2. The Forces of Decline and Regeneration: A Discussion of Jane Jacobs and Gentrification

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Abstract
This chapter takes the form of a discussion about the urbanist Jane Jacobs and the legacy of her work in the era of gentrification. Zipp introduces, Storring surveys Jacobs' contributions to our thinking about gentrification, and Hock analyzes Jacobs' “reticence” on the problem of racism in urban history. Then all three discuss the ways that Jacobs' signature ideas – the “sidewalk ballet,” organized complexity, the “self-destruction of diversity,” and others – appear now, in a time when cities are beset by problems she predicted but only glancingly addressed.

Keywords: Jane Jacobs, gentrification, race, social capital, rent gap, post-war

People or uses with more money at their command, or greater respectability (in a credit society the two often go together), can fairly easily supplant those less prosperous or of less status, and commonly do so in city neighborhoods that achieve popularity. The reverse seldom happens.
— Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, 98

Samuel Zipp / Introduction: The Jacobs Impasse

The Jane Jacobs we know, the patron saint of Hudson Street, is trapped in amber now. Those who revere her still think of her as essentially timeless – an evergreen font of wisdom about urban life, the hero of all the morality tales.
city lovers tell themselves. But if she remains “Saint Jane” to many, she is less revered by others, appearing now as a thinker mired in the past at best, and an object of mild suspicion at worst. Her ideas are a relic of New York’s Greenwich Village in another era, these folks say, a toolkit of small-scale ideas rendered more or less useless in a time of huge-scale urban and global problems.

It’s tempting to agree with the skeptics. Jacobs, it may seem, has become a historical figure. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, in an age of suburbanization, she was the thinker around which so many of our urban stories revolved, her vision of restoring vitality to cities crucial to turning back the devastation unleashed by several generations of modernizing dreams seemingly come to ruin. Now, however, she has become something else. Not quite the villain of a newer, emergent generation of city stories, her familiar lessons about the virtue of neighbourhoods, “eyes on the street,” and mixed uses nevertheless seem quite beside the point to those fixated on the quandaries of precarity, inequality, racialized dispossession, the financialization of housing, and climate catastrophe. “Much of the power of her work,” the urbanist Owen Hatherley writes, “comes from the accuracy with which she described the homogenising effect of the public-private meat axe on America’s great cities. Transferred elsewhere, many of her ideas have the quality of a cargo cult” (Hatherley 2017: 18).

One of the reasons for this impasse is, of course, gentrification. Whatever Jacobs may have had to say about the problem – and as we will discuss, she had a number of ideas about it and what to do about it – it has become something of a working assumption amongst Jacobs skeptics that her ideas are the original source of the “aesthetics of gentrification” that bedevil cities today. For some, the basic ideas Jacobs recommended in The Death of Life of Great American Cities have themselves become the building blocks of upscale urbanism. Since the 1980s and 90s, the ideals that became codified in her name – an urbanism of the streets, stoops, and small-scale neighbourhood – have lost their power to lead the way out of urban crisis. Adopted as the ideal vision of a middle class “back to the city” movement in the 1970s, they are now simply mobilized as lifestyle amenities for real estate boosterism, instruments of accumulation in the quivers of urban developers (Tochterman 2012; Moskowitz 2016).

As we will discuss, this is in part because of a larger problem: Jacobs herself would not let herself see cities as primal scenes of exclusion. She recognized the fact of inequalities – of class, and particularly of race – but was less concerned with confronting the way they had a constitutive role in making, not just ruining city life. She tended to see them as forces that could
undo the natural virtues of urban density and diversity – not fundamental properties of the ways that American cities had been built and arranged for more than a century before her mid-twentieth century moment.

For her, cities were about freedom and creativity. They were dynamic organisms, self-organizing systems of interdependencies – seedbeds for “organized complexity” that were predisposed to create vibrant social worlds if the planners and bulldozers could be turned back and people’s innate interest in creating “new work” unleashed. The contemporary crisis of cities that goes by the name of gentrification, the process Jacobs first called the “self-destruction of diversity,” was for her an unfortunate part of the larger churning – the death and life – that city economies unleashed. Vibrant city economies, she argued, drive overall prosperity. They might still be harnessed to transform the stagnant “plantation age” economies of modernity into new, human-centred, democratic worlds.

Jacobs’ innate belief in the generative power of cities, her sheer faith in their innate capacity to produce new ideas and collaborative innovation from their diversity of uses and peoples, may seem outmoded to many today. It might even seem naïve – but that faith gave her the conviction that cities were places where problems gathered not to fester but to be solved. More than a tribune of the ideal neighbourhood, Jacobs was perhaps our greatest champion of the city as a decentralized, dynamic, always unpredictable human system. The city, she believed, could never be a modern machine for living erected by the wise and all-knowing. It existed because people themselves created lives from its chaotic, improvisational economies.

Can we recover some of her faith in the problem-solving powers of city life? Or have the self-generating powers of her city economies run out of steam? Were they ever anything more than fables, fantasies about small-scale democracy ready to be captured by the forces of neoliberalism? I suspect that we should not settle for either the myth of Saint Jane or the urge to toss her into the dustbin of history. Either impulse leaves her caught, failed by partial appreciation for the full range of her thinking, held in the hardened suspension of hasty assumptions.

