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**Lessons taught by Jane Jacobs**  
**lessons learned by an architect**

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# JANE JACOBS IS STILL HERE

**Jane Jacobs 100**  
**Her legacy and relevance**  
**in the 21st Century**

**24 and 25 May 2016**

**Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment**  
**TU Delft, The Netherlands**

**edited by Roberto Rocco**

## **Jane Jacobs is still here**

### **Proceedings of the Conference Jane Jacobs 100: her legacy and relevance in the 21st century**

Conference organised by  
Roberto Rocco (TU Delft)  
Brian Doucet (University of Waterloo) and  
Andre Ouwehand (TU Delft)

Editor: Roberto Rocco

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## Susanne Komossa

“Jane Jacobs is probably one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century. Like Hannah Arendt, she felt obliged to think and investigate freely and without fear of being caught by conventions. Her critique of Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (1938) is pivotal for our understanding of contemporary cities and the forces that drive change. Basically, she marks the transition from thinking and urban design based on large scale labor to – what we would call today – the creative and inclusive city that is characterised by the dynamics between small/medium and large companies and the integration and overlap of work, leisure and everyday life of citizens.

Jacobs discussed these issues not only in the book ‘*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*’ (1961) but also in ‘*The Economy of Cities*’ (1969) and ‘*Cities and the Wealth of Nations*’ (1984). For a long time, thinking ‘economy’ was regarded as minor to cultural or political engagement. However, Jane Jacobs taught me to jump over these gaps and to ‘observe’ and investigate the mutual relationship between these three within our physical environment, the buildings we design and the public realm of cities. I feel honored to elaborate these lessons I learned during the closing of the Jane Jacobs centennial year at the Faculty of AB+E and indeed: ‘Jane Jacobs is still here!’”

Susanne Komossa is Associate Professor at Bouwkunde, coordinator of the research group ‘Architecture and the City: Public Building /Public Realm, Composition & Tectonics’, author of the book ‘*The Dutch Urban Block and the Public Realm: Models, Rules, Ideals*’

# Lessons taught by J.J.; lessons learned by an architect

**Susanne Komossa**

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**This article discusses the importance of observation in architecture and urbanism and subsequently, the hypothesis that decoding space through observation of form, use and design and typo-morphological research leads to an understanding of internal logic of spatial patterns instead of outer forms.**

## **Introduction**

Jane Jacobs is probably one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century. Like Hannah Arendt she felt obliged to think and investigate freely and without fear of being caught by conventions or institutions. Her critique of Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (1938) is pivotal for our understanding of contemporary cities and the forces that drive change. Basically she marks the transition from disciplinary thinking and urban design based on large scale labor to - what we would call today - the creative and inclusive city that is characterized by the dynamics between small/medium and large companies and the integration and overlap of work, leisure and everyday life of citizens. These issues Jacobs did not only discuss in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) but also in *The Economy of Cities* (1969) and *Cities and the Wealth*

of Nations (1984). For long time thinking 'economy' was regarded minor to cultural or political engagement. However, Jane Jacobs taught us to jump over these gaps and to 'observe' and investigate the mutual relationship between these three aspects of society within our physical environment, the buildings we design and the public realm of cities. Basically, this article discusses the importance of observation in architecture and urbanism and subsequently, the hypothesis that decoding space through observation of form, use and design and typo-morphological research leads to an understanding of internal logic of spatial patterns instead of outer forms.

