

# Time and Change as Neighbourhood Allies

Jane Jacobs

*The following is excerpted from an address made by Jane Jacobs on the occasion of her receiving the 2001 Vincent Scully prize from the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C.*

**W**e take it for granted that some things improve or are enhanced by time and the changes it brings. Trees grow larger; hedges grow thicker; fine old buildings, put to uses not originally anticipated, as this building has been, are increasingly appreciated as time passes. But some other things are too seldom enhanced or improved by the workings of time. On the whole city and suburban neighbourhoods have very chancy records of dealing well with time and change. I'm going to discuss briefly four common kinds of failure for city neighbourhoods and make a few suggestions.

**My first suggestion** concerns immigrants. Right now, in locations extending from the Virginia metropolitan fringes of Washington and the Jersey metropolitan fringes of New York to the Los Angeles fringes of Los Angeles, striving immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, China, the Philippines, Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa, are settling in woebegone city suburbs to which time has been unkind. Right now newcomers are enlivening dull and dreary streets with tiny grocery and clothing stores, second-hand shops, little importing and craft enterprises, skimpy offices and modest but exotic restaurants.

Either of two fates can befall these newly minted immigrant neighbourhoods. On the one hand, if members of the new populations and their children melt away as they find their feet, the

sequel for the bottom of the ladder is probably followed by yet another population. Ample experience informs us that neighbourhoods serving only as immigrant launching pads repeatedly take a step or two forward, followed by two or three steps backward, while dilapidation inexorably deepens with time.

In contrast, as many a Little Italy and Chinatown attest, along with less celebrated examples, immigrant neighbour-

hoods that succeed in holding onto their striving populations are neighbourhoods that improve with time, becoming civic assets in every respect: social, physical and economic. Progress on the part of the population is reflected in the neighbourhood. Increasing diversity of incomes, occupations, ambitions, education, skills and connections are all reflected in the increasingly diversified neighbourhood. Time becomes the ally, not the enemy of such a neighbourhood.



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Self-respecting people, no matter what their ethnic origins, abandon a place if it becomes fixed in their minds that it is an undignified or insulting place to be. Here's my suggestion: smart municipalities ought to contradict those perceptions before they take firm hold – no time to lose – by making sure that newly minted immigrant neighbourhoods receive really good municipal housekeeping, public maintenance, and community policing and justice services, along with some respectful amenities. Traffic-taming and street trees come to mind, and especially quick, hassle-free permissions for people to organize open-air markets if they ask to, or run jitney services, or make whatever other life-improving adaptations they want to provide for themselves.

Simple, straightforward municipal investments of the kind just mentioned, and sensitive, flexible bureaucratic adjustments are minor in comparison with costs and adjustments demanded by city megaprojects. But if those minor costs and adjustments attach newcomers to neighbourhoods in which they can feel pride and proprietorship as they are finding their feet, and afterwards, they carry a potential of huge civic pay-offs. Time and change will then have been enlisted as allies of these neighbourhoods.

**My second suggestion** has to do with communities' needs for hearts or centres and with a related problem: damage done to neighbourhoods by commercial incursions where they are inappropriate. The desirability of community hearts is well recognized nowadays. Much thought goes into designing them for new communities, and inserting them into neighbourhoods that have lost community hearts or never had them. The object is to nurture locales where people on foot will naturally encounter one another in the course of shopping, doing other errands, promoting their causes, airing their grievances, catching up on gossip, and perhaps enjoying a coffee or beer under pretty coloured umbrellas.

Let's think a minute about the natural anatomy of community hearts. Wherever they develop spontaneously, they are almost invariably consequences of two or more intersecting streets, well used by pedestrians. On the most meager scale, we have the cliché of the corner store or the corner pub that is recognized as a local hangout. In this cliché, "corner" is a significant adjective. Corner implies two streets intersecting in the shape of an X or a T. In traditional towns, the spot recognized as the centre of things surprisingly often contains a triangular piece of ground. This is because it is where three main routes converge in the shape of a Y. In communities where historically much traffic was waterborne, a heart often located itself at the intersection of a main waterfront street

with the exit from a busy dock where passengers disembarked; when water travel declined, the heart moved elsewhere. Large cities of course have typically developed not only localized neighbourhood or district hearts, but one or several major hearts, and these also have almost invariably located themselves at busy pedestrian street intersections. All but the very smallest hearts – the corner store – typically provided splendid sites for landmark buildings, public squares, or small parks.

