

Channeling Jane

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What would Jane Jacobs think about Tulsa's plans for a revitalized downtown? What would Jane Jacobs recommend for Tulsa?

The reason for my entertaining such preposterous questions is that I am a big believer in consulting experienced experts before embarking into virgin territory on any significant venture. And, it has seemed to me that our city representatives assigned to lead the charge in our city/county and downtown revitalization plan have not done quite the level of research and consultation with outside experts as, well, I would think important before embarking on this nearly 1 billion dollar venture. These would be city leaders, urban planners and otherwise relevant experts from whose successes and failures in their own similar ventures we can benefit. And if reaching for the stars, so to speak, one such expert would be Jane Jacobs. Impossible and impractical, you might say? True, she had been an inveterate big city dweller and advocate; she probably had never traveled to destinations even close to Oklahoma; and then there is the small issue of her having died this last April 25th at the age of 89. So, it is a far flung dream that I or any other Tulsan would ever benefit from a banter with Ms. Jacobs about Tulsa's meandering approach to urban planning, right? Wrong! I did . . . I think.

But first, an introduction. Jane Jacobs was that

irrepressible and irascible urban planning author, critic, protester and advocate for the organic and humane structure of downtowns whose 1961 seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* torpedoed the nation's vanguard urban planners and politicians who were spreading the flawed and fatal concepts of Urban Renewal. She offered her well-reasoned analysis (hugely oversimplified here) that the most successful places of urban life – in what she considered the great cities of America – were successful because they maintained a delicate balance of a vast capacity of interdependent functions and services and activities, very much like Nature's ecosystems. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* instantly became one of the most debated and celebrated books of the era, and in our time is required reading for all urban planning curricula nationwide.



PHOTOGRAPH: NATHAN M. HARMON

So, one recent Sunday afternoon I was aimlessly driving around the southern boundary of our downtown (as one can easily do in our downtown on a weekend), amid the immense patchwork of surface parking lots – graveyards of once dense and populated neighborhoods and mercantile areas – and pondering the future of our much debated city center. I scanned the vast flat concrete landscape, eradicated of so much of our urban history, and considered how little our city leaders and citizens have attempted to glean from the successes and failures of other cities having gone through the same challenges. I involuntarily shook my head at the scene while muttering expletives of disgust. In an effort to calm myself I challenged myself to imagine a conversation with the great Jane Jacobs, asking for her wisdom in mending the plight of our city center. Momentarily, I felt a strange shift

in the air inside my car, and looked over to my passenger seat to see a bespectacled, somewhat unkempt and grandmotherly little woman with a round face and wise, knowing eyes staring at me. She glanced away to look out the side window, and then with a thunderstruck expression back at me. "Good Lord, I feel like I'm in Dresden after the cleanup!"

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She said. "And who are you?" I stammered an introduction, told her she was in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and explained that I had somehow summoned her while commiserating on the fate of our city. "Hmm, this has been happening to me quite a bit lately", she said in her matter of fact tone. "Don't believe what you've read about willowing among heavenly clouds in the hereafter. I've never been busier. So, Tulsa . . . petroleum industry, oil barons, cowboys herding cattle down Main Street. Am I close? There was a movie about Tulsa, I seem to remember."

I affirmed her recollections, except for ranching on Main Street. While forcing some composure, I suggested that I take her through the downtown area.

"I must warn you that in my life's work - well, previous life's work - I focused my efforts on the best of America's cities," she said. "I am a New Yorker, you know. I am no expert on small cities, and most certainly not on single industry town-cities like yours."

"But, I assure you that your opinion would be most valuable, and I am anxious to share your observations with our city leaders," I said.

"I would recommend against that, unless you have a revolving door policy at your local psychiatric institute".

I could see her point.

While I drove through the main arterial streets, Ms. Jacobs sat and watched in quiet dismay the passing scenery, often shaking her head. "Your biggest swaths of surface parking appear to surround your downtown churches and your community college. This is no coincidence. They have not been friendly neighbors in your urban fabric, though they might vociferously argue to the contrary. Also, by looking at some of your handsomely articulated remaining buildings, it is clear you have lost a huge quantity of valuable building stock, many of them quite nice, I am certain. That loss is simply criminal".

