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Curing Slums: The Jane Jacobs Way and the Henry George Way

By WALTER RYBECK*

ABSTRACT. Henry George and Jane Jacobs were both self-taught public figures who shared an appreciation of the density, productivity, diversity, and cultural creativity of big cities. A century separated them, during which architects and planners designed cities according to abstract principles, but George and Jacobs expected the creative potential of a city to emerge from its inhabitants, not from a central planner. Although the interests and concerns of George and Jacobs overlapped on only a few topics, they both believed that slum dwellers could solve their own problems, given the right tools. For Jacobs, the solution to dilapidated housing lay not in bulldozing neighborhoods, but in rehabilitating them through a process she called “unslumming,” a gradual process of self-improvement that has at times been accused of being gentrification. Henry George offered a different solution, involving taxation of land values, one that did not focus on particular neighborhoods and thus avoided the paradox that local improvements would raise the price of real estate too high for local residents to stay. An example is given of how George’s solution actually worked in the Rosslyn neighborhood of Arlington, Virginia. In this case, no change in tax policy was needed to bring about a local economic renaissance in the 1960s, merely the realignment of property assessments that correctly reflected the actual value of land.

Introduction

Henry George, a keen observer of cities, noticed that the larger cities grew, the wider grew the gap between its rich landowners and its

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poor masses. Jane Jacobs, also a keen observer of cities, noticed that most of the city planners' attempts to improve cities were destroying features that make urban settings safe, effective, and enjoyable.

While George and Jacobs had much in common, their strategies took sharply different directions. Both were public figures and highly controversial ones. Neither had degrees in the fields in which they made monumental impacts. George had no academic credentials in economics, political science or philosophy. Nor had Jacobs credentials in city planning, sociology, or architecture. Because they had not been indoctrinated (one refrains from saying brainwashed) in prevailing doctrines, theories, and assumptions, they were not bound to them. Endowed with powerful intellects and largely self-taught, they were freed, as current jargon would have it, to "think outside the box" and clear new paths. Both courageously bucked mainstream professionals in their fields. Both foresaw the decline of cities and labored prodigiously, in writing, speaking, and political action, to reverse the forces that, according to their lights, contributed to this decline.

Both truly appreciated the essential nature of cities. In his account of how cities evolved from an "unbounded savannah" into great cities, George ([1879] 1979: 240–241) describes a St. Louis, Chicago, or San Francisco as:

the heart, the brain, of the vast social organism that has grown up from the germ of the first settlement; here has developed one of the great ganglia of the human world . . . Here, if you have anything to sell, is the market; here, if you have anything to buy, is the largest and choicest stock. Here intellectual activity is gathered in a focus, and here springs that stimulus which is born of the collision of mind with mind. Here are the great libraries . . . the learned professors, the famous specialists. Here are museums and art galleries. . . all things rare and valuable . . . Here come great actors, orators, and singers, from all over the world. Here, in short, is a center of human life.

"I love dense cities best and care about them most," Jacobs (1961: 16) wrote. She celebrated diversity—a wide range of architecture, trades, businesses, land uses, ethnicities, street scenes, amenities, culture—the mix of which George wrote a century earlier. She blasts, with all the impressive literary skill she possesses, the monotony, drabness, vulgarity, and sterility of cities and sprawled suburbs that lack such diversity.

Layout and Concept of the City Changes

To address how George and Jacobs analyzed the failings of cities and what they prescribed for making them healthier, it is necessary to understand changes in urban concepts that occurred after George penned *Progress and Poverty* in 1879 and before Jacobs penned *The Death and Decline of Great American Cities* in 1961.

The ancient and long-standing compact form of villages and cities was being undermined. Compactness was imperative early on for people's security. When common protection was no longer paramount, compactness reflected how far people could easily walk or ride in horse carriages from home to work, to shop, to socialize, whatever.

Commuter trains and other technological advancements permitted cities to spread out. More influential in altering the shape of cities were urban visionaries who had little appreciation of how vibrant cities really worked. Ignoring the virtues of the concentrated and mutually supporting mix of features admired by George and Jacobs, planners pushed for city centers with monumental buildings isolated from each other in park-like settings.

