

THE ECONOMY OF CITIES BY JANE JACOBS

An interpretation of the Jacobian views on which I built my analysis of the study of Urban Villages of Chandigarh.

Submitted By – Aiswarya A. R, MA - 02/22

Reading Jane Jacobs in 2023 is, still feels like a work that is way ahead of its time or in other words she has created such works that are timeless. Mrs. Jacobs was born a little more than a hundred years ago in 1916 in the Pennsylvania coal mining community of Scranton. Her parents were a doctor, a former schoolteacher, and a nurse. She accepted an unpaid employment at the Scranton Tribune as the women's page editor's assistant after finishing high school. She left Scranton for New York City a year later, right in the midst of the great depression of the history of U.S. She worked a variety of professions during her first few years in the city, primarily as a stenographer and freelance writer who frequently wrote about the city's working-class neighbourhoods. These encounters “gave me more of an idea of what was going on in the city and what business was like, what work was like,” as she puts it. She met her husband, architect Robert Jacobs, while working for the Office of War Information. Jacobs was able to more closely monitor the processes of urban redevelopment and planning once she was appointed associate editor of Architectural Forum in 1952. She observed that many of the city reconstruction projects she wrote about were neither safe, interesting, alive, or economically viable, leading her to become more and more critical of conventional planning theory and practise. In 1956, after she spoke at Harvard on this topic, William H. Whyte - an American sociologist - asked her to contribute to Fortune magazine with an essay titled “Downtown is for People” . In the seminal book “The Death and Life of Great American Cities” , published in 1961, she offered these facts and her own recommendations, posing a challenge to the modernist professional planning establishment and arguing for the value of empirical observation and local intuition. Also, in her work, she made the case that “urban renewal” and “slum clearance” were ignorant of the needs of city residents. In “The Economy of Cities” , Jane Jacobs, a former associate editor of Architectural Forum, elevates the case for diversification to the level of economic theory.

She has long been an opponent of the steel and concrete style of grandiose urban renewal and a supporter of the small neighbourhood and the small shop.

Though well-reasoned, supported by evidence, and convincing, her work frequently reads like a love of worlds long past, divided by continents and centuries of time, a romance that washed up on a faraway shore. This Jacobian view of urban economics will likely be as controversial and entertaining for readers who balked at some chapters in "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" but relished in others. Urban economists, sociologists, and historians may not find it persuasive, but it does contain a plethora of useful information that is not included in their publications.

The book "The Economy of Cities" (published in 1969) questions the notion that agricultural innovation that allowed cities to expand took place in the cities itself rather than in the countryside. It narrates the tale of how cities evolved from pre-agricultural history. She contends that cities, which originated as hotbeds of innovation as a self-defence mechanism and fed themselves with ideas while providing opportunity to those in business to serve them, were so because of their density of population, diversity, and ideas. Great cities are inherently creative, and Mrs. Jacobs has grasped onto this fundamental historical truth. She defines cities as settlements that generate their economic growth from their own regional economy, as opposed to mere towns, which do not. She questions why cities develop, remain static, and deteriorate. The question has huge ramifications for Jane Jacobs. A civilization that no longer has cities adorned by the divine spirit, that has fallen into arid times, that no longer explores and invents, is poised for the fall of empire. City economy, she says, do not grow by supplying peasants with the things that peasants need but by selling to people in other cities what they do not produce themselves. Rarely can large units or cities with just one industry provide the truly essential city work; instead, it is provided by local producers and craftsmen who can "add new work to older work." She is communicating to a sophisticated audience. In a brief, she explains how cities must import and export in addition to working to live. Growing companies import and export more goods, and eventually they should stop importing and start inhouse production of the imports. Everyone is aware of this, yet there are hurdles that change over time and location, as can be seen in a variety of cases. She believes that Detroit has devolved into an

innovation-declining, dead-level one industry business town. Pitts-burgh is depicted as a hopeless metropolis that cannot be saved by planners or urban designers. With her suggestions for export-generating patterns and import-replacing procedures to boost the economy at the grassroots, she has come to a conclusion.

