



# JANE JACOBS AND THE DEATH AND LIFE OF AMERICAN PLANNING

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And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”

During a recent departmental retreat here at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, planning faculty conducted a brainstorming session in which each professor—including me—was asked to list, anonymously on a bit of paper, some of the major issues and concerns facing the profession today. These lists were then collected and transcribed on the whiteboard. All the expected big themes were there—sustainability and global warming, equity and justice, peak oil, immigration, urban sprawl and public health, retrofitting suburbia, and so on. But also on the board appeared, like a sacrilegious graffito, the words “Trivial Profession.”<sup>1</sup> When we then voted to rank the listed items in order of importance, “Trivial Profession” was placed—lo and behold—close to the top. This surprised and alarmed a number of people in the room. Here were members of one of the finest planning faculties in America, at one of the most respected programs in the world, suggesting that their chosen field was minor and irrelevant.

Now, even the most parochial among us would probably agree that urban planning is not one of society’s bedrock professions, such as law or medicine or perhaps economics. It is indeed a minor field, and that’s fine. Nathan Glazer, in his well-known essay “Schools of the Minor Professions,” labeled “minor” *every* profession outside law and medicine. Not even clerics or divines made his cut. Moreover, Glazer observed that attempts on the





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part of “occupations” such as urban planning to transform themselves “into professions in the older sense, and the assimilation of their programmes of training into academic institutions, have not gone smoothly.”<sup>22</sup> But minority status by itself is not why “Trivial Profession” appeared on the whiteboard. It was there because of a swelling perception, especially among young scholars and practitioners, that planning is a diffuse and ineffective field, and that it has been largely unsuccessful over the last half century at its own game: bringing about more just, sustainable, healthful, efficient, and beautiful cities and urban regions. It was there because of a looming sense that planners in America simply lack the agency or authority to turn their idealism into reality, that planning has neither the prestige nor the street cred necessary to effect real and lasting change.

To understand the roots of this sense of impotence and ennui requires us to dial back to the great cultural shift that occurred in the planning field beginning in the 1960s. The seeds of discontent sown in that era brought forth new and needed growth, which nonetheless choked out three vital aspects of the planning profession—its *disciplinary identity*, *professional authority*, and *visionary capacity*. I’ll address each aspect in turn before tackling the messy but urgent matter of their recovery in this age of unprecedented challenge to the planning profession worldwide.

It is well known that city planning in the United States evolved out of the landscape architectural profession during the late Olmsted era. Planning’s core expertise was then grounded and tangible. It was chiefly concerned with accommodating human needs and functions on the land, from the scale of the site to that of entire regions. One of the founders of the Chapel Hill program, F. Stuart Chapin Jr. (whose first degree was in architecture), described planning as “a means for systematically anticipating and achieving adjustment in the physical environment of a city consistent with social and economic trends and sound principles of civic design.”<sup>23</sup> The goal was to create physical settings that would help bring about a more prosperous, efficient, and equitable society. And in many ways the giants of the prewar planning profession—Olmsted Jr., Burnham, Mumford, Stein and Wright, Nolen, and Gilmore D. Clarke—were successful in doing just that.





The postwar period was something else altogether. By then, middle-class Americans were buying cars and moving to the suburbs in record numbers. The urban core was slowly being depopulated. Cities were losing their tax base, buildings were being abandoned, and neighborhoods were falling victim to blight. Planners and civic leaders were increasingly desperate to save their cities. Help came soon enough from Uncle Sam. Passage of the 1949 Housing Act, with its infamous Title I proviso, made urban renewal a legitimate target for federal funding. Flush with cash, city redevelopment agencies commissioned urban planners to prepare slum-clearance master plans. Vibrant ethnic neighborhoods—including the one my mother grew up in near the Brooklyn Navy Yard—were blotted out by Voisinian superblocks or punched through with expressways meant to make downtown easily accessible to suburbanites. Urban planners in the postwar period thus aided and abetted some of the most egregious acts of urban vandalism in American history. Of course, they did not see it this way. Most believed, like Lewis Mumford, that America's cities were suffering an urban cancer wholly untreatable by the home remedies Jane Jacobs was brewing and that the strong medicine of slum clearance was just what the doctor ordered. Like their architect colleagues, postwar planners had drunk the Corbusian Kool-Aid and were too intoxicated to see the terrible harm they were causing.

Thus ensued the well-deserved backlash against superblock urbanism and the authoritarian, we-experts-know-best brand of planning that backed it. And the backlash came, of course, from a bespectacled young journalist named Jane Jacobs. Her 1961 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, much like the paperwork Luther nailed to the Schlosskirche Wittenberg four centuries earlier, sparked a reformation—this time within the planning profession. To the rising generation of planners, coming of age in an era of cultural ferment and rebellion against the status quo, Jane Jacobs was a patron saint. The young idealists soon set about rewiring the planning field. The ancien régime was put on trial for failures real and imagined, for not responding adequately to the impending urban crisis, and especially for ignoring issues of urban poverty and racial discrimination. But change did not come easily; the field was plunged into disarray. A glance at the July 1970 issue of the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* (precursor to