This scheme was dramatically displayed at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, which, though it opened a year late, marked the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' sailing to America. Daniel Burnham spearheaded the architectural plan for some 200 self-standing buildings, mostly of a French neoclassical character. These exhibit structures were set in parade formation among 600 acres of gardens, fountains, statuary, canals, and lagoons designed by Frederick Law Olmstead.

Developing the city as a showcase, rather than as a place to live and do business, won widespread acclaim and gave birth to the City Beautiful movement. The impact of this vision is seen today across the land in the civic centers and cultural centers of large cities.

A generation later came Euclidean Zoning. Approved by the Supreme Court in the 1920s, this did not relate to theories of Euclid, the third-century mathematician. Instead, it affirmed that a city had the right to shield its citizens from having to live next to stinking slaughterhouses or downwind from factories spewing noxious fumes, the latter of which was the concern of officials in the town of Euclid in northern Ohio.

This Euclidean tool gave city governments the legal right to forbid incompatible land uses for safety and health reasons, limiting land-owner's rights to use sites for any purpose they wished. Cities then extended this reasonable zoning tool to ridiculous lengths. Planners began calling for each type of land use to be hermetically sealed off from other uses. Courts, city halls, and other governmental functions were to be confined in their cluster. Commercial activities were to be cordoned off in their exclusive sector. Entertainment and cultural activities were assigned to another space. Clean industries, colleges, apartment buildings, single-family homes, parks, and playgrounds—each were to have their own zone.

Many of these extreme master plans thankfully gathered dust. But not all, as demonstrated by a court case in the mid 1900s. A company was charged with corrupting public morals when, for an advertisement, it photographed a lovely nude woman on Wall Street, not during working hours, when the stock market-financial district was teeming with people, but on a Sunday afternoon. The area at that moment was so devoid of people that, as the judge had to agree, there was no public in sight to corrupt. Case dismissed.

As if segregation of land uses was not bad enough, American cities were also infected by segregation by race. It was acceptable for people of a religious congregation to live close to their place of worship. Families of ethnic groups often live side by side to more readily enjoy native foods, dances, and other customs. A Chinatown or Little Italy is unobjectionable and actually adds to the richness of city life if—a big if—these enclaves occur by choice. Blacks were deprived of choice when federal and local regulations, real estate practices, mortgage lenders, and a climate of prejudice combined to confine them in ghettos. Black American soldiers who helped defeat Germany's super-race regime in World War II could not ignore the injustice and irony of returning home to their own country where a superior-behaving white majority restricted them to where they could find housing, not to mention jobs, seats on buses, and the rest.

Pretty Designs and Super Highways

Domination of the planning profession by architects was epitomized by Swiss architect Le Corbusier, who promoted what he called the Radiant

City. He designed a city of 3 million souls who would inhabit modern 60-story-high skyscrapers—each set a la City Beautiful in its own little park. Though he failed to win a contract to carry out this plan, it attracted the admiration of the Bauhaus School of architecture, led by Walter Gropius, along with such stars of their day as Ludvig Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer. Their mission, Gropius said, was to create functional urban structures adapted “to our world of machines, radios and fast cars.”

Reference to fast cars leads us to fast forward to another World's Fair, in New York in 1939. The burgeoning automobile industry wanted everybody to yearn to speed in their individual cars from home to work, to entertainment, or to distant cities. Since auto manufacturers and their oil industry allies profited little from public transportation, they cleverly eroded public support for streetcar and bus systems that had long served to keep cities reasonably compact. Visitors at the New York World's Fair, my family included, passed through huge dioramas portraying the auto companies' fantasy of the world to come—citizens continuously on the move along massive networks of high-speed roadways running through skyscraper-filled cities and criss-crossing the countryside. As multitudes were transported through these oversized models reminiscent of Emerald City, who then imagined that this fantasy would be swallowed whole by the city planning profession?

