



May 2014

# What Would Jane Jacobs Say?

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*A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for an Urban America*  
by Vishaan Chakrabarti  
Metropolis Books, 252 pp.

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During the seventies, I lived in New York City. I was in my twenties. It was a city of graffiti, declining public services, unsafe neighborhoods, homelessness, and the wonders of the Village. I came to love New York for its grit, diversity, creativity, and access to unlimited high and counter-culture—and for its sense of humor. I somehow managed on my student and then post-doctoral budgets to be a regular at concerts, theaters, the Rockefeller Center ice skating rink, and myriads of off-Broadway and club events in the West and East Villages. By all objective measures, I was poor, but I did not feel so because New York was within my reach. Yes, I lived in small and dark places, but there was always Central Park. Life eventually took me to the Boston area, but to this day, I consider myself more a New Yorker than a Bostonian. And I never gave up the idea of returning to the City, perhaps in my retirement.

Alas, as I approach my retirement, I find that this dream may not be realizable in today's New York: cleaner, safer, less spontaneous, and hugely more expensive. I am much more affluent than I was in my twenties, but I cannot afford the City (of course, my demands for comfort and space have increased over the years). How we got to this point is a well-known story. The transformation of the City's economy from manufacturing to financial services and other high-salaried sectors put an upward pressure on real estate prices. And the expanding class of the rich and super-rich around the globe who are looking for opportunities to park their money further

increased the demand for upscale housing. The market responded, and affordable housing in moderately attractive neighborhoods has become an extinct species. So is there a future in New York for me and my grandchildren?

This is more than a personal question. The world is rapidly urbanizing. Over the coming decades, the cities of the world are expected to absorb all the global population growth. Even in the US, a country built on the idea of an unlimited frontier and low-density living, interest in urban life has been growing during the past decade, and not only in the usual places on the northern ends of the East and West coasts. In Texas, for example, Austin and Houston are booming. But if cities are to be our future, they must be able to accommodate the middle-income creative classes as well as those who make a living in the accompanying service economy. To thrive, cities of the future must deliver on basic human needs and aspirations: livelihoods, education, safety, recreation, and community life. Vishaan Chakrabarti thinks that this is all possible through smart design and good infrastructure. His new book, *Country of Cities*, is a manifesto for a good life for all in hyperdense, well-designed, thriving cities across the US. The author's credentials give his voice gravitas. Chakrabarti is a professor of architecture at Columbia University, a partner in a thriving architectural firm, a former director of planning for Manhattan, and a former executive. He and I have things in common apart from our love for city living: we both arrived in the US in 1968, he from bustling Calcutta and me from urbane Warsaw, and we still hold on to the immigrants' faith that, in this country, the impossible is possible. On the other hand, I am neither an architect nor an urban planner, so I have no critical lens through which to view the design features proposed by the author. Rather, I looked to *Country of Cities* for a vision of the good life and for a compelling argument that could persuade millions of Americans that abandoning their present low-density living arrangements in favor of hyperdense city living would improve their well-being.

## The Case for an Urban Future

This is a beautiful book. If you like visual representations of ideas and data, you will love turning its thick glossy pages. More than half of them are filled with pictures and graphs. The storyline can be inferred just by following the pictures and the occasional poster-like statements that span two pages. This is also a passionate book, not shy to oversimplify or to use hyperbole to convey

the author's love for city life and his belief that it is the future for most Americans. The book is a call to arms for American citizens to open their eyes to the obvious superiority of urban life over the alternatives and for policymakers to deliver on this promise and potential. City life, the author proclaims, is the solution to most social ills: "Let us form an urban coalition that binds the need for economic prosperity, environmental stewardship and social mobility with the one-stop shopping of transit-rich hyperdensities...[T]hrough smart urbanization we can attack most of the major problems...from foreclosures to terrorism, to unfunded schools, to devastating oil spills, to ever more powerful storms."

