

Reference:

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*Jane Jacobs è senza dubbio un'autrice che contribuisce a dare spunti preziosi e continua a sollevare questioni cruciali per le città contemporanee. In tutti i suoi scritti Jane Jacobs ha sempre osservato le città e i loro processi spontanei di trasformazione, avanzando prospettive teoriche innovative riguardanti i fallimenti della pianificazione urbana e le diverse realtà inattese. La città è vista come un sistema vivente e il suo successo (o declino) dipende dalla capacità interna di auto-rigenerarsi continuamente rispondendo al susseguirsi di sfide e cambiamenti emergenti. L'articolo cerca di sottolineare la visione di Jane Jacobs in favore della città spontanea e dei processi di sviluppo incrementali e dal basso, ponendo al centro le persone e le loro azioni/interazioni, all'interno di contesti urbani complessi*

Parole chiave: Jane Jacobs; città spontanea; spazio d'azione

## Insights and reflections on Jane Jacobs' legacy. Toward a Jacobsian theory of the city

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### The relevance of Jane Jacobs today

The contribution of Jane Jacobs has surely influenced the field of urban planning as well as other fields of studies. More generally, one can say that she has expanded and deepened the ways to observe and study the complexity of contemporary cities (Goldsmith & Elizabeth, 2010; Mikoleit & Pürckhauer, 2011; Schubert, 2014).

Undoubtedly, her notoriety mainly depends on her best known book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), which has become a classical reference for those working on city policies and design. However, such success has indirectly overshadowed other contributions such as, *The Nature of Economies* (2000), and *The Economy of Cities* (1969), at least as important as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Alexiou, 2007; Gleaser, 2009; Desrochers & Leppälä, 2010; Ikeda, 2010; Gleaser, 2011). Reading these other books, paradoxically, we discover that Jane Jacobs has written a bit less on architecture and urban design and much more in the field of economics (Ikeda, 2012). Furthermore, throughout her life, she analyzes the perverse effects of urban planning decisions over the spontaneous and dynamic nature of cities (Jacobs, 1961, 1968, 1980, 1984, 2000).

In the current urban planning debate, more and more people envision cities with a high and intricate mix of uses, developed from the bottom, and that have a human scale. This appears to be a rejection of modernist principles diffused throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Buitelaar, Galle & Sorel, 2014). Although this seems to be a general tendency, a new direction toward more small-scale initiatives is slowly emerging in the planning field (Urhahn Urban Design, 2010). This 'slow' and 'little' shift probably derives from the current financial crisis since both government and private actors have scaled down their financial resources. Thus, urban planning cannot be active as it was before, but rather it may try to facilitate bottom-up and incremental development (Buitelaar, Galle & Sorel, 2014). In this perspective, a reappraisal of some of Jacobs' less known works can give useful insights into the urban planning field (Ikeda & Callahan, 2014), specifically for looking at dynamic processes that are at the base of city vitality and vibrancy (Andersson, 2005; Gordon, 2012).

In the past decades, the rise of taxation, together with the presence of tangled bureaucracy practices and restrictive regulations, were commonly accepted as ways of improving cities livability (Mengoli, 2012).

Despite this, nowadays such phenomena has created unintentional effects (Boudon, 1977; Gillon, 2000; Aydinonat, 2008;

Ermolaeva & Ross, 2011; Moroni, 2012), which, paradoxically, are unfavorable to urban improvements, especially to marginal neighborhoods, less wealthy inhabitants and those who want to start up new businesses and companies (Gleaser, 2011). In other words, sometimes, what has been introduced by institutions in order to improve collective quality of life can have regressive effects, reducing for example, opportunities to incrementally adapt urban areas according to new emergent citizens' needs (Ikeda, 2004; 2010; Buitelaar, 2010; Andersson, 2011). In this sense, Jane Jacobs offers a clear alternative vision, highlighting the extraordinary potentials of urban living in terms of social, economic and cultural interaction within vibrant and dynamic environments (Gleaser, 1999; Desrochers, 2001; Florida, 2008; Gordon & Ikeda, 2011; Ikeda, 2012).

