

# Jane Jacobs: Subsidiarity in the City

Paul Kidder  
Seattle University

---

**ABSTRACT:** Jane Jacobs's classic 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, famously indicted a vision of urban development based on large scale projects, low population densities, and automobile-centered transportation infrastructure by showing that small plans, mixed uses, architectural preservation, and district autonomy contributed better to urban vitality and thus the appeal of cities. Implicit in her thinking is something that could be called "the urban good," and recognizable within her vision of the good is the principle of subsidiarity—the idea that governance is best when it is closest to the people it serves and the needs it addresses—a principle found in Catholic papal encyclicals and related documents. Jacobs's work illustrates and illuminates the principle of subsidiarity, not merely through her writings on cities, but also through her activism in New York City, which was influential in altering the direction of that city's subsequent planning and development.

**KEYWORDS:** Jane Jacobs, subsidiarity, ethics, urban planning, urbanism, activism

The name of Jane Jacobs will forever be associated with maverick thinking on the vitality of cities and their economies. To utter her name today, when, more than a decade after her death, her reputation and popularity are greater than ever, is to evoke a distinct vision of urban life: neighborhood-centered, focused on lively mixed-used streets, dedicated to preserving old buildings, and resistant to large-scale urban development plans and projects. Her classic 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, offered a brilliantly scathing indictment of the post-war urban redevelopment theories that were reshaping American cities with expressways and high-rise housing projects while separating urban functions into largely

single-use zones—for commerce, residences, industry, and culture.<sup>1</sup> Some of the costliest of these developments, both in dollars and the displacement of citizens, was happening in her own city of New York, under the direction of Robert Moses, perhaps the most prolific master builder in U.S. history. The tale of Jacobs's role in defeating Moses in key redevelopment initiatives has today reached near-legendary proportions and her fame as an activist has begun to rival her fame as an author.

Trained as a journalist, Jacobs wrote for a broad readership rather than an academic one, her works often betraying a certain suspicion about the expertise born of graduate schools and professional enclaves. Partly as a result of this reticence about the academy, scholarly treatment of Jacobs's work has lagged behind its ardent popular reception. One exception is an enthusiastic interdisciplinary academic appreciation that took place at a 1987 Boston College conference organized by Richard Keeley, where Jacobs presented to an audience of philosophers, theologians, and other academics an early version of what became her book on patterns of moral character formation, *Systems of Survival*.<sup>2</sup> Though Jacobs was not a religious thinker, part of the interest at Boston College had to do with potential connections her thought seemed to have to Catholic social teaching and the Catholic intellectual tradition. The power of her thinking on urban affairs had inspired Jesuit philosopher and theologian, Bernard Lonergan (who had published a study of human understanding entitled *Insight*), to refer to her with the moniker, "Mrs. Insight." Her books, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and *The Economy of Cities*,<sup>3</sup> had been used in Boston College's PULSE Program, one of the nation's first undergraduate service-learning programs. The personal and intellectual relationship that Keeley established with Jacobs, deepened by the success of the conference, lead eventually to the donation of Jacobs's papers to the Burns Library at Boston College, which maintains them in archives used by a growing number of researchers.

In the following pages I would like to draw upon my familiarity with this Catholic connection to Jacobs's work to explore a particular principle central to Catholic social teaching, the principle of "subsidiarity," as it is illustrated and illuminated by Jacobs's thinking on cities. This principle of social organization

---

<sup>1</sup>Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Modern Library, 1991 [1961]).

<sup>2</sup>Frederick Lawrence, ed., *Ethics in Making a Living: The Jane Jacobs Conference*, a supplementary issue of *Lonergan Workshop* 7 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Jane Jacobs, *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992).

<sup>3</sup>Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Random House, 1969).

and governance has deep roots in the Catholic intellectual tradition and is voiced in several papal encyclicals—most thoroughly, perhaps, in one that does not use the word explicitly, *Rerum Novarum*.<sup>4</sup> As Jacobs once briefly defined subsidiarity, it is the principle that, other things being equal, “government works best—most responsibly and responsively—when it is closest to the people it serves and the needs it addresses.”<sup>5</sup> I say that Jacobs’s writing not only illustrates but *illuminates* this principle because her insights into the function of cities add a concrete richness to the understanding of the principle as well as providing some specific reasons why the principle makes sense in the circumstances of urban social life. We shall see, too, that Jacobs did not only advance the idea of subsidiarity in cities through the medium of writing, but also demanded it through her own activism, which included significant acts of protest and civil disobedience.