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*JAPA*) reveals a profession gripped by a crisis of mission, purpose, and relevance. As the authors of one article—fittingly titled “Holding Together”—asked, how could this well-meaning discipline transform itself “against a background of trends in the society and the profession that invalidate many of the assumptions underlying traditional planning education”?<sup>4</sup>

One way was to disgorge itself of the muscular physical-interventionist focus that had long been planning’s *métier*. King Laius was thus slain by Oedipus, in love with “Mother Jacobs,” as Mumford derisively called her.<sup>5</sup> Forced from his lofty perch, the once-mighty planner now found himself in a hot and crowded city street. No longer would he twirl a compass above the city like a conductor’s baton, as did the anonymous planner depicted on a first-day cover for the 1967 stamp Plan for Better Cities (he even wears a pinky ring!). So thoroughly internalized was the Jacobs critique that planners could see only folly and failure in the work of their own professional forebears. Burnham’s grand dictum “Make no little plans” went from a battle cry to an embarrassment in less than a decade. Even so revered and saintly a figure as Sir Ebenezer Howard was now a pariah. Jacobs herself described the good man—one of the great progressives of the late Victorian era—as a mere “court reporter,” a clueless amateur who yearned “to do the city in” with “powerful and city-destroying ideas.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, to Jacobs, not just misguided American urban renewal but the entire enterprise of visionary, rational, centralized planning was foul and suspect. She was as opposed to new towns as she was to inner-city slum clearance—anything that threatened the vitality and sustenance of traditional urban forms was the enemy. It is largely forgotten that the popular United Kingdom edition of *Death and Life* was subtitled “The Failure of Town Planning.” How odd that such a conservative, even reactionary, stance would galvanize an entire generation of planners.

The Jacobsons sought fresh methods of making cities work—from the grassroots and the bottom up. The subaltern was exalted, the master laid low. The drafting tables were tossed for pickets and surveys and spreadsheets. Planners sought new alliances in academe, beyond the schools of architecture and design—in political science, law, economics, sociology, and so forth. But there were problems. First, none of the social sciences were themselves primarily concerned with the city, and so at best they could be





only partial allies. Second, planning was not taken seriously by any of these fields. The schoolboy crush was not returned, making the relationship unequal from the start. Even today it's rare for a social science department to hire a planning Ph.D., while planning programs routinely hire academics with doctorates in economics, political science, and other fields. Indeed, Nathan Glazer observed that one of the hallmarks of a minor profession is that faculty with "outside" doctorates actually enjoy *higher prestige* within the field than those with degrees in the profession itself.<sup>7</sup> They also tend to have minimal allegiance to planning. As William Rich observed of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology faculty in the 1970s, members "from outside often tended to identify more strongly with their professional colleagues in other departments and schools than with the planning staff."<sup>8</sup>

This brings us to the first of the three legacies of the Jacobsian turn: *It diminished the disciplinary identity of the planning profession.* While the expanded range of planning scholarship and practice in the post-urban renewal era diversified the field, that diversification came at the expense of an established area of expertise—strong, centralized physical planning—that gave the profession visibility and identity both within academia and among sibling "place" professions such as architecture and landscape architecture. My students are always astonished to learn just how toxic and stigmatized physical planning—today one of the most popular concentrations in many programs—had become by the 1970s. Like a well-meaning surgeon who botches an operation, planners were (correctly) blamed for the excesses of urban renewal and many other problems then facing American cities. But the planning baby was thrown out with the urban-renewal bathwater. And once the traditional focus of physical planning was lost, the profession was effectively without a keel. It became fragmented and balkanized, which has since created a kind of chronic identity crisis within the field—a nagging uncertainty about purpose and relevance. Certainly in the popular imagination, physical planning was what planners did—they choreographed the buildings and infrastructure on the land. By the mid-1970s, however, even educated laypersons would have difficulty understanding what the profession was all about. Today, planners *themselves* often have a hard time explaining the purpose of their profession. By forgoing its traditional focus and expanding too quickly, planning became a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. And so it remains.





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The second legacy of the Jacobsian revolution is closely related to the first: *Privileging the grassroots over plannerly authority and expertise meant a loss of professional agency.*

In rejecting the muscular interventionism of the Burnham-Moses sort, planners in the 1960s identified instead with the victims of urban renewal and highway schemes. New mechanisms were devised to empower ordinary citizens and the grassroots to shape and guide the planning process. This was an extraordinary act of altruism on our part, and I can think of no other profession that has done anything quite like it. Imagine economists at the Federal Reserve holding community meetings and polls to decide the direction of fiscal policy. Imagine public health officials giving equal weight to the nutritional wisdom of teenagers—they are stakeholders, after all! Granted, powering up the grassroots was necessary in the 1970s to stop expressway and renewal schemes that had truly run amok. But it was power that could not easily be switched off. Tools and processes introduced to ensure popular participation ended up reducing the planner's role to that of umpire or schoolyard monitor. Instead of setting the terms of debate or charting a course of action, planners now seemed wholly content to be facilitators—"mere *absorbers* of public opinion," as Alex Krieger put it, "waiting for consensus to build."<sup>9</sup>