I gave her a synopsis of Tulsa's history and of what our downtown used to be, as well as the current plans for rebuilding.

"I can imagine the bustle and vibrancy of that earlier, robust era and the current planned improvements as well," she said. "Your downtown at its peak was about the size of four of our neighborhoods in Manhattan. You had a substantial amount of mercantile establishments and grocery stores, as well as modest residential units - mainly apartments - and many office buildings, given this was Tulsa's financial center, and some nearby industrial warehouses. Your downtown did not have quite the density or diversification to which I am accustomed, but still I imagine it had its own unique synergy and balance. Unlike now.

"What has happened to your little city is that it has been literally gutted - disemboweled of its vital urban organs and entrails. It no longer functions as a community or a whole body. It is literally a slowly perishing urban organism, and very near death. If the lifeblood of an urban body is humans, then there are scarcely few pumping through your downtown arterials.

Your theatres have long ago been destroyed, along with your handsome walkup apartments and brownstones, as well as your department stores, clothing stores, delis, markets, restaurants and schools. Your downtown residents have been drained away to other locales, and your downtown now remains a nearly lifeless carcass, with more surface parking than the remaining 8 to 5 day workers will ever need.

"You tell me there are bold and optimistic plans for new public buildings to ascend like a Phoenix from the rubble, touted by well-suited and smartly trimmed pundits to trigger an explosion of new life in your downtown. Sadly, that is unlikely to happen. Your new arena - designed by Cesar Pelli, did you say? He was a young and ambitious lad when I was more active. As exciting as it may be, that will not be the thing that shocks your downtown back to life. Neither will your renovated Convention Center do that, nor your Jazz Hall of Fame. Not even the proposed hotels and condominium dwellings that are the current news flashes. My fear is that your city leaders have, perhaps unwittingly, generated a huge amount of false hope among your citizenry. Glitzy, glamorous new buildings and projects will not by themselves lure a new generation of urbanites. Urban dwellers want to live among other urban dwellers, and within an environment that is rich with a variety of amenities, curiosities and everyday conveniences. Your downtown has a thin smattering of dwellings, but I do not see any urban dwellers on foot walking to nearby bookstores, shops or . . . Oh, wait! There's a group of . . . Oh . . . they appear to be homeless. Well, your city does have one thing in common with larger cities".

As we continued our slow meandering through the vacant streets, I asked her what she would advise. She paused for a moment to consider her answer, while studying a cluster of pigeons circling in an otherwise empty plaza.

"I would advise... first of all, not to take my advice too much to heart. There are forces unique to the demise and revitalization of small cities than to the great cities - no offense intended in my distinction - and I am very much out of my comfort zone here.

"With that said, I would advise that your city politicians and major developers educate themselves that, with rare exceptions, they are better off keeping and working with the small number of remaining older buildings and urban neighborhoods, rather than clear cutting the old stock to build new - and especially to use as parking. The process of adapting old buildings for new uses demands a higher level of creative consideration and creative funding than simply bulldozing and rebuilding, which is why so many mentally indolent developers and property owners, as well as confrontation-adverse politicians, opt for the latter. But in doing so, they rob your city and themselves of much greater rewards, not to mention they destroy structures that are often irreplaceable, that have immense embedded value, and are like pages from the book of your city's unique history.

"Next, the hired planners and well-moneyed developers should be restrained from over planning and overdeveloping. In other words, those in charge of redevelopment should allow for some of this new large-scale development, and then leave it alone. There should be ample opportunity given for the many pockets and patches of land to be filled in by individuals and small landowners. And be patient, because it will

take a long time - many years - as well it should. What the small-scale developers and individuals create will probably be much more interesting and regenerative than the mega developments, anyway.

"This leads me to my final suggestion, which both encompasses and trumps all others. And that is for Tulsa's' citizens and politicians discover a way to create a perception of your downtown such that it sparks a self generating growth that is socially and economically diverse and eccentric.