The paper considers Jacobs' writings beyond her best known work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in order to highlight some of her contributions, aiming to wide contemporary urban studies and planning debates. The paper is mainly divided into five parts. In the first part, it reflects upon different interpretations of the authoress within the field of urban studies. In the second part it presents the concept of 'living system' introduced by Jane Jacobs, and then the characteristics that such systems must have in order to survive. In the third part, three reading keys are proposed, emphasizing the factors that, according to Jane Jacobs, are behind the success of complex urban settings. In the fourth part, the paper suggests four critical issues relating to problems discussed by the writer that, in their turn, are not fully emerged yet. In the fifth and last part some final reflections are offered for fostering new insights and suggestions for further research.

#### **Jane Jacobs did not write an urban design manual**

Although Jane Jacobs is a largely appreciated and cited authoress in the field of urban studies, at least two main contrasting interpretations are visible. On the one hand, there are some scholars who think that Jane Jacobs wrote a kind of *urban design manual*, and this interpretation is largely diffused (Gratz & Mintz, 1998; Talen, 2005; Duany, Speck & Lydon, 2009). On the other hand, others believe that she can be considered an important exponent as regards the theme of *spontaneous city* (Holcombe, 2002; Webster & Lai, 2003; Moroni, 2005; Ikeda, 2010; 2011; Gordon, 2012; Ikeda & Callahan, 2014). In my opinion, there are many reasons why this latter interpretation is more pertinent, but at the same time, not considered enough. However, the term 'spontaneous' does not mean 'informal' or 'illegal', but rather it may better describe an unpredictable social and physical emergent order coming from the bottom (Hayek, 1967; Lai, 2004; Palmeg, 2013).

The most diffused interpretation, which is mainly found in her alleged contributions to urban design was supported, for instance, by circles such as New Urbanism and Smart Growth (both approaches are in fact explicitly inspired by the authoress). In support of this idea, one good example can be the case of the 'Smart Growth Manual' devoted to the theme of 'retail distribution' (Duany, Speck, Lydon, 2009).

In this specific circumstance, the manual suggests that urban planning should efficiently satisfy daily needs of inhabitants by providing little 'well-run corner stores'. In this regard, Jane

Jacobs, already in the early 1960s, did not agree with all those who spread the idea of collective efficiency of a 'corner store': «A few years ago, I gave a talk at a city design conference about the social need for commercial diversity in cities. Soon my words began coming back at me from designers, planners and students in the form of slogan (which certainly did not invent): 'We must leave room for the corner grocery store!' At first I thought this must be a figure of speech but soon I began to receive in the mail plans and drawings for projects and renewal areas in which, literally room had been left here and there at great intervals for corner grocery store. [...] This corner-grocery gimmick is a thin, patronizing conception of city diversity» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 190).

The issue of the urban planning efficiency is the one that offers major suggestions for a different interpretation compared to those more largely diffused (Ikeda, 2010)<sup>1</sup>.

Contrary to what can be thought, for the American-Canadian writer, inefficiency and impracticality are two essential characteristics that make our cities precious and economically flourishing, and offering new market occasions and opportunities (Jacobs, 1969).

In this sense, Jacobs herself was profoundly critical of her ideas becoming simplified into something like a best-practice handbook. This is evidenced, for example, when she writes: «I have tried to point out the kinds of places in cities that do this, and the way they work. My idea, however, is not that we should therefore try to reproduce, routinely and in a surface way, the streets and districts that do display strength and success as fragments of city life. This would be an exercise in architectural antiquarianism» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 140).

Despite this, plans often seek to achieve a predetermined order (a predetermined idea of city), through the assistance of behavioral rules that discipline people's actions in space in order to pursue collective efficiency (Buitelaar & Sorel, 2010; Moroni, 2010; Slaev, 2014). Nonetheless, not all people's actions can be determined by rules since there are infinite options that could be explored freely by them.

Therefore, it is useless to assert that planning can perfectly prefigure a particular future territorial structure (Moroni, 1999). Hence, it would be senseless to believe that one plan, containing diverse kinds of rules, can directly reach the expected final status. Rules are interpreted by people who, through their behavior, incrementally change the status quo. Outcomes and consequences are unpredictable because they are the results of free actions, spontaneous interactions and unintended effects (Nozick, 1974; Mises, 1963; Hayek, 1967).

