

1961: New York City

JANE JACOBS IMAGINES A CITY

A curious but understandable thing happened in the eighteenth century. By then, the cities of Europeans had done well enough mediating between them and many harsh aspects of nature, so that something became popularly possible which previously had been a rarity—sentimentalization of nature, or at any rate, sentimentalization of a rustic or a barbarian relationship with nature. Marie Antoinette playing milkmaid was an expression of this sentimentality on one plane. The romantic idea of the “noble savage” was an even sillier one on another plane. So, in this country, was Jefferson’s intellectual rejection of cities of free artisans and mechanics, and his dream of an ideal republic of self-reliant rural yeomen—a pathetic dream for a good and great man whose land was tilled by slaves.

In real life, barbarians (and peasants) are the least free of men—bound by tradition, ridden by caste, fettered by superstitions, riddled by suspicion and foreboding of whatever is strange. “City air makes free,” was the medieval saying, when city air literally did make free the runaway serf. City air still makes free the runaways from company towns, from plantations, from factory farms, from subsistence farms, from migrant picker routes, from mining villages, from one-class suburbs.

Owing to the mediation of cities, it became popularly possible to regard “nature” as benign, ennobling, and pure, and by extension to regard “natural man” (take your pick of how “natural”) as so too. Opposed to all this fictionalized purity, nobility, and beneficence, cities, not being fictions, could be considered as seats of malignancy and—obviously—the enemies of nature. And once people begin looking at nature as if it were a nice big St. Bernard dog for the children, what could be more natural than the de-

“Navajo Indians in the Canyon de Chelly,” c. 1904. Photograph by Edward S. Curtis.



sire to bring this sentimental pet into the city too, so the city might get some nobility, purity, and beneficence by association?

There are dangers in sentimentalizing nature. Most sentimental ideas imply, at bottom, a deep if unacknowledged disrespect. It is no accident that we Americans, probably the world's champion sentimentalizers about nature, are at one and the same time probably the world's most voracious and disrespectful destroyers of wild and rural countryside.

It is neither love for nature nor respect for nature that leads to this schizophrenic attitude. Instead, it is a sentimental desire to toy, rather patronizingly, with some insipid, standardized, suburbanized shadow of nature—apparently in sheer disbelief that we and our cities, just by virtue of being, are a legitimate part of nature too, and involved with it in much deeper and more inescapable ways than grass trimming, sunbathing, and contemplative uplift. And so, each day, several thousand more acres of our countryside are eaten by the bulldozers, covered by pavement, dotted with suburbanites who have killed the thing they thought they came to find. Our irreplaceable heritage of Grade 1 agricultural land (a rare treasure of nature on this earth) is sacrificed for highways or supermarket parking lots as ruthlessly and unthinkingly as the trees in the woodlands are uprooted, the streams and rivers polluted, and the air itself filled with the gasoline exhausts (products of eons of nature's manufacturing) required in this great national effort to cozy up with a fictionalized nature and flee the "unnaturalness" of the city.

The semi-suburbanized and suburbanized messes we create in this way become despised by their own inhabitants tomorrow. These thin dispersions lack any reasonable degree of innate vitality, staying power, or inherent usefulness as settlements. Few of them, and these only the most expensive as a rule, hold their attraction much longer than a generation; then they begin to decay in the pattern of city gray areas. Indeed, an immense amount of today's city gray belts was yesterday's dispersion closer to "nature." Of

the buildings on the thirty thousand acres of already blighted or already fast-blighting residential areas in northern New Jersey, for example, half are less than forty years old.

Thirty years from now, we shall have accumulated new problems of blight and decay over acreages so immense that in comparison the present problems of the great cities' gray belts will look piddling. Nor, however destructive, is this something which happens accidentally or without the use of will. This is exactly what we as a society have willed to happen. Nature, sentimentalized and considered as the antithesis of cities, is apparently assumed to consist of grass, fresh air, and little else, and this ludicrous disrespect results in the devastation of nature even formally and publicly preserved in the form of a pet.