The fatal flaw of such populism is that no single group of local citizens—mainstream or marginalized, affluent or impoverished—can be trusted to have the best interests of society or the environment in mind when they evaluate a planning proposal. The literature on grassroots planning tends to assume a citizenry of Gandhian humanists. In fact, most people are not motivated by altruism or yearning for a better world but by self-interest, pure and simple. Preservation and enhancement of that self-interest—which usually orbits about the axes of rising crime rates and falling property values—are the real drivers of community activism. This is why it is a fool's errand to rely upon citizens to guide the planning process. Forget for a moment that most folks lack the knowledge and expertise to make intelligent decisions about the future of our cities. Most people are too busy, too apathetic, or too focused on their jobs or kids to be moved to action over planning issues unless those issues are at their doorstep. And once an issue is at the doorstep, fear sets in and reason and rationality fly





out the window. So the very citizens least able to make objective decisions about planning action are the ones who end up dominating the planning process, often wielding near-veto power over proposals.

To be fair, activism of the NIMBY sort is a fierce guard dog that's helped put an end to some very bad projects, by the private sector as well as the government. And there are times when citizen self-interest and the greater social good do overlap. In Orange County, North Carolina, part of the Research Triangle and home to Chapel Hill, grassroots activism put an end to a proposed asphalt plant and stopped the North Carolina Department of Transportation's dreams of a six-lane bypass that would have ruined a pristine forest tract along the Eno River. But the same community activism has also canceled several proposed infill projects, thus helping drive development to rural greenfield sites. (Cows are slow to organize.) It's made the Orange County homeless shelter homeless itself, almost ended a proposed Habitat for Humanity housing complex in Chapel Hill, and generated opposition to a much-needed transit-oriented development in the county seat of Hillsborough (more on this in a moment). And for what it's worth, the shrillest opposition in each of these cases came not from rednecks or Tea Party activists but from highly educated "creative class" progressives who effectively weaponized Jane Jacobs to oppose anything they perceived as threatening the status quo—including projects that would reduce our carbon footprint, create more affordable housing, and shelter the homeless.

NIMBYism has been described as "the bitter fruit of a pluralistic democracy in which all views carry equal weight."<sup>10</sup> And that, sadly, includes the voice of the planner. In the face of an aroused and angry public, planerly wisdom and expertise have no more clout than the ranting of the loudest community activist; and this is both wrong and a hazard to our collective future. For who, if not the planner, will advocate on behalf of society at large? All planning may be local, but the sum of the local is national and eventually global. If we put parochial local interests ahead of broader societal needs, it will be impossible to build the infrastructure essential to the economic viability of the United States in the long haul—the commuter and high-speed rail lines; the dense, walkable, public-transit-focused communities; the solar and wind farms and geothermal plants; perhaps even the nuclear power stations.





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The third legacy of the Jacobsian turn is perhaps most troubling of all: *the seeming paucity among American planners today of the speculative courage and vision that once distinguished this profession.* I'll ease into this subject by way of a story—one that will appear to contradict some of what I just wrote about citizen-led planning.

I have served for several years now on the planning board of Hillsborough, North Carolina, where my wife and I have lived since 2004. Hillsborough, founded in 1754, is a charming little town some 10 miles north of Chapel Hill. It's always reminded me of a smaller, grittier, less precious version of Concord, Massachusetts. It has a long and rich history, progressive leadership, and an arts and culture scene many times its size. It is also blessed with a palpable *genius loci*: "If there are hot spots on the globe, as the ancients believed," writes resident Frances Mayes, author of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, "Hillsborough must be one of them."<sup>11</sup> The town is also located on one of the main rail arteries in the South, and has been since the Civil War. Every day several Amtrak trains—including the Carolinian, the fastest-growing passenger line in the United States—speed through town on their way to Charlotte or Raleigh, North Carolina, Washington, D.C., and New York. But a passenger train hasn't made a scheduled stop in Hillsborough since March 1964, when Southern Railway ended service due to declining ridership. After a century of connectivity, Hillsborough and Orange County were cut loose from the nation's rail grid.

In late 2007 a group of residents in our local coffee shop, a classic Oldenburg "third place" named Cup-A-Joe, got to talking about reviving rail service. Soon a petition was drafted, and within a few months several hundred people had signed it.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, I had students in my urban design and site planning class develop conceptual schemes for a station-anchored mixed use development on land along the tracks close to downtown. I invited town officials to the final review. The local newspaper did an article. Six months later the town purchased the parcel and set about appointing a task force to explore plans for a station. Amtrak, unprompted, produced a study showing that a Hillsborough stop would be profitable. The North Carolina Railroad Company, owner of the right-of-way and long a Kafka's Castle of impenetrability, suddenly got interested. Task-force members were treated to a corridor tour in the railroad's track-riding





Chevy Suburban; we were invited to conferences and seminars. The North Carolina Department of Transportation eventually submitted a request on our behalf for funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The station was, after all, a poster child for the sort of infrastructure project President Obama's stimulus package was ostensibly intended to support.