Nathan Storring / Cataclysmic Re-entry: Jane Jacobs, Before and After Gentrification

Three years before sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term gentrification in 1964, Jane Jacobs’ The Death and Life of Great American Cities attempted to describe a similar set of symptoms in different terms. While many of her
peers operated under the belief that “urban blight” spreads like a contagion, Jacobs argued that the opposite was the case: those with money and clout do the displacing. Yet scholars of gentrification have largely ignored that much of Jacobs’ breakout book, together with some of her subsequent writings, provide a robust, imperfect, and challenging theoretical framework for understanding neighbourhood disinvestment and reinvestment, migration and displacement in American cities.

In *Death and Life*, Jacobs foreshadows Neil Smith’s later “rent gap” theory of gentrification (Smith 1979: 545) by observing that concerted disinvestment is a crucial precursor to reaping profits from undervalued urban land. She was also one of the first to blow the whistle on the practice later known as “redlining” – which she calls “credit blacklisting,” since the common term had not yet been coined – whereby conventional credit was withdrawn from communities deemed unsafe investments by banks and government agencies (Jacobs 1961: 11, 127, 295, 314, 326, 332). As both Jacobs and Smith observe, this practice helped create a gap between the actual and potential value of land. Urban redevelopment authorities helped further widen this gap by displacing residents and clearing the land, taking on these costs on behalf of private developers. In this way, the urban renewal regime paved the way for the “cataclysmic re-entry of conventional money,” as Jacobs put it, with often devastating results for the people who once lived and worked in these areas (Jacobs 1961: 303). Of course, by the time *Death and Life* was released in 1961 a handful of brownstoners were already proving that slum clearance was an unnecessary and expensive step of the gentrification process.

While much of this “cataclysmic money” was being put into government-led urban renewal, Jacobs observed that far more was already going into a market-led process that she called “the self-destruction of diversity.” In *Death and Life*, Jacobs famously argues that the foundation for successful urbanism is a dense, complex diversity of uses. Less well known, though, is her argument that the market tends to both create and destroy these very mixtures. Like other market-oriented theorists of the city, Jacobs believed that the high costs of urban land encourage denser, more efficient uses of that land. Density, in turn, further increases the value of land. However, more controversially, Jacobs believed that this apparently beneficent feedback loop has a tipping point. Like the growth mechanisms of a cell that has gone cancerous, the same processes that drive urban diversification also eventually lead to homogenization and a collapse in values. As costs continue to rise in neighbourhoods facing fierce competition for space, eventually only the most profitable uses can afford to compete. Unlike in urban renewal, Jacobs says, “[t]he cataclysmic effects in such cases arise, not from vast
wholesaling of credit at all, but from the aggregate of many individual transactions which happen to be heavily concentrated in one locality in one period of time” (Jacobs 1961: 313). Over the course of a generation or more, Jacobs believed that these homogeneous places would be abandoned by anyone with the choice to do so, and become low-cost and low-income enclaves once more, until the diversification process begins again.

Unlike in the early literature of gentrification, Jacobs never cordons off housing as a special case in this market process. Upscale homogenization applies across retail, commercial, industrial, and residential uses. In fact, Jacobs found early American examples of these monocultures in older downtowns as they shifted from diverse commercial cores to “theatre districts” or “financial districts,” and the centre of gravity moved elsewhere. In some sense, then, gentrification could be understood as a subset of Jacobs’ self-destruction of diversity. In the cases where the district in question began as a working-class residential area, and the market converges upon middle-class or luxury housing as the homogeneous “highest and best use,” self-destruction leads to what we conventionally call gentrification.

Throughout *Death and Life*, Jacobs also makes a strong case for the importance of population stability in neighbourhoods. At the heart of her argument is the idea of “social capital” (a term that had not yet been popularized by sociologists, but which had already been sputtering into life in its current definition for over half a century). For Jacobs, social capital refers to the network of relationships in a neighbourhood that residents regularly draw upon for public safety, political effectiveness, social mobility, and resilience. She writes,

> To be sure, a good city neighborhood can absorb newcomers into itself, both newcomers by choice and immigrants settling by expediency, and it can protect a reasonable amount of transient population too. But these increments or displacements have to be gradual. If self-government in the place is to work, underlying any float of population must be a continuity of people who have forged neighborhood networks. (Jacobs 1961: 137-138)

Slum clearance killed neighbourhood networks, but “displacements” had market-driven causes as well. On the one hand, Jacobs found that constant out-migration in so-called slums had deleterious effects similar to slum clearance. In particular, if every resident who makes a gain in education or employment immediately chooses to leave the neighbourhood, their strongest relationships will likely survive, but many more casual ones may not. Those left behind lose access to the migrant’s resources, knowledge,
and inspiration. For Jacobs, this brain drain is part of the vicious cycle of persistently low-income neighbourhoods. On the other hand, Jacobs felt that an influx of newcomers could similarly disrupt the social capital of a neighbourhood – but only if that population remains transient and churning. Prefiguring recent studies by Columbia University researcher Lance Freeman (Freeman 2006), Jacobs argues that the incumbent residents who manage to remain in a gentrifying neighbourhood may actually benefit from the additional assets and clout that gentrifiers bring. But unlike Freeman, Jacobs emphasizes that any shared benefits require newcomers to assimilate into the existing community over time.

