

Nine Ways of Looking at Ourselves (Looking at Cities)

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This essay appears in *What We See: Advancing the Observations of Jane Jacobs* (New Village Press 2010), an anthology co-published by New Village Press and The Center for the Living City collecting original essays by leading thinkers to honor the late Jane Jacobs, best-known for her first book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. This essay explores nine different ways our own habits of perception affect our view of the culture of cities and their possible futures. An interactive website has been created for *What We See* at: www.whatweseesee.org. Reprinted in this issue of *Culture and Local Governance* with permission of the author and New Village Press.

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Cet essai est issu d'un ouvrage intitulé *What We See: Advancing the Observations of Jane Jacobs* (New Village Press 2010), une anthologie co-publiée par New Village Press et par le Center for the Living City et qui rassemble des textes originaux publiés par des auteurs prestigieux réunis afin d'honorer la mémoire de Jane Jacobs, mieux connue pour son premier ouvrage *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Cet essai explore neuf manières différentes d'aborder les perceptions et coutumes qui affectent notre compréhension de la culture des villes et leurs futurs possibles. Un site web interactif a été créé pour *What We See* at: www.whatweseesee.org.

Mots clé : développement urbain, planification locale, arts communautaires, développement culturel communautaire, graffiti, Jane Jacobs, Paul Goodman

In 2001 I co-edited *Community, Culture and Globalization*, an international anthology of community cultural development. Community artists from 15 nations contributed chapters about their own work – making meaning and beauty in collaboration with people creating community. Members of the international editorial team met in New York City just two months after 9/11. It took some persuading to get people there. It wasn't so much the aftermath of terrorism as all the commercial TV programming preceding it, portraying life on the streets of New York as nasty, brutish, and short. It was a little surreal to walk in a pack through a landscape festooned with larger-than-life American flags. We all felt dislocated, but not to the same degree. I learned something about looking without preconception from a colleague from India who, pointing to metal fire

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escapes retracted to the second stories of apartment buildings, asked if those were the only egress the residents possessed. With eyes gazing out from a beginner's mind, what would you or I see on a street corner in Chicago or San Francisco?

Perception is a partnership between the manifest world and the observer. People whose work focuses on the cultivation of community, as mine does, tend to emphasize intervention: what we see is valued primarily as an aid to conceiving the actions that can improve the picture. That is one truth: what we perceive and understand when we look at the world – the stories we tell ourselves to explain what we see – is what shapes our actions.

In tribute to Jane Jacobs, I write here not about *what* we see, but about *how* we see, taking my inspiration from *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs' hungry gaze absorbed the world in its infinite textures and varieties, tasting everything, refusing (almost) nothing. We relish her perceptions for their own sake, even as they create an appetite for the prescriptions that follow. Perhaps it came naturally to Jacobs, but for most of us, seeing that deeply and fully is a skill that must be – should be – cultivated. If our interventions can only be as good as our perceptions, what can we do to grind the lens of awareness and nurture the habits of mind that make us better – truer, clearer, deeper – perceivers of cities, and therefore better creators and tellers of the stories that ultimately shape them? Nine lenses, then, for looking at ourselves, looking at cities.

A wide lens

In asserting what should be, we separate good from bad, loved from unloved. Jacobs loved the bustling dance of the urban core. In the half century since she published *The Death and Life*, we've seen people abandon the city in droves for suburban and exurban communities, trading density for space and mildness. More recently, many cities have experienced repopulation of a rapidly gentrifying urban core returning empty nesters mixing with students, artists, and office workers. Large conurbations sprawl for miles, city eliding into town into village, trading inhabitants in a perpetual peristalsis. Each living situation answers some individual and cultural need. From my neighbourhood, I can see skyscrapers in the distance, but the things I love and crave are close at hand: light on water, quiet, plenty of elbow room.

What if we drop the distinctions and think of the whole conurbation as the city, not just the urban core? What if the parts Jacobs and her descendents valorize—the density, the interchange, the speed and excitement—rely on the whole ecology the way *Sequoia sempervirens* relies on the vast forest floor? Do judgments and snobberies fall away? Or new ones arise?

I live in a part of Richmond, California, that was home to the Kaiser Shipyards, where World War II Liberty ships were made. The availability of good-paying factory jobs brought countless migrants here from the deep South and Southwest, changing a town of twenty thousand mostly white residents into a diverse city of a hundred thousand with a street life fed by blues clubs and busy restaurants. My apartment is a block from the Bay, on former factory land remediated by a developer in exchange for the right to build. Something has been lost, and something new is emerging. Nearby, an old Ford assembly plant is being converted into a conference center, and green enterprises are being offered incentives to occupy other disused industrial space. But downtown has become a ghost town as the factory workers' grandchildren drive around it on their way to other shopping destinations. Nearly half my neighbours speak English as a second language.

