

# What Would Jane Jacobs Do?

Why the question remains so vital today.

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On a presidential campaign trail paved with discussions of border walls, Supreme Court nominees and terrorism fears, candidates have hardly mentioned cities beyond, perhaps, a remark about “New York values.” Yet a national agenda in this century must be an urban one. Two-thirds of the population now lives in the nation’s largest 100 metropolitan areas, and nearly 100 million more people are projected to live in American cities by 2050—swelled by the ambitious who move to them and those lucky enough to be born in them. Urban property values attest both to the desirability of cities and also to the scarcity of affordable housing as population growth outstrips new construction.

This week marks the centennial of the birth of Jane Jacobs, one of the world’s greatest urban visionaries, and her observations have never been more relevant or needed in our national dialog and in our cities than today, 10 years after her death. Jacobs first made her mark through her masterwork, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961 and still in print. It is required reading for elected leaders, urban planners and ordinary citizens.

Jacobs’s view of an ideal city, famously inspired by the street scenes she witnessed beyond the window of her West Village home, was humanely designed with short and walkable blocks. Successful neighborhoods are dense with a mix of housing, retail shops, schools, offices and cultural institutions. Networks of people bring “eyes on the street,” keeping each other safe and their communities connected and driving the economies of cities. Yet most cities at Jacobs’s time were far from this ideal and many have become even less so. Built in the early-to-mid 20th century, streets in most American cities were designed to move vehicles and not to support the neighborhood life along them.

Jacobs is remembered today for her role in defeating an expressway promoted by her nemesis, New York’s master builder Robert Moses, which would have slashed across Lower Manhattan. This victory over Moses inspired similar highway revolts against proposals for new roads through American downtowns in the 1960s and 70s. Yet aside from these halted urban highways, there has been little sustained effort in Jacobs’s name to reclaim and revive the ordinary city street itself from cars until relatively recently. Instead of inspiring an urban renaissance, *Death and Life* was followed by decades of rapid suburbanization, urban depopulation, congestion and economic decay, from which American cities are still recovering. City streets from curb to curb remain virtually unchanged, as congested and dangerous today as they were 50 years ago in Jacobs’s era, and the effects of this neglect are visible in neighborhoods from Boston to Atlanta to Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Toronto, where Jacobs moved in 1968 and ultimately spent more than three decades of her life. The question remains today: What Would Jane Jacobs Do—WWJJD?

Many communities are effectively fighting to keep streets exactly the way that Robert Moses left them.

We should honor Jacobs's memory today by redesigning our cities as she might have. It's not just a matter of livability or quality of life, but a long-term strategy for a denser urban future, one that is environmentally rational and economically vital. City residents have a carbon footprint a fraction of the average American, made possible by walkable neighborhoods, accessible transit, and not needing to use a car for almost every errand. A new generation of mayors, city leaders and community organizations have started to revitalize city centers and promote residential construction in downtowns where housing stock has been reduced to parking lots. They are taking advantage of the fact that fewer young Americans are opting to get drivers licenses, the lowest level in 30 years. Meanwhile, technology is transforming every part of urban life today, and transportation platforms like Lyft, Uber and car-share companies offer alternatives to car ownership and new opportunities for city dwellers.

But the process to fulfill Jacobs's vision may require revolutionary action instead of a merely evolutionary course. As city leaders attempt to adapt their cities for the future, they must face down passionate resistance from residents who perversely invoke Jane Jacobs and cite environmentalism, safety, local economics, and community autonomy not merely to oppose out-of-scale mega-projects, but to defeat proposals that Jacobs herself may have supported. Known as NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard), local residents at official city meetings reliably oppose dense new housing, new public space, bike lanes, or redesigned streets to combat dangerous driving. By using Jane-Jacobs-like language of neighborhood preservation as a decoy to oppose Jane-Jacobs-like projects, many communities are effectively fighting to keep streets exactly the way that Robert Moses left them.

We saw this fight first hand during Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration in New York. Guided by the mayor's long-range PlaNYC strategies to accommodate one million more city residents by 2030, we created nearly 400 miles of bike lanes, seven rapid bus routes and set in motion more than 60 plaza projects, including closing Broadway to cars in Times Square. Alongside more affordable housing, these steps, which reclaimed some 180 acres of former road space from motor vehicles, improved safety, local economics and gave people more options for getting around, but they also ignited bitter neighborhood fights—and even lawsuits—over the idea of what and who city streets are for.

Similar attempts to change street designs routinely make headlines in cities across the nation. In San Francisco, a city facing a severe housing shortage, an environmental lawsuit halted the building of bike lanes for five years, claiming that they would slow car traffic and increase air pollution. A church in Washington, D.C., claimed that the traffic and parking impact of proposed bike lanes would infringe on the congregation's religious liberties. Local neighbors decry attempts to redesign streets that they claim upset neighborhoods' historical character, make streets less safe or prevent people from reaching their stores or homes.

The impact of this NIMBYism doesn't end with a defeated apartment building or bike lane. Opposing dense, accessible neighborhoods pushes residential development into

ever-expanding suburbs and shrinking greenbelts around cities. The fight to leave our streets as they are condemns our nation to a sprawling future, longer and more congested commutes, and escalating infrastructure costs that combine for a \$1 trillion drag on the national economy.

The answer isn't compulsory transit or bike-riding but rather an urban revolution to make American cities the walk-able, bike-able and bus-able centers of population and economic growth this century. There must be increased affordable housing in cities and viable, competitive options to driving available to growing city populations. Leaders and likeminded advocates and citizens must articulate these goals as part of a change-based vision that people can say yes to and not allow needed changes to founder merely because some oppose them or find them controversial.

Paradoxically, what is most needed to achieve Jane Jacobs's vision is to deploy a Robert Moses strategy—redesigning our streets quickly and decisively for an increasingly urban age, this time committed to accommodating population growth and offering residents more options for getting around without a car. Fortunately, planners like Moses left us with abundant road space that can now be reprogrammed for new uses. But this process of adaptation will require a Jacobs-like approach, with a focus on the person on the street, and with the process designed to implement projects and not to halt them.

If we want safer, more equitable, affordable and economically vital cities, we can start by changing our streets today. It's WJJWD.