#### SOURCES AND PURPOSES OF THE PRINCIPLE

In Jacobs’s claim that governments act most “responsively and responsibly” when respecting subsidiarity there is implied both a practical and moral value to the principle. These types of value are discernable, as well, in Pope John Paul II’s encyclical of 1991, *Centesimus Annus*, which states:

a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need, and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.<sup>6</sup>

Communities “of a lower order” here include the family, communities of friends, and associations that are ordered by the participation and consent of their members. (*Rerum Novarum*, arguing specifically against the dissolution of family and community institutions by the socialist state, includes labor unions among the communities of a lower order that must be respected.)<sup>7</sup> As these kinds of communities and associations provide order to society through self-governance, it is practical folly to undermine them by regulating their members from a vantage point that lacks specific knowledge of their needs and

---

<sup>4</sup>*Rerum Novarum: Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Capital and Labor* (May 15, 1891): [http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs\\_le13rn.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_le13rn.htm).

<sup>5</sup>Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead* (New York: Random House, 2004), 103.

<sup>6</sup>*Centesimus Annus*, paragraph 48; [http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs\\_jp02ca.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_jp02ca.htm). On changes over time in the use of the notion in encyclicals, see J. Verstraeten, “Solidarity and Subsidiarity,” in *Principles of Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. David A. Boileau (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), 133–147.

<sup>7</sup>*Rerum Novarum*, paragraphs 48–52.

desires. But the principle is also a principle of justice, for to deprive families and associations of their authority is to rob them of their natural value and purpose.<sup>8</sup> The ability to reason one's way toward, and to choose, in concert with fellow citizens, the order by which one will live is one of the greatest freedoms one can have, a freedom that dignifies the human person in essential ways.

Roots of the principle of subsidiarity are normally traced back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. Because Aristotle saw that the organization of the city-state grows out of the order of the family and the neighborhood community, it seemed to follow that these smaller units must possess an integrity that the larger order should respect and support. The basis for his claim is not merely practical but born of a sense of the value of self-making and the formation of character that develops best in community.<sup>9</sup> The papal articulations of the subsidiarity principle reflect the development of these Aristotelian ideas in Thomist natural law theory, which incorporates them into a configuration of divinely ordered ends in nature. The family assists in the natural *telos* of individual survival and flourishing; the family, in concert with communities of relatives and friends, takes central place in ensuring the survival and flourishing of the species. As family and local community provide the first and most influential school for the development of mind and heart, they serve the specifically human end of growth in powers of reason and knowledge. To press the matter further in theological terms, it is in the intimacy of family and the community of friendship that one experiences most immediately the unity of the Holy Spirit and a shared human identity through the mystical body of Christ. When higher levels of authority undermine the authority of these more immediate communities, it hollows out the core of religious life.

Were the principle of subsidiarity absolute, however, there would be no need and no justification for larger and more complex systems of social organization. Part of the need for larger systems arises from the simple value of larger populations of people living together, permitting the specialization of labor and hosts of other social benefits; but another part is potentially corrective. For Aristotle, just governance, in whatever guise or scope, requires that we let reason rule. Powers of reasoning and virtues of character are indeed cultivated best in families and among exemplary communities of friends, but families can be abusive and communities corrupt. That the city or state may intervene to prevent or correct injustices, then, does not necessarily violate the principle

---

<sup>8</sup>John Finnis, "Subsidiarity's Roots and History: Some Observations," *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 61, no. 1 (June 2016): 133.

<sup>9</sup>Finnis, "Subsidiarity's Roots," 136–138; Justin M. Anderson, "Aristotelian Groundings of the Social Principle of Subsidiarity," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (October 2014): 333–351.

of subsidiarity, for that principle, because it is aimed at promoting justice and the human good, is already violated when the autonomy of families and communities is irresponsibly and unjustly abused.