"I have spoken and written often on the concept of city ecology. By this, I mean an urban ecology created by human beings and having fundamental principles in common with an ecology created in nature. Just as in the natural ecology, the health and vitality of a city's ecology requires immense diversity for it to sustain itself, and this diversity develops over time, with its varied components mutually interdependent in complex ways. In the case of cities, the necessary result is that this diversity grows in such complexity and intricacy that the various uses and functions give each other constant support, both economically and socially. The components of this diversity can vary enormously, but they must supplement each other in certain concrete ways. And by diversity I am speaking of a diversity of people of all socioeconomic levels, of building uses and functions, of street and sidewalk types and widths, and even of building designs.

"And remember this: a city cannot be successfully planned according to a desired final aesthetic, or the look of things. It is futile to plan a city's appearance, or speculate on how to endow it with a pleasing appearance of order, without knowing what innate functioning order it has. To seek a look of things as a primary purpose or as the main drama, this is apt to make nothing but trouble. That illusive goal defeats the necessary natural growth process, which can only be unintentionally directed and accomplished by the needs of the very people whose desire it is to live, work and thrive downtown.

"Needless to say, this diversity cannot be "planned" or "designed" by even the most celebrated and accomplished planners or designers. However, I believe that there are four primary conditions required for generating useful city diversity, and that by combining these four conditions, urban planning can create city vitality.

"First, an area or district in a city must serve more than one primary function, and preferably more than two, so that these people inhabiting or working there will go outdoors on different schedules and are in the area for different purposes.

"Second, most city blocks must be short, so that opportunities to turn corners on streets and sidewalks are frequent.

"Third, within any area or district, the buildings must vary in age and condition, including a good proportion of old ones so that they vary in the economic yield that they produce, and this mingling must be fairly close-grained.

"And fourth, there must be a sufficiently dense concentration of people, for whatever purposes they may be there. With the development of these four conditions, a city or district of a city should be able to realize its best potential, whatever that may be.

The maximum potential for Tulsa, in this chapter of its city life, will differ from that of other similarly sized cities. But if these four conditions are strategically placed, then the environment will be in place for maximum growth of your city's downtown ecosystem, and along with it, city life will have its best chance.

"And I stress, that all four of these conditions together are necessary to generate city diversity; the absence of any one of the four frustrates a city's full potential."

She paused again, and sighed while gazing out the windshield, eyes barely above the dashboard. "I am not sure what to think about your city, because the devastation to the urban fabric is immense. But perhaps there is a positive note here. Perhaps your little city is starting from scratch. You have demolished your city to such an extent that you may have a chance to begin anew, as in the case of, well...Dresden! If approached correctly, this may be a rather immense opportunity. Hmmm . . . interesting."

I felt a sudden wave of energy by her optimistic change of perception. "That may be entirely possible!" I said somewhat excitedly. I felt that I had interrupted her train of thought. I had just turned a corner, and had not been looking in her direction. I now waited intently to hear her continue, but when I looked to my side I saw a blurry and translucent form, as if there was some cloudy material in my eye. I stopped in the middle of the street and turned to stare at the passenger seat. The seat was vacant. My car was eerily quiet, yet I felt charged with some sort of energy. The silence was punctuated by a blaring truck horn, and a faint expletive yelled from behind. I jumped and felt as if I had awakened from sleeping. In a daze, I slowly started driving again, quietly making my way home.

Did I channel Jane Jacobs? Did she really visit me that recent Sunday in response to my plea for an answer to our downtown dilemma? Of course! Do you think I'm nuts? I do have a rather extravagant and colorful imagination, too. The point is that Tulsans and the representatives in charge of the city center reconstruction are feeling our way through what is perhaps one of the most critical efforts in the history of our city, and doing so virtually without an organized plan, and learning as we go. We should be on an exhaustive search for information, dos and don'ts, with guidance from other cities, city leaders, and other well-seasoned experts. Jane Jacobs is one such expert whose theories on urban planning and urban living are as valuable and relevant today as they were half a century ago, but she is no longer with us. The list of city leaders and experts outside of Tulsa who we could consult is inexhaustible. As we Tulsans embark on our own virgin attempt of an urban revitalization, we would benefit significantly from the wisdom of those who are well experienced and expert in the same venture.

*Author's note: Whereas the veracity of this incident is unsubstantiated, the representations of Jane Jacob's ideas are not. The quotes and elucidations in this article relating to urban planning concepts attributed to Jane Jacobs are excerpts from her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published by The Modern Library, New York.*