The book is divided into two parts. The first part explains why cities make sense as a home to millions of Americans in the future. The second gets more specific about how to make city life attractive and achievable. The arguments in favor of cities are threefold: economy, ecology, and quality of life. Like his two contemporaries, economists Richard Glaeser (author of *Triumph of the City*) and Enrico Moretti (author of *The New Geography of Jobs*), Chakrabarti argues that concentrating talent and skills in dense urban centers is the engine of creativity, economic growth, job creation, and prosperity. In the US, 90% of GDP and 86% of jobs are created in the cities, and a doubling of job density increases productivity by between 6 and 28%. Economically speaking, suburbs are parasites that live off cities. Through taxpayer-subsidized mortgage interest deductions, construction of roads and other infrastructure, and subsidies for automobile-based mobility, suburbs and exurbs take from public treasuries funds that could be spent on more egalitarian urban public transit, fast railroads connecting the cities, and other public goods.

The hyperdensity of cities, defined as 30 or more housing units per acre (75 per hectare), the threshold for economically viable train-based public transit systems, also makes ecological sense. For one thing, concentrating housing in tall buildings with small footprints preserves open space for parks, recreational areas, and nature reserves. Hong Kong, one of the densest cities in the world, practices this kind of land development. Second, an urban household consumes less energy than a comparable suburban household, partly because public transport replaces driving and because space heating per unit floor area is more efficient in a multi-unit building than in a freestanding house.

The third argument in favor of cities is quality of life. Walkable, diverse, lively cities are more fun than suburbs, exurbs, and small towns because of their cultural amenities, restaurants, plentiful entertainment activities, and shorter distances between people. Surely, the author seems to believe, these arguments will be clear to everybody who bothers to examine them, and so we should expect that Americans will increasingly want to live in cities: “Economic opportunities, environmentalism, public health, diversity, and the inherent joy of cities are together creating a profound and lasting transformation of the lifestyle sought by everyday Americans. Many of us are flocking to cities without government assistance.” I remain skeptical. Yes, interest in city living has been rapidly rising over the past decade, especially around public transit nodes, and this trend will likely continue. For different reasons, many aging post-WWII baby boomers and millennials (aged between 19 and 30), who together comprise half of the US population, are leaving the suburbs and looking for denser, walkable cities and communities. But how large is this trend? While surveys show that more than 70% of millennials would like to live in cities, so far only a small proportion among them are actually doing so, and whether they will stay once they have children remains an open question. America is, after all, a land of low-density communities. 82% of Americans live in areas with 4 housing units per acre or fewer, and only 4% live in areas where density is greater than 30.

City living, just like suburbia and small town life, is an acquired taste, developed through personal experiences rooted in childhood and adolescence. Contemplating a major transition in the US from small towns, suburbs, and exurbs to cities is not a modest proposition. We are talking about millions of people radically trading in a lifestyle they know and understand for something new and unknown. Such a move takes money, especially without a job waiting at the other end. Furthermore, the joys of the city which the author highlights—walking to work, sitting in cafes and restaurants, partaking in the cultural life—are accessible only to the affluent or to young people sharing their confined spaces with roommates. Most middle-class New Yorkers with children spend an hour or two a day commuting in crowded buses and subways from more peripheral locations in the Bronx or Queens and are too tired and financially strapped to enjoy the city nightlife. In that sense, the “us” in the author’s proclamation—those flocking to cities—is quite limited.

Part two of the book attempts to address the questions of feasibility and affordability by focusing on the whats and hows of creating great cities. Here, the built vision of a great city comprises mixed-use neighborhoods; high and low buildings next to each other, interspaced with parks and designed to maximize sunlight through setbacks and other design features; and development aimed at preserving historical landmarks while providing more height, especially around the public transit nodes. To achieve that vision, Chakrabarti argues passionately for lifting what he sees as excessive restrictions on building heights in cities like New York while at the same time keeping tight control over land development to preserve open public space. The author has deep faith in private developers to realize this vision if guided by wise urban policies, including such innovations as a cap-and-trade system for air spaces. He admits, though, that so far few private developers have exhibited the needed creativity. He is highly critical of city planners and urbanists for their lack of boldness and chides them for giving in to anti-development and anti-height activists who pursue their NIMBY agendas in the guise of preserving the legacy of Jane Jacobs, the urban planners' guardian angel. But he also counts on the planners' active support and interventions.

