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Collecting to the Core -- Urban Studies

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Collecting to the Core — Urban Studies

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at: <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists will introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

As a university urban studies librarian, I teach students that their professors expect them to use resources of an intellectual rigor that goes beyond popular press publications. I explain that scholarly books are written by people with advanced degrees doing professional research in their fields, the purpose being to advance their academic disciplines. These works have bibliographies and footnotes, and are often published by university presses. These are the standard books librarians purchase for the library collection. But occasionally there is a work by a journalist or popular writer that absolutely belongs in an academic library. The work is groundbreaking or stimulates such public debate that students need access to it. The subject of this essay is an excellent example of just such a book. It meets none of the criteria for a scholarly book. Not one. Yet no academic library should be without it.

Few disciplines include among their seminal works one written by an outsider with no academic credentials. And even fewer find that work still being hotly debated fifty years after publication. But such is the case with urban studies and **Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities***.¹ **Jacobs'** impact on the way people view cities and the way cities are planned has been so sweeping that many of her ideas are almost omnipresent. Her presence has been so enduring that an exasperated headline in the *Wall Street Journal* last year implored, "Enough with **Jane Jacobs** Already."² While some criticize her prominence, others celebrate her impact. In May, **HafenCity University** in Hamburg, Germany, will host a conference entitled, "Queen **Jane Jacobs** — **Jane Jacobs** and Paradigm Shifts in Urban Planning and Urban Re-development." While the debate regarding her ideas continues, this work is an undisputed classic. It has been added to the prestigious Modern Library series, translated into many languages, and is included in required reading lists at colleges and universities around the world.



Jacobs was not a trained urban planner or scholar, or even a college graduate. The story of her classic contribution to the canon is more personal than most. Born in 1916 in Scranton, Pennsylvania, she moved to New York City in 1935 after graduating from high school. Supporting herself with secretarial jobs, she pursued an interest in journalism by writing freelance articles about the city. She built her career at a number of magazines and in 1952 she became an associate editor at *Architectural Forum*, a publication which approached architecture from an intellectual perspective. There she was soon assigned to the city planning beat.

The stories that **Jacobs** covered in 1950s America were more typically about large-scale, orderly, "grand plan" projects. The postwar prosperity and concerns about poverty prompted the **1949 Federal Housing Act**, offering millions of dollars to cities willing to undertake major projects. The catchphrase was "urban renewal" and across the country neighborhoods were being bulldozed for high-rise public housing projects, multilane expressways, commercial development expanses, and civic centers. Politicians were gaining recognition by bringing in millions of dollars to redesign the landscape, and city planners were suddenly in a position to resolve genuine public problems through grand developments. Slums were targeted, and housing deemed substandard was razed, but the amount of money available led to corruption and misguided city planning. In addition to appallingly blighted areas, healthy, albeit rundown, neighborhoods across the country were being slated for demolition. Developers could target communities with no regard for residents' desires and faced few, if any, obstacles. But when **Jacobs** reported on these projects, she did not see the masterful renewal projects envisioned by the planners. She saw failure. The developers, **Jacobs** came to believe, did not understand or care how communities actually functioned. They seemed oblivious to people's collective daily rhythms and the human dynamic in neighborhoods. Cities were being destroyed, she argued, with alarming speed.

Much of **Jacobs'** experience came from observing her own neighborhood, Greenwich Village. In it, she recognized an ideal community of mixed-use properties, natural growth, and livability. The Greenwich Village of the 1950s and 60s is still recognizable today, but only because of the battles **Jacobs** and her neighbors fought against the city's bureaucratic system. This area was targeted by developers repeatedly. One of the biggest

threats came from the politically powerful, long-time city construction chief **Robert Moses**, who planned to put a highway through Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village. The residents formed a grassroots group and fought the project for six years, ultimately and surprisingly prevailing. **Jacobs** had become a seasoned community activist. Throughout the conflict, she formed one of the prevailing tenets of her work: residents deserve to have a voice in the plans for their community. She argued that their preferences, patterns, and history should all be taken into consideration during urban planning.