## **Observation instead of prefabricated recipes**

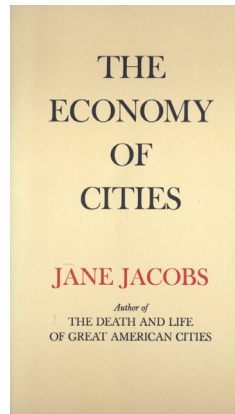
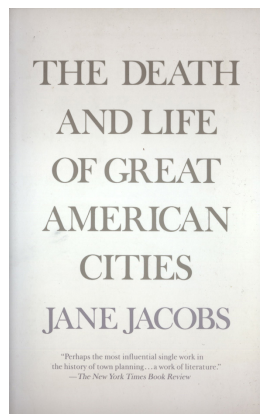
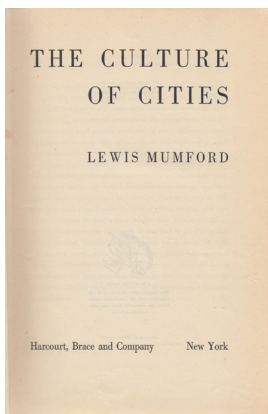
Basically, Jacob's book *Death and Life* - dating from 1961- taught us as architects

and urban designers to actually observe everyday street life and to understand how it is mirrored in architectural and urban form. Jacobs saw the city as the laboratory and not as some ideal 'tabula rasa', on which policy-makers, urban designers and architects could freely project future ideals. This was, in fact, what representatives of the Modern Movement propagated. Taking the 'real' city as the object of study differed very much from Louis Mumford's assumptions that interpreted the city as a construct on which ideas could be tested, and which could be completely planned as an ideal environment. Today we understand what the Modernists method meant: an endless series of trials and errors, which frequently led to failures. (Marzot 2017 p. 74-93) The Dutch housing area the Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam, for example, was 30 years after its completion up to a complete remake. Moreover, *Death and Life* attacked anti-









**Fig 1: 'The Mumford Jacobs debate of Modernism's anti urban doctrine'. Book cover The Culture of Cities 1938, The Death and Life of Great American 1961 Cities and The Economy of Cities 1969**

urban sanitary ideals of the urban zoning and division of functions. Instead, it pleaded for an overlap of functions. The period between World War One and Two and of the ending 40s and early 50s had been dominated by Modernist thinking. Taking the 'city as it is', with all its complexities and contradiction, was new and a radically different way of approaching.

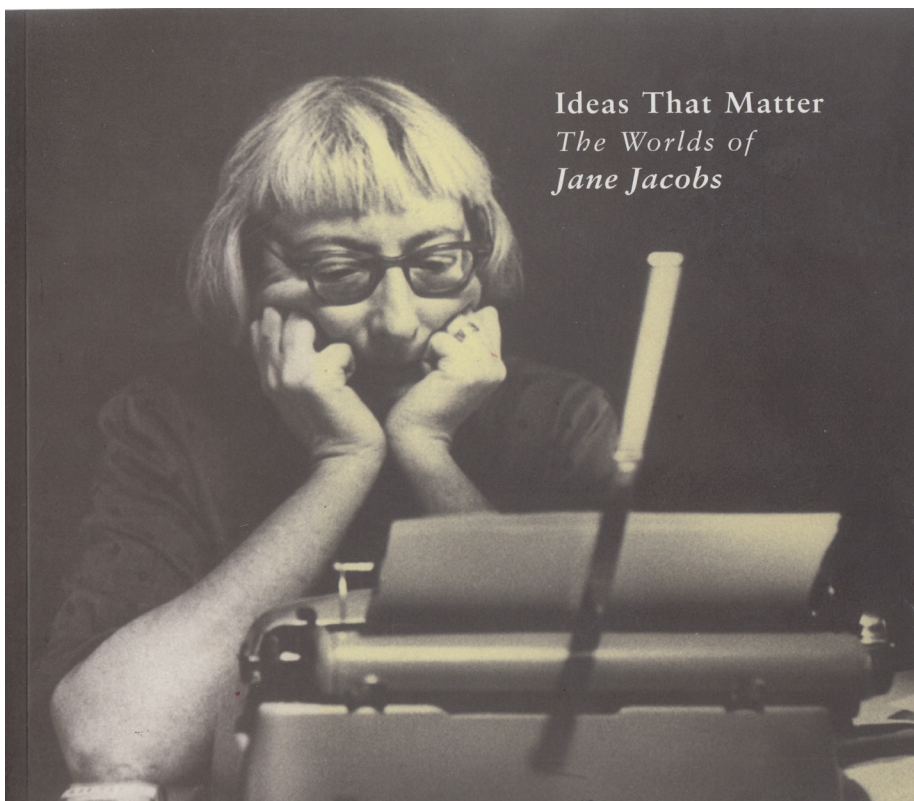
In architecture and urbanism at the end of the 1950s when *Death and Life* was written a series of criticisms appeared which all focused in fact on actual or historical urban form instead of future ideals. To start with, Saverio Muratori (1959) studied in his book *Studi per una Operante Storia Urbana di Venezia* the history of Venice in its built