A dialectic thus emerges between community authority and state authority. Each, ideally, serves as corrective to the other. Groups have biases that the larger political order can counter through the rule of law, but the state, with its distance from the lives of its citizens and its own inherent danger of corruptive power, is always in need of critical vigilance by its citizenry, a critical vigilance that is sometimes embodied best in a single group or visionary individual.<sup>10</sup> Yet in this dialectic, the principle of subsidiarity gives *prima facie* priority and the benefit of the doubt to the more proximate social bodies. Familiarity with circumstances is best at those levels, and people may best bring reasoned order to their lives under conditions that grant them freedom to cultivate and exercise their judgment, forming and maintaining their own kinds of interpersonal relations. The complexity of the dialectic provides plenty of occasions for dispute—indeed, rather constant dispute—and in this controversy and debate, what are often at loggerheads are competing visions of the good.

#### COMPETING VISIONS OF THE URBAN GOOD

The vision of the urban good that Jane Jacobs saw emerging in New York City in the 1950s was a progressivist and modernist one. Robert Moses had, by this time, spent decades shaping public policy and securing administrative power for himself, using his authority to establish a rich legacy of urban improvements, including scores of parks, playgrounds, pools, and parkways. His vision was of a modern, ordered, and sanitary city replete with everyday amenities and convenient routes for automobile travel. As his power increased, so did the scope of his transformative ambitions. After World War II he initiated a massive project to cut major expressways through all of the five boroughs of the city with the purpose of boosting mobility among them and thereby commercial development. In addition, he was slating whole neighborhoods for clearance and replacement with high-rise housing developments, eventually creating more than a quarter of a million units. He was overseeing development of the massive new Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in the heart of Manhattan. While other American cities were also engaged in development projects along the same lines, New York was unique in its scale and in the degree of power that one official could wield in getting plans built. Moses prided himself in being the man who could demand sacrifices that no elected official could demand,

---

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Bernard Lonergan, S.J., “Dialectic of Authority,” in *Third Collection: Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Vol. 16 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 3–9.

insisting that the magnificent powerhouse of a city that his plans would produce justified the poorly compensated displacement of many thousands of residents.<sup>11</sup> When the plans were opposed, protesters were called “selfish,” meaning that they were advocating their own private good over the common good of the city.<sup>12</sup>

Examining the fruits of urban renewal in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and other major cities as a writer for *Architectural Forum*, Jacobs’s early enthusiasm for the modernist approach began to be plagued by doubts, then frustration, yielding eventually a position of all-out opposition. She did not see in the results of the many lauded projects the promised utopian metropolis. The landscape of the new housing projects was uniform and dull; the expressways were noisy monstrosities for anyone who wasn’t driving on them, and they were bringing cars into the city that needed to be lodged in ugly parking lots and garages that deadened downtown streets. The zoning approach, with its single-use mentality, was driving the life out of districts. The issue wasn’t simply that certain projects and programs weren’t working; it was that the whole idea of the city that was being implemented was wrongheaded. Meanwhile, as Jacobs explored the old neighborhoods, some of which had been labeled “blighted” or “slums” by the city, she saw a liveliness to them born of the active public life of their streets and the stoops of their walk-up row houses. This vitality was aided by the diversity of uses on these streets—residences, shops, places for recreation, entertainment, and worship—bringing the presence of shopkeepers and other public persons to their sidewalks, as well as activity at different times of the day. This diversity of uses, activating the streets with people who cared about the neighborhood, increased safety and encouraged contact among residents, further promoting a rich social dynamic.<sup>13</sup>

By the mid-1950s Jacobs had become an activist in West Greenwich Village. From this point into the early 1960s, her activism played an increasing role in influencing New York redevelopment policy through three major campaigns, her contributions of leadership and expertise expanding in each successive campaign, ultimately earning her credit for contributing pivotally in bringing to an end the long reign of Robert Moses. Although hundreds of

---

<sup>11</sup>See Robert Moses, *Working for the People: Promise and Performance in Public Service* (New York: Harper, 1956); Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).

<sup>12</sup>“Jane Jacobs’ Response to Patrick Byrne’s Presentation,” in Lawrence, *Ethics in Making a Living*, 186–187.

