

THE SKY LINE

Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies

EVER since 1949, when the national Housing Act was passed, the cities of this country have been assaulted by a series of vast federally aided building operations. These large-scale operations have brought only small-scale benefits to our city. The people who gain by the government's handouts are not the displaced slum dwellers but the new investors and occupants. In the name of slum clearance, many quarters of Greater New York that would still have been decently habitable with a modest expenditure of capital have been razed, and their inhabitants, along with the shopkeepers and tavern keepers who served them, have been booted out, to resettle in even slummier quarters. Even in municipal projects designed to rehouse the displaced slum dwellers or people of equivalent low income, the physical improvements have been only partial and the social conditions of the inhabitants have been worsened through further social stratification—segregation, actual-

ly—of people by their income levels. The standard form of housing favored by the federal government and big-city administrators is high-rise slabs—bleak structures of ten to twenty stories. Superficially, these new buildings are an immense improvement over both the foul Old Law tenements of New York and the New Law (1901) tenements that covered the newer sections of the Bronx and the upper West Side up to 1930. The latest model buildings are only two rooms deep; all the flats have outside exposure; the structures are widely spaced around small play areas and patches of fenced grass spotted with benches. Not merely are the buildings open to the sun and air on all sides but they are as bugproof and verminproof as concrete floors and brick walls can make them; they have steam heat, hot and cold water, standard bathroom equipment, and practically everything a well-to-do family could demand except large rooms and doors for their closets; the absence of

the latter is an idiotic economy achieved at the expense of the tenants, who must provide curtains.

These buildings, with all their palpable hygienic virtues, are the response to a whole century of investigation of the conditions of housing among the lower-income groups in the big cities, particularly New York. Shortly after 1835, when the first slum tenement deliberately designed for congestion was built, on Cherry Street, the Health Commissioner of New York noted the appallingly high incidence of infant mortality and infectious diseases among the poor, and he correlated this with overcrowding of rooms, overcrowding of building plots, poor ventilation, lack of running water and indoor toilet facilities. For a large part of the nineteenth century, in all big cities, housing conditions worsened, even for the upper classes, despite the common boast that this was "the Century of Progress." It was only because of a tremendous effort by physicians, sanitarians, housing reformers, and architects that legislation established minimum standards for light, air, constructional soundness, and human decency.

Unfortunately, it turned out that better housing was more expensive housing, and at the rents the lower-income groups could afford no landlord could be tempted to invest. The most profitable rentals came from congested slum housing. So pressing were the economic and sanitary problems in urban housing that when finally government aid on a large scale was secured, the dominant concept of good lower-income housing was naturally centered on physical improvements. Our current high-rise housing projects find their sanction in the need to wipe out more than a century of vile housing and provide space for people who have been living in slums holding three hundred to seven hundred people an acre. On sound hygienic terms, the one way of meeting this demand within the limited areas provided is the erection of tall buildings, whose grim walls are overshadowing ever-larger sections of Manhattan. There is nothing wrong with these buildings except that, humanly speaking, they stink. What is worse, after a few years of



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occupancy, some of them stink in an olfactory sense. Not only that, but the young have found the automatic elevators marvellous instruments for annoying adults; putting them out of order or stalling them has become a universal form of play. London County Council administrators have told me the same story about the conflict between high-rise urban aesthetics and what Jane Adams called the spirit of youth in city streets—or, rather, here, in city elevator shafts. By the very nature of the high-rise slab, its inhabitants are cut off from the surveillance and protection of neighbors and passersby, particularly when they are in elevators. In some housing projects, the possibility of casual violence, rape, even murder—a rising menace in all our big cities—is conspicuously present. The daily life of the inhabitants, besides being subject to the insistent bureaucratic regulation of the management, labors under a further handicap. Because of a long-standing rule, only lately removed, urban-renewal projects could not provide marketing facilities to replace those they had wiped out; often the housewife has to trundle her heavy shopping bags many blocks and is denied the convenience of sending a small member of the family to the corner store. In short, though the hygiene of these new structures was incomparably superior to anything the market had offered in the past—and in sunlight, air, and view definitely superior to the congested super-slums of the rich on Park Avenue—most of the other desirable facilities and opportunities had descended to a lower level.

From time to time in this column I have pointed out these deficiencies in public housing in New York; as far back as 1942, when one of the first high-rise projects opened, in the Navy Yard area of Brooklyn, I foretold that it would become the slum that it now notoriously is. But the person who has lately followed through on *all* the dismal results of current public housing and has stirringly presented them is Mrs. Jane Jacobs, whose book, "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" (Random House), has been an exciting theme for dinner-table conversation all over the country this past year. Though her examples of desirable urban quarters are drawn chiefly from New York—in deed, largely from a few tiny pockets of New York—the bad fashionable patterns she points to are universal. A few years ago, Mrs. Jacobs stepped into prominence at a planners' conference at Harvard. Into the foggy atmosphere of professional jargon that usually en-