form. By drawing the morphology of the urban blocks, the *fondamente*, and their interior division, he was able to document the existing city in a very accurate way. Within these drawings he distinguished and ordered the individual houses and housing typologies, which shared certain characteristics in so-called *tabelloni*. From these series of comparable building types he distilled main types defining the typical lay-out of Venetian houses which could serve as a model for the next step in design history. So, basically Muratori states that 'the city is the only model' (Castex, 2013 p.19-41) and that the past already includes the future (building). This return to the city was followed by writings of diverse architects-

theorists, like Aldo Rossi (1966), Robert Venturi, (1972), Colin Rowe (1975), Jean Castex, Jean Charles Depaule, Philip Panerai (1977), and Rem Koolhaas (1978). The school of Versailles of Jean Castex cum suis, questioned specifically the relationship between the history of urban form and society. They state 'The term architectural model makes clear that the development of form is not directly related to the translation of a social aim, but that during the development of the design, form uses mediations that are specific to architecture and whose history yet has to be written. In the distance between this unusual history (of form S.K.) and the more general history of society lays the potential input of the discipline: architecture, but also its limits.' (Castex 1977, Dutch edition p.222) This citation implies the important statement of the inner logic that binds urban form to society; i.e. as architects we need to trace and understand the inner logic of spatial patterns and how they have been related to everyday life of the city during past and present.

## Everyday life and public realm

Jane Jacob was also one of the first authors calling for an approach to the public realm at the neighborhood or district level in which everyday lives of all those participating in urban life, whether children at play, shopkeepers, loiterers or businessmen, were important. For her, but also Hannah Arendt (1958) en Jürgen Habermas (1962), and later Henri Lefebvre (1970, 1980 p. 147, 1996 p. 205) and Richard Sennett (1991) and



**Fig. 2: 'The Worlds of Jane Jacobs', Book cover 'Ideas that matter'**





**Fig 3:**  
‘The city is the only model’,  
Jean Castex  
2013. Book  
cover Sacerio  
Muratori,  
‘Studi per una  
operante storia  
urbana di  
Venezia’, 1960.

in the actual use of the chosen (prototypical) urban blocks and buildings. With regard to the use of street photography as research tool we follow George Baird. He states that street photography is not only suitable for illustrative, but also analytical purposes to understand public space (Baird 2011 p. 58).

## Urban economy

Jane Jacobs was a pioneer to comment on the mutual relationship between physical structure of cities and the urban economy. She states ‘Cities are not chaotic. They have an order of economic development, but they work without ideology. Ideology only prevents us from seeing the order.’ (Allen 2011, p.23) In her book *The economy of cities* she distinguishes between corporate cities and innovative cities. According to her, corporate cities like Detroit are characterised by big scale labour; i.e. a limited number of businesses that fabricate a single product like cars. Already in 1968 Jacobs states that these businesses will have difficulties with innovation and therefore will be vulnerable in case of economic change. In contrast to these big scale labour cities that served as the model for Le Corbusier’s