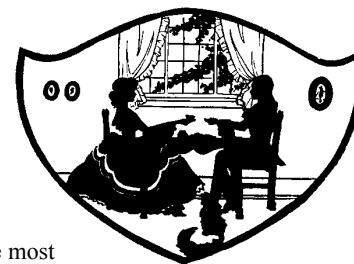
Jane Jacobs' ideology grew from personal observation, and she was a keen observer. In the communities that were the healthiest, she noted diversity, manageable scale, and an active social fabric. These were natural ecosystems that eschewed an imposed, artificial order. Blocks were small and walkable, streets narrow, and everything was scaled to the humans who lived and worked there. She saw developers creating the exact opposite. Communities that had evolved organically over decades, even centuries, were leveled and replaced by high-rise, high-density projects for single use and separated from the street. The planners, the policy makers, the people with educational credentials and advanced degrees all claimed that urban renewal was the solution to society's ills. **Jane Jacobs** disagreed and passionately advocated for New York City's communities. And she wrote a book.

The reaction to *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was swift and polarized. For citizens whose communities were on the chopping block, **Jacobs'** work symbolized a commonsense approach, but many developers and politicians considered her a housewife with no credentials. Her work was belittled and dismissed by opponents, but the blistering condemnation did not quell the debate. She continued her advocacy, and because her arguments were thoughtfully constructed and derived from real-world observations, her ideas gained supporters as well as significance. Her arguments were not flawless. However, in many cases they have been vindicated. The high-density, high-rise housing projects are widely considered failures, and areas that were able to resist paving parks with expressways in the 1960s generally acknowledge a positive outcome. Though even followers will concede that not every community could exist in the same way as Greenwich Village, **Jacobs** started a national dialogue that has endured for fifty years, and her advocacy work has instilled methods that have impacted community-based organizations beyond measure.

While it isn't the norm, **Jacobs'** work proves that it is not only scholars who advance

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Not Good at What They Do



Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

The other day while minding my business walking down one of the long white hallways of Ingram's "Building 14" where I work in La Vergne, Tennessee, I overheard a conversation in one of the offices as I passed by. Someone was describing someone else as being "good at what they do."

That common phrase has always struck me as a little odd. Mainly since you can't be good at what you don't do. Sometimes I've heard the phrase used as a kind of backhand semi-compliment, to mean that someone is indeed good at something they do, but according to tone and context, the unspoken message is that they are not so good at other things they do. But other times it's meant as an out-and-out compliment, possibly expressed as "good at what they do," with the emphasis, meaning either that someone is good at everything they do, or a notch down, that they are only good at part of what they do.

So to one degree or another, my Ingram colleagues were saying something at least mildly positive.

All this reminded me of a program I attended at this past ALA conference in San Diego. There were four well-known speakers. Their topic was "Is Selection Dead?" A lot of people must have wanted to find out, since the program drew a full house in a large room, SRO in fact. Speaker after speaker said that the prognosis isn't good for selection in academic libraries, that the pulse is weak. Selection is in its "twilight," the job of selectors has "morphed" — those were among the gentler words we heard. Statistics were presented, harsh numbers showing that if you found yourself at the betting window of a race track, you wouldn't want to put even \$2 of your money on the horse named "Book Selector."

Today we hear all the time that the bets selectors place on the books they choose for their collections are way too often throwaways. That there's hardly any collections money left anyhow. That patrons — meaning anyone, really — would do a better job with the money that is left. We heard, when you get down to it, that selectors are not good at what they do.