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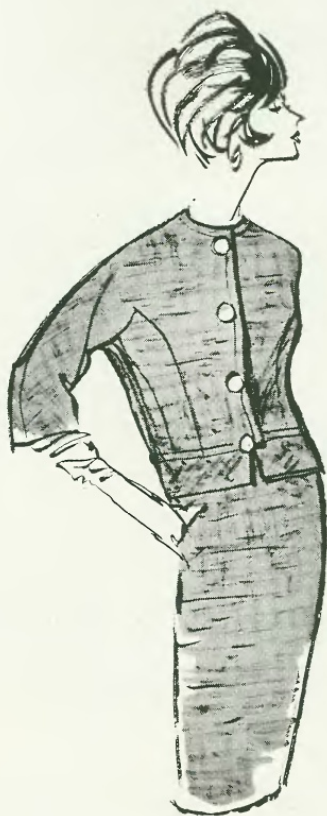
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velops such meetings, she blew like a fresh offshore breeze to present a picture, dramatic but not distorted, of the results of displacing large neighborhood populations to facilitate large-scale rebuilding. She pointed out a fact to which many planners and administrators had been indifferent—that a neighborhood is not just a collection of buildings but a tissue of social relations and a cluster of warm personal sentiments, associated with the familiar faces of the doctor and the priest, the butcher and the baker and the candlestick maker, not least with the idea of “home.” Sanitary steam-heated apartments, she observed, are no substitute for warmhearted neighbors, even if they live in verminous cold-water flats. The chat across the air shaft, the little changes of scene as a woman walks her baby or tells her troubles with her husband to the druggist, the little flirtations that often attend the purchase of a few oranges or potatoes, all season the housewife’s day and mean more than mere physical shelter. It is no real gain to supplant the sustaining intimacies of long neighborhood association with the professional advice of a social worker or a psychiatrist, attempting by a wholly inadequate therapy to combat the trauma of social dislocation. Mrs. Jacobs gave firm shape to a misgiving that many people had begun to express. But she saw more deeply into the plight of both those who were evicted and those who came back to live in homogenized and sterilized barracks that had been conceived in terms of bureaucratic regimentation, financial finagling, and administrative convenience, without sufficient thought for the diverse needs of personal and family life, thus producing a human void that matched the new architectural void. In this process, even valuable buildings have often been destroyed, though cherished landmarks in the life of the community, so that the operation may “start clean,” without any encumbrances.

Mrs. Jacobs’ criticism established her as a person to be reckoned with. Here was a new kind of “expert,” very refreshing in current planning circles, where minds unduly fascinated by computers carefully confine themselves to asking only the kind of question that computers can answer and are completely negligent of the human contents or the human results. This able woman had used her eyes and, even more admirably, her heart to assay the human result of large-scale housing, and she was saying, in effect, that these toplofty barracks that now crowd the city’s sky



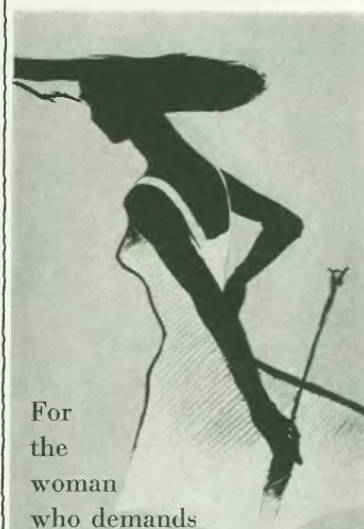
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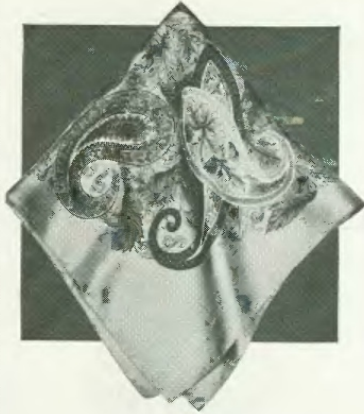
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Before seeking to do justice to Mrs. Jacobs' work as a whole, I must say a word about her first chapter, in which she does not do justice to herself. Ironically, this doughty opponent of urban-renewal projects turns out to have a huge private urban-renewal project of her own. Like a construction gang bulldozing the site clean of all habitations, good or bad, she gaily bulldozes out of existence every desirable innovation in urban planning during the last century and every competing idea, without even a pretense of critical evaluation. She is opposed to sterile high-rise projects, but she is even more opposed to the best present examples of urban residential planning, such as Chatham Village, in Pittsburgh, and she seems wholly to mis-

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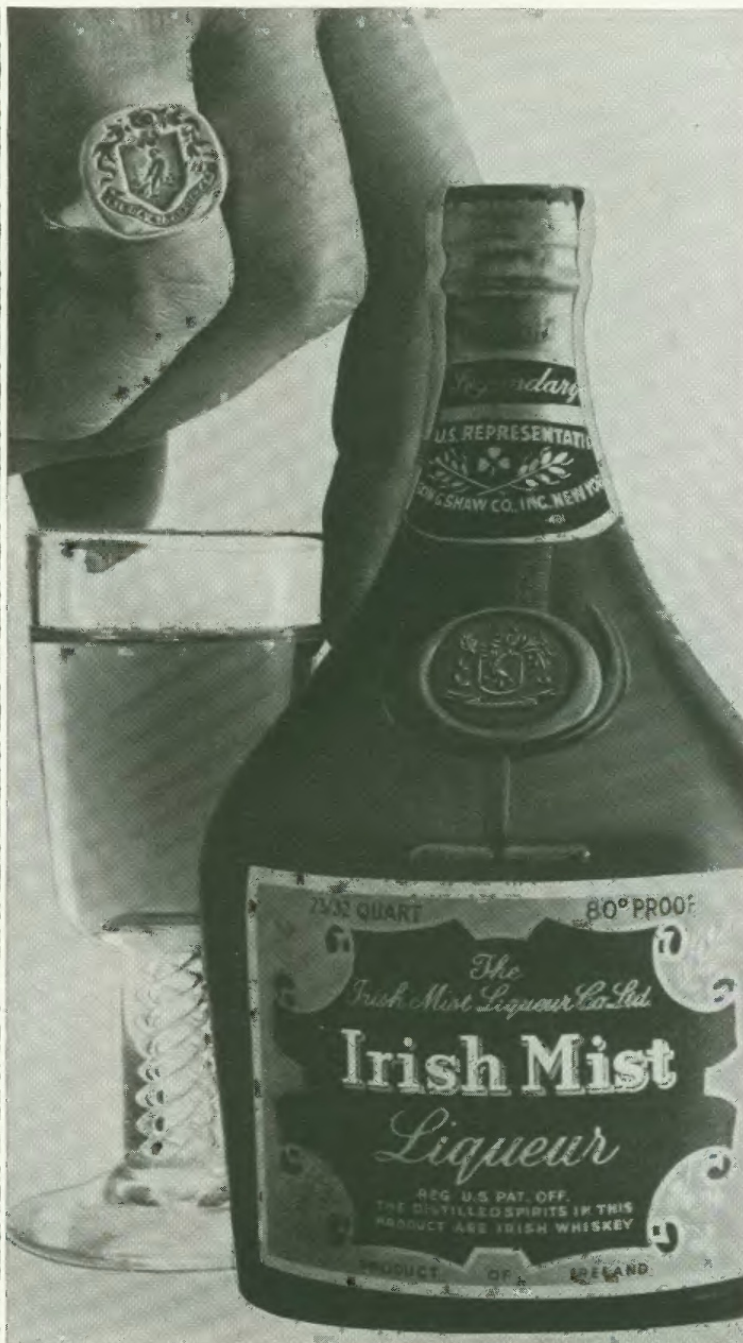