Slums Become an Issue

Far ahead of his time, Henry George ([1879] 1979: 194) was appalled at slum conditions. He vociferously objected to the common view of his era that “wealth is but the reward of industry, intelligence, and thrift; and poverty but the punishment of indolence, ignorance and imprudence.”

Americans were slow to realize that slums and the people condemned to live in them needed help. They clung to the belief, still fervently believed in some circles, that people could escape dreadful living conditions if they really worked at it. From the founding of our republic, Americans had enjoyed unprecedented opportunity to advance themselves. So many had risen from poverty that those who were well off could comfort themselves by assuming that the hell holes

of cities were a temporary state of affairs from which slum dwellers could extricate themselves if they tried hard enough.

Far from temporary, slums persisted and worsened till they could no longer be ignored. Public housing was initiated in a 1937 law with a proviso that for each housing unit built, a slum unit would be torn down. This proviso was rarely carried out, but public housing gave many families a needed uplift. Original public housing consisted of small low-rise projects. Many tenants, whose livelihoods had been knocked out from under them for no fault of their own during the Great Depression, found their way back up the economic scale. Instead of raising the rents of these successful tenants and letting them stay, housing authorities moved them out. Subsidized housing, they argued, should serve only the poorest of the poor. The very families that could have provided the projects with stability, leadership, and middle-class values were ousted from the projects. Not surprisingly, the projects became occupied by families that could not cope, and public housing's reputation declined precipitously.

This problem was compounded after World War II. Housing shortages and escalating rents substantially increased the need for public housing. Yet, few neighborhoods welcomed new projects. When officials did find potential locations, they put up huge buildings to house as many families as possible. These mammoth projects became warehouses of people with the worst personal and social pathologies, some becoming so crime-ridden and unmanageable that they were literally dynamited out of existence.

Slums and city problems finally were on the nation's front burner. The 1949 Housing Act ambitiously called for "a decent house in a suitable neighborhood for every American family"—a goal to be achieved "as soon as feasible." Some six decades later it apparently is not yet feasible. At any rate, the Act was a prelude to slum clearance with a vengeance under the umbrella of a 1954 federal urban renewal program. Local renewal authorities would buy out slumlords' properties at high prices and resell them at subsidized low prices to developers in exchange for their promise to build apartments, commercial centers, and arenas that the planners in their wisdom decided should replace the blighted areas. Officials seemed surprised when blacks and poor whites who were displaced dubbed the program "urban removal."¹

Not in Jane Jacobs's Neighborhood

When urban renewal and expressways threatened to tear apart New York's Greenwich Village where Jane Jacobs lived, she started a mutiny, not only against those particular proposals but against the whole structure of city planning—slum clearance, urban renewal, the City Beautiful and Radiant City movements, the works. Three-quarters of a century earlier there were no renewal plans or demolitions for super highways, but what George ([1879] 1979: 557) witnessed in New York and large cities around the world stirred him deeply.

[W]hen I first realized the squalid misery of a great city, it appalled and tormented me, and would not let me rest, for thinking of what caused it and how it could be cured.

Unlike Jacobs, George had known poverty himself and empathized with people “in the most abject, the most helpless and hopeless condition.” These were found, George ([1879] 1979: 234) became aware, not in prairies or primitive backwoods cabins where land is worth nothing, but in great cities where a tiny patch of land is worth a fortune. George ([1883] 1981: 234) felt for poor city dwellers who “never press foot upon mother earth, or pluck a wild flower . . . All the sweet and joyous influences of nature are shut out from them.”

Where Henry George saw ugliness, poverty, desolation, and injustice, Jane Jacobs saw something different. She detected physical and human qualities well worth treasuring. She noticed small facets of urban life that urban specialists had overlooked and that, in many instances, sparked a new and better life for some slums. Jacobs (1961: 6) insisted on studying “real life” and criticized planners “guided by principles derived from the behavior of towns, suburbs, tubercular sanitariums, fairs, and imaginary dream cities—from anything but cities themselves.”