Jacobs herself was not oblivious to the power dynamics of her presence in gentrifying Greenwich Village. She saw herself in this role: as a newcomer with choice who had assimilated into the community and used her assets and clout accordingly. In *Death and Life*, for example, Jacobs notes that the Village was only saved from an urban renewal scheme in the early 1950s when officials were confronted with evidence that the area had attracted “newcomers with money,” like herself. She notes, however, that this “was possibly the least significant of the constructive changes that had occurred unnoticed” (Jacobs 1961: 272).

What were these other “constructive changes”? Jacobs argued that gentrification was not the only path to neighbourhood change, speaking at length instead about “unslumming,” a process of economic regeneration that occurs when existing residents find some form of social mobility yet choose to stay in their old neighbourhood. “It hinges,” says Jacobs, “on whether a considerable number of the residents and businessmen of a slum find it both desirable and practical to make and carry out their own plans right there, or whether they must virtually all move elsewhere” (Jacobs 1961: 272). If allowed, these many little plans gradually upgrade a neighbourhood physically, and more importantly, the social capital of these newfound “people with choice” gives others in the neighbourhood slightly more access to their growing resources. In *Death and Life*, Jacobs presents unslumming and mild gentrification as often happening in parallel, with a small yet steady stream of newcomers mingling with striving long-time residents, both adding to the economic diversity and resources of the neighbourhood as a whole. However, even in 1961, Jacobs recognized that this combination of endogenous and exogenous growth and investment is a delicate balance. “An unslumming slum is peculiarly vulnerable in still another respect,” she writes. “Nobody is making a fortune out of it” (Jacobs 1961: 287-288).

Jacobs rarely returned to the specific subject of gentrification in her writings until the early aughts, when she began revisiting many of her
earlier ideas, including these questions of disinvestment and reinvestment, in-migration and out-migration in city life. In “Time and Change as Neighborhood Allies,” from 2000, she describes once again the “self-destruction of diversity” – however, in this case, she replaces her former terminology with the word “gentrification,” affirming the affinity between the two processes. She also further differentiates between the early stages of the process described in Death and Life, a “golden age of gentrification” that adds diversity and provides new resources to existing inhabitants and the advanced stages of the process, wherein gentrification “explodes into a feeding frenzy of real-estate speculation and evictions,” ultimately leading to a homogenization of uses (Jacobs 2016: 358). She notes that this “golden age” has become vanishingly short, suggesting the need for both a greater supply of “gentrifiable” neighbourhoods, and support for new approaches to retaining affordable housing, retail, and work spaces.

The unslumming process also makes a reappearance in this speech, though with a significant clarification. In Death and Life, Jacobs presents unslumming as a relatively generalized urban process that can take place in any neighbourhood; in “Time and Change,” Jacobs presents it as a process unique to immigrant neighbourhoods. This new, narrower interpretation arguably tempers her previous optimism on the subject of race, suggesting that the processes of resident-driven neighbourhood change Jacobs celebrates in Death and Life are not available to intergenerationally poor, non-immigrant communities in American cities – including many African American neighbourhoods today.

Jane Jacobs’ final published book, Dark Age Ahead, continued the retrospective tone of her final years, returning to urban planning issues, like housing and traffic engineering, alongside her more recent interests in institutions and ethics. Her treatment of gentrification in the book follows suit, and although it only makes a brief appearance, it provides a telling personal disclosure. As Jacobs details the various failed government responses to our ongoing urban housing shortage, she writes:

Sometimes the “slums” were inherently such desirable areas with such attractive community life that gentrifiers in possession of savings and do-it-yourself resourcefulness achieved renovations that public policy and financial redlining denied them. Frequently they needed to fight interlocked establishments of developers; philanthropists; planners; architects; federal, state, and local bureaucrats; and elected officials to save their spontaneously rejuvenating areas from destruction. Usually they lost these battles (Jacobs 2004: 144).
While this portrait of “gentrifiers” is surely a composite, some of it seems undeniably autobiographical. In 1948, Jacobs and her husband moved into a rat-infested building in New York’s West Village with a bullet hole in the front door. They renovated their home over the course of two decades, and famously faced down numerous slum clearance threats to their neighbourhood. It is notable, then, that Jacobs identifies herself here as a gentrifier. Perhaps she still saw herself as part of a “golden age” of gentrification in the Village, as a gentrifier who integrated into the community and gave back, but even so, it is perhaps also a recognition that her presence contributed to both the “unslumming” and the gentrification of her beloved neighbourhood.