In Jane Jacobs' writings, the idea of reality is interpreted as a highly complex state of affairs, where cultural, economic and social interactions always cause something unpredictable (Portugali, 1999; Batty, 2005, 2011).

For this reason, adopting a Jacobsian point of view, we may look at a city as an emergent and spontaneous order (Gordon, 2012). As Jane Jacobs puts it: «There is a quality even meaner than outright ugliness or disorder, and this meaner quality is the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be served. [...] The basic idea is to try to begin understanding the intricate social and economic order under the seeming disorder of cities» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 15).

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### The city is a living system

During the 1960s Jane Jacobs represented - and still represents - a clear watershed in the field of urban studies, giving an alternative to modern and orthodox practices widely diffused in the western culture after the second world war (Flint, 2009). In this perspective, one book, more than others, gives us insights and describes the concept and the nature of living systems such as cities. This book is, *The Nature of Economies* (2000).

Cities, per se, have no particular purpose or end, except the one to assist their inhabitants with their own personal plans, dreams and ambitions, and to live close to each other in a complex system. Beside this, cities are a dense and intricate mix of markets, cultures, trades and problems and, because of this complexity, they are able to discover new diverse and arrangements over and over again. In other words, cities are continuous and dynamic processes, living bodies, often emerging by human actions but not by human design (Mises, 1963; Hayek, 1967; Holcombe, 2011). According to this, a city could be thought as, more or less, an involuntary human invention where people get benefits from the proximity to others, sharing knowledge and increasing opportunities through spontaneous collaboration (Hayek, 1945; Desrochers, 2001b).

According to Jane Jacobs, four founding principles are the basis of living systems development and growth (Jacobs, 2000).

First, she thinks that *adaptation* is one of these founding principles. For adaptation she means the capacity to respond incrementally and progressively to new emergent needs and opportunities. An innovative force resides within the urban areas and living systems in order to know how to constantly reinvent themselves and survive (Jacobs, 2000, p. 15; Urhahn Urban Design, 2010).

Second, she argues that the concept of development complies with the principle of *differentiation*; that is, when from a general element (for instance an urban area or a single activity) emerges a new one that is different from the previous. This principle has the advantage of recognizing development as an incremental process by which an existing situation leads to another (Jacobs, 2000, pp. 16-18; Desrochers & Leppälä, 2010).

Third, she considers development as a process that is related to the principle of *self-refueling*, as well as the ability to import continuously new additional resources to be added to the existing allocations. These resources can be social, economic or cognitive (Jacobs, 2000, pp. 65-68; Gleaser, 1999).

Lastly, the principle of *unpredictability* implies that the final state will match, most of the time, to a succession of surprises, and therefore, unexpected events. Thus, final states will often be the unaware result of creativity and self-organization of people. Someone may define the obtained results as disorder, while others, on the contrary, will see it as an emerging order, due to an infinite collection of actions (Jacobs, 2000, pp. 134-150; Mises, 1963).

According to the authoress, «Truth is actually composed by many fragmented realities. Its essence lies in the flow and change. Being changes the greatest truth, the understanding of its processes is the true essence of things» (Jacobs, 1992).

Nevertheless, for many years, planners have produced hardly adaptable designs to unpredictable rapid changes in terms of tastes, resources, ideas and needs, reducing vitality and reproducing homogeneity (Ikeda & Callahan, 2014). In fact, «A living city

is a settlement that consistently generates its economic growth from its local economy». More specifically, «a living city is one in which government planning has at most provided a basic matrix within which unpredictable scenarios arise along with infinite individual actions [...] Try to create rationally and artificially a living city via particular vision will inevitably result in boring spaces and homogeneity» (Jacobs, 1969, p. 292).

### Reading keys for a Jacobsian theory of city: diversity, concentration and opportunity

According to Jane Jacobs, a living system, for instance, the city, should be able to adapt itself to new, unpredictable circumstances, to differentiate its internal elements and to self-refuel and self-sustain its living equilibrium. In addition to these principles, the authoress also recognizes some factors that favor living systems development and success. Nevertheless, too often, it has been preferred to stay on the surface and talk about the 'sidewalks width' or the personal vicissitudes of Jane Jacobs with Lewis Mumford, rather than those with Robert Moses (Flint, 2009; Gratz, 2011), hazarding that a city, in order to run, needs different functions, and that these functions must be defined carefully and paternalistically by the planner (Gleaser, 2006). For this reason, I believe it is at least appropriate to reflect on her contribution, trying to understand the reading keys, which, in a more or less implicit way, are at the base of her seminal thoughts. In my opinion, there are three principle reading keys to consider for generating a 'Jacobsian theory': 1) *Diversity*, in the sense of physical structure, economic order and social composition; 2) *concentration*, as a possibility of new social and economic exchanges; and 3) *opportunity*, as possibilities to modify the state of affairs.

