

# FORUM

June 14, 1958

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Mr. Chadbourne Gilpatric  
The Rockefeller Foundation  
30 Rockefeller Plaza  
New York 20, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Gilpatric,

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As you know from our discussions, I am eager to write a book about certain characteristics of the big city, and I hope that a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation will make it possible for me to do this.

The reason I want to write this book is that we are now planning for our cities with very little idea of what the city is, what works well in it and what does not. Most city planning and rebuilding today is based, fundamentally, on rejection of the city. Urban planners, beginning with Ebenezer Howard, have concentrated so much on what is wrong with the city that they have tended to substitute a pattern of city life and appearance that is based on small town and suburban values and is not suitable to the kind of communities they are working with. Enough such planning has now become reality --particularly in housing projects and their associated shopping or community facilities-- to demonstrate that the results are neither socially wholesome for the city nor stimulating to urban enterprise. Moreover, the projects are esthetically dreary, boring and unmagnetic. Meantime, "good" areas of the city go downhill, and there is little awareness of the right things to do for them. I think these dismaying results are largely owing to lack of thought and observation about how the big city really works and lack of appreciation for what it does well.

Our cities have gone through an enormous amount of unplanned trial-and-error experimentation. If we will only look for this and try to understand what it means, we can learn much from it to guide our treatment of the city and stimulate our imagination about ways to improve the city.

I propose to investigate five factors of the city; among them we can get a much clearer idea than we have of what the big city is and how it functions. These five factors are the street, the park, the scale, the mixture, and the focal centers.

The street is the most important organ of the city; we need to know what jobs it does, how people try to use it, when and how it works as a unifier and a social control, what distinguishes the streets of socially or economically successful parts of the city, what has been past experience with superblocks and other street variations in the city.

The park, as a social feature, is a sort of specialized extension of the street, in the sense that many of the same principles of social safety and informal use seem to operate for both. We need to know what

distinguishes parks that do a good job --that is, parks that are wholesomely used and much used. City outdoor activities are a part of this subject too.

Scale includes the characteristic sizes of things in the big city, and ranges of sizes, and also the frequency with which similar things occur. We need to know the characteristic scale of different kinds of commercial and cultural enterprises, the scale of big-city neighborhoods and communities, the scale of the kinds of institutions that have grown most spontaneously or have been most responsive to needs.

(of neighborhoods)  
Mixtures are related to scale, but there is much that is interesting about them, in themselves: for instance, the sort of mixtures occurring in business areas that have shown the best survival value, the kinds of mixtures of people and activities that occur in areas which fight political battles for community survival or improvement most successfully, what happens to areas of extreme sorting-out of people or activities, and why, what opposing forces are at work for mixing and sorting.

Focal centers are the places within a city community, large or small, that are important out of all proportion to their size. We need to know what kinds of things are in the places where big-city communities come to a focus, what kind of effect they exert, and what relation they have to a sense of community. Related to this is the question of "borders" and edges of areas within the city. The borders are much less significant than the centers, but present planning has pretty well overlooked the importance of centers and concentrated on defining borders, often with ridiculous results because what looks like a border in orthodox planning theory may, in reality, be a vital center.

I would conclude by analyzing the implications of all this for planning in cities, and would make some suggestions about suitable aims and means for big city planning and rebuilding. I would also discuss the limitations of planning --the things in the city that must be left to happen, that no planner can do for people, but that will be done well or ill or not at all, partly depending on whether the general framework hampers the functioning of the city or fosters it.

I am afraid this sounds very abstract; actually, however, I plan to make my points and describe the city mainly by means of specific instances and examples. I would include examples embracing, in each section, commercial life, residential life, cultural and institutional life, because one of the very important characteristics of the big city is the inextricable interdependence among all these aspects of life; we have already been led much astray by arbitrary attempts to deal with these as isolated and independent entities. My definition of socially or economically successful parts of the city does not exclude all run-down parts of the city by any means. There is an enormous difference between a physically rundown, but socially viable, part of a city, and a social slum. And even within bad social slums there are often bits and pieces, or past history of the city working well, from which we can learn much by comparison and contrast.

I would draw primarily upon Manhattan for my information, partly because

I am best acquainted with it, but also because I think Manhattan represents a kind of caricature of the qualities of the big city and it shows, in wonderfully sharp outlines, many advantages, disadvantages and problems that are characteristic of metropolitan centers, at least in the United States. I would concentrate, in Manhattan, most upon East Harlem, Greenwich Village (a big range is represented among these two) and the series of downtowns which Manhattan has grown from south to north. But I would compare my findings in these areas against other parts of Manhattan, the lower East Side and Chelsea, for example, and against a number of other cities entirely. The purpose of this is to avoid the pitfall of attaching misleading importance to superficially striking irrelevancies, and to concentrate on what seems to have widest and soundest applicability. Another reason for examining other cities is that this opens my eyes to things I have ignored, by taking them for granted, in the places I know best. But I would stick to big cities and to the urban --rather than suburban-- parts of those cities.

My bias, in general, is that of a person who is on the side of the big city. I think the big city is a great thing, that there is very much to admire and to cultivate in it, and I want to see it work well and fulfill its potentialities. The most valuable thing about it, in my view, is that it is a marvellously intricate, constantly adjusting network of people and their activities. This network makes all the unique and constructive contributions of the great city possible; it also makes possible the social controls that have to be effective on people, communities and enterprises within the big city if we are to maintain a high standard (or even a decent standard) of civilization.

In style, I would aim at the general interested citizen, rather than writing for the specialist. But I hope (and think) that the book would interest specialists.

On Jan 4)  
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The tentative time schedule which I set myself is three months of concentrated interviewing, observing, investigating and reading (a process in which I am already engaged, of course, insofar as I can squeeze it in), then five months of writing, supplemented with more investigating as it proves necessary, and one month of revision and rewriting. The grant which we discussed would support me for eight of these months, including the necessary travel and secretarial expenses, and the advance which I hope to get from an interested publisher would support me for the final month. During this time I would be on leave of absence from my job at Architectural Forum, if this can be arranged as I think it can be. Upon completion of the book, I would hope to interest the Forum, and possibly other publications, in articles drawn from it, but this would be subsidiary and subsequent to the book itself.

If this time schedule seems tight for the job to be done, I do not think that is a disadvantage. I know it is tight, but I have learned that I do my best work when I am under pressure that I have to do my utmost to meet. It is not very comfortable, but it works. I would like to begin this fall, preferably in October, but the exact time would have to be adapted to the convenience of the Forum.

Sincerely,

Jane Jacobs  
Jane Jacobs