Good Intentions.¹

by JOHN McMORROUGH

Among the unwitting apologists for an urbanism of shopping is Jane Jacobs, who, in identifying those aspects she found necessary for sustaining a vital city life, delineated the ingredients by which shopping could stand in for urbanity and created a “city lite” that became the model for resuscitating America’s ailing downtowns.
Attempts at good deeds often succeed in producing the opposite effect. Central to a description of how shopping has become a model of the city is a parable of sorts, about how a dream for diverse civic qualities degenerated, in execution, into monotonous repetition. Yet the characters that have emerged as proponents of a shopping urbanism were typically not interested in the machinations of Machiavellian capitalism, but sincerely looked to shopping as a means to improve public life. Without disregarding the role of rhetoric, this aspiration toward a goal for the greater good must still be recognized, and to dismiss such projects, regardless of their success or failure, as evidence of base motivations is to miss a more complex trajectory.

The prime illustration of this convolution of intention can be found in the work of Jane Jacobs, patron saint of the city. A journalist for Architectural Forum in the 1950s, but with no formal training in planning or related fields, she emerged, nonetheless, as a figure revered for her insight into city planning. Consider her analyses of Le Corbusier, "the man with the most dramatic idea of how to get all this anti-city planning right into the citadels of iniquity" and who initiated a "tradition of wishful frivolity"; of his radiant city, and its subsequent generations, which, "as to how the city works, . . . tells nothing but lies"; and of CIAM's legacy of cutting and clearing to provide space for new, large-scale projects. This critique constituted a wake-up call to the planning culture of the time. In Jacobs's estimation, the comprehensive nature of contemporary planning schemes was incapable of providing suitable grounds for diversity, and she discussed very pragmatically what she deemed necessary for a quality of city life predicated on it.

The basis of her critique and the model that she upheld as ideal was her Hudson Street neighborhood in Greenwich Village. In the work with which she is most associated, The Death and Life of Great American Cities of 1961, a sort of manifesto toward stasis, or nondevelopment, Jacobs argued that the vitality of the city depends on four factors: a mix of uses to ensure traffic and occupancy at all times of the day; short blocks to increase frequency of streets and opportunities; a mix of buildings in terms of age and condition; and a sufficiently dense concentration of people. According to Jacobs, "given the development of these four conditions, . . . a city district should be able to realize its potential, wherever it may lie." Taken together, these represent a fairly innocuous list of qualities illustrating the overlooked aspects of a city that make it enjoyable—that make it a city. As an agenda, they represent a sincere desire to recast the motivation for urban development.

Yet already contained within this set of qualities is the potential for its corruption. In classifying and enumerating these conditions for the diverse city, Jacobs unintentionally created a description, when applied to retail, of what the next wave of the large-scale development she was resisting would entail. With a few minor exceptions, her book contains no images, and Jacobs herself suggested that "for illustrations, please look closely at real cities." Elsewhere, she referred her reader to the work of Gordon Cullen for examples of the city image under discussion. But even without visual description, the style envisioned is identifiable.
Planners and developers were quick to recognize the value of Jacobs's new terms for describing a type of retail based not on the isolated, oasis-like experience of the mall, but on the life of the city. Her four conditions were assessed and hastily applied toward this end. The reevaluation of existing city stock, with the belief that degenerating neighborhoods contained within themselves a richness and diversity not possible in monolithic settlements, and similarly, the reuse of aged buildings, understood as being naturally far more heterogeneous than any feasible new replacements, were implemented as the basis for retail appropriation. With the recognition that aged buildings could not be found in the suburbs, and that outright condemnation of them would not technically be allowed within Jacobs's urbanism, the festival marketplace type emerged in the setting of cities' historic, or at least historic-looking, districts. At the same time, a concentrated populace and mixed-use zoning formed the prescription for an active, bustling environment, one aimed at a vitality that would surpass the reality of a place's existence as a set of stores.

Jacobs was highly critical of "massive single uses in cities," which "form borders," for "borders in cities usually make for destructive neighbors." She saw the early planned shopping districts as examples of such uses, because they introduced "barrier effects" in the urban fabric by "throwing formidable borders for moving and parked cars around inherently weak and fragmentary preserves." To counteract these urban rifts, Jacobs called for turning "barriers" into "seams"—a term she borrowed from Kevin Lynch: "an edge [where] some visual or motion penetration is allowed through it, a line of exchange along which two areas are sewn together." The goal was to increase pedestrian traffic and density and, by removing boundaries, to make more areas of the city accessible to the public. These efforts, however, also proved to be the principal concerns behind urban shopping developments, whose survival is, after all, premised on generating the greatest volume and duration of foot traffic.

While the major focus of Jacobs's critique was the monofunctional district, her attempt to create urban difference at a much finer scale, with much finer gradations between zones, asserted an increased smoothness in the experience of the city. The greater frequency of streets produced by shorter blocks and the resultant redistribution of functions from separated, singular zones of use to a highly differentiated mix of functions would ultimately serve to even out the texture of the city fabric. For pedestrian to proliferate over vehicular traffic, city blocks would emerge as microscopic islands within a homogenized urbanity. The ramifications are temporal as well as spatial. In describing the notion of the two-shift district, Jacobs explained the need for urban areas to remain "alive" at all hours of the day and night, with distinctions of time giving way to nonstop availability. Store hours, in this scenario, provide a natural beater of the vitality of an area, and businesses will stay open as long as is profitable; profitably, the implication is, has a direct correlation to the nominative vitality of the street.

