Dark Age Ahead: Understanding Jane Jacobs in the Trump Era

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What would Jane Jacobs do? Among many urbanists, the playful question carries its religious connotations with more than a hint of sincerity. It's not just on T-Shirts, but in headlines, and in debates and lectures, not to mention the text (and subtext) of however many think pieces and scholarly contributions to urban theory. And after November 8th, it's hard not to at least wonder what she would have made of it all.

The question was certainly in the air last night, as a group of prominent Toronto scholars analyzed Jacobs' ongoing impact a century after her birth. Hosted by the University of Toronto's Innis College, the panel featured U of T's Erica Allen Kim, Paul Hess, Michael Piper, Patricia O'Campo, and Richard Florida. Moderated by Urban Studies Chair Shauna Brail, the discussion looked at Jacobs' contributions—and their limitations in the 21st century context—from a multidisciplinary and intersectional range of of perspectives.

Shaun Brail introduces the speakers, image by Momin Ahmad

Speaking from an architectural point of view, the Daniels Faculty's Erica Allen-Kim presented Jacobs's organic, street-level approach as a critical reproach to the modernist architectural notion of "the city as a work of art." Jacobs' experiential, "bottom-up approach" clashed with the prescriptive ethos of "top-down planning and architecture" espoused by thinkers like le Corbusier and Robert Moses. Jacobs helped "restore modernism to its humanist ideals," Allen-Kim argued, influencing the half-decade of architecture to come.

Geography and Planning professor Paul Hess assessed Jane Jacobs' legacy through the expanded geography of urban planning. Following Allen-Kim's impressively nuanced and highly focused analysis, Hess explained how Jacobs' theories—which "changed planning"—helped shape

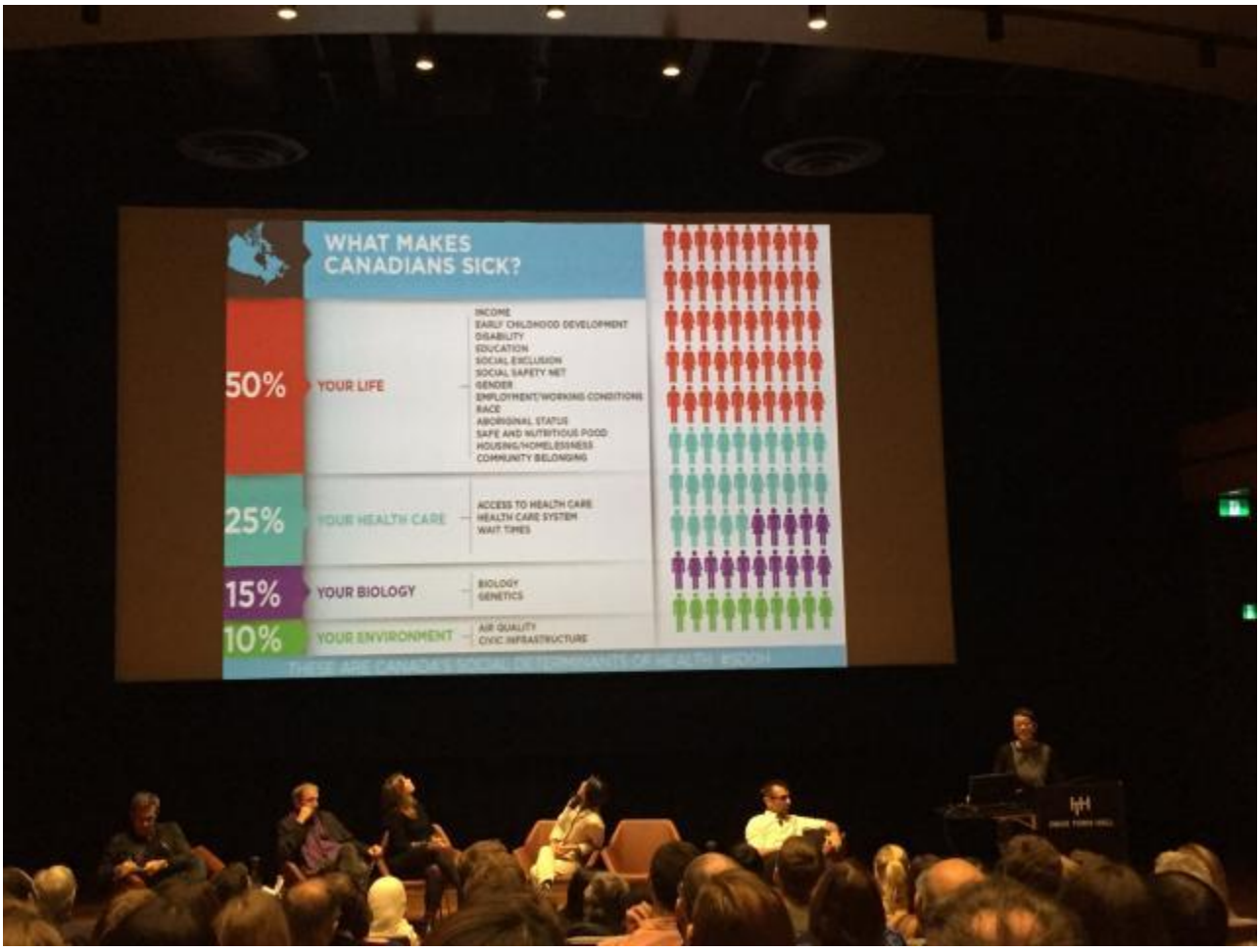
Toronto's modern cityscape. Citing "the planning of the St. Lawrence neighbourhood in the 80s... and the 2002 Official Plan" (which Jacobs supported), Hess pointed out how Jacobs' humanist ethos—which privileged walkability and connectivity—has influenced planning practice throughout much of the world. While acknowledging that Jacobs was an unpredictable and uncommonly flexible thinker—so we'll never really *know* what she would've thought of the proposal—Hess added that Westbank's proposed redevelopment of Mirvish Village also incorporates many of Jacobs ideas about fine-grained and human-scale urbanism into contemporary development.