Jane Jacobs belongs in the canon of gentrification literature. Before a significant discourse on the subject even existed, she had already identified the rent gap as a driver of cataclysmic reinvestment, and observed the negative and positive impacts of well-off newcomers to a neighbourhood on incumbent residents. Long before discussions of “commercial gentrification” emerged, Jacobs contextualized the gentrification process within broader “forces of decline and regeneration.” While most gentrification narratives, even today, focus exclusively on acts of resistance as the primary mode of agency on the part of incumbent residents, Jacobs provides an alternative model of resident-driven neighbourhood change. Of course, Jacobs also had her significant oversights, particularly regarding the relationship between her theories and racism. However, given her unique contributions to the gentrification discourse and her continued popular influence, Jacobs’ work deserves to be contextualized historically and scrutinized seriously – not dismissed outright, nor accepted passively, as is so often the case today.

Jennifer Hock / Reading Between the Lines: Jane Jacobs’ Reticence on Race and Racism

If, as Nathan argues, Jacobs still has much to teach us about the phenomena of economic decline and revival, we need to start wrestling with one aspect of her thought that seems puzzling today: her apparent reluctance to address issues of race and racism, crucial aspects of the conversation on gentrification. At first glance, her writings seem colour-blind in the contemporary, neoliberal sense of the word: dismissive of both the injuries of racism and the importance of racial and ethnic communities and identities. Her best-known work, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, does not portray deepening racial segregation during the mid-century years as a crisis, and people of colour appear to be peripheral to her narrative. As Herbert Gans, Marshall
Berman, and others have pointed out, Jacobs’ city initially seems to be a world of white working-class neighbourhoods, ranging from “solid working-class whites at the bottom to professional middle-class whites at the top” (Berman 1988: 324). Indeed, in the absence of explicit discussion of racial conflict even as she celebrates other types of diversity, Jacobs’ writings, particularly her well-known celebratory passages on the small-scale urbanism of the stoop and the street, run the risk of becoming building blocks in a white spatial imaginary that emphasizes nostalgia for the old, ethnic neighbourhood in the face of today’s sprawling multiracial and multi-ethnic city (Lipsitz 2011). Yet a closer reading of her work shows that Jacobs’ reticence on the issue of race – her refusal to consider race a fundamental characteristic of urban neighbourhoods – was a distinct social and political position in the late 1950 and early 1960s, one that needs consideration before we can understand her larger arguments about the importance of social and physical diversity in the “unslumming” neighbourhood.

In 1954, as Jacobs was establishing her reputation as a critic of public housing and the urban renewal program, Gordon Allport published a book called The Nature of Prejudice, a work of social psychology and one of the most influential texts on racial bias published in the post-war years. Writing in response to the scientific racism of the previous generation, which purported to be based on documented and identifiable group differences, Allport characterized prejudice as a kind of irrational social contagion and focused on the processes by which it was formed and transmitted from person to person and from one generation to another. At the social scale, it manifested itself in shared beliefs about racial superiority and overt discrimination, behaviours intended to subordinate individuals and groups.

Like many contemporaries writing in the shadow of the Holocaust in the post-war years, Allport emphasized the fundamental similarities among groups and individuals. Even “where visibility does exist,” he wrote, speaking specifically of visible racial difference, “it is almost always thought to be linked with deeper-lying traits than is in fact the case” (Allport 1954: 132). Prejudice was learned, and through self-awareness could be unlearned. Structured, cooperative contact among members of different groups was essential to this self-awareness, a key means to dispel irrational beliefs and reduce discriminatory behaviour. In Allport’s words, “Prejudice may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals” (Allport 1954: 281). The resulting theorization of intergroup tension and conflict, known as the “contact hypothesis,” held that isolation of groups from one another worked to confirm irrational beliefs
about out-groups; conversely, social contact was essential to reducing fear, misunderstanding, and the resulting discriminatory behaviour.

Allport’s explanation of the dynamics of racial conflict help us understand the way white liberals, particularly housers and planners, approached race relations in the post-war North. If group differences were fundamentally irrelevant and prejudice irrational, liberals could work to diffuse tensions and reduce discrimination by creating situations and physical spaces in which that irrationality could be identified and exposed and commonalities explored. Public housing, which liberals hoped would transform the dynamics of the nation’s housing market, quickly became the key site where this debate was played out. “We have two alternatives as we enter a period of rapid expansion in public housing and as we prepare to destroy our slums,” Morton Deutsch and Mary Evan Collins wrote in the widely read *Interracial Housing* in 1951. “We can either house people according to their needs without regard to their race, religion, or national origin, or we can create, much as we have done in the past, segregated communities…” (Deutsch and Collins 1951: 4). In their studies of both racially segregated and racially integrated housing projects in New York and Newark, Deutsch and Collins found that prejudice was widespread; the majority of white housewives entering integrated public housing did not like the idea of living with black families. But they also found public housing created precisely those “equal status” situations that helped dispel irrational prejudice, and that “neighbourly contact” with black families reduced hostility among whites – indeed, the more fine-grained the spatial integration, the more positive whites were about other races. As Deutsch and Collins wrote, “We are, in effect, rejecting the notion that has characterized much sociological thinking in the field of race relations: the notion […] that ‘stateways cannot change folkways.’ The evidence of our study is that official policy, executed without equivocation, can result in large changes in belief and feelings despite initial resistance to the policy” (Deutsch and Collins 1951: 127).