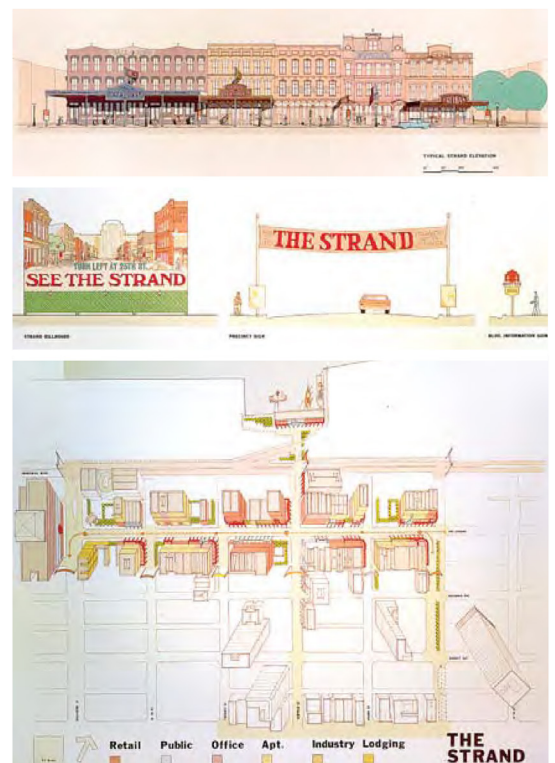
the notions of everyday life of city dwellers and the public realm are closely connected.

The everyday life forms in fact the link between city dwellers’ public and private life. For quite some part it takes place in the public realm as the physical domain where people go out, are in love or go to work, exchange ideas and form opinions but also are in conflict, pick up knowledge of all kinds, enjoy themselves, can see and be seen, and meet others. Or to put it in more architectural terms, ‘The public realm can be seen as a specific part of urban public space is closely related to the notion of the urban ‘public sphere’, for it is there that both the virtual and physical exchange of ideas, opinions, experience, knowledge, ideologies, goods and labor take place’, i.e. it is ‘the turf where strangers meet’ (Komossa 2010, p.37, Sennett, 1991 p. XVII).

## Urban Form

Following this train of thought, for us as architects and urban designers it is important to find how the relationship between the private space of a house or building and the public realm of the

city are actually composed. Basically this relationship is defined by the composition of the interior spaces as such, the access typology, and the elements that form the transition from inside to outside. Moreover, the qualities of the space around buildings and blocks, but also the way in which corners and stoops are designed inform us. There are different ways to analyse this relationship in drawings but also by using street photography. Typomorphological research provides us with the tool of drawing through scales; i.e. ranging from a scale 1:200 for sections and plans of the individual house or building to 1:5000 of a city quarter. To select, document and interpret areas this way renders information about the composition but also helps to detect and deal with the immanent contradictions of (today’s) architecture and built environment. In this research approach street photography is complementary and utilised to document changes



**Fig 4: Proposal for urban renewal of the Strand, Galveston, Texas, by Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown 1975. Source: VSBA**





**Fig 5:**  
**Observation**  
 – Street: New  
 York, Park as  
 stage for urban  
 performance  
 Source:  
 Photograph by  
 the author

much more diverse palette of the service, knowledge and creative industries. In fact, following this development, the physical structure of blocks and buildings also had to change too to supply a smaller grain and small and big spaces, old and new ones, cheap and expensive ones to allow the start-up and growth of businesses. Moreover this structure will have to provide spatial coherence, the possibility to mix functions, the ability to allocate a high density of inhabitants and businesses, and the overlap of work and dwelling. If we look at Dutch cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam we can see that this shift starts being part of urban policies and design at the end of 1980s which actually was marked by a return-to-the-city that was advocated by Jacobs and in the above mentioned critical literature from 1960 onward.

## Conclusion

In Ideas matter Jacobs states ‘Change is so major a truth that we understand process to be the essence of things.’ (Allen 2011, p.165) This refers to the economical, social and cultural developments which continuously take place in cities. This changing use, architectural form and design are mirrored in the character of public spaces, specifically the urban public realm, buildings and urban blocks.