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understand their nature, their purpose, and their achievement. Her misapprehension of any plans she regards as subversive of her own concepts of urban planning leads her to astounding statements, and she even attempts to liquidate possible opponents by treating those who have attempted to improve the design of cities by methods not her own as if such people were determined enemies of the city. To wipe out her most dangerous rival, she concentrates her attack on Sir Ebenezer Howard, the founder of the New Towns (Garden City) movement in England. Her handling of him is, for those who know anything of his biography, comic. Howard, it happens, devoted the last quarter century of his life to the improvement of cities, seeking to find by actual experiment the right form and size, and the right balance between urban needs and purposes and those of the rural environment. Under the rubric of the "garden city," he reintroduced into city building two important ideas: the notion that there is a limit to the area and population of a city, and the notion of providing for continued population growth by founding more towns, which would form "town clusters," to perform the more complex functions of a metropolis without wiping out the open recreational spaces and the rural activities of the intervening countryside. Fifteen such communities exist in England today as partial embodiments of his principle, mostly with populations ranging from sixty to ninety thousand—a group of towns that will eventually hold a vast number of people working not as commuters to London but in their local factories and business enterprises. During the last year three more such towns have been founded in Britain alone.

Ebenezer Howard, Mrs. Jacobs insists, "set spinning powerful and city-destroying ideas: He conceived that the way to deal with the city's functions was to sort and sift out of the whole certain simple uses, and to arrange each of these in relative self-containment. He fo-

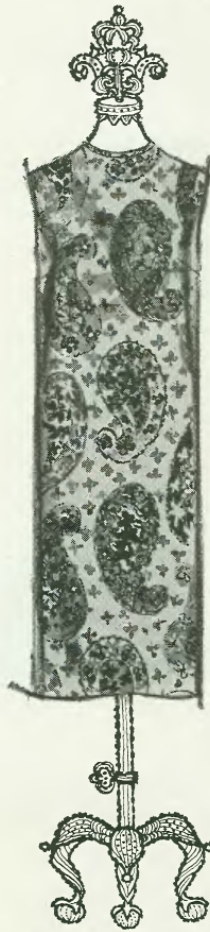


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cussed on the provision of wholesome housing as the central problem, to which everything else was subsidiary." But this characterization brashly contradicts Howard's clearly formulated idea of the garden city as a balanced, many-sided urban community. In the same vein, Mrs. Jacobs' dislike of nearly everything about current town planning is concentrated in one omnibus epithet, expressive of her utmost contempt: "Radiant Garden City Beautiful." Obviously, neither radiance (sunlight) nor gardens nor spaciousness nor beauty has any place in Mrs. Jacobs' picture of a great city.

I shall say no more of Mrs. Jacobs' historical knowledge and scholarly scruple except that her innocence of easily ascertainable facts is rather frequent. An English reviewer has charitably called her an *enfant terrible*; terrible or not, she has become a rampant public figure in the cities movement, and she has a sufficiently large uncritical following even among supposedly knowledgeable professors of planning to require a rigorous appraisal of her work lest all of it be accepted as holy writ.

"THIS book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding." With these brave words Mrs. Jacobs introduces herself. An exhaustive critical analysis and appraisal of the torrent of urban renewal that has been reducing areas of New York and other cities to gargantuan nonentities of high-rise buildings has been long overdue. To have someone look over the situation with her rude, fresh eye seemed almost a gift from Heaven. Unfortunately, her assault on current planning rests on an odd view of the nature and function and structure of big cities. Underneath her thesis—that the sidewalk, the street, and the neighborhood, in all their higgledy-piggledy unplanned casualness, are the very core of a dynamic urban life—lies a preoccupation that is almost an obsession: the prevention of criminal violence in big cities.

In judging Mrs. Jacobs' interpretations, I speak as a born and bred New Yorker, who in his time has walked almost every street in Manhattan, and who has lived in every kind of neighborhood and in every type of housing, from a private row house on the West Side to an Old Law dumbbell railroad flat, from a grim walkup apartment off Washington Square to the thirtieth floor of an East Side hotel, from a block of row houses with no shops on Brooklyn Heights to a two-room flat in the same neighborhood over a lunchroom, with

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the odor of stale fat filtering through the windows, and with a tailor, a laundry, a florist, grocery stores, and restaurants—Mrs. Jacobs' favorite constellation for "urban liveliness"—immediately at hand. Like a majority of my fellow-citizens, I am still unregenerate enough to prefer the quiet flat with a back garden and a handsome church beyond it in Hicks Street or a row house backing on a green common in Sunnyside Gardens to all the dingy "liveliness" of Clinton Street as it was back in the twenties.