It is hard to conceive of Jacobs as a racial liberal like Deutsch and Collins in part because of her sympathy to “folkways” and her objections to “stateways” – particularly those stateways imposed by postwar housers and planners. It is also hard to conceive of her as a racial liberal because in so many other ways she is allied with the rising generation of 1960s radicals and community advocates, many of whom were fifteen, twenty, or even twenty-five years younger than she was. She was anti-establishment. She advocated for the grassroots in the face of a technocratic planning establishment. She became a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War. Christopher Klemek has cleverly characterized her radical, community-centred approach as “New
Left Urbanism” and the term so accurately describes her thinking that we often forget that she was 45 years old when *Death and Life* was published. Much of her intellectual formation took place in the very different climate of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (Klemek 2009).

On issues of race and racism, the Jacobs of *Death and Life* has more in common with the older generation of racial liberals, who were primarily concerned with ending discrimination and facilitating cultural assimilation and individual opportunity, than with the radicals who would think more systemically and identify and condemn “institutional racism.” Like many racial liberals, she believed that racial prejudice was the result of ignorance and habit and would diminish over time, and so discussion of racism remains coded in her writings, appearing only occasionally in comments opposing racial segregation or outright discrimination. She actively works to downplay cultural differences that critics found stigmatizing – insisting, for instance, that East Harlem’s Puerto Ricans, whose working class street life many planners found to be a blighting influence on the neighbourhood, “are essentially the same as the people of the mixed, Americanized street on which I live, and essentially the same as the people who live in high-income apartments or fine townhouses, too” (Jacobs 1961: 59). East Harlem’s problems, she argues, are due to the ravages of multiple redevelopment projects. Like racial liberals like Charles Abrams or Robert Weaver, she refers to people of colour not as “Negroes” or as “Puerto Ricans” but as “discriminated against” populations, and she dismisses the presence of communities of colour as a meaningful factor in neighbourhood change at all (Jacobs 1961: 103). In the case of one neighbourhood, she counters prevailing narratives of blight and decline quite explicitly: its “basic troubles are not owing to a criminal or a discriminated against or a poverty stricken population,” she says about a Boston neighbourhood in the process of becoming a black ghetto; “its troubles stem from the fact that it is physically quite unable to function safely and with related vitality as a city district” (Jacobs 1961: 34).

The key difference between Jacobs and other racial liberals of the era, of course, was her distrust of top-down physical planning solutions as a meaningful way of addressing segregation, prejudice, and discrimination. She was not colour-blind in the contemporary, neoliberal sense; she took her integrationist beliefs to the streets in a demonstration in 1963, when a proposed shift in school district boundaries threatened to leave her daughter’s racially mixed public school nearly all-white (Goodman, “If School Is De-Integrated,” 1963). But where Weaver, Abrams, and others saw the expansion of the federal government into the housing market as an
opportunity to create modern residential environments in which integration might take place, Jacobs believed that newcomers – in her world, the African Americans and Puerto Ricans who were moving into the nation's great cities during the Second Great Migration – would be integrated into existing neighbourhoods and urban economies. Complex diversity at the local level – older buildings, varied housing types and land uses, localized economies, and street-level social interdependencies – could do what the monoculture of housing projects could not: provide the social and physical context in which this integration could happen.

Like many in the early 1960s, Jacobs hoped and expected that prejudice and discrimination would gradually be eliminated in the post-war world. She saw residential integration and neighbourhood revitalization proceeding apace with broader cultural change: “The effective breaking down of discrimination outside a slum, and the less dramatic self-diversification within an unslumming slum, proceed concurrently,” she wrote. “If America has now, in the case of Negroes, reached an effective halt in this process ... – a thought that I find both highly improbable and quite intolerable – then it may be that Negro slums cannot effectively unslum ... In this case, the damage to our cities might be the least of our worries; unslumming is a by-product of other kinds of vigor and other forms of economic and social change” (Jacobs 1961: 284).

Highly improbable and quite intolerable: Jacobs is optimistic in ways we might not recognize today. Allied in other ways with members of the younger generation, she lacked their concern about the apparent durability of racism, perpetuated by nominally race-neutral customs and policies. Both her insistence on integration as the desired goal for black and Puerto Rican urban newcomers and her relative lack of interest in the role of racism as an enduring, structuring element in urban development mark her as the product of an earlier era, rather than the harbinger of our own.