The converse logic doesn't work. Living, beating community hearts can't be arbitrarily located, as if they were suburban shopping centres for which the supporting anatomy is a parking lot and perhaps a transit stop. But given the anatomy of well-used pedestrian main streets, hearts locate themselves; in fact they can't be prevented from locating themselves. Of course good design can greatly enhance or reinforce them, as I implied with my remark about landmark buildings and public squares.

Now for the related problem of commercial or institutional facilities intruding into inappropriate places. From time to time I glance at plans and artists' renderings for charmingly designed residences with their yards, and I wonder where future overflow of commerce can be pleasantly accommodated. Perhaps this consideration doesn't matter in a village which is destined to remain a village. But it matters very much in a city neighbourhood or in a town or village which becomes engulfed by a city. In cities, successful hearts attract users from outside the neighbourhood, and they

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also attract entrepreneurs who want to be where the action is. These things happen. In fact, if these things didn't happen cities would be little more advantageous economically and socially than villages; they wouldn't generate urban surprise, pizzazz and diversity.

So with time and change, originally unforeseen commercial and institutional overflows can occur in city neighbourhoods. Where do they go? They may have to find and convert makeshift quarters. Occasionally the makeshifts are delightful, but most commonly they register as ugly, jarring, intrusive smears into residential streets where they were never meant to intrude. Watching this happen, people think, "the neighbourhood is going to the dogs." So it is visually – and soon, as a sequel, perhaps socially; in the end, perhaps economically as well. So much is this form of deterioration disliked and feared, that one of the chief purposes of zoning regulations is to prevent it. Even if the regulations succeed at holding time and change at bay, as enemies, any success they have comes at the

cost of squelching city potentialities, meaning convenience and innovations.

Here is where the anatomy of natural neighbourhood hearts can come to the rescue. One important adaptive advantage of open-ended main pedestrian streets forming intersections is that these streets are logical places to locate convertible buildings before there is a need to convert them. They can be a designed form of neighbourhood insurance, so to speak. For example, row houses can be designed to convert easily and pleasantly to shops, small offices, studios, restaurants, all kinds of things. Several joined together even convert well to small schools and other institutions. And of course many buildings originally put up for work, especially loft buildings, convert pleasantly to apartments or living-and-working combinations. In sum, I am suggesting that urban designers and municipalities should not think about the street anatomy without also providing or encouraging easily convertible buildings on those streets as opportunity to do that arises. This is a practical strategy for dealing with time and change as allies, not enemies.

**My third suggestion** concerns gentrification of low-cost neighbourhoods to which time has not been kind but which have valuable assets. Typically, the first outsiders to notice those assets are artists and artisans. They are joined by young professionals or other middle-class people whose eyes have been opened by the artists' discoveries. For a time, gentrification brings heartening renovations and other physical improvements into a neighbourhood that needs improvements, along with new people whose connections, life-skills and spending money can be socially useful to the neighbourhood's existing inhabitants, and often are. As long as gentrification proceeds gently, with moderation, it tends to continue to be beneficial, and diversifying.

But nowadays especially, a neighbourhood's period of what might be called its golden age of gentrification can be surprisingly short. Suddenly, so many, many

new people want in on a place now generally perceived as interesting and fashionable that gentrification turns socially and economically vicious. It explodes into a feeding frenzy of real-estate speculation and evictions. Former inhabitants are evicted wholesale, priced out by what Chester Hartman, urban planner and author, aptly calls "the financial bulldozer." Even the artists, who began the process, are priced out.

The eventual ironic result is that even the rich, the people being priced in, are cheated by this turn of events. They were attracted by what they perceived as a lively, interesting, diverse and urbane city neighbourhood – in short, by the results of gentle and moderate gentrification. This kind of urbanity is killed as the place becomes an exclusive preserve for high-income people.

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Time is not kind to high-income preserves in cities, unless they are small and cheek-by-jowl with livelier and more diverse neighbourhoods. One need only notice that many a poor and dilapidated neighbourhood contains once-beautiful, proud and ambitious dwellings, to see evidence that exclusive preserves of the rich do not necessarily hold up well in cities. The rich it seems, grow bored with undiverse, dull city neighbourhoods, or their children or heirs do. This is not surprising because such places are boring.

When gentrification turns vicious and excessive, it tells us, first, that demand for moderately gentrified neighbourhoods has outrun supply. By now, experience has revealed the basic attributes of such places – attributes artists discover: the streets have human scale, buildings are various and interesting, streets are

safe for pedestrian use and many ordinary conveniences are within pedestrian reach and neighbours are tolerant of differing life-styles. It is pitiful that so many city neighbourhoods with these excellent basic attributes have been destroyed for highway construction, slum clearance, urban renewal and housing projects. Nevertheless, some currently bypassed civic treasures do remain, and where they do, moderate gentrification – I emphasize moderate – could be deliberately encouraged to help take the heat off other places being excessively gentrified. Another way of adding to supply could be by encouraging judicious infilling of housing in neighbourhoods with human scale but not excessive compactness or density.

