

# The Redevelopment of “Human and Social Values in Modern City Life”: Jane Jacobs and the Rockefeller Foundation

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In one of the earliest reviews of Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Lewis Mumford set the tone for the way that many readers would respond to this seminal study of urban life when he condescendingly nicknamed it “Mother Jacobs’ Home Remedies.”<sup>1</sup> Published a few months after Mumford’s *New Yorker* piece, Robert Weinberg’s review of *Death and Life* complains that it is “written from the point of view of the homeowner, the housewife and the mother, living in the center of a large city, New York, in a community, Greenwich Village, one of whose neighborhoods, West Village, is the scene from which Mrs. Jacobs surveys what is happening around her.”<sup>2</sup> Edward J. Logue, the mind behind several mid-century urban renewal schemes, similarly accuses Jacobs of practicing a provincial urbanism. Admitting that “Greenwich Village has always had its fans,” Logue sarcastically cites Jacobs as the “first one to propose that we use its street life as the model for city life everywhere. It is in the image of the Village that she would recast our slum-stricken cities.”<sup>3</sup> Like Mumford, Weinberg and Logue, many have since read *Death and Life* as a naïve vision of urban life fashioned by a housewife and amateur observer of the city.

These images of Jacobs as a provincial pedestrian and myopic mother who parlayed her front-stoop observations on Hudson Street into a meta-narrative of urban life continues to obscure the intellectual and geographic complexity of her work. Only recently have scholars

begun to supplant these reductive depictions of Jacobs by situating her in conversations about city life that transcend the domestic and communal confines of the West Village.<sup>4</sup> The material I encountered at the Rockefeller Archive Center continues to complicate the picture of Jacobs as a homespun urban intellectual by situating her vision of the city at the center of a much broader conversation about mid-century urban life and form that was, in part, facilitated by the Rockefeller Foundation. While many have acknowledged the important role that the two grants from the Rockefeller Foundation played in giving Jacobs the financial means to write *Death and Life*, scholars have typically failed to see the organization as an important part of her intellectual history. Attending more carefully to Jacobs's dealings with the Rockefeller Foundation helps clarify the nature and reach of her urban vision by connecting it to a wide range of urban intellectuals and institutions.

Records of Jacobs's initial meetings with Chadbourne Gilpatric—her primary contact with the Rockefeller Foundation, where he was an associate director of the Humanities Division—reveal a much more dynamic relationship than one might expect to find between them. From the very beginning, Gilpatric treated Jacobs less as a desperate supplicant than as an authoritative informant. Gilpatric's report of his first conversation with Jacobs in May 1958 draws attention to her status as an expert in “critical studies of city planning, with particular reference to cultural, human, and aesthetic factors.” Given these expertise, which she had acquired through her work as an associate editor at *Architectural Forum*, Gilpatric sought out and then carefully documented her opinions of several grant proposals currently under consideration at the Rockefeller Foundation. He notes, for instance, that Jacobs was aware of Ian McHarg's “proposal for a series of books on aspects of civic design and related landscape architecture,” and that she “expressed enthusiastic approval” of the project.<sup>5</sup> In their follow-up

meeting a month later, Jacobs gave Gilpatric a positive “evaluation of urban studies with reference to aesthetic factors and personal values” at the University of Pennsylvania. Home to urban intellectuals such as W.L.C. Wheaton and Louis I. Kahn, the University of Pennsylvania was, according to Jacobs, the “most productive and influential center at present in the United States,” and possessed a “characteristic concern with the importance of the community as well as in the usual physical and economic considerations.” Clearly impressed with Jacobs’s grasp of the field of city development, Gilpatric gave her “in confidence a copy of Pennsylvania’s proposal for monographs on critical aspects of city design” and asked her to respond with “frank comments.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to seeking the thumbs-up or thumbs-down from Jacobs on existing submissions, Gilpatric pumped her for the names of urban intellectuals and institutions that the Rockefeller Foundation might seek out and support. During their initial conversation, for instance, Jacobs frankly told Gilpatric that she would “like to see the RF find and give opportunities for observation and writing to some first-rate architectural critics who could develop helpful new ideas for the planning of cities,” and confidently recommended Grady Clay as an ideal candidate for such an opportunity. She also vouched for Ian Nairn, Nathan Glazer and Catherine Bauer as individuals that deserved “opportunities for observation and writing” from the Rockefeller Foundation.<sup>7</sup> During these early meetings, Jacobs’s own grant proposal was secondary in importance to her role as an outside referee for the Rockefeller Foundation. Gilpatric did not, it is clear, regard her as an amateur or provincial observer of the city, but as an astute insider whose approach to urban problems resonated with and could help shape the Rockefeller Foundation’s growing desire to intervene in urban design.