The challenge Jacobs offers a contemporary audience on the issue of racism and gentrification, then, is not the one we expected at first. A closer reading, acknowledging the widespread mid-century belief that the very presence of communities of colour caused neighbourhood decline and the racial liberal response that emphasized equal status and opportunity, reveals the complexities of Jacobs' position and the historical distance that separates her understanding of racism from ours. Instead, she challenges us to think seriously about the mix of land uses, variety of buildings types, social interdependencies, and fine-grained, complex local economies that – she believed – might one day operate to make communities of colour at home in the city.
Discussion

Zipp: Your essays suggest a divided legacy for Jacobs. On the one hand she should be seen as an analyst of gentrification, not simply a harbinger of its ill effects. But she also treats with kid gloves the social phenomenon that has made gentrification such an urgent topic today: race. Of course, gentrification can and has happened in places where race is of little, or at least reduced significance. Does her “reticence” on race make Jacobs' work less useful today? Or can we pry her loose from the primal scene of the “sidewalk ballet” – Greenwich Village in the 1950s and 60s where the classic “aesthetics of gentrification” was founded – and find in her work any other clues as to what might be done about gentrification?

Storring: Jacobs may not provide much insight into the social and cultural forces behind gentrification in American cities today, however she does offer plenty more of use regarding the economic forces. For one thing, Jacobs has always been a strong advocate for new models of affordable housing. While she critiqued the “projects” built under the American urban renewal regime for their anti-urban design, Jacobs led the effort to build the more granular West Village Houses in New York City, 420 affordable apartment units planned by the neighbourhood and subsidized by New York City and New York State. After moving to Toronto in 1969, Jacobs also became a booster of her adopted city’s emerging public housing program, which created affordable housing by buying up and converting older houses and by building new infill development in empty lots and even in backyards.

On the other hand, Jacobs also prefigured many of the market-oriented arguments about affordability that are popular today. In her final book *Dark Age Ahead*, for example, she argues that North American cities have fallen behind on new housing construction, leading to rising prices and homelessness rates. And Jacobs had been calling for the liberalization of land-use zoning for over three decades before that. In this same vein, she believed that promoting broad-based ownership and other forms of secure tenure was particularly important to battling gentrification, for businesses as well as homes. In the speech I mention in my opening essay, she even speculates that long-term mortgages, low-interest rates, and government guarantees to lenders could help improve workspace ownership rates, just like they had for housing (Jacobs 2016: 362).

Hock: I’m convinced that Jacobs remains relevant as much because of the quality and accessibility of her writing as the value of her ideas and
observations. She may be able to help specialists formulate policy, certainly, but she also teaches the average reader how to understand and appreciate aspects of the city they hadn’t been able to articulate before, and street life – even that hackneyed “sidewalk ballet” – remains chief among them.

When it comes to issues of race, racism, and gentrification, we need to bring Jacobs into the twenty-first century by placing her in dialogue with writers who have thought deeply about the ways in which racism is implicated in the “sidewalk ballet.” For instance, the political theorist Iris Marion Young, who builds on Jacobs’ ideas in her characterization of city life as “an openness to unassimilated otherness,” even as she admits that this view remains an unrealized ideal in contemporary cities characterized by segregation, marginalization, and exclusion (Young 1990: 251). Also relevant here is Elijah Anderson, who characterizes American cities as patchworks of racially exclusive and homogenous neighbourhoods but who also sees rare instances of mixing and encounter under “cosmopolitan canopies where people of different racial and cultural types not only share space but seek out each other’s presence” (Anderson 2011: 30). Too often we either take Jacobs’ descriptions of street life at face value or we dismiss them as nostalgic, where in fact many have continued to study the conditions under which various types of cooperation and conflict emerge in urban public places.

Zipp: Jacobs is remembered primarily as an advocate for a proper kind of urban space – the streets and stoops of the piecemeal city over the modern city of towers and plazas. Have we too closely associated her with debates over physical urban space and ideal forms of urban public life? How might this have shaped the way that Jacobs has taught people to understand gentrification?

Hock: Forty or fifty years after the publication of Death and Life, Jacobs’ reputation as a defender of older neighbourhoods and her vivid writings on urban public life combine to offer a kind of alibi for the gentrifier – an alibi that might be consonant with her ideas in some ways and quite far removed from them in others. It’s quite easy today to read her defence of the streets and the stoops, her disdain for redevelopment, and her description of the virtues of older buildings through the eyes of the young, predominantly white professionals who have flooded into city centres since the 1990s, valorizing brownstones and rowhouses, walkability, and street life. To this growing demographic, accustomed to racially and economically homogeneous landscapes and uncertain of its place in the city, her idealized descriptions of urban public life might seem to describe the benefits of various kinds of
diversity. After all, Jacobs’ West Village streets have room for the working class as well as the middle class, for public figures as well as strangers, for reciprocity and interdependence as well as privatism. For an affluent newcomer to an urban neighbourhood, Jacobs might seem to suggest that social differences are part of the larger sidewalk ballet.

Watching the speed at which many neighbourhoods gentrify today, Jacobs might describe them not as “unslumming” but as undergoing the self-destruction of diversity. (What she called “cataclysmic money” today comes from the private sector as well as the state.) But her emphasis on consensus and interdependence also masks conflict and allows gentrifiers to understand their role in neighbourhood change in the best possible light.