"I shall mainly be writing about common ordinary things: for instance, what kinds of city streets are safe and what kinds are not; why some city parks are marvellous and others are vice traps and death traps," Mrs. Jacobs says. This reveals an overruling fear of living in the big city she so openly adores, and, as all New Yorkers know, she has considerable reason for fear. Her underlying animus fosters some of her most sensitive interpretations of the quality of life in a genuine neighborhood, but it also fosters a series of amateurish planning proposals that will not stand up under the most forbearing statistical examination. From her point of view, one of the chief mischiefs of contemporary planning is that it reduces the number of streets by creating superblocks reserved almost exclusively for pedestrian movement, free from through wheeled traffic, with the space once preëempted by unnecessary paved streets turned into open areas for play or provided with benches and plantations for the sedentary enjoyment of adults. Such a separation of automobile and pedestrian runs counter to her private directives for a safe and animated neighborhood; namely, to multiply the number of cross streets, to greatly widen the sidewalks, to reduce all other open spaces, and to place many types of shops and services on streets now devoted solely to residences. The street is her patent substitute for the more diversified meeting places that traditional cities have always boasted. What is behind Mrs. Jacobs' idea of assigning exclusively to the street the mixed functions and varied activities of a well-balanced neighborhood unit? The answer, I repeat, is simple: Her ideal city is mainly an organization for the prevention of crime. To her, the best way to overcome criminal violence is such a mixture of economic and social activities at every hour of the day that the streets will never be empty of pedestrians, and that each shopkeeper, each householder, compelled to find both his main occupations and his recreations on the street, will serve as watchman and

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This is indeed an original theory of the city, and a new order of city planning. It comes pretty close to saying that if the planners had kept blocks as small and irregular as they are in many old quarters of Manhattan below Fourteenth Street, and had made universal the mixture of shops and tenement houses that long characterized the main avenues, the blight and corrosion and violence that have now spread over the whole city could have been avoided. By concentrating upon the street and upon such neighborhood activities as the street promotes, Mrs. Jacobs holds, we shall go a long way toward producing a metropolis that shall be at once "fantastically dynamic"—the phrase is hers—and humanly safe. But if this remedy were a sound one, eighteenth-century London, which met all of Mrs. Jacobs' planning prescriptions, would not have been the nest of violence and delinquency it actually was.

As one who has spent more than fifty years in New York, I must remind Mrs. Jacobs that many parts of the city she denounces because they do not conform to her standards were for over the better part of a century both economically quite sound and humanly secure. In the urban range of my boyhood, there were occasional rowdy gangs even half a century ago—we always ran for cover when the West Ninety-eighth Street gang invaded our street—but their more lethal activities were confined largely to their own little ghettos and nearby territory: Hell's Kitchen, the Gas House District. With the policeman on his beat, a woman could go home alone at any time of the night on a purely residential street without apprehension. (She could even, astonishingly, trust the policeman.) Mrs. Jacobs treats the great parks she fears are an invitation to crime (she also disparages them as a recreation space) on the strange ground that no one any longer can safely use them, as if they were an original sin and a chronic ailment, although this is a state of affairs that would have seemed incredible as late as 1935. Until the present Age of Extermination, Mrs. Jacobs' plans for abating violence would not have been called for—not even by Mrs. Jacobs. Certainly it was not Frederick Olmsted's mistake in long ago laying out Riverside Drive, Morningside Park, and St. Nicholas Park that has made these large parks unusable sham-