And all along I kept wondering: "Why did this have to come out of a coffee shop and a classroom? *Where were the planners?* Why didn't the town or county planning office act on this opportunity at its doorstep?" A moment ago I argued that the public lacks the knowledge and expertise to make informed decisions about city planning. If that's the case, what does it say about our profession when a group of citizens—most with no training whatsoever in architecture, planning, or design—comes up with a very good idea *that the planners should have had?* When I asked about this, the response was: "We're too busy planning to come up with big plans."<sup>13</sup> Too busy planning. Too busy slogging through the bureaucratic maze, issuing permits and enforcing zoning codes, hosting community get-togethers, making sure developers get their submittals in on time and pay their fees. This is what passes for planning today. We have become a caretaker profession—reactive rather than proactive, corrective instead of preemptive, rule bound and hamstrung and anything but visionary. If we lived in Nirvana, this would be fine. But we don't. We are entering the uncharted waters of urbanization on a scale the world has never seen. And we are not in the wheelhouse, let alone steering the ship. We may not even be on board.

How did this come about? How did a profession that roared to life with such grand ambitions become such a mouse? The answer points to the self-inflicted loss of agency and authority that came with the Jacobs revolution. It's hard to be a visionary when you've divested yourself of the power to turn visions into reality. Planning in America has been reduced to smallness and timidity, and largely by its own hand. So it's no surprise that envisioning alternative futures for our cities and towns and regions has defaulted to non-planners such as William McDonough and Richard Florida, Andrés Duany and Rem Koolhaas, and journalists such as Joel Kotkin and the inimitable James Howard Kunstler. Jane Jacobs was just the start. It is almost impossible to name a single urban planner today who is a regular presence on the editorial pages of a major newspaper, who has galvanized popular sentiment on





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issues such as sprawl and peak oil, or who has published a best-selling book on the great issues of our day in this age of unprecedented global urbanization. We are the presumptive stewards of the urban future, yet we have ceded the charting of our very own field to others.

Late in life, even Jane Jacobs grew frustrated with the timidity and lack of imagination on the part of planners—Canadian planners this time. In an April 1993 speech—later published in the *Ontario Planning Journal*—she lamented the *absence* of just the sort of robust plannerly interventionism that she once condemned. Jacobs read through a long list of exemplary planning initiatives—the Toronto Main Street effort; the new Planning for Ontario guidelines; efforts to plan the Toronto waterfront; and plans for infill housing in the city, the renewal and extension of streetcar transit, the redevelopment of the St. Lawrence downtown neighborhood, and on and on. And then she unleashed this bitter missile: “Not one of these forward-looking and important policies and ideas—not ONE—was the intellectual product of an official planning department, whether in Toronto, Metro, or the province.” Indeed, she drove on, “our official planning departments seem to be brain-dead in the sense that we cannot depend on them in any way, shape, or form for providing intellectual leadership in addressing urgent problems involving the physical future of the city.” This, I hardly need to add, from a person who did more than any other to quash plannerly agency to shape the physical city.<sup>14</sup>

Well, what can be done about all this? And what might the doing mean for the future of planning education? How can we cultivate in planners the kind of bold visionary thinking that characterized this profession in its youth? How can we ensure that the enthusiasm and bright-eyed idealism so typical of our students is not extinguished as they move into the world of practice? How can we transform planners into big-picture thinkers with the speculative courage to imagine alternatives to the urban status quo, and equipped with the skills and the moxie required to lead the recovery of American infrastructure and put the nation on a greener, more sustainable path?

As I’ve argued throughout this chapter, it was the Jacobsian revolu-





tion and its elimination of a robust physical-planning focus that led to the diminution of planning's disciplinary identity, professional agency, and speculative courage. Thus I believe that a renewed emphasis on physical planning—the grounded, tangible, place-bound matter of orchestrating human activity on the land—is essential to refocusing, recalibrating, and renewing the planning profession in America. By this I do not mean regression back to the state of affairs circa 1935. Planning prior to the grassroots revolution was indeed shallow and undisciplined in many respects. Most of what was embraced post-Jacobs must remain—our expertise on public policy and economics, on law and governance and international development, on planning process and community involvement, on hazard mitigation and environmental impact, on ending poverty and creating cities of justice and equality. But all these areas of concern should be subordinated to a core set of competencies related to placemaking, infrastructure, and the physical environment, both built and natural. I am not suggesting that we simply toss in a few studio courses and call it a day. Planners should certainly be versed in key theories of landscape and urban design. But more than design skills are needed if planning is to become—as I feel it must—the charter discipline and conscience of the placemaking professions in coming decades.