I take my daily walk through a salt marsh inhabited by a lively population of avocets, curlews, even herons. I must drive to the grocery store in a more densely populated area, crossing paths with urban neighbours who drive out here to walk. I do not think we inhabit two distinct places, city and not-city. I think we make the city together.

The lens of the uncolonized mind

Jacobs was a member of ‘The Auto Club’, the entirely unorganized society of autodidacts whose self-education is driven not by some normative notion of credential or curriculum, but solely by curiosity, desire, and need. I love the way Jacobs’ perceptions illuminate the uncolonized mind, the consciousness untouched by the narrowing process that may follow submission to a too rigid or otherwise overdetermined formal education.

The chief handicap of the colonized mind is the habit of approaching any subject with readymade ideas of what is worth noticing and knowing. The fence enclosing worthy knowledge can be staked in varied terrain, but it always constrains. What types of information have been valorized by those in authority, or those in fashion? What types of information are unworthy because they cannot be weighed and measured by the instruments our numbers-crazy culture deems accurate? What is considered subjective, what objective, and how is the difference made to matter?

When we observe human beings in the shared habitat of cities, nothing is irrelevant. The challenge is to hold as much information in awareness as possible, allowing patterns to emerge rather than imposing them. As I began writing this chapter, scientists ‘discovered’ a vegetarian spider. It is not that *Bagheera kiplingi* had never been identified before Christopher J. Meehan observed it during fieldwork in Mexico. But as the spider’s preferred home was a species of acacia typically swarming with ants – and as all previous spiders had been carnivores – investigators prior to Meehan simply concluded the spider had chosen the plant as a likely place to find a succulent ant dinner. Meehan paid open-eyed attention long enough to notice *Bagheera kiplingi* opting at mealtime for leaf tips rather than ant flesh. A thirsty mind freed from normative ideas of knowledge is the most fertile learning environment of all.

The lens of common fate

Planners and policymakers commonly prescribe measures for others they would find intolerable in their own lives, such as the wholesale practice of relocation, which Jacobs calls “slum shifting” and “slum duplicating.” Faced with the multiple discontents of a low-income housing project, planners “build a duplicate of the first failure and move the people from the first failure into its expensive duplicate, so the first failure can be salvaged.” I try to imagine the fantasies of the public housing authority director who devised such a scheme: that the bleak uniformity, cheap construction, and non-existent amenities of a housing project would magically add up to a decent place to live, if only they were made new and fresh?

In considering the many recommendations made for improvement in our cities, I have found a simple thought experiment unfailingly useful. Would those who make these decisions live under their strictures for a meaningful stretch of time? Consider how unthinkable it is that policymakers’ families might have to make do with the medical care they prescribe for users of the public health system; that their children might attend the poorest of the schools their policies shape; that they

might sleep night after night amidst the sounds, smells, and other sensations of public housing. That this common-sense question is almost never asked – and earns a huge laugh on the few occasions when it is – is the true absurdity.

The lens of motive

The vistas of colonized thought resemble the Radiant City: stretches of ground-level landscape punctuated by the repetition of identical protuberances. Instead of tower blocks, these are questions severed from their reasons to exist. Almost every time I talk about community cultural development – the collaboration of artists and other community members – someone is sure to ask: ‘But is it art or social work?’ Generally, the question comes just after I’ve described a public art project. It might be a participatory mural portraying a local story that contributes to a neighbourhood’s distinct character, or a project in which dancers or theatre artists help the residents of a particular community share their stories and turn them into an occasion of public memory, such as a performance marking the toll of gun violence and putting forward a basis for greater conviviality.

The tendency to use the category *art* as a knife to pare the worthy and valued from the rest is so embedded in conventional thinking that when I respond to such questions with another – ‘Why do you ask?’ – the reply is almost always a sputter or silence. Such questions have no independent meaning or value: whether one calls something art or not is a matter of indifference, unless some practical distinction or privilege attaches to the answer. The issue emerges when people are deciding which projects to fund, to respect, or to admire. On one such occasion, the director of a red-carpet theatre described the belief that generated his question. “The major institutions,” he said, “are about artistic excellence, and the smaller community-based groups are about participation.” In truth, each is about both excellence and participation, each defining these aims in its own way and each, given the crooked timber of humanity, achieving them only part of the time. Questions are essential to clear sight, but it is also necessary to know why they are asked.