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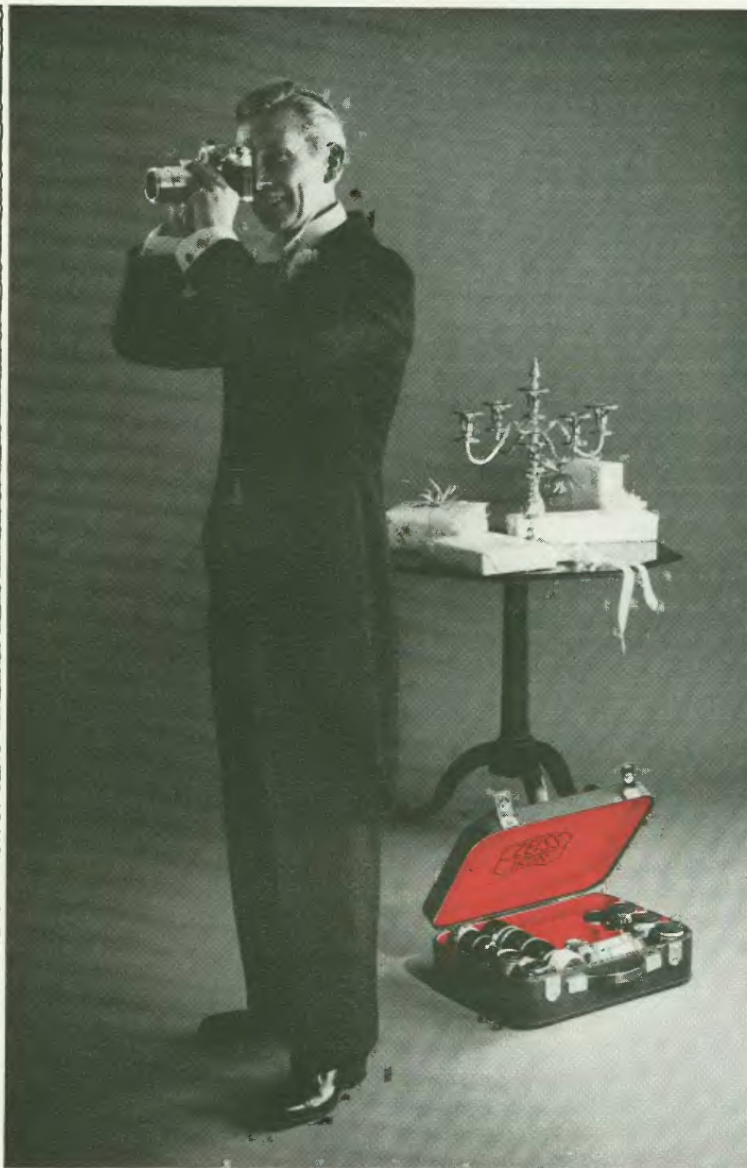
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bles today. What is responsible for their present emptiness is something Mrs. Jacobs disregards: the increasing pathology of the whole mode of life in the great metropolis, a pathology that is directly proportionate to its overgrowth, its purposeless materialism, its congestion, and its insensate disorder—the very conditions she vehemently upholds as marks of urban vitality. That sinister state manifests itself not merely in the statistics of crime and mental disorder but in the enormous sums spent on narcotics, sedatives, stimulants, hypnotics, and tranquilizers to keep the population of our “great” cities from coming to terms with the vacuous desperation of their daily lives and with the even more vacuous horrors that their rulers and scientific advisers seem to regard as a reasonable terminus for the human race. Lacking any sense of an intelligible purpose or a desirable goal, the inhabitants of our great American cities are simply “waiting for Godot.”

Mrs. JACOBS is at her best in dealing with small, intimate urban areas. She understands that the very life of a neighborhood depends upon the maintenance of the human scale, for it fosters what the philosopher Martin Buber calls I-and-thou relations between visible people who share a common environment, who meet face to face without intermediaries, who are aware of their personal identity and their common interests even though they may not exchange a word. This sense of belonging rests, however, not on a metropolitan dynamism but on continuity and stability—the special virtues of the village. These virtues remain conspicuous features of Greenwich Village—the area Mrs. Jacobs favors as a paragon of healthy urban design. By the beginning of the nineteenth century this part of the city, the old Ninth Ward, was so well



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defined, so individualized, that the City Planning Commissioners of 1811 did not dare to make it conform to the grid-iron pattern they imposed with geometric rigor on the rest of the city.

The larger part of this homogeneous area consisted of two- and three-story red brick houses with white porticoes, some of the best of which, those on Varick and King Streets, were destroyed to make way for the Seventh Avenue extension. For long, a loyal population clung to these quarters partly because—as an old friend of mine who lived there remembers—though the residents of the oldest houses had to draw their supply of water from a common pump in the back yard, they were far cheaper than more up-to-date accommodations. This historic enclave would have lost most of the very features Mrs. Jacobs admires, including its short streets, if it had been sufficiently “dynamic.” The Village’s two special characteristics, indeed, make mock of her “new” principles—its original low density of population and its well-defined architectural character, which graciously set it off from the up-and-coming brownstone-front city that leaped beyond it. In short, old Greenwich Village was almost as much a coherent, concrete entity, with definite boundary lines, as a planned neighborhood unit in a British New Town.

The contradiction between Mrs. Jacobs’ perceptions of the intimate values of neighborhood life and her unqualified adoration of metropolitan bigness and dynamism remains unreconciled largely because she rejects the principles of urban design that would unite these complementary qualities. Her ultimate criteria of sound metropolitan planning are dynamism, density, and diversity, but she never allows herself to contemplate the unfortunate last term in the series—disintegration. Yet her concern for local habits and conventions points her in the right direction for overcoming this ultimate disintegration: the recognition of the neighborhood as a vital urban entity, whose stability and continuity are necessary for rebuilding the kind of life that the metropolis, in all its cataclysmic economic voracity (“cataclysmic” is Mrs. Jacobs’ happy epithet), has destroyed. She recognizes that a city is more than buildings, but she fails to perceive that a neighborhood is more than its streets, or that the static geometrical order of the gridiron plan and the old-fashioned rectangular block has long been one of the chief obstacles to an effective neighborhood life. The new street system she proposes, with twice the num-

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ber of intersecting north-and-south streets, would do nothing to give visible reality to the social functions of a neighborhood—those performed by school, church, market, clinic, park, library, eating house, theatre. Mrs. Jacobs has no use for the orderly distribution of these activities or the handsome design of their necessary structures; she prefers the hit-and-miss distribution of the present city. No wonder she opposes the admirable work of Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. These pioneer planners have repeatedly demonstrated—in Sunnyside Gardens; in Radburn, New Jersey; in Chatham Village—how much superior a well-planned, visibly homogeneous neighborhood can be to the sort of random community she advocates. In the multi-dimensional order of the city she favors, beauty does not have a place. Yet it is the beauty of great urban cathedrals and palaces, the order of the great monastic and university precincts of Oxford and Cambridge, the serenity and spaciousness of the great squares of Paris, London, Rome, Edinburgh, that have preserved intact the urban cores of truly great cities over many centuries. Meanwhile, the sordid dynamism of the dingier parts of these same cities has constantly proved uneconomic, inefficient, and self-destructive. Instead of asking what are the best possible urban patterns today for renovating our disordered cities, Mrs. Jacobs asks only under what conditions can existing slums and blighted areas preserve their congenial humane features without any radical changes in their physical structure or their mode of life. Her simple formula does not suggest that her eyes have ever been hurt by ugliness, sordor, confusion, or her ears offended by the roar of trucks smashing through a once quiet residential neighborhood, or her nose assaulted by the chronic odors of ill-ventilated, unsunned housing at the slum standards of congestion that alone meet her ideal standards for residential density. If people are housed in sufficiently congested quarters—provided only that the buildings are not set within superblocks—and if there is a sufficient mish-mash of functions and activities, all her social and aesthetic demands are satisfied. She has exposed these convictions in a flat statement: "A city cannot be a work of art." The citizens of Florence, Siena, Venice, and Turin should take note. But, of course, Mrs. Jacobs might have her own peculiar answer to this: If these places are beautiful they are not and never were cities. What has happened is that she has jumped from the quite defensible po-