<sup>13</sup>Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life*, chs. 1–6, 7, 13, 15; Robert Kanigel, *Eyes on the Street: The Life of Jane Jacobs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), ch. 9. See also Peter J. Laurence, *Becoming Jane Jacobs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

people participated in these campaigns, and while they included important politicians, academics, and celebrities, the tale of their unfolding has come to be told often as a narrative of Jacobs versus Moses, a David-and-Goliath story, presented in lively detail in books such as Anthony Flint's *Wrestling with Moses* and Roberta Brandes Gratz's *The Battle for Gotham*, and reaching literary heights in a graphic-novel-style presentation and an opera currently in development.<sup>14</sup>

The story begins when Jacobs joined a campaign, initiated by actress Shirley Hayes, to oppose the extension of Fifth Avenue through Washington Square Park, an amenity popular with families in the West Village. In the grass-roots effort to save the park from roaring traffic, Jacobs worked as what she called a "foot soldier," talking with neighbors, leafletting, and learning the techniques of organization, publicity, and creative protest. The work coincided with the writing of the *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, and gave her insights, as she was grappling with theories of urban development, into how plans become realities. A hard-fought effort, the campaign ultimately succeeded in getting cars banned from the park permanently, a victory celebrated with a "ribbon-tying" ceremony—the opposite of what would be done for the opening of a new road.<sup>15</sup>

In a second campaign, launched in 1961 to prevent sections of the West Village (including Jacobs's own street) from being designated for urban renewal, her role grew to that of organizer, strategist, and spokesperson. She had now completed her book and could argue against urban renewal development with exceptional critical authority and rhetorical skill. She learned more about how the interests of developers drove the renewal machine, and how Moses and his staff worked behind the scenes to skirt public input and opposition. She and her fellow "Villagers" understood how elected officials had come to be subservient to Moses, and the activists began framing this subservience as a weakness in their denunciation of decisions by Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr. and other city officials. The leveraging of political perceptions and reputations played a key role in yielding another hard-won victory.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>Anthony Flint, *Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took On New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City* (New York: Random House, 2009); Roberta Brandes Gratz, *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs* (New York: Nation Books, 2010); Pierre Christin and Olivier Balez, *Robert Moses: The Master Builder of New York City* (London: Nobrow, 2014); *A Marvelous Order: An Opera about Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs*, music by Judd Greenstein, libretto by Tracy K. Smith, animation and direction by Joshua Frankel, <https://mosesjacobsopera.com/>. See also Kanigel, *Eyes on the Street*, ch. 15.

<sup>15</sup>Flint, *Wrestling with Moses*, ch. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Flint, *Wrestling with Moses*, ch. 4.

The third battle—in many ways the most difficult but also the most decisive—was to defeat plans for the Lower Manhattan Expressway, a project Moses had dreamed of building since the 1940s. Jacobs, who was more than ever hoping to focus exclusively on her writing, was recruited in 1962 by Father Gerard la Mountain, whose Church of the Most Holy Crucifix was to be overrun by the project, to join the campaign that he was helping to organize. By now Jacobs's book was becoming known and she had a reputation as a community leader. She was one of the most knowledgeable voices opposing the highway and one of the most outspoken. She had no illusions that the public was being listened to in the official opportunities for public comment; only Moses mattered, and this project was among the most dear to his heart. Jacobs encouraged neighborhood residents to watch for signs of real-estate developer activity in the neighborhood, and even employed detective work in tracing a typewriter that had produced pro-highway statements, ostensibly from local neighborhood groups, to a real estate office (evidence of what is today called “astroturfing”). Through many varieties of advocacy and strategy, the campaign's efforts succeeded in getting parts of the highway planning process delayed or halted, but Jacobs understood that this kind of project must be killed repeatedly before it truly dies. Hopes that it could be stricken permanently from city plans were high when John Lindsay succeeded Wagner as mayor, but the plan returned in a bizarrely compromised form, dodging certain areas of contention but introducing mammoth new construction nonetheless. An elaborate model by prominent architect, Paul Rudolph, showed the highway lined with narrow but towering high-rise buildings, completely out of scale with everything around them.<sup>17</sup>

At an infamous meeting for public comment on this plan, Jacobs took to the stage in silent protest, with many following her. As the citizens seized the stenographer's record of the meeting, Jacobs was arrested and taken to jail. As it turned out, her reputation was now prominent enough that this act of civil disobedience proved to be a lightning rod that helped to turn widespread public sentiment against the officials pushing the project. The expressway was soon entirely abandoned, and the moment is seen by many interpreters as signaling the beginning of the end of Moses's reign.<sup>18</sup>

While there are many kinds of stories embedded in this narrative of modern New York history, among them is a tale of subsidiarity, as understood in theory but also as lived out in practice. So far had New York officials (and

---

<sup>17</sup>Flint, *Wrestling with Moses*, ch. 5. On Rudolph's plan, see Paul Goldberger, “Paul Rudolph's Manhattan Megastructure,” *New Yorker*, Nov. 8, 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/paul-rudolphs-manhattan-megastructure>.