The dialogue between Jacobs and Gilpatric not only positions her at the center of a sprawling network of city designers and urban planners prior to the publication of *Death and Life*, but also helps elucidate the nature of her work. If Jacobs helped guide the Rockefeller Foundation's involvement in the postwar city as a consultant, her own work responded, in part, to its own urban ideals. Shortly after the Rockefeller Foundation had decided to fund Jacobs's study of urban life, she informed Gilpatric that the book she hoped to write would challenge "two dominant and very compelling mental images of the city."

The first urban prototype that *Death and Life* would attempt to upend had been inspiring urban reformers for decades: "the image of the city in trouble, an inhuman mass of masonry, a chaos of happenstance growth, a place starved of the simple decencies and amenities of life, beset with so many accumulated problems it makes your head swim." *Death and Life* also would attempt to undercut the concept of the city toward which these same reformers so often aspired: the "rebuilt city, the antithesis of all that the unplanned city represents, a carefully planned panorama of projects and green spaces, a place where functions are sorted out instead of jumbled together, a place of light, air, sunshine, dignity and order for all."<sup>8</sup> Both of these images, Jacobs suggested, slowly strangled cities and contributed to their current demise.

Jacobs told Gilpatric that she intended to create an alternative image of the city—one that would enable readers to see that "within the seeming chaos and jumble of the city is a remarkable degree of order, in the form of relationships of all kinds that people have evolved and that are absolutely fundamental to city life."<sup>9</sup> At least initially, then, Jacobs did not see her project primarily as one that would change the course of urban planning, but as a significant intervention in the conversation about "big-city communities."<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, many critics have overlooked the exact nature of that intervention, mistakenly assuming with Mumford that,

for Jacobs, urban communities consist exclusively of “a cluster of warm personal sentiments, associated with the familiar faces of the doctor and the priest, the butcher and the baker and the candle-stick maker.”<sup>11</sup> However, as Jacobs makes clear in her letter to Gilpatric, the relationships that she locates at the center of the city’s social order are not necessarily those formed among warmhearted neighbors, but those social networks made up of “very intimately interlocked (although often casually so)” relationships.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than continue thinking of a community as a collection of intimate, private relationships, Jacobs contends that the social viability of the city depends upon the opportunity for urbanites to have casual contact with one another—the type of interactions that often do not even require participants to know each other’s names. The relationships that matter most in cities are those that spring up in its public spaces and stay there.

Gilpatric’s description of Jacobs’s project in the Rockefeller Foundation’s official grant-in-aid award corroborates her own sense of the book’s contributions. The award notes that Gilpatric and his fellow humanities officers had been “exploring the field of urban design to look for ideas and actions which may improve thinking on how the design of cities might better serve urban life including cultural and humane value.”<sup>13</sup> In Jacobs, they had found their ideal grantee.

Even before the publication of *Death and Life*, Jacobs and her distinct vision of “big-city communities” had become the poster child for the Rockefeller Foundation’s efforts to find and fund projects that would help develop what Gilpatric had described as “human and social values in modern city life.”<sup>14</sup> According to Gilpatric, the Rockefeller Foundation’s “search for specific projects to bring under critical scrutiny important aspects of the growth of major American cities” had been “somewhat opportunistic and episodic” since 1929, when it had given Harvard University a grant of \$240,000 to help establish a graduate school of city planning.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1950s, these efforts to stimulate the incorporation of “human and social values” into urban design became much less episodic and opportunistic. In 1954, the Rockefeller Foundation gave the Massachusetts Institute of Technology \$85,000 for a study on aesthetic aspects of city planning—a grant that resulted in the publication of Kevin Lynch’s *Image of the City*; and between 1956 and 1958, it gave the University of Pennsylvania \$58,000 for individual studies on the improvement in design of urban environment and a conference to formulate guidelines for more adequate criticism of city design.<sup>16</sup>

As early as the fall of 1960, Gilpatric had begun urging the Rockefeller Foundation to formalize its forays into the realm of urban design through the establishment of a program that would purposely set aside funds for relevant proposals. Gilpatric became obsessed with the idea of creating such a program and spoke about it with nearly everyone with whom he came in contact. When he met with Jacobs in early February, 1962, he asked her to “react frankly to a possible program for the RF to promote criticism of urban design.” Jacobs gave an “enthusiastic endorsement of the concept of the program” and, at Gilpatric’s request, provided a long list of names that might serve as members of an advisory committee.<sup>17</sup> In these conversations about his pet program, Gilpatric repeatedly used *Death and Life* as his calling card. The Rockefeller Foundation’s ties to Jacobs’s project not only gave Gilpatric the credentials he felt he and his proposed program needed to be taken seriously, but also helped him articulate the kind of projects that the program hoped to sponsor. The Rockefeller Foundation, he essentially informed his contacts, was looking for more people like Jane Jacobs.