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sition that good physical structures and handsome design are not everything in city planning to the callow notion that they do not matter at all. That beauty, order, spaciousness, clarity of purpose may be worth having for their direct effect on the human spirit, even if they do not promote dynamism or reduce criminal violence, seems not to occur to her. This is the aesthetics of social realism with a vengeance.

Mrs. Jacobs' most original proposal, then, as a theorist of metropolitan development is to turn its chronic symptom of disorder—excessive congestion—into a remedy, by deliberately enlarging the scope of the disease. It is her belief, unshaken by irrefutable counter-evidence, that congestion and disorder are the normal, indeed the desirable, conditions of life in cities. But it is now a well-established fact in biology that overcrowded quarters produce stress even in animals, a state marked by anxiety and hostility. Elbow room is a general requisite for even animal health. Since her obstinate belief in high population density underlies Mrs. Jacobs' entire argument, it gratuitously vitiates even her valid contributions.

Yet despite its blind spots and omissions, her book at times offers a valuable look at the complex activities of the city—especially those urban functions that flourish precisely because of all the interchanges that take place, by chance no less than by plan, most frequently in cities that have reached a certain order of bigness and complexity. Unlike the big corporations and research laboratories that are stampeding into suburbia, Mrs. Jacobs recognizes how much of value they will leave behind, in exchange for temporary access to a golf course, a private airfield, or a few domestic acres. She also recognizes, by observation and experience, the communal nucleus of the city—the value of the spontaneous “primary” association of families and neighbors, upon which all the later complexities of urban life are



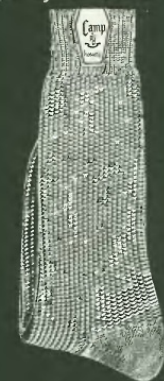
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based. And though she dislikes the notion of a planned "neighborhood unit," she chooses for her normal neighborhood the size that Clarence Perry, in his studies for the Regional Plan for New York back in the twenties, hit upon as roughly the proper size for such a unit—about five thousand people. "We shall have something solid to chew on," she observes, "if we think of city neighborhoods as mundane organs of self-government. Our failures with city neighborhoods are, ultimately, failures in localized self-government. And our successes are successes at localized self-government. I am using self-government in its broadest sense, meaning both the informal and formal self-management of society." Excellent. But, as against Mrs. Jacobs, many of us hold that such activities would be furthered by deliberately designed structures and that a planned architectural neighborhood unity will give firmness to its common functions, as it does in the classic example of Venice.

Venice was one of the few cities that, from the Middle Ages onward, were deliberately planned and practically organized on the neighborhood principle, each parish with the little *campo* at the center—occupied by a café, and shops, and a fountain—and its guildhall and its church, a building that might boast as fine a Tintoretto as the ducal palace. There is still plenty of variety and domestic vitality in such neighborhoods despite their long decay, but they do not follow Mrs. Jacobs' formula of shops and factories strewn all over the quarter. Her overvaluation of the now archaic street pattern leads to her naïve remedy for combatting random violence. And her prescription ("eyes on the street") is a result of wishful thinking. Since when has the idea of shopkeepers as substitute policemen kept even them from being held up and knifed? And what makes Mrs. Jacobs think that even policemen are immune to murderous attack? But about the long-term remoralization of this demoralized metropolitan community, she is emphatically right; the stabilities of the family and the neighborhood are the basic sources of all higher forms of morality, and when they are lacking, the whole edifice of civilization is threatened. When no one cares for anyone else, because we have all become mere telephone digits or Social Security numbers, the elaborate fabric of urban life breaks down. Out of this rejection and isolation and emptiness comes, probably, the purposeless hostility of the juvenile delinquent.

Mrs. Jacobs' concern for the small-

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est unit of urban life is, then, pertinent and well directed. Unhappily, the main tendency of the metropolitan economy she ardently supports is to turn all business over to big commercial enterprises increasingly automatic in operation and automatically increasing in size. The huge, impersonal supermarket is symbolically the ultimate goal of unregulated metropolitan expansion. Mrs. Jacobs wishes to fight new forms of economic organization that are wiping out choice and variety. But the notion of achieving this by multiplying the number of short streets and increasing the number of marginal small enterprises absurdly ignores the larger forces that must be controlled and humanized. The dominant economic institutions in our cities deliberately work to curtail freedom and reduce autonomy. There is no dividing line between the dynamic forces Mrs. Jacobs favors and the cataclysmic forces she opposes, for they have the same origin—an obsessive concern for power and profit, and an indifference to more humane interests.