The festival marketplaces easily adapted such homogenizing tenets (with or without contradiction) to gear retail to the prominence of the pedestrian, rather than to an integration of the surrounding urban environment. Most emblematic of the implementation of these attitudes has been the work of the
Van Ginkel Associates, Madison Avenue Mail project, New York City, 1971
Rouse Company, prime developers of the festival marketplace type. First with Quincy Market in Boston (1976), followed by Harborplace in Baltimore (1980) and South Street Seaport in New York (1983), these developments sought to overcome the lack, in previous versions of planned shopping districts, of the vicissitudes of place. But, as architectural critic Paul Goldberger explained at the time, these projects fail in their goal, only serving to "take the conventional aspects of the urban experience, the little cafés and the energetic markets overflowing with produce, and turn them into something tame."14 In the subtraction of any type of casual occurrence, these embodiments of Jacobs's theory empty it of meaning in its planning and use, as Trevor Boddy writes:

The cornerstones of Jacobsian urbanism—picturesque ethnic shops piled high with imported goods, mustachioed hot-dog vendors in front of the improvised street corner fountains, urban life considered as one enormous national-day festival—are cruelly mimicked in every Rouse market and historic district on the continent. Contemporary developers have found it eminently easy to furnish such obvious symbols of urbanism, while at the same time eliminating the racial, ethnic, and class diversity that interested Jacobs in the first place, and launched a widespread reconsideration of our cities a generation ago. Jacobsian urbanism has not failed but succeeded too well—or more accurately a diorama of its most superficial ideas has preempted the public domain.15

Though it may be convenient to conclude that Jacobs is the unsuspecting, injured party in a manipulation by money-grubbing developers, this would be to oversimplify matters on both accounts. While profit is an unavoidable truth of the developer's motivations, there is a sheen of sincerity to these projects in their attempts to implement Jacobs's ideas. They share a genuine faith in the power of assembled masses to constitute an urbanity: the shopper in an urban setting, given sufficient time, will be transformed into an urbanite, and shopping becomes not only a method of economic renewal of the city, but also a means for creating converts to city life. The idealized notion that the base adoption of Jacobs's theories has happened from outside her own discourse and that these theories were maliciously co-opted by the retail development industry is slightly erroneous. It is even disproven within her own writings, specifically in the promotion of her theory. In an article entitled "Where to Locate a Bookstore in a City and Where Not to Locate One," Jacobs discussed the applicability of the conditions described in *The Death and Life of American Cities*—diverse functions, short blocks, mix of old and new buildings, sufficiently dense concentration of people—to finding the optimum urban locations for retail businesses.16 According to Jacobs, "All of the elements that make for neighborhood diversity are so interrelated that all elements would be important in some degree for a bookstore's success, but I must admit that I don't know much about bookstores. For all I know, someone right now may be planning a bookstore in a location where none of these elements is present. I hope not; but if so, I wish him luck."17 Jacobs had to have realized the usefulness of her own work for the goals of retail planning and cannot have been overly surprised by the ultimate outcome.
Jonathan Barnett and Edward Larrabee Barnes, South Street Seaport district plan, New York City, 1972
In the end, an examination of the negative effects of the festival marketplaces should not be focused strictly on their proliferation, but more precisely on the role they have played in coloring how subsequent like areas would be developed. These developments have made inescapable the understanding of large areas of cities as "planned" for shopping, instead of existing as valid expressions of urbanity. Despite the good intentions on the part of Jane Jacobs and, more arguably, the big businesses that hoped to assimilate these intentions, her ideas have, through multiple translations, become corrupted. Most alarming is not that the festival marketplaces have, at least within the ideals of Jacobsian urbanism, failed to interpret her central principles; rather, it is that these constructions of urban life have come to dominate readings of the city, debasing all the while the character of cities themselves.

See "Legislated Transactions," "Three-Ring Circus"

1. "Hell," Bernard Shaw wrote in Maxims for Revolutionists, "is paved with good intentions, not with bad ones."
4. More recently, in a symposium in Toronto entitled Jane Jacobs: Ideas That Matter, she was praised for the fresh air she has breathed into the discourse of urbanism and for bringing "sophisticated language to things that hadn't previously been given a fundamental social dimension: sidewalks, streets, and neighborhood." See Beth Kapusta, "How Jacobs Changed a City," The Toronto Globe and Mail, 14 October 1997.
6. They can also be understood as a premonition of the ideas presented in the New York Charter of the New Urbanism that would emerge more than two decades later, even though Jacobs is very explicit that these qualities belong to the city and warns against their application to the small town. See ibid., 16. 7. Ibid., n.p. Jacobs did reproduce a few illustrations of short blocks.
9. Pike Place, South Street Seaport, and the Madison Mall project, reproduced here, illustrate Jacobs's ideal—as rendered by retail.
11. Ibid., 269.
13. Even the Manhattan grid seems to have been too articulated for Jacobs's taste, requiring a redistribution of the congregation of businesses along the avenues.
17. Ibid., 31.