Jacobs’s vision of the city, then, helped lay the ideological footings for what would become the Rockefeller Foundation’s Program for Urban Design Studies. In Gilpatric’s official write-up of the Rockefeller Foundation’s commitment to “undertake a more systematic program

for at least one year to encourage and aid individual studies of highly important topics in this complex field,” Jacobs’s presence is palpable. All of the program’s objectives stress, to some degree, the “importance of urban communities within metropolitan areas.” The document notes, for instance, that the program would direct attention to the “satisfactory comprehensive development of urban districts or communities such as East Harlem in New York, where the physical environment could be made to provide for most of the cultural and social needs of a dense, mixed, and mutually identified population.”<sup>18</sup>

Jacobs’s ongoing involvement in East Harlem, which began long before the publication of *Death and Life*, and her persistent pleas to Gilpatric for financial support for innovative projects in the neighborhood clearly shape the goals of the Program for Urban Design Studies. As she had from her initial contact with the Rockefeller Foundation, Jacobs also played an important role as a consultant for the Program for Urban Design Studies. She continually recommended individuals to Gilpatric as potential grant recipients and reviewed proposals after they had been submitted.

Placing Jacobs at the heart of the Rockefeller Foundation’s mid-century mission to improve urban life through urban design offers an additional corrective to the traditional image of Jacobs as an isolated and amateur observer of the city. Through the Rockefeller Foundation, we can connect her to urban intellectuals and institutions with whom she has typically only been loosely associated: Ada Louise Huxtable; Kevin Lynch; city planners and architects at the University of Pennsylvania, such as Ian McHarg, W. L. C. Wheaton, Edmund Bacon, and Louis Kahn; The New School; William H. Whyte, Jr.; Herbert Gans; Victor Gruen; I. M. Pei; and Catherine Bauer, among many others.

Situating Jacobs in relation to the Rockefeller Foundation and the sprawling

network of urban intellectuals for which it acted as a node also allows us to recognize that her urban vision, which has traditionally been understood as a radical departure from mid-century thinking about urban life and form, was part of a much larger conversation about how to put “human and social values” at the center of urban redevelopment. As we better understand the complex nature of that conversation, our evaluations of Jacobs’s work can move beyond the simple binaries that tend to characterize assessments of it.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.



## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Mumford, Lewis. "The Sky Line: Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies." *New Yorker*, (1 December 1962), pp. 148-79.
- <sup>2</sup> Weinberg, Robert C. Review of Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and *The Future of Our Cities*, *AIA Journal* (March 1962), p. 71.
- <sup>3</sup> Logue, Edward J. "The View from the Village." *Architectural Forum* 116 (March 1962), p. 89.
- <sup>4</sup> Peter Laurence, for instance, challenges the popular portrait of Jacobs "as a doctrinaire and angry young woman who wanted all cities modeled on the domestic scale of Greenwich Village" by calling attention to her work as an editor at *Architectural Forum*, where, by 1956, she "had written on redevelopment in New Orleans, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Washington, and Fort Worth, and had become [the] *Forum*'s urban renewal specialist." See Laurence, Peter. "Jane Jacobs Before *Death and Life*." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 66 (March 2007), pp. 5, 12. See also Hock, Jennifer. "Jane Jacobs and the West Village: The Neighborhood against Urban Renewal." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 66 (March 2007), pp. 16-19; and Klemek, Christopher. "Placing Jane Jacobs within the Transatlantic Urban Conversation." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 73 (Winter 2007), pp. 49-67.
- <sup>5</sup> Chadbourne Gilpatric interview notes from a meeting with Jane Jacobs, 9 May 1958, Folder 3380, Box 390, Series 200R, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- <sup>6</sup> Chadbourne Gilpatric interview notes from a meeting with Jane Jacobs, 4 June 1958, Folder 3380, Box 390, Series 200R, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- <sup>7</sup> Gilpatric interview notes from a meeting with Jane Jacobs, 9 May 1958.
- <sup>8</sup> Jane Jacobs to Chadbourne Gilpatric, 1 July 1958, Folder 3380, Box 390, Series 200R, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Jane Jacobs to Chadbourne Gilpatric, 14 June 1958, Folder 3380, Box 390, Series 200R, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- <sup>11</sup> Mumford, Lewis. "Sky Line." p. 152.
- <sup>12</sup> Jacobs to Gilpatric, 1 July 1958.
- <sup>13</sup> Chadbourne Gilpatric, "Grant in Aid to the New School for Social Research for a study by Mrs. Jane Jacobs of relations of function to design in large cities," 8 September 1958, Folder 3380, Box 390, Series 200R, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- <sup>14</sup> Gilpatric interview notes from a meeting with Jane Jacobs, 4 June 1958.
- <sup>15</sup> Chadbourne Gilpatric interview notes from a meeting with Jane Jacobs, 8 February 1962, Box 20, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- <sup>16</sup> "Program for Urban Design Studies," 4 April 1962, Folder 59, Box 11, Series 911, RG 3.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- <sup>17</sup> Chadbourne Gilpatric, interview notes from a meeting with Jane Jacobs, 8 February 1962, Box 20, RG 12.3, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- <sup>18</sup> "Program for Urban Design Studies," 4 April 1962.