Her work celebrates the power of ideas to influence how we perceive the world. They claim that "The Economy of Cities" is not a romance; but the book never fails to give us the impression that the author is romanticising the economy of a city that was established on the aid of its peasants and their local produce. Although, her theory that cities are built upon a rural economic base is still an enigma in the world. Her overview of the history of markets and the barter system, as well as how these concepts are still in use, is intriguing. When she described the migration pattern that would have initially taken place and how that led to developing a particular area - an explosive growth in economy, infrastructure, etc. - due to local production of goods that were previously imported and to a resulting shift of imports, it was incredibly relatable. As I am studying about the Urban Villages of Chandigarh and its initial and migrant settlement pattern, it was really beneficial reading how Mrs. Jacobs talked about the direct relationship between the availability of work, need for workers and growth in economy. The reading was helpful in understanding the village's character, the need for redevelopment, and perhaps how I might approach the development strategy to uplift the inhabitants' economy because their primary source of income is from the rental properties they own.

Some perspectives that I would like to take away are: -

Cities as Ecosystems: Jacobs viewed cities as ecosystems and life forms. According to her, neighbourhoods, streets, and buildings serve as dynamic organisms that change over time in response to how people interact with them. She described how a city's various components—sidewalks, parks, neighbourhoods, the government, and the economy—work in harmony with one another, much like an ecosystem in nature. This knowledge aids in our ability to comprehend how cities function, how they fall apart, and how they may be better organised.

The typical trend in development or redevelopment is to demolish or relocate elements that have been present there for a long time. No matter how big or how complicated the part, it will hold a special place in the residents' memories. It falls under the category of the area's imageability. Everything, regardless of size, contributes to the ecosystem of the city.

Mixed-Use Development: The blending of various building kinds and functions, whether residential or commercial, old or new, was something Jacobs favoured in "mixed-use" urban development. This theory contends that cities' vitality depends on a variety of structures, homes, companies, and other non-residential uses, as well as on people of various ages using places at various times of the day. According to her, intermixing city uses and users is essential to both economic and urban development since she perceived cities as being "organic, spontaneous, and untidy."

This would help an urban design enthusiast to observe the activity pattern of a space in a very unique and subjective way without trivialising the mapping.

Bottom-Up Community Planning: Jacobs argued that local knowledge is more suitable to directing community development than the conventional planning methodology that relies on the judgement of outside specialists. She based her writing on practical experience and observation, pointing out how government planning and development plans are typically at odds with how city neighbourhoods actually operate in real life.

Her theory is that a planned neighbourhood will naturally establish its own community spaces and be associated with a sense of security and belonging. This leads us on a trail of revelation that community space is never built; rather, it is discovered or created out of a human mental comfort; in order to obtain such comfort, it is crucial to understand the residents' cultural and habitual customs.

The Case for Higher Density: Jacobs proved that high density is necessary for city life, economic progress, and success, despite the fact that conventional planning theory had previously associated it with crime, squalor, and a host of other issues. Even though she acknowledged that density by itself does not result in healthy communities, she showed via specific examples how higher densities result in a critical mass of people that can support

more lively communities. Jacobs corrected many misconceptions regarding dense populations by clarifying the distinction between high density and overcrowding.

When we analyse a location's demographics, we often have a tendency to use generalisations like "the area is too congested, densely packed, etc." and "the densification we witness poses a threat to the community." Jacobean philosophy, on the other hand, helps us see the possibilities a location's population is creating. Studying the potential economy that could emerge from such a location is necessary.

Local Economies: Jacobs shed new insight on the nature of local economies by analysing the development and growth of cities and their economies. She disputed the notions that cities are the result of agricultural development, that specialised, highly efficient economies drive long-term progress, and that the finest sources of innovation come from huge, stable corporations. Instead, she created a strategy for local economic growth centred on diversifying the local labour force, fostering small enterprises, and encouraging urban businessmen's entrepreneurship.

It's eye-opening to see her describe how the trade routes and markets have remained constant throughout history all around the globe. The historical context of a given civilisation is connected to that learning. Business depends on repeat customers making frequent purchases; for these clients, having access to quality products to meet their daily demands is crucial. This returns them daily to the same seller. This creates a cyclic system where the seller sets up shop where he expects the customer to come and the customer returns to the same location where he first spotted the vendor. Knowing the location of the first sell/barter is crucial.

As we question our growing city's relationship with food once again, it would serve all of us concerned with creating sustainable communities well to dust off our copies of this genuinely thrilling book and get our eyes back on the street.