1) *Diversity as a key asset*. For Jane Jacobs diversity is nature and, consequently, the nature is diversity (Jacobs, 2000). In this way, the vain attempts to placate the spontaneous adaptations of urban space (to the real needs of people) can be interpreted also as actions against the nature of the city<sup>2</sup>. Starting from the bottom, from individuals and their aspirations, Jane Jacobs teaches us the intrinsic and fundamental importance of each acting citizen. Limitation of human expressions and choices, when those do not harm others, are activities against the fascinating balance of the spontaneous city. At the basis of this analysis there is a deep trust to 'trade' and 'exchange' in terms of ideas, services, skills, goods and communication (Desrochers, 2001a; Florida, 2003; Ikeda, 2011). Moreover, for Jane Jacobs the encounter of differences and diversity is what drives social, economic and cultural development of cities. Diversity should be reflected in the physical setting, created by man and adapted over time according to their needs and necessities.

«Cities are full of people doing different things, with different reasons and different ends in view, and the architecture reflects and express this difference, which is one of content rather than form alone. Being human, human beings are what interest us most. [...] It is the richness of human variation that gives vitality and color to the human setting» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 229).

2) *Concentration as driving force for development*. More and more frequently, density (in terms of people per defined unit of space) is considered a sufficient factor which should be able to create dynamic and vibrant environments, solely because many

people are spatially close to each other. This idea, according to Jane Jacobs, turns out to be reductive compared to a more complex reality. In other words, it is a general belief that a high level of concentration can automatically generate diversity for the simple fact that so many people gravitate nearby. In my view this is questionable.

Concentration is a crucial factor; in fact, 'agglomeration' is a fundamental genetic principle of the city. If cities exist it is because people have always taken advantage of managing their social and economic relationships in a spatially concentrated arena (Gordon & Richardson, 1997; Webster & Lai, 2003; Andersson, 2005; Gordon & Ikeda, 2011; Holcombe, 2011). However, Jane Jacobs states that concentration is a key factor for the generation of different uses, which help the creation of a vibrant urban economy; but, as the authoress writes, density alone is not enough. According to this, high-density environments such as a prison or a slum should be economically and socially dynamic places, but for various reasons, they are not. Therefore, what the writer firmly asserts is the supremacy of diversity over the concept of concentration.

«The economic foundation of cities is trade. [...] Trade in ideas, services, skills and personnel, and certainly in goods, demands efficient, fluid transportation and communication. But multiplicity of choice and intensive city trading depend also on immense concentrations of people, and on intricate mingles of uses and complex interweaving of paths» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 340).

Therefore, concentration is more complex than the mere concept of density. For concentration, she means (in addition to the concept of density) the coexistence of different mixed and mingled uses, together with the possibility of creating new contacts, and the reduction of time and distance to complete a complex network of interactions (Desrochers, 2001). So, the concept of concentration must be linked to the one of diversity, stretching the idea of concentration to opportunities for innovation and to get in touch with new things and different people. Arguing about the importance of diversity, Jane Jacobs observes that «Like so much of orthodox planning, the presumed harm done by this use and that use has been somehow accepted without anyone's asking the question, 'Why is it harmful? Just how does it do harm, what is the harm?' I doubt that there is any legal economic use (few illegal ones) that can harm a city district as much as lack of abundant diversity harms it. No special form of city blight is nearly so devastating as the great blight of dullness» (Jacobs, 1969, p. 217).