**Storring:** At its core, Jacobs’ vision of the city was not an aesthetic one. And as Jennifer observes, reducing her ideas to the “ballet of the sidewalk” and its set pieces of stoops, sidewalks, and storefronts may simply provide an alibi for gentrifiers. However, Jacobs had deep concern for the self-determination of people and communities. Again and again, in her writing on city planning and economics, Jacobs comes back to the idea that the greatest urban good is to enable as many people as possible to pursue their own plans for life and livelihood. The most beautiful American city, to her, is one that allows and even enables the countless plans of countless people, and celebrates that hodgepodge visually. Hudson Street may have become the prototype for Jacobsian urbanism in popular culture, but she chose this street in Greenwich Village because she found it utterly ordinary – not an extraordinary exemplar of beauty or urban order. The evolving aesthetic of people’s plans, ever increasing in complexity, can happen in a tower block or a suburb, too – if we allow it and invest in it.

**Zipp:** One of the keywords in discussions of gentrification is “displacement.” A catch-all for the various ways that people are forced out by neighbourhood change, it suggests that gentrification is of a piece with the expulsions of slum clearance Jacobs herself campaigned against. It is also invoked to capture the more ephemeral results of gentrification – the subtle shifts in neighbourhood commerce, atmosphere, and aesthetics that reveal that one group – or “community” has been “displaced” by another.

Thinking about this issue, it strikes me that there’s an irony at the heart of common thinking about Jacobs. On the one hand she is seen as the great tribune of urban community – the kinds of places we often imagine as stable and rooted, where people make neighbourhood networks – their “social capital” – and resist the displacement brought on by slum clearance
and gentrification alike. On the other hand, she is the foremost chronicler of urban process, of the flux, inventiveness, and change that propels city life. What role does this tension play in her ability to come to grips with gentrification?

**Storring:** In the spirit of Jane Jacobs’ later book, *The Nature of Economies*, one might say that a neighbourhood is stable in the same way an ecosystem is stable. Individual elements are constantly coming and going, beginning and ending, but the overall system has a kind of equilibrium, an emergent character, that evolves on a longer time scale. Likewise, Jacobs recognizes that “urban community” isn’t a stable term. Old-timers move on or pass away, and newcomers arrive, and either connect or don’t. “Social capital,” for Jacobs, represents the continuity of relationships throughout this churn. If the churn becomes so fast or violent that the fund of relationships is diminished and no new ones have time to grow in their place, it leaves a neighbourhood politically helpless and unresilient. For Jacobs, the violent displacement and transient newcomers that accompany gentrification threaten the equilibrium of social capital, but the alternative for her isn’t stasis. As she would conclude later in her life, if change is inevitable, all we can do is recruit time and change as allies instead of failing to fight them as foes.

**Hock:** I think the real tension may lie between the activist and normative aspects of Jacobs’ thought. As an activist, she knew very well how to foster a sense of stable community in the face of unwanted change; it’s an effective way to fight the bulldozer. As a writer, she was a systems-builder who often emphasized ideal or normative scenarios in which cities worked effectively – a way of thinking that runs counter to our sense that our most pressing urban problems are fundamentally problems of disequilibrium. This may be one of the reasons her later thinking on urban economies is less popular than her earlier critiques of urban renewal. It seems difficult, even immoral, to use the language of balance, interdependence, and complexity to describe gentrification.

**Zipp:** Not sure about “immoral,” but it seems true that one of the reasons gentrification is so hard to turn back once it gets going is that, even though it can appear as a problem of “disequilibrium,” of “tipping points” and so forth, it is actually a complex, interrelated problem of both everyday neighbourhood change and government policy, of what, Jennifer, you called “folkways” and “stateways.” Jacobs was a well-known champion of “folkways” over “stateways.” But as Nathan has suggested, there’s more to Jacobs than
meets the eye. How has she imagined the role of government beyond its role as wielder of the “meat axe”? So much of metropolitan development depends on how public subsidies are conceived and in whose hands they land. Can we envision a more proactive role for government in turning back the “self-destruction of diversity”?

**Storring:** Jacobs is most remembered for her skewering of the failures of government intervention in the city. She fought against the Vietnam War and the urban renewal regime. Later, in Canada, she advocated for breaking up government monopolies in energy, mail service, and transportation. Yet this is only a partial picture. As Jacobs told an interviewer in 2002, “I never said that government was messing around too much in our lives. I said it was doing stupid things. That’s not the same thing at all. It may be doing too little in our lives and still be doing stupid things” (Jacobs, 2002).