In passing from that now barely recognizable unit of urban life, the neighborhood, to the larger problems of the city, Mrs. Jacobs again approaches but never reaches a desirable goal. She has had enough political experience to recognize that the city, by its very size, has got out of hand, particularly out of the hands of its own citizens, and that its hugeness causes it to be misplanned and misadministered. Because they lack any integral organs for formulating policies or making decisions, or even contesting the proposals of the Mayor, the City Planning Commissioners, the Borough Presidents, or Mr. Moses, the political pressure exerted by local areas is feeble and sporadic, and achieved only with great effort through *ad-hoc* organizations. The result has been a docile conformity by our governing agencies to other influences, unconcerned with the common good. Mrs. Jacobs realizes that if public officials are to be made more responsive to public opinion and be prevented from making wanton changes in neighborhoods to favor lending institutions, big contractors, and rich tenants instead of the old residents, politics must be organized on a local basis. So, too, her proposed new neighborhood organ of government, like the English borough and unlike the purely formal area of an Assembly District, must have some coherence and integrity as an economic and social unit. Functions that were once pushed to the periphery of the city, or



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packed into specialized enclaves, like the Seventh Avenue garment district, should be distributed over wider areas in these local-government units. For smaller metropolises, like Baltimore, she suggests that thirty thousand would be the right population for such units, while for cities as big as Chicago and New York, she chooses a hundred to two hundred thousand, and she recognizes that to form these boroughs into active municipal entities, industry and business must be established in these subcenters. (See "The Roaring Traffic's Boom," in *The New Yorker* of April 16, 1953, for a similar proposal.)

I take a certain mischievous delight in pointing out that the thirty thousand she has hit on for a self-governing district is precisely the figure Leonardo da Vinci, the first advocate of New Towns, suggested to the Duke of Milan when he proposed to overcome the congestion and sordor of that city of three hundred thousand people by designing ten component cities of thirty thousand, the same number, I repeat, that Ebenezer Howard—the archvillain in Mrs. Jacobs' private urban melodrama—tentatively chose for his original garden city. Nor do I think less of her proposals because the great Leonardo and the wise Howard got there before Mrs. Jacobs. But the recent Royal Commission in Great Britain on the government of London concluded that a hundred thousand to two hundred and fifty thousand was the desirable population for the boroughs of Metropolitan London. If Mrs. Jacobs errs in laying down the ideal number for a borough in ordinary metropolises, she errs in favor of the smaller unit. I salute her as a reluctant ally of old Ebenezer Howard.

Mrs. Jacobs innocently believes that complexity and diversity are impossible without the kind of intense congestion that has in fact been emptying out the big city, hurling masses of people into those vast, curdled suburban Milky Ways. In the desire to enjoy amenities unattainable at even a quarter of the density of population she considers desirable, millions of people are giving up the delights and stimulations of genuine city life. It is quite ordinary people who cherish such suburban desires, not followers of Ebenezer Howard or Clarence Stein. Now, it is this massive, century-old drift to suburbia, not the building of super-blocks or garden cities, that is mainly responsible for the dilapidation and the near-death of big American cities. This movement toward the rural periphery in search of things that were the proud possession of every pre-mechanized city has

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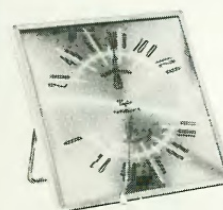
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BY *Taylor*

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been helped by the most active enemies of the city—the overbudgeted highway engineers who have riddled metropolitan areas with their gaping expressways and transformed civic cores into parking lots. Those who leave the city wish to escape its snarling violence and its sickening perversions of life, its traffic in narcotics and its gangster-organized lewdness, which break into the lives even of children. Not least, the suburban exiles seek to find some nightly surcease from constant bureaucratic regimentation: Punch the time clock! Watch your step! Curb your dog! Do not spit! No parking! Get in line for a ticket! Move on! Keep off the grass! Follow the green line! Wait for the next train! Buy now, pay later! Don't buck the system! Take what you get! The refugees who leave the metropolis may not keep even the fleeting illusion of freedom and security and a normal family life for long. But their reaction is evidence of their own spontaneous vitality and a quickened desire for autonomy, which most of their working life as members of an overcongested, necessarily impersonal hive defeats. Strangely, the city that so insistently drives its population into the suburbs is the very same city that Mrs. Jacobs quaintly describes as "vital." She forgets that in organisms there is no tissue quite as "vital" or "dynamic" as cancer growths.

But if "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," taken as a critique of modern city planning, is a mingling of sense and sentimentality, of mature judgments and schoolgirl howlers, how does it stand as an interpretation of the larger issues of urban development and urban renewal, which the title itself so boldly points to? Here again Mrs. Ja-



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cobs heads her argument in the right direction, toward matters that have been insufficiently appreciated or misinterpreted. No one has surpassed her in understanding the reasons for the great metropolis's complexity and the effect of this complexity, with its divisions of labor, its differentiations of occupations and interests, its valuable racial, national, and cultural variety, upon its daily activities. She recognizes that one cannot handle such a multi-dimensional social organization as one might handle a simple machine, designed for a single function. "A growing number of people have begun, gradually," she notes, "to think of cities as problems in organized complexity—organisms that are replete with unexamined, but obviously intricately interconnected, and surely understandable, relationships." An admirable observation, but the author has forgotten the most essential characteristic of all organic growth—to maintain diversity and balance, the organism must not exceed the norm of its species. Any ecological association eventually reaches the "climax stage," beyond which growth without deterioration is not possible. Despite Mrs. Jacobs' recognition of organic complexity in the abstract, she has a very inadequate appreciation of the ecological setting of cities and neighborhoods; she brusquely turns her back to all but the segregated local environment. Yet the overgrowth of our big cities has destroyed those special environmental qualities that made their setting desirable and fostered their growth in the first place. The obvious result of the large-scale metropolitan congestion she advocates—the poisoning of the human system with carbon monoxide and the two hundred known cancer-producing substances usually in the air, the muffling of the vital ultraviolet rays by smog, the defouling of streams and oceanside (once used for fishing and bathing) with human and industrial waste—is flatly ignored. This is worse than an oversight; it points to a basic defect in her thinking, a failure to take in the environment as a whole.