The lens of language

How we write about cities is as important as what we write. Too often, experts contradict themselves by proposing a vital, permeable, self-developing community using language that telegraphs specialization and exclusion. What Jane Jacobs says, and how she says it, are the same. Formal and casual arguments are stirred together to make a rich and satisfying stew. The observations of Mrs. Penny Kostritsky are presented with as much dignity and given as much consideration as the pronouncements of the Regional Plan Association of New York, and seem to the reader to bear more relationship to lived experience, and therefore carry more authority.

Strolling through no-nonsense descriptions and analyses of urban experience in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, you come across Paul Bunyan’s vest, a “head of withered lettuce,” a “pipsqueak,” a “wigwag,” or a “bosky.” When this happens, it is like finding a new penny or a red marble on the sidewalk: everything brightens. Jacobs’ diction is calm, even when it crackles with underlying anger, but it is not moderate. She is not engaged with an invisible antagonist who requires that her words be scrubbed of anything that might give offense to those who, after all, have offended her by their indifference or stupidity. What she has to say is driven by a powerful,

positive vision of possibility and not by her disappointment, however potent, in those whose failures obscure it.

I crave such voices: forthright, slicing through a thick crust of blather with the satisfying inevitability of a hot knife through butter. Reading prose that demonstrates in its very tone, form and vocabulary the points it has been deployed to argue, a sense of possibility awakens.

Jacobs' voice reminds me so often of Paul Goodman's, who brought the same open-eyed gaze, the same blending of the lofty and pedestrian, the same confiding tone to his writing on so many subjects. More than a decade before *The Death and Life* was published, Goodman wrote of the peril of leaving democracy to the experts:

The idea of Jeffersonian democracy is to educate its people to govern by giving them initiative to run things, by multiplying sources of responsibility, by encouraging dissent. This has the beautiful moral advantage that a man can be excellent in his own way without feeling special, can rule without ambition and follow without inferiority. Through the decades, it should have been the effort of our institutions to adapt this idea to ever-changing technical and social conditions. Instead, as if by dark design, our present institutions conspire to make people inexpert, mystified, and slavish.

One is astounded at the general slavishness. The journalists at the President's press conference never ask a probing question, they have agreed, it seems, not to "rock the boat." Correspondingly, the *New York Times* does not print the news, because it is a "responsible newspaper." Recently, the Commissioner of Education of the State of New York spoke of the need for young people to learn to "handle constructively their problems of adjustment to authority" – a remarkable expression for doing what you're told. (Goodman 1962, pp. xvi-xvii)

The malady Jacobs and Goodman diagnosed half a century ago, the confusion that so easily accepts the substitution of authoritative nonsense for the evidence of our own bodies and minds, has its roots in the gradual disappearance of the democrat's voice in favor of the expert's or the demagogue's. It was a social ill when they wrote; now it is epidemic, and every one of us holds the cure.

The lens of individual initiative

Whether on the scale of a single life or a whole city, much conventional planning is merely superstition, pretending that our own wishes rather than the unpredictable interaction of events and energies will determine the future. Given the starring role randomness has already played in shaping the early twenty-first century, it is striking how strongly lodged in orthodox thinking is belief in the value of a type of planning analogous to drawing up blueprints. Imagine this place in five years, planners say, or ten, and then they write up the results, which are shelved along with other plans. Vast quantities of money and energy are wasted on this pretense, most of which could reasonably be invested instead in readiness, in developing nimbleness and resourcefulness, in improving our ability to recognize opportunity. Jacobs asserts individuals' right to have their own plans – to take the initiative, to be enterprising – as against the big plans imposed by believers in this superstition. When we look through this lens, we are looking for the signs of the elbow room needed to work out a *modus vivendi* despite our very real differences.

The lens of embedded beliefs

The usual argument against investing needed public resources in livable cities is cost. In the decades since Jacobs published *The Death and Life*, our attraction to punishment has expanded almost beyond reckoning. As I write this, over 7 million people are in prison, on parole, or on probation, with total state spending of around \$52 billion, by far the highest incarceration rate and the largest prison population on the planet (Pew Center on the States 2009, p. 11). While U.S. population has increased by nearly half since Jacobs' book came out, the prison population has grown by well over 1000%. Beyond America's borders, the National Priorities Project (www.costofwar.com) calculates that we have spent over \$970 billion on wars since 2001, an average cost of \$315 million a day—that's more than two annual National Endowment for the Arts budgets daily, seven days a week. The unexamined idea that we can't afford to invest adequately in cities is embedded in conventional thinking, but the truth is not so much our lacking resources as our addiction to spending them on punishment.