Who would prefer this vapid suburbanization to timeless wonders? What kind of park supervisor would permit such vandalism of nature? An all too familiar kind of mind is obviously at work here: a mind seeing only disorder where a most intricate and unique order exists; the same kind of mind that sees only disorder in the life of city streets, and itches to erase it, standardize it, suburbanize it. The two responses are connected. Cities, as created or used by city-loving creatures, are unrespected by such simple minds because they are not bland shadows of cities suburbanized. Other aspects of nature are equally unrespected because they are not bland shadows of nature suburbanized. Sentimentality about nature denatures everything it touches.

Big cities and countrysides can get along well together. Big cities need real countryside close by. And countryside—from man's point of view—needs big cities, with all their diverse opportunities and productivity, so human beings can be in a position to appreciate the rest of the natural world instead of to curse it. Being human is itself difficult, and therefore all kinds of settlements (except dream cities) have problems. Big cities have difficulties in abundance, because they have people in abundance. But vital cities are not helpless to combat even the most

difficult of problems. They are not passive victims of chains of circumstances, any more than they are the malignant opposite of nature.

Vital cities have marvelous innate abilities for understanding, communicating, contriving, and inventing what is required to combat their difficulties. Perhaps the most striking example of this ability is the effect that big cities have had on disease. Cities were once the most helpless and devastated victims of disease, but they became great disease conquerors. All the apparatus of surgery, hygiene, microbiology, chemistry, telecommunications, public health measures, teaching and research hospitals, ambulances and

In all things of nature there is something of the marvelous.
—Aristotle, c. 340 BC

the like—which people not only in cities but also outside them depend upon for the unending war against premature mortality—are fundamental byproducts of big cities and would be inconceivable without big cities. The surplus wealth, the productivity, the close-grained juxtaposition of talents that permit society to support advances such as these are themselves products of our organization into cities, and especially into big and dense cities.

It may be romantic to search for the salves of society's ills in slow-moving rustic surroundings, or among innocent, unspoiled provincials if such exist, but it is a waste of time. Does anyone suppose that, in real life, answers to any of the great questions that worry us today are going to come out of homogeneous settlements? Dull, inert cities, it is true, do contain the seeds of their own destruction and little else. But lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves.

Jane Jacobs, from *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*. Jacobs' first and most influential book condemned the urban renewal projects of the 1950s for their focus on cars. She remained an ardent advocate for anthropocentric city planning until her death in 2006, in Toronto.

1782: New York

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM

It is natural to conceive that those who live near the sea must be very different from those who live in the woods; the intermediate space will afford a separate and distinct class.

Men are like plants: the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow. We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment. Here you will find but few crimes; these have acquired as yet no root among us. I wish I were able to trace all my ideas; if my ignorance prevents me from describing them properly, I hope I shall be able to delineate a few of the outlines, which is all I propose.

Those who live near the sea feed more on fish than on flesh and often encounter that boisterous element. This renders them more bold and enterprising; this leads them to neglect the confined occupations of the land. They see and converse with a variety of people; their intercourse with mankind becomes extensive. The sea inspires them with a love of traffic, a desire of transporting produce from one place to another, and leads them to a variety of resources which supply the place of labour. Those who inhabit the middle settlements, by far the most numerous, must be very different; the simple cultivation of the earth purifies them, but the indulgences of the government, the soft remonstrances of religion, the rank of independent freeholders must necessarily inspire them with sentiments very little known in Europe among people of the same class. What do I say? Europe has no such class of men; the early knowledge they acquire, the early bargains they make, give them a great degree of sagacity. As freemen, they will be litigious; pride and obstinacy are often the cause of lawsuits; the nature of our laws and governments may be another. As citizens, it is easy to imagine that they will carefully read the newspapers, enter into every political disquisition,