



CONVERSATION: what role does the texture and fabric of the city have in shaping the present and future lives of its younger citizens?

5.30pm to 7.30pm on Wednesday 9 July 2008, in the Members' Study at the

Royal Commonwealth Society,

25 Northumberland Avenue, London WC2N 5AP Tel: 020 7930 6733

Jane Jacobs conversation 9 July 2008

Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was concerned with what makes big cities safe and enjoyable places to live. For her, the key difference between cities and smaller settlements is that they are "by definition, full of strangers" (p.30). Jacobs asked how it can come about that people live happily amongst so many strangers. Her answer was that cities depend upon everyday life at street level: "the bedrock attribute of a successful city district is that a person must feel personally safe and secure on the street among all these strangers" (p.30).

In Chapter 4 of the book, and no doubt in response to contemporary worries, Jacobs turned to the question of how children grow up in cities. Her key argument states, "the first fundamental of successful city life [is that] people must take a modicum of public responsibility for each other even if they have no ties to each other." And she goes on: "this is a lesson nobody learns by being told. It is learned from the experience of having *other people without ties of kinship or close friendship or formal responsibility to you* take a modicum of responsibility for you" (p. 82, emphasis in original).

Chapter 4 explores two questions: how do children grow up to be good citizens of big cities? And what is the role of the built environment in this process? Jacobs' answers are that children must have everyday, relatively spontaneous contact with adults in their neighbourhoods beyond home and school; and that there should be places very close to children's homes where this everyday contact can take place.

Jacobs' paradigmatic 'place of socialization' is of course the busy sidewalk of a city street, as provocatively signalled by the title of Chapter 4 (*the uses of sidewalks: assimilating children*). She is contemptuous about parks and playgrounds, dismissing as a 'fantasy' the idea that they are inherently wholesome or happy places (p. 74).

Jacobs was writing in the early 1960s, but her concerns are strikingly resonant today. Health experts warn about the rise in childhood obesity and mental health problems, while children's behaviour in public is becoming the focus of a nationwide moral panic. In the capital, the new Mayor of London has declared that young people will be his top priority, amidst an apparent surge in violent crime amongst teenagers. While some of these concerns might be overplayed, it is hard to avoid the sense that things are not well with the nation's children, and especially those growing up in cities.

And yet the communitarian vision of city child rearing put forward by Jacobs is out of favour. The Government's *Children's Plan* includes new funding for play facilities, but the money is probably headed for the segregated provision she despised. Other responses have focused on a



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mix of punitive measures (ASBOs, dispersal orders and the like) educational initiatives (in schools and youth provision) and parenting programmes.

Some questions to consider:

- Is Jacobs right about the role of everyday interactions between children and adults in nurturing a sense of responsibility and mutual trust?
- If she is, what prospects are there for fostering such experiences in cities today?
- Can streets ever have this role – and if not, can any other public spaces?
- Or has Jacobs simply misunderstood the forces that shape future generations of city-dwellers?

Join us at this conversation to share views and ideas.

Jane Jacobs conversation: reading

The first reading is all but essential: the rest are optional.

Jacobs J (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Chapter 4 (pp.74 – 88)

Chapters 2 and 3 are also useful. (Chapter 1, in which Jacobs sets out the target of her attack on top-down city planning, is not particularly relevant to the topic under discussion.)

Ward C (1978) *The Child in the City*

Beunderman J, Hannon C and Bradwell P (2007) *Seen and Heard: Reclaiming the public realm with children and young people*

Esp. chapters 1 and 2 (pp.24 – 49).

Available as a pdf from the website www.demos.co.uk.

Gill T (2007) *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society*

Esp. chapters 1 (background and context) and 5 (beyond risk aversion)

Available as a pdf from

<http://www.gulbenkian.org.uk/publications/education/no-fear>

You might also want to browse some of the comment pieces I have written on the Guardian's Comment is Free website:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/timgill>

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