Planning students today need a more robust suite of skills and expertise than we are currently providing—and than may even be possible in the framework of the two-year graduate curriculum.<sup>15</sup> Planners today need not a close-up lens or a wide-angle lens but a wide-angle zoom lens. They need to be able to see the big picture as well as the parts close up; and even if they are not trained to design the parts themselves, they need to know how all those parts fit together. They need, as Jerold Kayden has put it, to “understand, analyze, and influence the variety of forces—social, economic, cultural, legal, political, ecological, technological, aesthetic, and so forth—shaping the built environment.”<sup>16</sup> This means that in addition to being taught courses in economics and law and governance, planning students should be trained to be keen observers of the urban landscapes about them, to be able to decipher the riddles of architectural style and substance, to have a working knowledge of the historical development of places and patterns on the land. They should understand how





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the physical infrastructure of a city works—the mechanics of transportation and utility systems, sewerage, and water supply. They should know the fundamentals of ecology and the natural systems of a place, be able to read a site and its landform and vegetation, know that a great spreading maple in the middle of a stand of pines once stood alone in an open pasture. They need to know the basics of impact analysis and be able to assess the implications of a proposed development on traffic, water quality, and a city's carbon footprint. And while they cannot master all of site engineering, they should be competent site analysts and—more important—be fluent in assessing the site plans of others. Such training would place competency in the shaping and stewardship of the built environment at the very center of the planning-education solar system. And about that good sun a multitude of bodies—planning specialties as we have long had them—could happily orbit.

We are far from this ideal today. As it stands, a planning student can get through most graduate programs in the United States without taking a single course in land-use or physical planning. It is fully possible to earn a master's degree at our top planning schools without knowing how to read a contour map, without understanding what a figure-ground drawing represents, without being able to assess the design quality of a storm-water system on a set of plans, without knowing that L'Enfant's design for Washington, D.C., drew from a tradition extending back to 16th-century Rome. This is expertise that was once well covered by required course work in nearly every program. But as planning moved away from its roots, the core of required courses was slowly chiseled away until only a shell remained—and a disputed one at that. So severe was planning's post-Jacobs identity crisis that in the 1970s MIT—then, as now, the premier American program—eliminated *all* required courses for a time. As William Rich observed at the time, few students registered for “subjects related to physical planning or planning fundamentals,” while more took courses “in social planning and in other departments.” He continued:

This trend first made itself felt in 1967 when students demanded, and the faculty agreed, that studio courses be made optional; a year later students suggested that all formal course requirements





for the MCP [master's of city planning] degree be eliminated, extending a policy already in use in the doctoral program. Rather than redefine a professional program that would take into account the relevance of research and knowledge from other fields, the faculty eliminated the specific guidelines they had helped make obsolete. They substituted general guidelines intended to accomplish the same result, but even these have been largely ignored by some students and their advisors.

Thus, observed Rich, "as the range of Departmental interests" widened, it became "increasingly difficult to identify substantive areas that ought to concern all students."<sup>17</sup> This essential problem remains. The overextended, unfocused nature of planning today is reflected in a required core of course work so stripped down and minimized that it can hardly stand on its own. Compare this to the way physicians are educated. At medical school and during their residencies, all physicians—regardless of eventual specialization—have to master the basics of internal medicine. They may become psychiatrists or proctologists or cardiac surgeons, but they'll always share a set of core skills that, in the end, define what it is to be a physician. If someone collapses clutching their abdomen in a crowded restaurant, nobody calls for a gastroenterologist; they ask, "Is there a *doctor* in the house?"

Although I know of no program today without required course work of some kind, in most the core is only a shadow of what it once was. At the University of North Carolina, for example, students must take courses in quantitative analysis, economics, planning theory, and urban spatial structure, along with a two-day geographic information systems workshop. But compare this to the requirements for the 1958–1959 academic year. Then, students were all required to take a staggering 13 courses—equivalent to practically the entire curriculum in most programs today. These included Traffic and Transportation, Municipal Facilities and Management, Site Planning, Community Design, Urban Planning Practice, Methods and Techniques, Advanced Planning Design, and an Urban Renewal Seminar. Even a decade later, there were nine required core courses, still with a strong focus on physical planning and environmental design. And this in a program that had never been part of a design school,





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that was launched from within the sociology department, and that has ever since been a unit in the College of Arts and Sciences.<sup>18</sup>

All this would be academic, literally, were it not for the momentous changes under way in the United States and the world today—changes that will increasingly demand a new level of engaged action on the part of the planning profession. The rapid urbanization of Asia, Africa, and parts of South America is dramatically altering global flows of labor, capital, energy, and natural resources. “Over the next two decades,” writes Richard Dobbs, “the world will see a burst of urban expansion at a speed and on a scale never before witnessed in human history.”<sup>19</sup> We in the United States face a somewhat opposite conundrum—that of a nation not urbanized enough to be sustainable in the long haul. Planning in America has its work cut out for it as never before: It must take the lead in changing our patterns of settlement on the land, building the necessary infrastructure to end our catastrophic addiction to cheap oil, and working toward a more sustainable urban future. We need to literally come together in space, retrofit suburbia and create dense walkable communities, and build “a country of cities.”<sup>20</sup> We need to restore the vast railroads that scored this country a century ago and commit far more federal funding toward rebuilding our bridges and tunnels, our water and sewer infrastructure, our electrical grids. We have coasted for decades on infrastructure built generations ago. That infrastructure served admirably, but it is aging and beginning to fail. How well we respond to these signal challenges will determine whether we are indeed a relevant and important profession or a truly minor one.

