

[BIRTH OF A BOOK – COPY for microsite page 2 – May 2011 - www.janeswalk.net]

[by Julia Bennett] [try quotes inset itals] [pics – Jacobs sweeping front porch Greenwich Village; Jacobs bicycle; Jacobs white glove protest Penn Station]

I'm not a professor. I barely finished high school! - Jane Jacobs

In these days of blogging and media saturation, the idea that everyone has the right to access media to express their views, even if they are not experts, politicians, or media owners, is accepted without question.

But five decades ago when Jane Jacobs, a young working mum in Greenwich Village, took time off from her job, and asked her four-year-old to answer the dial telephone if it rang, while she wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, we weren't there yet. Jacobs was a media pioneer, and she had some company. Two other women without notable credentials were writing books which spoke to a public issue in plain and evocative language. Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), is credited with igniting the second wave of American feminism. Rachel Carson published *The Silent Spring* (1962), a passionate and researched critique of pesticides, and with it advanced the global environmental movement.

Public history can help put some context on what they did. This growing area in the discipline is, by one definition, the practice of looking back at events from the points of view of citizens who didn't write about it – maybe because they were too busy living it.

From that perspective, public history shows that the heady 1950s economic boom in North America had plenty of downsides. The use of industrial chemicals was causing new rates of disease, though global warming was barely on the horizon. Historic buildings and the community roots they represented were being torn down with abandon. And women had lost the beginnings of economic and social equality they enjoyed in World War II.

But the 1950s also brought a boom in communications, from public and private television to book publishing and print journalism. Though built for consumption rather than discourse (with the exception of educational public broadcasting) the media offered one remarkable new thing: access. And access was one of the requirements of a true “public sphere” where citizens debated and influenced governance, according to philosopher Jürgen Habermas, writing *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, his citizen call to arms, at the same time as Jacobs.

Quote to come – inset quote itals

In 1961 Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* didn't come out of the blue, even as a critique of cities. Back in the 1800s, Henry David Thoreau wrote about getting away from urban distraction to Walden Pond, and Friedrich Engels described urban tenements and poverty that he saw as capitalism's worst legacy. Charles Dickens and D.H. Lawrence wrote about the ways industrial cities defeated the human spirit.

But fast forward to the time just prior to Jacobs. Modernist fiction, science fiction, architecture, and medicine were all about doing away with the old, and with it the social ills it bred, and replacing the old with new structures and technology that would transform human life. Cited as the most influential architect of the twentieth century, Swiss artist Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (who called himself Le Corbusier) made this view tangible, and very nearly permanent, in the tall buildings and sweeping public spaces that modernist architects have made part of every North American city today.

Jacobs made her observations about city life because the modernists were not succeeding. She observed and catalogued the failings in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. In one memorable passage, she describes how the only functioning social places in a Le Corbusier-style highrise housing development, with its barren corridors and plazas, were the laundry rooms in the basement where people actually wanted to be, and where they talked to each other and felt comfortable.

To Jacobs, the lofty skyscraper of Le Corbusier was a dream. Its laundry room, a reality. There was spilled soap, toys, flickering light but also community and shared wisdom – like Manhattan's shabby Greenwich Village street on which Jacobs raised her own children.

“All kinds of settlements (except dream cities) have problems. Big cities have difficulties in abundance, because they have people in abundance. But vital cities are not....passive victims of chains of circumstances, any more than they are the malignant opposite of nature. Vital cities have marvelous innate abilities for understanding, communicating, contriving and inventing what is required to combat their difficulties.” - Jane Jacobs

Jacobs saw little to praise, however, in the work of the few credentialled architectural reformers springing up to fight modernism. She saw both the British father of the “garden city” movement, Ebenezer Howard, who wrote about the need for man to escape to an idealized village life, and respected American urban humanist Lewis Mumford, as city-haters who romanticized the isolated poverty of rural life that urban newcomers were fleeing in droves. Even the isolation and car-dependence of the suburban housewife, pressured to conform to a nuclear family ideal, was not working, as Jacobs pointed out.

“Our irreplaceable heritage of Grade I agricultural land ... is sacrificed for highways or supermarket parking lots....the air itself filled with the gasoline exhausts ... required in this great national effort to cozy up with a fictionalized nature and flee the “unnaturalness” of the city. The semisuburbanized and suburbanized messes we create in this way become despised by their own inhabitants tomorrow...” - Jane Jacobs

Jane Jacobs may have been the first author to embrace cities, and document their organic benefits for working people. And more, she articulated how “sustainable” communities could be lived, even though the phrase “sustainable development” would not be used for another decade (in the Club of Rome's 1972 book *The Limits To Growth*).

In 1955 a chain of events began for Jacobs that would lead her to shape these ideas into *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, a book that at the time of her death in Toronto has been translated into six languages and never been out of print in North America.