

**#CityHallShelfie: March 19, 2020**  
**The Death and Life of Great American Cities: Jane Jacobs**  
[Lunch Meeting Link](#) | [Evening Meeting Link](#)

**Discussion Guide**

1. This book was originally published in 1961, making it almost sixty years old. What parts felt relevant to you still? What parts - especially due to technology or mapping - felt outdated or less useful?
2. One of the cool things I related to is that Jacobs' thinking was significantly influenced by a six-month stint she spent in Appalachian NC before moving to New York, watching her aunt try singlehandedly to save a tiny mountain town from economic decline on a mission trip. What did you think about her ideas relating to economic success and the pursuit of the American dream - related to how we build and plan neighborhoods, communities, and cities?
3. What do you think about the activism first / planning second path of Jacobs' career? It's often not known that she had more of an influence on community organizing tools and strategies before she wrote the definitive argument against modernist planning approaches :)
4. She specifically urges readers not to use these strategies outside of large, urban cities (in smaller cities, towns, or villages, for example), but are there ways you can think of using some of these principles in those places?
5. Given today's typical neighborhood concerns, do you think that her "eyes on the street" philosophy still holds true? What about the idea of diversity in buildings themselves (in age, character, type, affordability), as well as in uses (residential and commercial), to encourage diversity among community members themselves?
6. Did you know Jane Jacobs turned down honorary degrees to more than 30 institutions - but had no formal training or planning experience?!
7. Discuss this quote: "We are all accustomed to believe that maps and reality are necessarily related, or that if they are not, we can make them so by altering reality."
8. Discuss: "No other expertise can substitute for locality knowledge in planning."

## Ideas, Resources, and Takeaways



Jane Jacobs in Washington Square Park, NYC, 1963, courtesy of Fred W. McDarrah.

From the [Atlantic's](#) summary:

Reduced to a word, Jacobs's argument is that a city, or neighborhood, or block, cannot succeed without diversity: diversity of residential and commercial use, racial and socioeconomic diversity, diversity of governing bodies (from local wards to state agencies), diverse modes of transportation, diversity of public and private institutional support, diversity of architectural style. Great numbers of people concentrated in relatively small areas should not be considered a health or safety hazard; they are the foundation of a healthy community. Dense, varied populations are "desirable," Jacobs wrote,

because they are the source of immense vitality, and because they do represent, in small geographic compass, a great and exuberant richness of differences and possibilities, many of these differences unique and unpredictable and all the more valuable because they are.

[Jane Jacobs' Guide to Urban Planning: Developing Baltimore City's Master Plan](#)

Often, Jacobs' primary principles can be found underpinning what planners refer to as smart growth principles and ideas: walkable neighborhoods, placemaking, mixed use development and zoning, "little plans" that meet a smaller unit's needs, and ranges of available housing including affordable housing (although not in its current form).

### **Want to know more?**

Check out the Center for the Living Center's Jane Jacobs online exhibit [here](#).