Ebenezer Howard ([1898] 1902), an Englishman, inspired many planners with his book on garden cities. He was also a target of Jacobs's venom. Howard's book included minutely detailed plans for new towns that were to be located out in the country, beyond the borders of large cities. Said Jacobs (1961: 17):

He not only hated the wrongs and mistakes of cities, he hated the city and thought it an outright evil and an affront to nature that so many people should get themselves into an agglomeration. His prescription for saving the people was to do the city in.

Curiously, similar comments could be made of Jacobs's dismissive attitude toward farm communities and small towns. In contrast, George saw important values in them as well as in large cities and felt that communities of all sizes would benefit once they were shorn of land monopoly. Further, he believed that his land tax remedy would stop depleting villages of their vitality and their people who, under current economic pressures, flee to oversized metropolitan areas.

Denoting safety as a "bedrock attribute" of a successful city district, Jacob draws attention to the importance of the sidewalk drama. Lots of people on and adjacent to sidewalks provide a constant succession of eyes. She noted that eyes belonging to "the natural proprietors of the street" make residents and strangers in an area feel secure. In a charming example of watchfulness, Jacobs recalls standing at a transit stop when someone called out of a second-story window to let her know the bus doesn't stop there on weekends.

Shop owners and other street "actors" watch out for the men, women, and children playing their varied sidewalk roles. Children, Jacobs observes, prefer playing on sidewalks amid the ever-changing street scene over formally supervised sports on the playground. She does not oppose parks, but finds that the parks that function best have the same diversity of uses, mix of ages, and crowding as are seen in healthy sidewalks. Lacking these features, parks tend to be dangerous and under-utilized.

Unslumming

Instead of slum clearance, Jacobs champions the "unslumming" of slums and expresses confidence that many slums have the potential to unslum. For neighborhoods to regenerate or remain healthy, Jacobs believes they must have the following four indispensable conditions: one, a great mix of functions; two, short blocks with frequent chances to turn corners; three, a mingling of buildings of different ages and varying economic purposes; and four, a sufficiently

dense concentration of people, including residents, to assure round-the-clock activity.

Jacobs cites numerous unslumming examples, enough to make a case that her thesis is no pipe dream. She cites, among others, her own Greenwich Village, Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, the North End of Boston, and Georgetown in Washington, DC, whose liveliness and charm she contrasts with the monotonous streets of "quiet residential areas" so romanticized by planners and sprawl promoters.

It is clear that Jane Jacobs saw Georgetown in positive terms, and from the perspective of the new residents it was. But for the previous residents, that particular case of unslumming was a disaster. When I was working with a group that was trying to improve housing conditions in poor neighborhoods in Washington, DC in the 1960s, we heard the same plea over and over: "Don't let them Georgetown my neighborhood." To comprehend what that saying meant requires a bit of history.

Georgetown Revitalized

Georgetown, now part of the nation's capital city, was originally a busy port city near the uppermost navigable point of the Potomac River. From its early days it had a sizeable population of slaves and free blacks. By the time of the Depression it was largely populated by lower- and middle-class blacks. Dean Acheson, the future secretary of state, was considered a white pioneer in a low-rent, African-American district when he moved there during the New Deal era. A story is told that one evening Acheson met another white person as he was posting a letter and, as if he were in darkest Africa, exclaimed, "Dr. Livingston, I presume."

The truth is that, like Acheson, other white people of means discovered the quiet charm of the narrow streets lined with small homes abutting each other, the tiny yards, and the several streets with small shops. Before long, black residents were bought out and replaced by wealthier whites who imposed strict restrictions on building changes to preserve the area's unique character. Now the area boasts some of the most valuable real estate in DC.

A Non-Meeting of Minds

Are Georgetown's superb assets an example of Jane Jacobs's unslumming, a cautionary tale of gentrification and black displacement, or both? Why do many other sectors of Washington with equally pleasant architecture go downhill or languish as "perpetual slums," to use Jacobs's term, while only a few hot spots flourish? Why do the poor rarely benefit when their neighborhood gets a face lift and becomes fashionable?