The whole matter of planning, infrastructure, and the fate of nations has come into high relief in recent years with the rise of China. Le Corbusier famously observed that to send a young architect to Rome was to ruin him for life. American planners who travel to China risk coming back equally ruined, for they learn that their Chinese cousins have effectively charted the most spectacular period of urban growth and transformation in world history. They are then beset with an affliction far worse than the “Robert Moses envy” suffered, usually in silence, by an earlier generation of American planners. Here now is a nation that makes even Moses look small. Name any category of infrastructure and China has likely built more of it in the last 30 years, and bigger





and faster, than any other nation on Earth—probably than all other nations *combined*. Long the poor man of Asia, China is now beating us at a game we once mastered—the game of building, and building big; the game of getting things done.

This envy is spiked, of course, by a growing awareness that China's uncanny ability to build—and our seeming incapacity to do very much at all—is not historically neutral or politically inert but has vast implications for the future viability, competitiveness, and security of the United States. What does it say about a nation that, for example, takes seven years to build a pedestrian footbridge over an expressway in Durham, North Carolina? Seven years! My wife, who grew up in China, finds this astonishing. “But Americans put a man on the moon!” she says. “Seven years to build a little bridge?” Seven years in China means entire new cities built from scratch. It will mean, seven years hence, the most extensive national high-speed rail network on the planet. Already Chinese trains are the fastest in the world. They make the lovely Amtrak Acela—the speediest thing we have—look like it's standing still (which too often it is). Very soon rail travel between Shanghai and Beijing, long an overnight trip, will be down to a mere four hours. Service like that along the U.S. eastern seaboard would mean Boston to New York, or New York to Washington, in just over an hour. Meanwhile, in Raleigh, North Carolina, months have been wasted as citizens, planners, and politicians quarrel over a handful of backyards and parking lots that may get clipped by the proposed Southeast High Speed Rail. And where the United States has earmarked all of \$8 billion for high-speed rail, China has allocated \$300 billion for phase one alone.

Of course, there are immense equity and justice and environmental issues with the way cities are built and rebuilt in China; we all know that. People are shunted around like so many scared sheep, evicted with only a few weeks' notice. Those who protest are silenced quickly, often violently. I am not advocating the sort of ruthless authoritarian approach to urban growth and renewal that China favors. But just as China needs more of the American-style gavel of justice, equity, and democratic process, we in the United States need more of that very effective Chinese sledgehammer. And this will require something that makes many people nervous: ridding the development process of some of the many trammels and fetters that came in the wake of the Jacobsian grassroots revolution. For example, community consent is usually an asset to smart





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planning, but it must be regulated to prevent populist opposition to projects that promise clear benefits to a majority of citizens beyond the local scene.

Think of the infamous Cape Wind project in Massachusetts—the pioneering offshore wind farm venture that was stalled for nearly a decade by an elite minority whose “right project in the wrong place” catchphrase was but a white-wine version of the beer-and-pretzels “not in my backyard.” Ten years and 100,000 pages of administrative review later, the visionary project is only now finally nearing construction. The Cape Wind story also highlights the need for much greater elasticity in terms of environmental compliance and mitigation. Here again we have too much of a good thing, where China has not nearly enough. Too-numerous, too-strict environmental laws are often the lever by which development opponents bring good, necessary projects to their knees. Do we really need, for example, a 3-foot stack of environmental impact statements for a single segment of a high-speed rail line on the eastern seaboard? At what point does guardianship of the public interest become obstructionism, a drag on our ability to get anything done at all and thus a hazard to our future? Indeed, if today’s requirements for environmental impact assessment—not to mention public comment and review—were in place in the 1930s, only a very tiny fraction of New Deal public works would have been built.

And this brings me to my final point. We can envy China’s ability to get things done, but we have a more proximate—and more balanced and equitable—model of our own to look to for inspiration: that heroic era of public works our grandparents orchestrated about 75 years ago, with a fraction of the wealth and twice the Depression we have now. The New Deal, with its storied programs such as the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corp, was American planning’s finest hour. The sheer scope and scale of projects built in those otherwise grim years staggers the imagination—Hoover Dam; the Triborough Bridge; the Blue Ridge Parkway; entire state park systems; thousands of schools, libraries, and hospitals; the rural American electric grid; the Tennessee Valley Authority. These are improvements that millions of Americans enjoy and use to this day. Getting such a vast program of works built in less than a decade required a muscular federal government with deep pockets and broad powers of eminent domain. It also required a citizenry willing to accept a certain degree of sacrifice for the good of society and the benefit of the future.





The impediments to a public-works campaign of such scale and ambition today are vast and daunting. Mustering the political will alone would likely be impossible barring an economic meltdown even more severe than the one we are currently mired in. Many Americans—perhaps even a majority—simply don't believe in the ability of the federal government to solve problems anymore. We also no longer have the shared set of norms and values—about nation, about the public realm—necessary to agree upon a bold course of government action. America has always been a nation of freedom-loving individualists. But in the past, primacy of the individual was tempered by common culture. Self-interest was, in effect, harnessed productively to the wagon of collective good. The United States prior to the 1960s was, of course, a far less polyglot society than it is today; consensus formed more easily on many issues. The cultural revolutions of the 1960s brought civil rights to African Americans and others long marginalized by America's white, northern European, Protestant charter culture. But the 1960s—and the “me” decade that followed—also inadvertently unhitched the horses of self-interest from the good cart Commonwealth. A new emphasis on cultural relativism made the harmless trope of the American melting pot suddenly toxic. What shared values and mores we once had slowly faded. The incredible diversity of America today—ethnic, religious, cultural, political—is one of our greatest strengths; we are a mighty mirror of the globe itself. But the absence of cultural hegemony also makes it very difficult to reach consensus on anything. If we share no common culture beyond that of consumerism, then we are just so many free-floating, self-interested atoms each seeking its own best orbit.