3) *Opportunity as possibilities to adapt the state of affairs.* We can recognize the existence of two conceptions of culture: the first one refers to the idea of culture in the sense of collective identity, while the second one has a broader meaning and concerns people's activities regarding intellectual, moral and artistic aspects of life. Most of the time, public authorities intervene to defend the name and prestige of collective identity, forgetting that people's activities, in general, are also part of this very wide range of identities. This attitude is likely to discredit new possible innovations, in order to protect the image of consolidated cultural cornerstones (Throsby, 2001, p. 25). Thus, on the one hand, we have a more traditional and conservative conception of culture, close to the current political view, which sees its realization in visions such as the 'city of culture' (Montgomery, 2003; Tallon, 2010); while on the other hand, there is a different

vision of culture as a emergent and spontaneous process strongly correlated to human activity in space (Jacobs, 1969).

Jane Jacobs, on several occasions, quotes real stories of enterprising people who, through their work and the opportunity glimpsed by them, were able to change the state of affairs<sup>3</sup>. In doing so, the writer advocates for an idea of culture, which is closely related to the contextual real opportunities for people to act and interact within a certain urban arena, by providing new and innovative ideas and solutions.

Therefore, the term 'opportunity', parallel to the concept of 'culture', is intended as an individual's possibility to participate and contribute to the overall incremental city development. For this reason, it seems to be preminent to understand the role that any acting man (understood both as an individual and as a cooperating group) may have on the creation of social, economic and cultural prosperity, through his continuous interactions with diversities (Mises, 1963). Thus, what Jane Jacobs underscores in her writings is the importance for people to be inserted into contexts that develop forms of pluralism and ensure adequate bottom-up growth (Urhahn Urban Design, 2010). Consequently, in a 'Jacobsian perspective', the expansion of contextual opportunities is always favorable to (unpredictable) urban development and social and cultural dynamics. In fact, for the authoress, «Poverty has no causes. Only prosperity has causes. Analogically, heat is a result of active processes; it has causes. But cold is not the result of any process; it is only the absence of heat» (Jacobs, 1969, p. 121).

#### Four open questions and remarks

We have understood that Jane Jacobs' contribution is mainly about ways to observe cities and spontaneous processes. According to her view, cities are living systems that seek to survive according to principles such as adaptability, differentiation, self-refueling and unpredictability. Moreover, the success of living systems mainly depends on the coexistence of three factors - diversity, concentration and opportunity - for bottom-up and unpredictable development.

After this brief reconsideration of Jane Jacobs' work, it is relevant to highlight other aspects that, for various reasons, have not fully emerged in the literature yet. Through some suggestions offered by the American writer, the aim here is to discuss concepts, such as: 1) *standards* (intended as a specific set of rules introduced by public authorities in order to protect public health, safety and general welfare quality), 2) *participation* (intended as a planning tool), 3) *plan and final states* (in terms of urban plan goals and objectives), and 4) *collective space management*. The ideas emerging in the next observations seek to reflect upon four basic and wide questions, and this section tries to reinterpret the work of Jane Jacobs by proposing some extracts of her writings which can contribute to spur further research and debates in contemporary urban studies and planning.

1) *Standards.* Can the increase of standards, through their direct and indirect economic effects, gradually raise the bar excluding more and more new social groups from market participation? In this case, the main issue underlined by Jane Jacobs concerns bureaucratic and institutional aspects. On the one hand, she highlights the effects of rules which pursue public ends in terms of quality of life and, on the other hand, the need to have low

prices in order for those who are excluded to participate to the market. Therefore, the authoress tries to analyze the relation between the increase of standards and the rise of less wealthy social groups which are excluded by the market. In her opinion, standards and rules (together with taxes) introduced by public authority can often have unintentional effects (Moroni, 2012); and as she states, «Cities contain people too poor to pay for the quality of shelter that our public conscience (quite rightly, I think) tell us they should have» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 323).

All this means that, for instance, people should have the opportunity to choose and self-determine freely their living conditions according to their means, preferences and values. Moreover, as Jane Jacobs often narrates in her book *The Economies of Cities* (1969), pioneering activities and new immigrants need cheap spaces, such as old buildings or spaces that can be reused (for example, abandoned buildings), but often planning regulations, standards or zoning do not allow it or they make the reuse expensive or highly complex.