However, more than increased supply of desirable city neighbourhoods is needed to combat

socially vicious evictions of existing inhabitants. Artscape, a Toronto organization concerned specifically with protecting and promoting the interests of artists,

has come to the conclusion that the only sure way of preventing artists from being priced out of their quarters is ownership – in this case, ownership by nonprofit organizations. The same is probably true for many other existing inhabitants – ownership by cooperatives, community development corporations, land trusts, nonprofit organizations – whatever ingenuities can be directed to the aim of retaining neighbourhood diversity of population.

**My final suggestion** concerns the hazards of a somewhat different form of popularity. As I mentioned earlier, some community hearts and their associated street anatomies attract many outsiders and are widely enjoyed. This is not a bad thing; on the contrary. The hazard is this: as leases for commercial or institutional spaces expire, tenants are apt to be faced with shockingly increased rents. Property

taxes on the popular premises can soar too, instigating even further increases. If zoning prevents commercial overflow, so much the worse. The upshot is that many facilities are priced out of the mix. The hardware store goes, the bookstore closes, the place that repairs small appliances moves away, the butcher shops and bakeries disappear.

As diversity diminishes, into its place comes a kind of monoculture: incredible repetitions of whatever happens to be most profitable on that street at that time. Of course these optimists don't all succeed. Six of the seventeen new restaurants, say, die off rather rapidly, and five of the seven gift shops don't make it through the next Christmas. Into their places come other optimists who hope something will be left in the till after the debt costs on renovations and the incredible rents are paid. But starting gradually while times are good, and rapidly when they aren't, the street becomes dotted with vacancies. The old conveniences don't return to fill them. They can't afford to. All this is not owing to competition from malls or big boxes - but because success has priced out diversity.

A popular main pedestrian street running through my own neighbourhood is now afflicted by this dynamic. However, fortunately the hardware store remains, so does the book store, one butcher shop with its associated European grocery, and a large general bargain and outlet store. Not only do these remain, they flourish; one - the hardware - has doubled its space. The secret of their stability is that they own the buildings where they do business, so were not vulnerable to being priced out by soaring rents. The banks also remain; they own their buildings.

This has caused me to think about home ownership. When it became public policy in the United States to encourage home ownership, financial devices such a

long-term mortgages, small down payments, and mortgage acceptance agencies, primarily the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), proved successful at promoting the policy. Tract housing sold to homeowners under these arrangements was sprawling and otherwise ill-conceived for fostering much



*The Annex Neighbourhood, Toronto*

sense of community, but that is another matter. At least, fostering ownership worked. Today some 65% of American households own their own houses or apartments, the highest percentage in the world.

This has made me wonder whether similar techniques would enable or encourage small businesses - especially those whose success depends heavily on location - to own their own premises. Of course not all would want to, and among those that did, all would not be able to; but that is also true of households. Why shouldn't it become public policy to foster business stability, and stability of city streets and neighbourhoods, by enabling enterprises to protect themselves, through ownership, against abruptly rising rents? In other words, I've arrived at much the same conclusion as Artscape: that ownership is the surest protection against being priced out of a place of work.

These four suggestions may seem trivial compared with other municipal concerns such as racism, poor schools, traffic, unemployment, illegal drugs, inadequate tax revenues, crime, persistent poverty, what to do with garbage, how to lure tourists, whether to build another stadium or a convention centre, and so on.

Nevertheless, neighbourhoods that decline are pretty serious too. Two steps forward, followed by three steps back, is no way for a city to progress, and it doesn't help solve other municipal problems either; the pattern makes them more intractable.

The pattern isn't new. It has practical causes and unless these forms of civic ineptitude are faced and overcome, North American city neighbourhoods are as unlikely to deal well with time and change in the future

as they have been in the past. The suggestions I've made may not be politically possible. There may be better, or at any rate different, means of accomplishing similar aims. My purpose is to help stir up some creative thinking, now lacking, about effects of time and change on city neighbourhoods; above all to stir up thinking about how to enlist time and change as practical allies - not enemies that must be regulated out and fended off on the one hand, or messily surrendered to on the other. We might as well learn how to make constructive alliances with the workings of time because time is going to continue happening; that's for sure.

*For more information on the Vince Scully Prize and the National Building Museum, see [www.nbm.org](http://www.nbm.org). Jane Jacob's most recent book is Dark Age Ahead.*