Pondering these questions makes one lament that Jacobs failed to marry her insights with those of Henry George. He pointed to ways of reviving the whole city, not a few neighborhoods, and of ending demeaning poverty throughout society. If his ideas had been followed, the total amount of housing would have increased throughout the city, and the problems of gentrification never would have arisen. If that had occurred, there would have been no downside to the improvements that Jane Jacobs presented. That this melding of strategies did not take place is revealed in the index of Jacobs's masterwork, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which has no citations for land, property tax, speculation, or even poverty.

Two possible explanations for this gap in Jacobs's thinking have occurred to me. First, at the height of her career, George and his formula for creating a more equitable economy were in bad repute. George pulled no punches in refuting theories of the leading economists of his day, and they retaliated by ridiculing him and labeling him, at best, as an impractical idealist. Thus, in 1968 when U.S. Senator Paul H. Douglas (distinguished economist and chair of the National Commission on Urban Problems) endorsed land value taxation he confronted this bad reputation. Whenever the land issue is raised, he wrote, "cynics commonly dismiss it by saying, 'Oh, that is the single tax,' or 'that is Henry George,' as though by labeling the proposal they had somehow refuted or disposed of it" (USNCUP 1968: 396).

A second explanation is that few urban academics and practitioners, or even economists, were probing the economic causes of market failure in general or housing and slum catastrophes in particular while Jacobs was writing about cities. In fact, during the same period, Dr. Margaret Reuss, an ardent housing activist who chaired the economics

department of the University of DC, suddenly discerned how land speculation was pricing lower income families out of affordable housing. With a touch of disbelief and anger she exclaimed in a personal conversation she had with me: “How in the world did I get a Ph.D. in economics without learning about Henry George!”

Fortunately this is changing. A growing number of highly regarded economists currently sing George’s song, so to speak. For example, four Nobel Laureates were among the signatories of an open letter in 1990, calling on Mikhail Gorbachev to follow Henry George’s advice in collecting the rent of land for public use rather than leaving it in private hands (Noyes 1991: Appendix, 225–230). Cities in America and abroad, by following George’s precepts, are strengthening their downtowns, improving housing conditions, and expanding job opportunities. Too bad these developments came a bit late for Jane Jacobs.

Jacobs (1961: 31) almost appeared to be on the trail of Henry George when she wrote: “Deep and complicated social ills must lie behind delinquency and crime, in suburbs and towns as well as in great cities.” Then she immediately closed that door, writing: “This book will not go into speculation on the deeper reasons.” Earlier in her book, Jacobs (1961: 7) wrote: “There is nothing economically or socially inevitable about either the decay of old cities or the fresh-minted decadence of the new unurban urbanization.” Nowhere does she pinpoint the underlying economic distortion of cities, which, unless corrected, does make decay and decadence inevitable, as George pointed out.

In fairness, Jacobs quotes management expert Anthony J. Panuch, who succinctly addresses this distortion: “No amount of code enforcement or tax abated housing rehabilitation by the City of New York will be able to keep pace with slum formation, *until and unless the profit is taken out of slums by taxation*” (Jacobs 1961: 316, emphasis in original). Jacobs however does not pursue this critical point.

Getting from Here to There

If Jacobs might have gained much from George, tax reformers of a Georgist bent also could learn from Jacobs, especially in the arena of political action.

George's approach to change was noble and philosophic: "Social reform," George ([1883] 1981: 242) wrote, "is not to be secured by noise and shouting . . . but by the awakening of thought and the progress of ideas. Until there is correct thought, there cannot be correct action; and when there is correct thought, action *will* follow."

There is truth in the old saying that "if you do not know where you are going, any road will take you there." Thus, there is no quarrel with George's emphasis on education as a road to change. Through his passionate writing, his effective oratory, and even his almost successful run for mayor of New York, giving the public the right road map was uppermost in George's career.