Mrs. Jacobs approvingly quotes Dr. Karl Menninger's observation that the best remedies for delinquency are "plentiful contacts with other people; work, including even drudgery; and violent play." But the kind of congested conglomeration she advocates would provide no room for violent play, and no sufficient opportunity to find relief from the monotonous and depressing regimentation of the big city. From the days of Ur onward, city dwellers have always had the countryside close at hand. There

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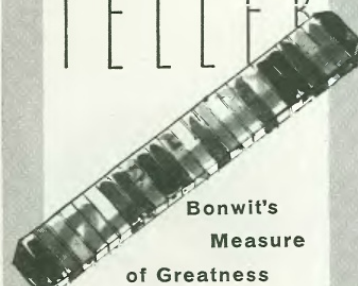
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their homicidal impulses could be exorcised by digging and delving, or by shooting at destructive animals, and there their need for spontaneous muscular exercise could be satisfied by swimming and boating and climbing rather than by knives, brass knuckles, and rumbles. (Emerson long ago prescribed a pasture and a wood lot as the best cure for juvenile village mischief; they didn't call it "juvenile delinquency" in his day.)

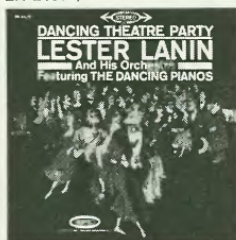
When they have reached a point long ago overpassed by New York, Chicago, London, Tokyo, and Moscow, big cities are under the necessity to expand their operations to a more capacious container—the region. The forces that have formed our cities in the past are now almost automatically, by their insensate dynamism, wrecking them and threatening to destroy whole countries and continents. Against this background, the problem of policing public thoroughfares to prevent violence is minor; violence and vice are symptoms of those far graver forms of disorder that Mrs. Jacobs rules out of consideration, because they challenge her rosily sentimental picture of the "great American city." To blame the conditions in the congested, overgrown metropolis of today on the monumental scale and human hollowness of its urban-renewal projects is preposterous, for this draws attention from the grim, enveloping realities that our whole metropolitan civilization confronts. The prevailing economic and technological forces in the big city have broken away from the ecological pattern, as well as from the moral inhibitions and the social codes and the religious ideals that once, however imperfectly, kept them under some sort of control, and reduced their power to human dimensions. Just as there is no



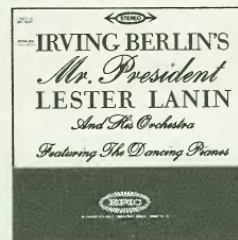
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limit to the power assigned to those who build nuclear weapons and rockets, who plan space shots and lunatic-cool mass exterminations, so there is no limit to those who multiply motor cars and gasoline, who push on the market every variety of drug, narcotic, chemical, and biotic agent, without regard to the effect on the landscape or upon any form of organic life. Under this "cataclysmic" eruption of power, with its lack of any goal but its own expansion, as Henry Adams presciently predicted half a century ago, law disappears as a priori principle and gives place to force, morality becomes police, disintegration overcomes integration. The present metropolitan explosion is both the symbol and the agent of this uncontrolled power.

Failing to appraise the larger sources of urban disintegration, or to trace the connection between our major adult and our minor juvenile forms of delinquency, Mrs. Jacobs mistakenly regards those who may have a better grasp of the situation as enemies of metropolitan life. Now, under more normal circumstances, the special virtue of the great city was that it tended to keep any one idea or institution or group from dominating. Today military power, scientific power, technical power, financial power, and, in fact, "cataclysmic" power in every manifestation, to operate most successfully on their own terms, wipe out urban diversity and do away with every mode of organic growth, ecological partnership, and autonomous activity. "Silent Spring" came to the big city long before it visited the countryside. No planning proposal now makes sense unless it is conceived in terms of truly human—that is, self-limited and self-directed—purposes. The command of this unlimited, automatically expanding power is, again as Henry Adams wisely pointed out half a century ago, the central problem of our civilization. For Mrs. Jacobs to imagine that the horrifying human by-products of the city's disordered life can be eliminated by a few tricks of planning is as foolish as for her to imagine that too generous open spaces and superblocks fostered these symptoms.

If our urban civilization is to escape progressive dissolution, we shall have to rebuild it from the ground up. Certainly we shall have to do far more than alter street plans, humanize housing projects, and give wider geographic distribution to economic activities. Since such a general transformation will affect every aspect of life, urban politics and planning must play an active and significant part. But

DECEMBER 1, 1962



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IN THE HEART OF
FLORIDA'S FABULOUS KEYS

CARL A. TWITCHELL, President

THE NEW YORKER

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it is the formative, stabilizing, coherent, order-making forces, not the dynamic ones, that need special encouragement. One cannot control destructive automatisms at the top unless one begins with the smallest units and restores choice and initiative to them—to the person as a responsible human being, to the neighborhood as the primary organ not merely of social life but of moral behavior, and finally to the city as an organic embodiment of the common life, in ecological balance with other cities, big and little, within the larger region in which they lie. A quick, purely local answer to these problems is no better than applying a homemade poultice for the cure of a cancer. And that, I am afraid, is what the more original proposals of "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" come to.

—LEWIS MUMFORD

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You want to repaint your house

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