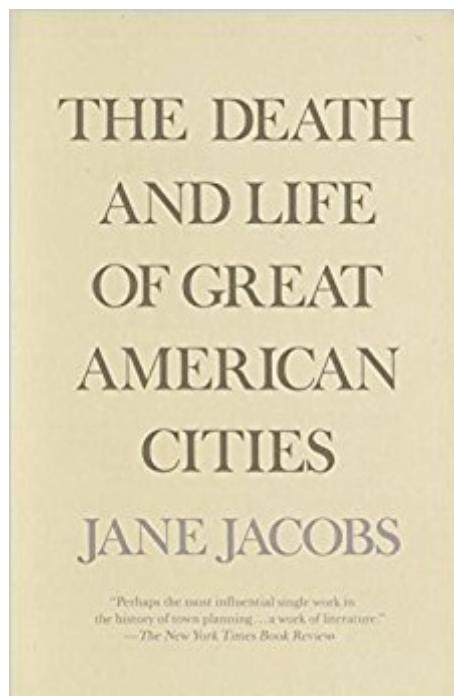


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# The Death And Life Of Great American Cities



## Synopsis

A direct and fundamentally optimistic indictment of the short-sightedness and intellectual arrogance that has characterized much of urban planning in this century, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* has, since its first publication in 1961, become the standard against which all endeavors in that field are measured. In prose of outstanding immediacy, Jane Jacobs writes about what makes streets safe or unsafe; about what constitutes a neighborhood, and what function it serves within the larger organism of the city; about why some neighborhoods remain impoverished while others regenerate themselves. She writes about the salutary role of funeral parlors and tenement windows, the dangers of too much development money and too little diversity. Compassionate, bracingly indignant, and always keenly detailed, Jane Jacobs's monumental work provides an essential framework for assessing the vitality of all cities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This 1961 book by Jane Jacobs, a one-time writer for architectural magazines in New York City, turned the world of city planning on its head. The author, who possessed no formal training in architecture or city planning, relied on personal observations of her surroundings in Greenwich Village in New York City to supply ammunition for her charges against the grand muftis of the architectural profession. "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" consists mostly of common sense observations, but there is also a good amount of statistical information, economics, sociology, and some philosophy at the base of the author's arguments. This 1993 Modern Library reprint seeks to bring Jacobs's work to a whole new generation of readers, a necessity when one realizes that a

majority of the problems plaguing cities in 1961 continue to be a problem today. Jacobs begins her book with a brief history of where modern city planning came from. According to the author, the mess we call cities today emerged from Utopian visionaries from Europe and America beginning in the 19th century. Figures such as Ebenezer Howard, Lewis Mumford, Le Corbusier, and Daniel Burnham all had a significantly dreadful impact on how urban areas are built and rebuilt. These men all envisioned the city as a dreadful place, full of overcrowding, crime, disease, and ugliness. Howard wished to destroy big cities completely in order to replace them with small towns, or "Garden Cities," made up of small populations. Similar in thought to Howard, Mumford argued for a decentralization of cities into thinned out areas resembling towns. Le Corbusier, says Jacobs, inaugurated yet another harmful plan for cities: the "Radiant City."

Even 35 years after it was written, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* remains the classic book on how cities work and how urban planners and others have naively destroyed functioning cities. It is widely known for its incisive treatment of those who would tear down functioning neighborhoods and destroy the lives and livelihoods of people for the sake of a groundless but intellectually appealing daydream. But although many see it as a polemic against urban planning, the best parts of it, the parts that have endeared it to many who love cities, are quite different. *Death and Life* is, first of all, a work of observation. The illustrations are all around us, she says, and we must go and look. She shows us parts of the city that are alive -- the streets, she says, are the city that we see, and it is the streets and sidewalks that carry the most weight -- and find the patterns that help us not merely see but understand. She shows us the city as an ecology -- a system of interactions that is more than merely the laying out of buildings as if they were a child's wooden blocks. But observation can mean simply the noting of objects. Ms. Jacobs writes beautifully, lovingly, of New York City and other urban places. Her piece "The Ballet of Hudson Street" is both an observation of events on the Greenwich Village street where she lived and a prose poem describing the comings and goings of the people, the rhythms of the shopkeepers and the commuters and others who use the street.

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