<sup>18</sup>Flint, *Wrestling with Moses*, 172–178.

those of other cities who had gotten on the urban renewal bandwagon) lost sight of subsidiarity that they were funding projects that sundered the very communities whose authority the principle would demand they defend. The alternative social order that they were substituting was worked out abstractly, almost deductively, from general concepts of “housing,” “retail,” “industry” and the like, all organized in aesthetically pleasing ways on the drafting table. It was presented paternalistically as something that people needed, something they should want if they were properly enlightened. In fighting this paternalism and showing the deep flaws in the thinking behind the renewal programs, Jacobs became a voice and an agent for the local citizens whose views had been dismissed and overridden.

For this reason, one can say that subsidiarity is at the heart of everything Jacobs did in defense of her vision of urban health and vitality. Both her writings and her activism illustrate how the importance of the principle can be articulated and actively pursued. But in the specifics of her thinking there are insights that help concretize and enrich the meaning and value of subsidiary in the urban context. I want to identify just a few of these, emphasizing, as I have been doing so far, those that come from her first and most famous book, but mentioning, also, a pair of points from later books that broadened the scope of her concern to the topic of relationships between cities and nations.

#### LESSONS IN SUBSIDIARITY

Richard Sennett recalled being present at a public interaction between Jacobs and Moses. Where others would rant at him, her style was to ask questions: “How do you know this is what people want?” “Do you know any of the people in this room?” “Who do you know?”<sup>19</sup> She saw city officials as occupying a world far removed from that of the constituencies that their policies affected. Their neglect of subsidiarity yielded some obvious biases—towards developers seeking construction projects over neighbors seeking preservation, toward car traffic over foot traffic, toward regional benefits over inner-city benefits. Indeed, the expressway mentality so consistently served regional low-density mobility over urban high-density livability that Jacobs deemed it an “anti-city” approach.

But there is also a subtler blindness to subsidiarity that comes from the planning mindset of the times. As one abstracts from categories of “neighborhood” and “community” to replace them with concepts like “housing” and “retail,” one ceases to imagine urban life the way people in traditional mixed-use

---

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Kanigel, *Eyes on the Street*, 433. Possibly it was another official Jacobs was questioning. She did not recall this occasion later, identifying only one time she was present at a meeting with Moses himself.

neighborhoods experience it and value it. The city becomes, for planners, a set of two-variable problems: how to connect homes and offices, or offices and manufacturing. Jacobs's vision of the city, where mixed-use neighborhoods and districts jumble up every kind of activity seems, to this mindset, like chaos. But in fact, she argues, it is organized complexity. You see the patterns of organization emerge, not by imagining the elements, but statistically over time. You may not be able to predict how people will organize their interactions, but you can discern the patterns emerging, and avoid inhibiting them.<sup>20</sup> In the struggle over competing visions of the common good, the dangers of abstraction loom so large that Jacobs became wary of the very term.

One of [Robert Moses's] favorite sayings was, "You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs," and the omelet was the common good and the eggs were the people who were broken. . . . [P]eople understand when you say "the neighborhood good." That is not so abstract. "The good of the city," that gets a little more abstract, and you can "justify" a few more eggs broken, usually wrongly. And the bigger and more abstract the subject of this "good" gets, the more easy it is to make it a grindstone for somebody's axe.<sup>21</sup>

The neighborhood good, however, must of course function within the city and in concert with the city. Jacobs's way of conceiving the relationship is to think of a flow of information coming from neighborhoods up to the city level—what people are experiencing, how they are managing, what they need—and the power and resources heading back the other direction. She sees a crucial intermediary for this process in the political unit of the urban district. When properly organized, districts are small enough to be in touch with the life of street neighborhoods but large enough to hold influence with city officials.<sup>22</sup> Districts have their own requirements for health and self-governance. They must have a variety of primary uses, such as major businesses or cultural venues, that can generate an array of secondary uses that complement those primary institutions and serve the people who use them. This is not only how one maintains a local economy, but how one builds opportunities for a richly varied life within the district—and builds, by extension, a district that citizens want to protect and improve.<sup>23</sup>

The health and proper functioning of the district, in turn, depends upon the vitality in the functioning of their subsidiary street neighborhoods. Here again, the autonomy of the neighborhoods is enhanced by generating safety

---

<sup>20</sup>See Jacobs, *Death and Life*, ch. 22.