Decoding space through observation of form, use and design and typo-morphological research leads to an understanding of

plead for the division of functions in urban planning, innovative cities in her view are characterised by all kinds of businesses and spaces, and a vivid public realm to support the integration of work and leisure,

the exchange of knowledge and the spreading of risks between a series of smaller companies. Today, due to economic change and migration of work and people we witness this change from big scale labour to the



**Fig. 6:**  
**Market Hall**  
**Boqueria in**  
**Barcelona 2008.**  
 ‘The everyday is composed of a multiplicity of moments, such as games, love, work, rest, struggle, knowledge, poetry and justice, and links professional life, direct social life, leisure and culture.’ Henri Lefebvre. Source: Photograph by the author





**Fig. 7: Corners, early 20th century block combining shopping & dwelling. Café on the corner combining different worlds, Nieuwe Binnenweg Rotterdam Source: Photograph by the author. Manuel de Sola Morales A wide range of façades and people are found on corners, which produces innovation and stimulation. The “Cities, Corners” exhibition will show how the idea of corner extends beyond the purely geometric to become a vitalising principle and a genuine metaphor for the city. Forum Barcelona 2004 Source: [http://www.publicacions.bcn.es/b\\_mm/abmm\\_forum/131-134ang.pdf](http://www.publicacions.bcn.es/b_mm/abmm_forum/131-134ang.pdf)**

internal logic of spatial patterns instead of outer forms. Basically this understanding enables us, as architects and urban designers, to produce more adequate designs. Looking back, it took a long time before critical thinking of the 1950s, 60s and 70s became daily practice and for sure, this process is not yet finished.

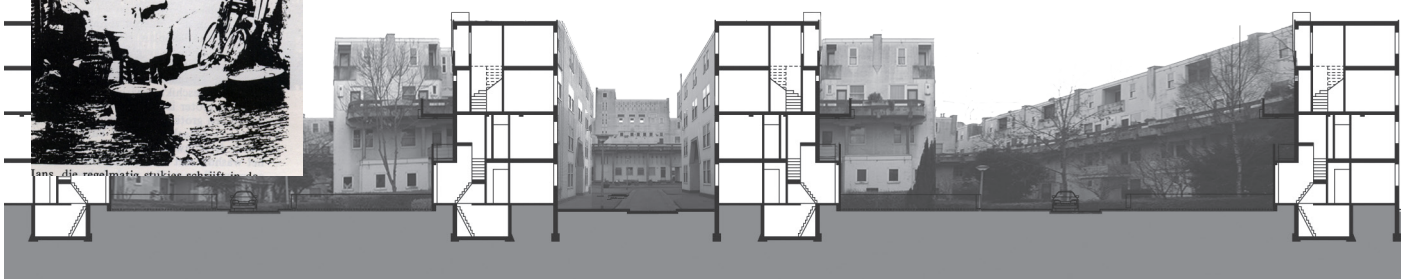
Moreover, Jane Jacobs like Hannah Arendt, triggered ‘unorthodox’ thinking by being a radical outside institutions presenting –at their time– uncomfortable messages. By doing so, she also made tangible the difficult relationship between academe and critical women. Even today we encounter qualifications and defamations vis-à-vis women

like ‘excus truus’ (apology woman), suggesting a woman on a official board is not qualified but only be hired of her gender or ‘fish wife’, discriminating outspoken women who are ventilating their opinions in public. However, defensive reactions or calling thoughts ‘malapropism’ Allen, 2011 do not hold: the process of change has already started!

**Fig. 9: Access systems, architects have difficulties with the relationship between architecture and everyday life.**

Often we are still prisoners of CIAM Modernist thought and mobilise collective space as the ideal physical enclave.

Urban regeneration of the Oude Westen in Rotterdam 1970s and 1980s; the city as laboratory. Source: Photograph by the author



**Fig 8: ‘Women in public; collective realms are needed to avoid excessive conversations and neighbours’ quarrels’. Rotterdam, Spangen housing complex with collective facilities in its inner court 1919, perspective section, Tim Vermeend**





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