2) *Participation*. Are we convinced that participation, despite its complex meaning and different facets (see for example, Arnstein, 1969) is only about the opportunity for different 'actors' to dialogue democratically? Can real possibilities for people to freely act and interact, even in an uncoordinated way, be considered another important form of social participation? The term participation, interpreted through the use of Jane Jacobs' lens, becomes something much deeper than a mere idea of political dialectical confrontation. In fact, as the writer believes, concrete chances for acting and interacting, also economically, are the basis for dynamic and vibrant cities. For this reason, in the first instance, I suggest one of her observations about public assemblies limits, and then I briefly outline a possible new vision for an active and 'Jacobsian' concept of participation.

«Citizens who wish to speak their minds address the Mayor or the five Borough Presidents [...]. Sometimes the sessions are calm and speedy; but often they are tumultuous and last not only all day, but far into the night. [...] In many cases the hundreds of people who have lost a day's pay are being hoaxed because it has all been decided before they heard. [...] Helplessness, and its partner futility, become almost palpable during these hearings» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 405).

Too often, a participatory-dialectical component was assumed to be capable of solving various city problems face social needs, but, unfortunately, it cannot always be the case. In reality, public participation is often exploited for consensus – building or, worse again, to give the impression to citizens to participate effectively to policy making process (Arnstein, 1969). Considering all these aspects, Jane Jacobs leads us to believe that things work in a more complex way and, yet again, that there are other forms of participation that can concretely influence social dynamics. According to this, here I seek to point out what she means by the term participation through another excerpt of her writings: «Dr. Matthew is the organizer and director of an interracial community hospital in the largely black section of Jamaica at the outskirts of New York City. Its success gave rise to a problem. Public transportation in the neighborhood was so poor that the hospital's workers and patients were inconvenienced going back and forth. To solve this problem, Dr. Matthew organized a free bus service [...] This novel arrangement was a brilliant solution to a number of difficulties [...]. Dr. Matthew's bus service

flourished, so much so that soon He organized a second bus line in Harlem where people have long complained about the public surface transportation [...]. Suppose scores – or better, hundreds – of small new transportation services were started in the city to meet this or that difficulty. Transportation in New York might actually begin to improve – even to develop. But early in 1968, as soon as Dr. Matthew's second line had started, the city government went to court and obtained an injunction against both lines, which were forced to close. That was the end of that. People who are prevented from solving their own problems cannot solve problems for their cities either» (Jacobs, 1969, p. 229).

Thus, participation can be conceived as something more than the mere dialectical confrontation. Participation is also the opportunity to influence the environment through certain actions. Participation also means to make, create and innovate independently by adding new solutions and services within an extended network of interrelated acting men. This is clear, for example, when the authoress states that «Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 238).

3) *Plan and final states*. Do planners consider that focusing too much on final states (rather than processes of transformation) reduces the benefits of spontaneous and dispersed potential arising from social and unpredictable interaction?

The basic theme of this third question concerns the role that citizens can have in a hypothetical incremental city development processes. Resuming the Misesian definition of 'acting man' (Mises, 1963), we understand that people can be seen as passive or as active agents. Looking at some of Jacobs' numerous statements, one can affirm that she considered people as crucial and dynamic city elements, due to the fact that they voluntarily or involuntarily contribute to collective development also through their unpredictable free actions and interactions. In fact, as Jacobs argues, «Most city diversity is the creation of incredible numbers of different people and different private organizations, with vastly differing ideas and purposes, planning and contriving outside the formal framework of public action» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 241).

For this reason, the more diverse people are in knowledge and tastes, the greater the opportunities for city development and discoveries of goods and ideas. Although the concept of 'urban regeneration' has come to mean something like 'planned intervention' toward a certain final state, for Jane Jacobs the concept of regeneration is intrinsic in any living system such as the city (Jacobs, 1993; Batty, 2011). Thus, in her perspective, cities adapt and adjust themselves from the bottom, thanks to the unpredictable actions and cooperation of many individuals (Jacobs, 1969).

4) Are we sure that other forms of *collective spatial management* do not exist in addition to the ones we have already tested? In this sense, if inhabitants have a recognized and spontaneous role in managing and maintaining certain public areas where they live, what kind of consequences might ensue?