Jacobs believed that government has a strong role to play, both in responding to housing affordability and in addressing the underlying precarity that makes a neighbourhood so susceptible to gentrification in the first place. As I noted before, Jacobs argued that governments should invest in affordable housing, particularly in a tactical way that adds and protects housing in the very places where displacement is expected to happen. She also argued that government should actively intervene in the market on behalf of young businesses – not the tech entrepreneur class that has become so powerful today, but the many ordinary business people who have little political or economic power in the face of large, established corporations (Storring and Zipp 2016). As early as *Death and Life*, it’s clear that Jacobs saw everyday entrepreneurship as an important means for people who face racism and other forms of discrimination to seek economic opportunity on their own terms and to provide resources and inspiration to others in their community. As she argues in a 1994 speech to a society of women entrepreneurs, despite wishing and legislation and criticism, the glass ceiling for many groups has not dissolved until members of that marginalized group bypassed entrenched systems themselves by becoming successful proprietors of their own businesses (Jacobs 2016: 329). If these entrepreneurs remain in or return to their old neighbourhoods, Jacobs believed their success can become part of the virtuous cycle of “unslumming” by offering others access to their growing resources, clout, knowledge, and life experience. Recently, community members in the Boyle Heights neighbourhood of L.A. have coined the term “gentefication” to capture both the upsides and downsides of this process, as educated Latinos and Latinas return to their old Latino neighbourhood (Delgadillo 2016).
Jacobs believed government could act as a “third force,” actively protecting these emerging economic interests from monopolization, regulatory capture, and even outright attacks from established players. In general, she admired interventions that either removed regulations or subsidies that actively favour big business or set new performance standards that left room for people to meet those standards creatively, whether through market dynamics or direct community involvement. For example, Jacobs ironically admired the effectiveness of the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration at spurring suburban housing construction after World War II, even if she felt the urban form it created was unequal and environmentally and economically unsustainable. Therefore, when it comes to gentrification, if we want to take inspiration from Jacobs, I would argue for government intervention that protects and cultivates the plans of incumbent residents, rather than ones that try to freeze the economic, social, or physical status quo.

**Hock:** We tend to remember her critiques of heavy-handed government intervention and her emphasis on small-scale decision making, but Jacobs’ broader interest in urban economies and urban organization meant she had creative ideas about the multiple scales at which urban residents exert their political power and the way in which we decentralize various services. City districts that are small enough to be responsive to constituents but large enough to wield actual political power might be a good idea, she said, given the fact that so much of the gentrification debate falls at a scale that’s not addressed well by either pro-development city councils or often reflexively slow-growth neighbourhood advisory groups.

**Zipp:** For me, thinking with Jacobs remains useful because of her faith in people acting together to solve problems. In a time in which so much seems broken or corrupt, Jacobs sees the city as the place where people are thrown together to create something greater than themselves and where the self-organizing capacities to work out the knottiest troubles will naturally arise. Of course, her colour-blind liberalism and her democratic faith – in self-organizing systems, in the essential sameness and capacity of all people – led her away from a full confrontation with the forces of exclusion and domination that had already done so much to shape cities.

One might argue that “unslumming” becomes “the self-destruction of diversity” precisely because not everybody is given a free and fair playing field for their energies and interests. Some people – the white, male, and propertied, historically – have had less fettered access to capital, while others have had to struggle to win equal access to urban space, and to the
subsidies that allow entry to the same property market that has been such a fecund source of wealth creation. The state-managed flux of urban life that Jacobs celebrated has served some more than others, and narrowed and winnowed away the very diversity that urban life promises to deliver, and that Jacobs also championed.

Urbanists on the right long ran a rudimentary version of the basic Jacobs software: let the self-organizing properties of the market do their work and all will sort itself out. That brand of common sense long reigned supreme, lodging itself in the neoliberal urban development policy that underwrites an actually existing unfree market by continuing to steer public subsidy to highly concentrated sources of private capital. In recent years, however, things have started to change. Where once discussion of redlining, zoning, housing segregation, and gentrification had little purchase beyond a narrow swath of academics and organizers it now routinely surfaces online and in national magazines and newspapers. In fact, much city writing on the left these days amounts to pointing out, again and again, how the power of race, class, gender and other forms of social division shape our unequal cities. We don’t know yet what effect this will have, but can thinking with Jacobs offer a path beyond this face-off to a place where we might actually realize the democratic cities she envisioned? Can we modify the standard Jacobs playbook to find a way to truly harness everyone’s creative capacities and make equal cities and economies?

Storring: Perhaps the debate is already changing. The recent fault lines emerging around affordability in U.S. cities seem to have fractured the traditional divisions of right and left. When it comes to electoral politics, the Yes in my Backyard (YIMBY) activists, who have been gaining ground, run the gamut from progressive to conservative. They fight for the liberalization of housing markets in order to improve affordability, but the legacies of redlining and segregation play a substantial part in their argument, and many of them support public housing, too. Meanwhile, the pejoratively named Not in my Backyard (NIMBY) activists they oppose focus more on gentrification and the local effects of new development, a traditionally progressive cause, yet they often find themselves in the position of defending an unfair and deteriorating status quo. The interesting part to me is that both sides carry distinct strands of Jane Jacobs DNA.

Hock: Moments when hardened political fault lines fracture are opportunities for new types of thinking about cities, as Jacobs herself discovered in the 1960s. My hope is that an increased awareness of the pervasiveness of
racialized inequality in our cities will lead to a more sophisticated vocabulary for discussing it and for understanding its role in structuring urban phenomena like gentrification. Jacobs may not help us there. But gentrification, so often discussed at the neighbourhood level, is ultimately a problem of the part's relationship with the whole, and on that issue she had much to say. As the climate change crisis deepens, our understanding of social, racial, economic, and environmental justice may intersect more often, and her ideas about cities as complex ecologies, emphasizing interdependence and complexity, may prove helpful once again.

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