doughnut cities, with their ghost town office centres. Toronto has lively, intensified main streets with mixed low-rise commercial and residential uses. There is well-used, widespread public transit. Even when developers build high-rise office towers, they often must commit to building residential homes in the same towers or near by. This year, the huge 1950s Regent Park high-rise housing project is being torn down and replaced by high-density lower-rise buildings. The downtown and central city are filled with people at all hours. As a recent article in *Metro Toronto* by Chris Atchison puts it:

Ask many Torontonians why they live in Canada's most populous city and they'll often cite their comfort level amongst a mixture of skyscrapers and diverse neighbourhoods. "[I like] the diversity of the different communities in the city" says carpenter Lane Antinori. "There are little villages ...and you can get anywhere easily."

3. Honouring the Canadian Jane

A public intellectual and outspoken pundit, Jane had the rare honour of being listened to by much of the Canadian populace and leadership. Where she had saved one neighbourhood in Manhattan, she saved many more in Toronto by word, deed, and inspiration. Even when she was ignored by mega-project promoters, Canadians felt warmed by knowing we were part of her human-

scale country. She received the Order of Canada award in 1996. As her citation puts it:

A social activist and a proponent of the principle of thinking globally and acting locally, she has left her indelible mark on the Toronto landscape. By stimulating discussion, change and action, she has helped to make Canadian city streets and neighbourhoods vibrant, liveable and workable for all.

In action, Jane was interpersonally warm and intellectually tough. She prided herself on being plain-spoken. Sometimes she was just ornery, as when she insisted repeatedly that academics despised her. When Beverly Wellman and I assured her that the sociological award we were presenting was just one symbol of how much esteem scholars had for her, she did not want to hear it. She would not go to anything academic at the University of Toronto, just five blocks from her house, and relented only when sympathizers began in 1997 a "Jane Jacobs: Ideas That Matter" annual symposium that celebrated her work.

People in universities who have learned from her views would have profited from

more give-and-take with her. Conversely, more contact with scholarly research might have provided evidence that communities are being transformed to counter her contention in *Dark Ages Ahead* that community and family are dying. This was Jane's last published book, written in her late eighties, and I have puzzled over the shift from *Death and Life*.

I've often wondered why I, having built my career on showing that neighbourhoods are not the only form of communities, liked neighbourhood-focused Jane so much. Partly, it is that we shared a style and sensibility as fellow New York Canadians. She loved cities and believed that they could be good places – whatever pessimists of the Chicago and Los Angeles schools say. She

Toronto resident

"I live at 69 Albany Avenue in Toronto," she said at the first *Ideas that Matter* conference, "but I also live in the universe."

The author with Jane Jacobs



cared deeply. Instead of resting on her early laurels, she worked to the end and was apparently writing at least one book at the time of her death. She made waves and inspired both those around her and those who read her. She preferred to debate directly, New York–style, rather than indirectly, Toronto-style.

“Once you know about fractals, you know you live in all of them,” Jane once said, a line that was quoted in her obituary in *NOW* magazine. She saw life as constructed of loosely connected networks – see *The Economy of Cities*, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, and *Systems of Survival*. For the paradox of Jane is that while she fought for neighbourhoods, she was all over Toronto – and the continent – networking for what she believed in. As she walked the streets of New York and Toronto, she saw particulars and envisioned universals. Thus she argued in *The Nature of Economies* that economies must harmonize with nature and not brutalize it through modernist mega-construction. “I live at 69

Albany Avenue in Toronto,” she said at the first *Ideas that Matter* conference, “but I also live in the universe.”

I walked by 69 Albany two weeks after Jane’s death, and all was as when she had lived there. There was no shrine, no piles of flowers, just a few chairs on a wide covered porch. A month later, the house went up for sale.

Jane not only talked the talk, she walked the walk, and she lived the life. Tomorrow, I will walk past her home again, look up and smile. I will miss her ideas, her advocacy, her waves – and her brownies.

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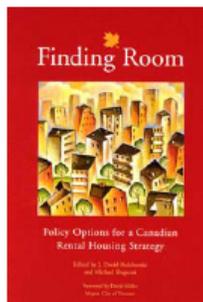
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