Even when we do invest, punishment often shapes our choices in hidden or unacknowledged ways: we would rather forbid than enable. The public debate over graffiti art offers an interesting illustration. Graffiti art – not tagging buildings and signs with one's initials, but using spray cans, stickers, and other arts media to create complex works in public spaces – can be disturbing because it intervenes in the environment, disrupting expectations, and often introducing unsettling imagery. I've taken part in a quite a few forums and debates on the subject. The typical argument offered to oppose such works turns on two elements: private property and public consent. "They don't ask for permission from the people who own the wall!" opponents of graffiti art say. (Sometimes this is true, although many experienced graffiti artists make permission a point of pride and integrity; often its lack is merely assumed by people who can't imagine otherwise.) They also say, "Now I have to look at this, and nobody asked me if I wanted it there!"

Both assertions depend on not noticing the commercialization of public space, or at least on not recognizing it as a choice in which most city-dwellers have no part. It would be interesting to ask random passersby on a major-city street why we allow businesses to fill public space with large-scale advertisements. My hunch is that most would simply accept it as 'the way things are'. Jacobs prescribes attracting foot traffic as a way to drive out excessive automobile traffic, a positive alternative to banning automobiles. In much the same way, creating protected public space in cities for free visual expression would reduce the room given over to advertising. It would also address both of the common objections to graffiti art. But because we are so used to thinking only in terms of stopping things we dislike, the punitive approach tends to dominate. As everyone knows (and Jacobs plainly says), it almost always exacerbates whatever problem it attempts to solve.

The lens of negative liberty

Stadtluft macht frei (City air makes you free) was one of Karl Marx's favorite sayings. The human desire to be seen and known remains forever in dialectical interaction with our equally human wish for anonymity and the freedom it confers. Officially, we are all for conviviality and comity these days – myself included. Yet every community builder I know sometimes shares the longing to lock the door and disappear in front of the television, to sit sometimes in silent hope that an unanswered doorbell will discourage an unwanted visitor. Our biases in favor of certain social goods sometimes

blind us to personal goods. In addition to company, almost everyone craves what the philosophers call ‘negative liberty’, the freedom from restraint and compulsion that comes most easily with anonymity.

I work with a great many community artists whose own work is to help animate community life, the opposite of anonymity. When people take part in a community arts project, one benchmark of success is whether civic engagement and collegial enterprise will heighten their disposition to re-enter the social arena. One idea is that collective art-making is a powerful means of cultivating full cultural citizenship, an experience of meaningful belonging, participation, and mutual responsibility. Another is that the playful space of creative collaboration presents a lower threshold than other forms of civic participation, forming a gateway to community life. Both are true. But even the friendliest neighbour will recoil from an overdose of earnest encouragement, because it cancels the freedom to be left alone. The trick is finding a balance.

The lens of no theory

We are standing at the coastline between worlds. I like to call the old world *Datastan* because it has embraced ‘hard’ data – weights, measurements, any form of quantification – almost to the exclusion of other forms of value, with the absurd result that many of the things we care most about are not part of social equations because they can’t be quantified. In *Datastan*, we are willing to sacrifice children’s well-rounded education, the kind that teaches them to be resilient, improvisational, curious, and creative, for one that reduces education to numeric test scores. In *Datastan*, we are willing to bulldoze long-lived neighbourhoods to make way for sports stadiums and freeways. In *Datastan*, we confidently propound theories about human communities, then try editing those communities to fit the theories. The critique of *Datastan* has been gathering force since the mid-twentieth century. I am moved by the way Isaiah Berlin expressed it in his wonderful essay, “The Sense of Reality,” grounded in the truth that what may be known about human beings is very little compared to what must remain fluid and mysterious:

To claim to be able to construct generalizations where at best we can only indulge the art of exquisite portrait-painting, to claim the possibility of some infallible scientific key where each unique entity demands a lifetime of minute, devoted observation, sympathy, insight, is one of the most grotesque claims ever made by human beings. (Berlin 1996, pp. 20-21)

It appears Jacobs was immune to the madness of theory. To tip *Datastan* into oblivion, the rest of us may need inoculation. Happily, to get it, all we need do is open our eyes and minds.

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