<sup>21</sup>Jacobs, "Jane Jacobs' Response to Patrick Byrne's Presentation," 187.

<sup>22</sup>Jacobs, *Death and Life*, ch. 6.

<sup>23</sup>Jacobs, *Death and Life*, ch. 8.

and mutual benefit within the interactions of people themselves. A diversity of street uses creates a liveliness that helps in this regard, as do small blocks that allow pedestrians to take a variety of interesting routes from one place to another, ideally with sidewalks dotted with shops that serve needs and offer diversions. The preservation of old buildings alongside new construction can help with accommodation of different income groups, as well as business ventures that need moderately priced work spaces. A mixture of properly defined public and private spaces helps members of the community to know when and where one is to behave according to the norms of the community and the freedoms of public life.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, just as *Rerum Novarum's* application of the principle of subsidiarity to families requires justly functioning families, so the principle applied to the city assumes and requires that the subsidiary units of governance, the districts and street neighborhoods, are well-functioning social units. One can easily see what is not working in a neighborhood and call it a slum; far more difficult is to see what is working and how it can be enhanced, or to see how city policies might have themselves contributed to an area's decline.

#### COROLLARIES: THE CITY AND THE NATION

What I am calling the health and autonomy of neighborhoods and districts has much to do, in Jacobs's view, with growth in the independence of their economic activity. The more a community can serve its own needs the more it acquires authority in self-governance. In an analogous way, cities as a whole can enhance their economic independence by doing what is called, with regard to national economies, "replacing imports." Cities are understandably attracted to natural resources and manufactured products that they can obtain most cheaply, whether from near or far; and they are drawn to markets for their own goods that pay the best, no matter where those markets are found. But to make decisions merely on immediate price factors poses long-term risks, as it creates import and export dependencies over which a city has little control. For this reason, cities should attempt to balance short-term decisions with long-term strategies for sourcing resources locally and serving local markets. Indeed, often enough the neglect of local opportunities is due to the mere lack of shared knowledge about what the local economy produces. In a similar fashion, cities often seek to attract large, successful firms that will bring large numbers of jobs, but they can neglect the value of supporting local start-up and spin-off ventures. The large, established firms can demand great concessions

---

<sup>24</sup>Jacobs, *Death and Life*, chs. 2–5, 9, 10.

and need have little loyalty to any particular city, but home-grown ventures tend to have deeper roots in their cities of origin.<sup>25</sup>

If cities are to be able to monitor this local economy and get the right kinds of economic feedback from its patterns of production and exchange, they do well to realize that national currencies, national economic policies, and national financial institutions can all contribute to distorting that local information. Jacobs's theory here is not going so far as to say that the national institutions should be countered with local currencies and autonomous financial institutions, but rather that if one is to think of a city more as an economic unit of its own, one must discern where national conventions are having the effect of obscuring its independent features.<sup>26</sup>

I mention these corollary points without elaborating or defending them simply to show how thinking in terms of subsidiarity can be found in writings that move beyond the dynamics within cities to the functioning of cities within larger economies. In Jacobs's view, a city that builds a tightly interconnected local economy, being less at the mercy of national or international institutions and trade regimes, strengthens its position of subsidiary self-governance relative to the national arena. Jacobs's ideas in this broader area have been more persistently controversial than the most popular notions from her first book and have received a number of critiques. But of any critic one may ask, does the critique come from a position that recognizes intrinsic value in the principle of subsidiarity, or is that principle being treated as a matter of little consequence?

#### THE FABRIC OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

Jane Jacobs is consistently identified as a practical thinker, and even a "genius of common sense,"<sup>27</sup> but such formulations can obscure the moral theory that is embedded in her interpretations of city life. She was a master of the kind of thinking that pivots between the concrete and the abstract, enriching the experience of particulars with an understanding of their significance. In that understanding, composed of hundreds of insights, theoretical orientations can be discerned, and among them is a consistent application of the principle of subsidiarity. In its general formulation, subsidiarity is a principle, but in its realization, it must function as a habit of thought. The process can be described as the dialectic of *praxis*: theory arising out of ongoing practice and informing it, but also being constantly revised in light of the understanding that practice

<sup>25</sup>See Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities*, ch. 5.

