

FORUM

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Wood. With whom
is she negotiating at
the New School?

Dear Mr. Gilpatric,

SEP 16 1958

In my letter to you of June 14th, about the book on the city which I am eager to write, I described briefly the subject matter I plan to cover, and its general tenor. However, I am dissatisfied that I explained the point of the book or the reason why I think the investigation and descriptions I propose may be useful.

At present, there seem to be two dominant and very compelling mental images of the city. One is the image of the city in trouble, an inhuman mass of masonry, a chaos of happenstance growth, a place starved of the simple decencies and amenities of life, beset with so many accumulated problems it makes your head swim. The other powerful image is that of the rebuilt city, the antithesis of all that the unplanned city represents, a carefully planned panorama of projects and green spaces, a place where functions are sorted out instead of jumbled together, a place of light, air, sunshine, dignity and order for all.

Both of these conceptions are disastrously superficial. Both of them neglect --they simply overlook-- the most fundamental part of any useful image of the city --the way people use the city. And so these powerful mental pictures have become hindrances and blocks to intelligent observation and action. As an instance of this, a few years ago I gave a talk about the great importance of stores and storekeepers in city neighborhoods, and also the important non-commercial ways in which city people use store fronts. Since then, I have been distressed at the way this observation has been simplified into a gimmick, "the corner grocery store," by many people who were apparently moved by what they heard, but who have fixed in their heads so formalized an image of the "residential" city that they are unable to assimilate contrary data from real life, except by modifying it into a pretty meaningless gadget. In fact, there is remarkably little awareness that these standard images are superficial. As an extreme example, New York housing agencies have spent something close to \$250 million on rebuilding in East Harlem, without spending anything to find out what they were really up to --neither what they were really destroying, nor what they were really creating. Even when funds are set aside for urban renewal study here or in other large cities, the study almost invariably begins with standardized preconceptions about what is wrong and what will be a desirable result, and takes off from there. Thus concepts of neighborhood, of amenity, of all manner of city facilities, are grafted onto abstract preconceptions with

little heed to how these things operate in the city.

What I would like to do is to create for the reader another image of the city, not drawn from mine or anyone else's imagination or wishes but, so far as this is possible, from real life; an image more compelling to the reader than the abstractions, because he is convinced it is truer. I would also like to go further than this, however, and open the reader's eyes to a different way of looking at the city for himself and understanding what he sees.

This is a pretty ambitious aim, I know, but since we are dealing here with concrete, specific facts of life and behavior, I think it can be done by presenting a pointed accumulation of examples, illustrations, and explanations of cause and effect.

The problem is how to present this accumulation of facts, and inferences from facts, so it really adds up for the reader and persuades him of its significance, instead of overwhelming or confusing him. This is a tough problem, because of the subject matter and the thesis: that ~~in~~ within the seeming chaos and jumble of the city is a remarkable degree of order, in the form of relationships of all kinds that people have evolved and that are absolutely fundamental to city life --more fundamental and necessary to safety, to convenience, to social action, to economic opportunity, than anything conceived of in the image of the rebuilt city. Where it works at all well, this network of relationships is astonishingly intricate. It requires a staggering diversity of activities and people, very intimately interlocked (although often casually so), and able to make constant adjustments to needs and circumstances; the physical form of the city has also to be full of variety and flexibility for people to accommodate it to their needs --not as isolated family units but as a living community.

Complexity is thus of the essence, but it won't do to throw these intricacies at the reader like a basket of leaves. And it won't do, either, to begin with broad, simplified strokes and then embroider these with complications, because any valid simplifications and broad principles in this case can only be based on understanding of the underlying detail --not vice-versa. I think the problem can be overcome by taking up certain aspects of the city, one at a time, without evading the intricacy of each aspect, but by choosing the sequence of subjects so that an understanding of each illuminates the next one and leads into it. The sequence that I think now will work best is that described in my previous letter --the street, the park, the scale, the mixture, the centers and edges, and then the implications and possibilities of all this for the physical city and its people.

The reason I think it is important to do this at all is that I am convinced any good that is going to come of planning for the city is going to have to foster the city's diversity instead of obstructing it. And any effective planning is going to have to be based on

// respect for what catalyzes constructive behavior and trends in the city, or at least predisposes toward them, instead of being based on futile attempts to keep things in hand by master-minding --and oversimplifying-- an impossible infinitude of detail.

There are, of course, quite a number of people today looking at the city in the same way I am doing, and I intend to draw on the observations of many of them. In fact, the way I began looking at the city in this fashion --hunting for evidence of how people use it-- was as a result of being walked around East Harlem for several afternoons by Mr. William Kirk, the Headworker of Union Settlement. I hardly knew what he was driving at, at first, but the accumulation of detail and incident soon began to make pretty exciting sense, and opened my eyes to other things in other places. This is the process I will have to try to duplicate in the reader's mind, with the difference that he must be convinced of what we are up to from the beginning, and he has to get it in more variety of scene and circumstance from the beginning.

Any usefulness that this image of the city will have will depend first, on how true it is (on this I will try my best), and second, on whether it exerts any influence on the things that are done deliberately to shape the city and its life. I hope it will, but of course I do not know.

Sincerely,

Jane Jacobs
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