Of course nobody ever comes out and actually says it that plainly, but when it comes to selectors, that's the message these days. In fact I don't remember a group of librarians who have received the public "beating," as one of the San Diego speakers put it, that selectors have taken in recent years. The closest parallel I can think of is catalogers, who used to get knocked regularly for being reclusive social misfits, who turned out a miniscule number of cataloging records per week, records that didn't matter much anyway, with their manuals of codified rules and procedures that only they understood or cared about. But catalogers fought back like tigers. They discovered metadata, and ran with it. They invented acronyms that sounded more interesting than AACR2 ever did, such as FRBR and RDA. People began paying attention to catalogers.

But selectors have taken it all lying down so far. They have not fought back. Maybe they are too busy promoting information literacy. Maybe they are occupied all the time with faculty liaison duties. Maybe they are too busy managing the institutional repository. Or too busy setting up arrangements for their patrons to select the books. Or maybe they really don't have an answer to the negative performance reviews they now receive so regularly and so publicly for the job they do in carrying out what used to be considered, and not all that long

ago, the most prestigious, most important job in the library, book selection.

That's nothing like the selectors I remember. Having visited libraries across North America for some twenty-five years on behalf of companies who offer approval plans, I've probably had more meetings with more academic library selectors than anyone in history, one-on-one meetings in their offices, small group meetings in conference rooms, meetings with a dozen or more selectors at once in wood-paneled, trophy-room, showpiece spaces with portraits of university dignitaries of the past hung on the walls, in between shelves of old books captive behind grilles in cases that were never unlocked.

The selectors I remember always had an answer. When I started out in the mid-1980s, selectors ruled the roost. Everyone catered to them. I remember early on visiting a big library in the Midwest where there was a selector who wanted to meet with me to discuss problems he'd had with our approval plan. I had heard stories about this selector, who from most accounts ate acquisitions staff members alive and had the same taste for vendor representatives. His office was deep in the lower levels of a library building that, to a non-native, was nearly un-navigable. As I descended through warrens of stacks, in and out of surprising dead-end turns, and across unmapped annexes of the building, I thought of Kurtz and *Heart of Darkness*. I wondered how long it would take me to find my way out.

Kurtz was pleasant that day. I heard later that sometimes he was. And of course that sometimes he wasn't. In any case, "he built some great collections," one of the other librarians told me. No doubt he did, from his office fastness crammed with books, catalogs, national bibliographies, and, since he was the European history selector, paper bibliographic slips, white ones from the **Library of Congress** as well as piles of others in a spectrum of colors from the vendors who came from the respective countries and regions of the continent and UK.

Little did I know it, but I was witnessing the beginning of the end for bibliographers whose job was to "build great collections." Whether or not a book circulated anytime soon was beside the point for them, then. Some were scholars. They often had languages. Sometimes they had good stories of travel abroad for their research or book-buying. Quite a few were Ph.D.s or almost-Ph.D.s, usually from History or English, who hadn't gotten a teaching job and ended up as librarians, sometimes happily, sometimes with a measure of bitterness. My encounters were not always as pleasant as my

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academic disciplines. Without **Jane Jacobs**, major themes in urban studies would not exist as they do now: the advantages of mixed-use zoning, the injunction that planners should seek input from community members, and the observation that neighborhoods have natural, organic rhythms are all firmly established in urban studies and in urban planning. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is essential not only to an urban studies collection. Reverberations of **Jacobs'** theories can be found in numerous other social disciplines, making this the exceptional transdisciplinary and transnational work. Her discussion of "eyes on the street" and the role of "social capital" in functioning communities remains relevant

to fields like sociology, and her emphasis on mixed-income housing influences economic study. Academic libraries may very well retain multiple copies of this canonical work. It has remained relevant to the undergraduate curriculum, as well as to the general public, for the last fifty years and will likely remain fundamental for the next fifty. 🌸

Endnotes

1. **Jacobs, Jane.** *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* New York: Random House, 1961.*

2. **Manshel, Andrew.** "Enough with Jane Jacobs Already." *Wall Street Journal.* 29 June 2010. Web. 7 March 2011.

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries.*