Jacobs however needed quick action to save her beloved Greenwich Village. She did not have the luxury of time for an extended period of education when she locked horns with the politically powerful Robert Moses, the czar of the New York City region's infrastructure. His plans, if not stopped, could have destroyed the intimate linkages that enabled her neighborhood to thrive.

In winning this battle she arrived at a strategy useful for all community activists. Poor neighborhoods typically lack political clout. That is why their streets have more potholes and poorer garbage pickup than do places where rich folk live. Jacobs found that a small and poor city neighborhood can overcome its lack of power by allying itself with their larger urban districts whose people have connections with city hall, with state and federal officials, and with other decisionmakers and people of influence. These networks can break through the bureaucracy to get things done or halt objectionable changes.

Interestingly, to illustrate her strategy, Jacobs could have pointed to what Arlington, Virginia achieved. It overcame a county government that was paralyzed in dealing with community problems such as Rosslyn, its commercial-industrial slum. Rosslyn's spectacular revitalization drew national attention, but the behind-the-scenes maneuvers that made it possible did not.

Lyle C. Bryant, a retired economics professor and federal housing official well-versed in the Georgist reform, became a quieter version of Jane Jacobs in the 1950s. He convinced some 30 citizen associations to ask state tax officials to correct Arlington's wildly erratic assessments. To get business support, he helped put economist L. L. Ecker-Racz on a

local advisory committee. He persuaded Arlington's leading realtor, Fred A. Gosnell, Sr., to chair the reassessment board. When owners objected to new assessments, up from \$3,000 to \$196,000 in a typical case, Gosnell pulled out his checkbook and said he would buy the site at the higher value. Owners accepted the increases. Bryant enlisted noted land economist Homer Hoyt and Max S. Wehrly, leader of the business-oriented segment of the planning profession, to do market analyses; their work alerted developers to seize opportunities in Rosslyn, strategically located across the river from Washington.

To bridge serious tensions between Arlington's commuter-federal workers and the local business-professional group, Bryant created a Committee of 100, with early meetings set up so members from each camp were assigned to alternating seats. Soon the camps began working together. A major achievement—worth replicating in all urban areas—was creation of a high-level chief economist position in Arlington's governing board. It seems clear from Bryant's writings that, had he lived longer, the next step would have been to remove property taxes on residential and commercial structures, *à la* Henry George (Bryant 1967).

The point of this brief account of Arlington is to suggest that George and Jacobs left legacies that, if combined, could go far to spur spontaneous and continuous regeneration of cities and the uplifting of poor city dwellers.

Conclusion

Jane Jacobs and Henry George lived in different epochs with different concerns about urban life. In the late 19th century, when Henry George was active, the big cities of Europe and the United States were both intense centers of economic activity and the site of incredibly horrible living conditions. As a result, the primary concern of Henry George was to lift workers out of a state of abject poverty by ensuring that work was available and that earnings were not taxed.

By the time Jane Jacobs became an activist and writer in the 1960s, urban poverty remained an issue, but government housing policy was pointed in the wrong direction: toward the displacement of poor residents through "urban renewal." In the process of fighting the bulldozer

mentality, Jane Jacobs discovered that many slums have the power to regenerate themselves as safe and desirable neighborhoods through the self-directed interactions of residents, shopkeepers, shoppers, and strangers in close contact with each other.

It is unfortunate that Jane Jacobs was unfamiliar with the benefits of Henry George's solution to urban blight. His tax policy could achieve for an entire city what her program did for a neighborhood, and without the side effects of gentrification. Perhaps if someone had shown her the outstanding success of a modified Georgist plan in Rosslyn, Virginia, she might have joined forces with the advocates of Henry George.

Notes

1. Sadly and ironically, the federal government took the name and intent of this program from the book by Miles Colean (1953), *Renewing Our Cities*. Yet federal officials utterly ignored the essence of Colean's message, which, like Jacobs, rejected the planners' efforts to impose their sense of what a city needed, and like George, wanted to allow natural market forces to operate. Colean specifically called for halting the land speculation that, according to his analysis, was blocking enterprise and job creation throughout a city.

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