Another suggestion deriving from the works of Jane Jacobs is the chance to look at the local as a possible way to administer the city in a subsidiary and decentralized manner. This idea pushes the authoress to severely criticize the common ways to look at the city as a whole in an aseptic way, losing sight

of the potential contained therein. In her opinion, those who administer, unable to genuinely understand the city as a whole, often choose to carry out policies that avoid confrontation with local contexts taking counterproductive initiatives. According to this, she observes that «routine, ruthless, wasteful, oversimplified solutions for all manner of city physical needs have to be devised by administrative systems which have lost the power to comprehend, to handle and to value an infinity of vital, unique, intricate and interlocked details» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 408).

Hence, for success and control of a public or common space, as well as private ones, there is always a spontaneous component derived from a context's situation, and the idea of solving a problem related to a neighborhood's vitality without understanding their peculiarities is unthinkable.

The emergent vision of Jane Jacobs leads us to believe that one of the possible ways to have vibrant neighborhoods is to let their inhabitants be the advocates of such success or failure, and, as the authoress states, «City dwellers have to take responsibility for what goes on in city streets [...] for local public life» (Jacobs, 1961, p. 83).

Therefore, Jane Jacobs claims that one way to overcome the distance among central authority and inhabitants is to give more room for 'local' and 'independent' management in order to bring collective decisions closer to people needs (see for example, Brunetta & Moroni, 2011). This does not mean that cities need more 'participation' (participation in the sense of political dialectic), but rather, they probably need more room for spontaneous self-organization.

#### Jacobsonian city implications and future challenges

Jane Jacobs is without doubt one of the most quoted, radical and challenging authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, it is not a coincidence if her writings have influenced many research fields, and, above all, the way we observe the city. Nevertheless, I think that the authoress still needs to be reconsidered and valorized in the field of urban studies and planning.

Moreover, one of the main merits of Jane Jacobs is that she brought planners 'down to the earth' by teaching them to look more at the street level in order to observe and understand what actually makes cities work.

I suggested that her contribution gave room for different interpretations that go from the field of urban design to the theory of spontaneous city, while her main efforts were principally related to the observation of spontaneous processes within cities, and then the description of emergent order generated from the bottom.

In addition, the article asserts also that the works of the American-Canadian writer look at cities as living systems composed by individuals who, in turn, act and interact continuously. In this sense, the city, like any other living system, survives by adapting itself toward emerging order that is, most of the time, unknown and unpredictable.

On the one hand, for decades the writer has highlighted the failures of top-down planning and, on the other hand, she has analyzed the processes that make the city vital and successful. According to Jane Jacobs, behind the success and survival of a living system, like the city, there is the encounter of three fundamental factors such as diversity (in the sense of physical

structure, economic order and social composition), concentration (as a possibility to get in touch with new social and economic trades) and opportunity (as chances to operate in terms of creativity, culture and enterprise).

Today the urban planning field is experiencing paradigmatic shift (due also to the financial crisis), which poses new challenges and questions in favor of bottom-up and incremental development practices (Buitelaar, 2010; Urhahn Urban Design, 2010). For this reason, it is essential to consider Jacobs' writings and criticisms in order to bring into question some planning concepts that are often taken for granted. In this perspective, the paper offers four reflections in relation to different current issues to discuss: standards and their unintended effects, participation as a planning tool, the relationship between planning and uncertainty, and, finally, the matter of self-organization as a possible solution for administrative decentralization. These insights and suggestions offered by the paper are in their own ways relevant and crucial for the current debates in urban studies and planning, but, certainly, they are not the only ones that the writer offered in her inspiring writings. What really matters today is to reconsider her contribution and, as she has been doing throughout her life, to look at the city as a dynamic system, and as a place of actions and as a product of actions an intricate and dynamic order, a never ending process of transformation where people play a vital role.

#### Notes

1. In this regard, see for instance the comments made by the writer when, speaking of urban efficiency, compares the 'efficient Manchester' (and its subsequent decline) with the 'inefficient but competitive Birmingham', in *The Economies of Cities* (1969).
2. In this regard, see for instance, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961, pp. 432-434), where the authoress speaks about the relation between urban settings and diversity, and how the concept of diversity is related to the one of nature.
3. A concrete example is offered by the authoress when in *The Economies of Cities* (1969, pp. 202), she describes the vicissitudes of the Tracerlab, a successful company composed by three young scientists from Harvard, who declared to a local newspaper that if they had not found a place at a low price in an old and abandoned building, they would have never been able to start their business.

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