<sup>26</sup>See Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations: Principles of Economic Life* (New York: Random House, 1984), ch. 11.

<sup>27</sup>Glenna Lang and Marjory Wunsch, *Genius of Common Sense: Jane Jacobs and the Story of The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine, 2009).

affords.<sup>28</sup> We can certainly call it a dialectic, but perhaps, in the present context, we might borrow Jacobs's metaphor of the "fabric of urban life" and think of the relationship as practice woven through with insights that discern, at every turn, patterns of intelligibility. Theory is at work in the process, but never as an end in itself; and in every particular situation, theory is put at stake and is allowed to be challenged by experience.

It is through this fabric of theory and practice that Jacobs had her greatest influence. She grew frustrated, and indeed resentful, that her work of writing should be interrupted in order to fight battles against city programs that should never have been proposed in the first place; but in fact there was a synergism between her writing and her activism that rendered both more powerful. Her writing lent her activist voice a rare degree of critical brilliance and her activism showed how her ideas could promote the genuine values of citizens. It is unlikely that either the writings or the activism could have the same effect on their own. Indeed, as Jacobs's later writings moved away from urban activism, and away from urban issues generally, their impact was not felt as strongly.

As to the influence of the *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs noted, in the 1993 forward to the Modern Library edition, that the book is said to be highly influential, but she herself doubted the claim. Decades after the book's original publication, cities continued to grow in low-density, car-oriented patterns; new suburban subdivisions were springing up everywhere, but older urban neighborhoods continued to suffer from neglect. The old gatekeepers were gone, she said, but somehow the gates still stood. The modernist urban ideal was not defended the way it used to be, and yet, perhaps by the force of inertia, it remained the dominant pattern of urban growth and development.<sup>29</sup> Twenty-five years after the publication of that forward do things stand differently? Jacobs is certainly better known than ever—familiar, at least in some respects, to anyone who has gone through an academic architecture or planning program. Books continue to appear and academic citations, particularly of *Death and Life*, have been growing in number.<sup>30</sup> In practice, some of her language has made its way into the standard vocabulary of planners and architects, and one can point to many urban districts that have used her

---

<sup>28</sup>Cf. "Editors' Introduction," *Praxis: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Faith and Justice* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 1–3.

<sup>29</sup>Jacobs, *Death and Life*, xi–xviii. On the "dominant pattern" of the period, see Anthony Downs, *New Visions for Metropolitan America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1994).

<sup>30</sup>See Richard Harris, "The Magpie and the Bee: Jane Jacobs' Magnificent Obsession," in *Reconsidering Jane Jacobs*, ed. Max Page and Timothy Mennel (Chicago and Washington, D.C.: Planners Press, 2011), 66–69.

ideas on street activation and the strategic location of public amenities very effectively to revitalize their cores and attract new residents. In the movement known as “New Urbanism,” a great push has been made for styles of urban design and development that are oriented around transit and conducive to pedestrian uses.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, it is hard to say that Jacobs’s vision of denser, more mixed and architecturally varied neighborhoods is competing in a major way with the low-and-mid-density models. Car-oriented urban sprawl remains dominant in most American metropolitan regions, and central cities continue to suffer for it.

What continues to change is the urgency of the need for better ways of city-making and urban revitalization. That urgency becomes greater with each passing year. In our time it becomes clear that patterns of climate change have added a whole new gamut of reasons for the kind of denser and environmentally lower-impact living that Jacobs championed so many decades ago. Her voice continues as a moral voice full of moral reasoning, and the urgency of our current need for change makes for a continued role for civic activism. In reading Jacobs for her contemporary importance, it is reassuring to see that most of her vision is to be realized through the support and strengthening of subsidiarity rather than its abrogation by higher authorities. It is as true as ever that the communities formed in cities are the cities’ most valuable treasure.

*Paul Kidder is Professor of Philosophy at Seattle University, where he works in areas of metaphysics, Continental philosophy, twentieth-century Catholic thought, philosophy of art, and ethics in urban affairs and international development. He is the author of Gadamer for Architects and several previous essays on ethics in the work of Jane Jacobs.*

---

<sup>31</sup>See, for example, Peter Katz, *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994) and Peter Calthorpe, *The Next American Metropolis: Ecology, Community, and the American Dream* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993).