It goes without saying that an atomized nation of self-serving individuals is not one likely to have much faith in a shared civic realm. Both sides of the political aisle are to blame here. From the right comes peevish insistence on private enterprise and personal liberty at all costs; from the left, a welfare-state culture that has created a generation of Americans expecting handouts like spoiled children. The right is against stimulus spending of any sort; the left seems more eager to spend on public-sector entitlement programs than on public works. Either way, it is the *civitas* that suffers. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act exemplifies the stalemate. Many observers, including me, were greatly cheered when President Obama signed the so-called Recovery Act into law on February 17, 2009. At first flush it looked very much like





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the start of the second New Deal, a bold new era of public works, of Americans in shirtsleeves building the parks and power dams of tomorrow. Sadly, it's been nothing of the sort. Of the nearly \$790 billion authorized by the stimulus package, a mere \$105 billion was tagged for infrastructure, and only a fraction of that for truly progressive plays such as high-speed rail. More than twice that amount—\$237 billion—went toward the “tax incentives for individuals” that did virtually nothing to boost the economy. Billions went to help the unemployed, just as in the New Deal, except that in the 1930s the nation got bridges, tunnels, highways, hospitals, schools, libraries, and universities in exchange—because it *employed* the unemployed, instead of just writing them benefit checks. But unemployed people vote, after all; unconceived children do not. We live in a tyranny of the immediate, and costly investments with long returns are a tough sell in an instant-gratification society. Fareed Zakaria calls this the “genetic defect in democracy”—that it “massively overpowers and privileges the present compared to the future.”<sup>21</sup>

Even where the political will can be mustered, we often lack the money to make things happen. A public-works campaign on the scale of the New Deal would cost trillions today—money we actually had until recently but chose instead to piss away on desert sands. We fund nation building and infrastructure in Afghanistan and Iraq even as our very own roads, bridges, airports, schools, and hospitals crumble and rust away. What money our states have is increasingly bound up in entitlement programs that are a third-rail issue for politicians seeking elective office. Consider the ill-fated rail link between New York and New Jersey—the ARC Tunnel (Access to the Region's Core). The \$9 billion project, already well under way by the fall of 2010, was among the largest public works in the United States. It would have been the first trans-Hudson rail tunnel in a century, adding critically needed capacity to New Jersey Transit's commuter lines, which have seen ridership quadruple since 1984 (trips to Penn Station increased by 150 percent from 2000 to 2010). The tunnel would have created some 6,000 jobs during construction and an estimated 40,000 when completed in 2018. But in October 2010, New Jersey governor Chris Christie canceled the project after rejecting a loan offer from the U.S. Department of Transportation. Christie claimed he did not want to burden New Jersey taxpayers with massive debt. Indeed, the Garden State is already on the verge of bankruptcy, and it's not because of public works. “The New





Jersey state budget,” notes Zakaria, “is mostly now devoted to pensions [and] healthcare for state employees.”<sup>22</sup> There is simply no money left for building infrastructure, for assuring future competitiveness and economic viability.

One of the most compelling proposals for renewing America’s civic infrastructure comes from Vishaan Chakrabarti, one of our most gifted and visionary urbanists. Chakrabarti, who studied city planning at MIT in the early 1990s, served as planning director of the Manhattan office of the New York City Department of City Planning before moving to the real estate sector and becoming the Marc Holliday Professor of Real Estate Development at Columbia University. In a December 2009 essay for the Architectural League of New York’s UrbanOmnibus website, Chakrabarti asked readers to imagine the “road not taken” by the Obama administration—one that would have avoided the costly, protracted battle over health care by proposing instead a “silver bullet” reform package aimed at solving several interrelated problems American society currently faces, including the public health crisis. Chakrabarti called it the American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA, as if we needed reminding). He asked readers to imagine President Obama saying to the American people:

We are going to build a new national landscape, and in the process we are going to create jobs, build an innovation economy, rein in health care costs, lower our dependence on foreign oil, and lead the planet to sustainability.

We will build and rebuild infrastructure that lowers greenhouse gas emissions and encourages urban density, emphasizing high-speed rail, transmission grids from alternative energy sources, national internet broadband, and critical roadway maintenance. We will deemphasize all infrastructure that exacerbates emissions, particularly roadway and airport expansion projects. The government will fund approximately \$350 billion (about half of TARP) over three years, solving the nation’s mobility needs while lowering automobile use and censuring the energy devoured by McMansions. To expedite infrastructure construction and lower costs, NEPA [the National Environmental Policy Act] will be streamlined and project labor agreements will be negotiated with unions. Millions will be employed, pouring liquidity into Main Street.