Wetsbank's Mirvish Village proposal, image via submission to the City of Toronto

But where are Jacobs' limitations in 2016? Despite the empirical validity that bolsters much of Jacobs' ethos, Hess pointed out that she "did not really write much about race and class" instead offering "a prescription for built form." While geography and built form play important roles in shaping socio-economic orders, Hess noted that Jacobs' framework—which can be interpreted almost as geographic determinism—fails to take into account social issues shaped by more than place. Hess also added that Jacobs "had very little to say about the suburbs," while the famous maxim that 'new ideas need old buildings' needs recalibration in a culture of gentrification that fetishizes older built form. (In that light, Jacobs' ethos now probably applies more to the mid-to-late 20th century's 'ugly' buildings than it does to the Victorian architecture she championed).

In analyzing Jacobs' thought as it pertains to public health, social epidemiologist Patricia O'Campo also outlined both the merits and limitations of Jacobs' contributions. O'Campo framed Jacobs' insights into the relationship between geography and socio-economic conditions as

prescient. Jacobs' work set part of the theoretical framework for evaluating health outcomes as they pertain to the environment and community, O'Campo noted, broadening the understanding of health to include "non-constitutional, environmental factors." However, while Jacobs' contributions help identify "social capital as a factor in health," empirical results don't always support Jacobs' theory that the community members with most social capital tend to be the healthiest.



Patricia O'Campo analyzes health outcomes, image by Momin Ahmad

Architect, urban designer, and Daniels Faculty professor Michael Piper also tested the limits of translating Jane Jacobs' thought to the 21st century context. Piper argued that Jacobs' unique brand of thought combined support of "compact city centres" with the perspective of a "contrarian advocate and curios observer." But how to be a contrarian advocated when the compact city centres Jacobs favoured become the norm? Changing norms inherently change the nature of contrarianism and curiosity. In this regard, a failure to revise Jacobs' thinking to take into account changing social-economic circumstances is a failure in applying her methodoloy.

From Allen-Kim's detailed analysis of built form, to Hess' overview of planning practice and urban geography, and O'Campo's exploration of broader socio-economic outcomes, to Piper's understanding of Jacobs' as a theorist, the evening's speakers—who I presented out of order

above—offered wide-ranging insights into Jane Jacobs' influence. From buildings to cities to public health to the nature of theory, Jacobs' contributions seep deeply into 21st century thought. So what do we make of them now?

Jane Jacobs, image via Library of Congress

An answer came from Richard Florida. "When I asked Jane Jacobs about her most important contribution, her answer surprised me," Florida noted. "She told me her most important work was not in *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, it was understanding how economic growth is generated." Jacobs, Florida explained, devised a radical new understanding of economics.

"Jacobs understood the economies grow though innovation," Florida explained, "which she argued does not come from companies, but from people." Combining Jacobs' insights with Joseph Schumpeter's model of "capitalism reinventing itself through creative destruction," Florida argued that Jacobs' theory of economic growth points to quality of place—and the communities and interactions that arise from it—as the key determinant of economic success.

"Geography plays a key role," Florida continued, pointing to the correlations between economic success, population density, and voting patterns in the United States. "In many ways, Donald Trump follows what we saw with Rob Ford," Florida argues, citing the growing socio-economic

divides between urban centres and surrounding areas. At a larger scale, Trump's victory points to similarly growing geographic schisms south of the border, Florida claimed, with the structure of the community, with low-density areas voting Republican while high-density communities typically voting Democratic. To Florida, building different types of communities means building a different society. Diversity and density aren't just nice things to have, they've incubators of creativity and (hopefully) tolerance.

While the misogyny and racial animus vividly expressed throughout the electoral cycle surely transcend the influence of geography alone, Florida regards geography as a decisive factor in shaping economic and socio-cultural structure. Geography can help create better communities, Florida argues, and "right now, communities are the only thing we have left."

Florida concluded by celebrating a thinker "that always seemed about 10 years ahead of her time." Reading from Jacobs' final book, 2004's *Dark Age Ahead*, Florida argued that Jacobs' analysis of social decay—rooted significantly in geography—offers a prescient insight into the rise of Trumpism. "I'm working on a book called *The New Urban Crisis*," Florida told the audience, explaining that the election results led him to revisit Jacobs' final work. "And she had me beat by about a decade."