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Health care costs, which are mainly tied to chronic disease stemming from obesity, will lessen as people drive less. As people urbanize in response to new infrastructure and the tax reform described below, rates of diabetes and chronic heart disease will plummet.<sup>23</sup>

How would ASIA be funded? By recouping the \$7.8 billion lost each year to traffic congestion; by emissions trading; by phasing out the federal tax deduction for mortgages that has effectively subsidized single-family home ownership for decades now; by imposing a one-dollar-per-gallon gasoline tax. This tax would not only fill federal coffers but also act as a disincentive to driving and better compensate society for the many hidden costs of our automobile culture.

I remember talking about the subject of planning, public works, and national destiny several years ago with a Cambridge, Massachusetts, bartender I had gotten to know when I was teaching at Harvard, a Haitian émigré who had grown up in East New York. He was an infrastructure junkie of sorts and had just returned from visiting his son in Las Vegas; the highlight of his trip was Hoover Dam. I was going on one evening about our crumbling roads and bridges and what they might portend for America's future. After a long pause, my friend shook his head, wiped the bar, and said with a heavy sigh, "Fall of Rome." Bartenders are no fools, and he may well be right. The stakes are so high indeed in this brave new globalizing planet, this world in which American supremacy in all things is no longer a given. It may be wholly unrealistic to expect any single profession, let alone one as internally conflicted as ours, to rescue a nation and put it on a green and righteous path. On the other hand, none of the placemaking disciplines are better equipped than ours to help humankind navigate the manifold challenges of a world of cities. Planners alone have the breadth and range of expertise that solving the full spectrum of urban problems and opportunities in the 21st century will require. An extraordinary global urban age is just dawning, and it could well bring about either planning's end or its finest hour. The choice is ours.





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### JANE JACOBS AND THE DEATH AND LIFE OF AMERICAN PLANNING

1. For the record, it was not me who contributed “Trivial Profession.”
2. Nathan Glazer, “Schools of the Minor Professions,” *Minerva* 12, no. 3 (1974): 346–64.
3. F. Stuart Chapin Jr., *Urban Land Use Planning* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1965), vi.
4. William Rich et al., “Holding Together: Four Years of Evolution at MIT,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 36, no. 4 (July 1970): 242–52.
5. I refer here to Mumford’s long-winded critique of *Death and Life*: “Mother Jacobs’ Home Remedies,” *New Yorker*, December 1, 1962, 148–79.
6. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 17–18. It is astonishing that Jacobs would fault Howard for being a planning amateur; she was, after all, herself a journalist with an equal lack of professional training in planning or design. Lewis Mumford was especially piqued at Jacobs’s dismissal of Howard, his mentor and hero. See Mumford, “Mother Jacobs’ Home Remedies.”
7. Glazer, “Schools of the Minor Professions.”
8. Rich et al., “Holding Together,” 244.
9. Alex Krieger, “The Planner as Urban Designer: Reforming Planning Education,” in *The Profession of City Planning: Changes, Images, and Challenges, 1950–2000*, ed. Lloyd Rodwin and Bishwapriya Sanyal (New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Urban Policy Research / Rutgers University Press, 2000), 209.
10. Matthew J. Kiefer, “The Social Functions of NIMBYism,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 28 (Spring/Summer 2008), 97.
11. Michael Malone et al., *27 Views of Hillsborough: A Southern Town in Prose and Poetry* (Hillsborough, N.C.: Eno Publishers, 2010), back cover.
12. See Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You Through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).
13. In no way do I mean this to be a criticism of our town planners, who are capable and well-trained professionals. But even the most gifted young professional has his or her hands tied by the institutional structure and professional strictures within which planning must operate in most American communities.
14. Jane Jacobs, “Are Planning Departments Useful?” *Ontario Planning Journal* 8, no. 4 (July/August 1993), 4–5. The speech and subsequent essay ignited a firestorm of debate among Canadian planners.
15. We need a three-year curriculum for the master’s degree in planning. Landscape architecture, architecture, law, and business all long ago moved to this model. There is nothing aside from inertia stopping us from doing the same. The planning profession is an order of magnitude more complex than it was 50 years ago, and yet we still expect students to master it all in two years.



16. Jerold S. Kayden, "What's the Mission of Harvard's Planning Program?" *Harvard Design Magazine* 22 (Spring/Summer 2005), 4.
17. Rich et al., "Holding Together," 244.
18. "Department of City and Regional Planning," in *Record of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*, no. 577 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 12, 19–21; "Department of City and Regional Planning," in *Record of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*, no. 713 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 18–19.
19. Richard Dobbs, "Megacities," *Foreign Policy* (September/October 2010).
20. Vishaan Chakrabarti, "A Country of Cities," *Urban Omnibus*, July 2, 2009; available at <http://urbanomnibus.net/2009/07/a-country-of-cities>.
21. Fareed Zakaria, interview by Charlie Rose, *The Charlie Rose Show*, PBS, October 25, 2010.
22. Zakaria, *Charlie Rose Show*.
23. Vishaan Chakrabarti, "Being Dense About Denmark," *UrbanOmnibus*, December 16, 2009; available at <http://urbanomnibus.net/2009/12/being-dense-about-denmark>.