Investing in infrastructure is the second major condition for achieving this vision of great cities. The author emphasizes that infrastructure includes not only transportation, utilities, and communications, but also schools, cultural systems, health care facilities, and parks. But he addresses only the transportation part of the list. Here, the responsibility to get the job done lies with policymakers and politicians: to invest in subway systems and other intra-city systems of mass transit as well as in the fast rail systems connecting the largest American cities. But how would we fund such major programs? His answer is as clear as it is unrealistic in the current political climate: eliminate the mortgage interest deduction, which in any case favors the rich and the suburbs, and invest the resulting revenue in urban infrastructure.

### **A Beautiful City with No One to Call It Home**

One cannot easily argue with the case the author makes that future prosperity in the US will lie in cities, or with his general prescriptions for creating such cities: build the infrastructure, create height in order to reduce costs per household, increase density to support public transit,

create job opportunities and a thriving economy. If anything, Chakrabarti underestimates the potential societal benefits of urbanization. Ecologically speaking, he does not include the effect of city living on material consumption. As city apartments are smaller than suburban houses—and more expensive, there is less room for accumulation of material possessions, as well as less discretionary income to purchase them, at least among the middle-class city dwellers. That would contribute to reducing our ecological footprint. And from the perspective of social change, for those of us who, like me, wish to see a rise in social movements for less income inequality, a fairer economy, and a stronger democracy, cities offer a far more fertile ground than suburbs for civil action. The book is also short on offering a plan for implementing Chakrabarti's vision. But that is forgivable in an architect and city planner. After all, his job is to convince politicians of the case for the cities; they should do the rest. What is not forgivable is the aloofness of this book with regard to people.

There are no people in this book. The author forcefully and compassionately talks about affordability, income inequality, and his wish to avoid creating museum cities for the rich, such as Paris, where the rich live in the center and the poor live in refugee camp-like high-rise housing projects at the outskirts. An effective manifesto must have sufficient power to persuade the skeptics that city life would be a good life. This book lacks that power. It fails to awaken in the readers, especially those who are not yet in love with city life, a desire to make the move to the tall, dense cities envisioned here. This was the genius of Jane Jacobs in *The Fall and Rise of Great American City*: her ability to bring to life the everyday existence of city dwellers, with all their daily concerns, such as children's safety, good neighbors, access to life amenities and employment, and the feel of the street and the neighborhood park.

In that spirit, I tried to imagine the experience of a middle-income family moving to the New York of the future, with double or triple the present day density. Let us take a young assistant professor of sociology at Columbia University (hardly an average American) bringing his family of four to the City. We already know that they would not have a car and would instead use public transport, but otherwise what would their life be like? Since the book does not say much on that count, I followed the cues the author drops about his own life: living in the lovely area of

Union Square, with medium-rise buildings and a park in the center, and spending weekends in a cottage in an affluent coastal village on Long Island. But wait...an assistant professor of sociology would not be able to afford that! He or she would probably live in some distant location of one of the outer boroughs, traveling an hour each way standing in a crowded subway that would have to accommodate twice as many people as today. Could this young family live in Atlantic Yards, an innovative village under development in Brooklyn, designed by the author's architectural firm? There, modular on-site construction techniques promise to reduce the construction costs by about 30%, which (with fixed cost of the land and debt service) might translate to about 10% lower overall cost to households. I doubt that this would be enough to make it affordable to this hard-working middle-income family. And how would it feel to live in a neighborhood of 30 to 40 story buildings? Would it create a sense of a neighborhood and a community? What about children's safety, fresh air, access to sunshine, and schmoozing with neighbors?

Since Chakrabarti's book does not answer these fundamental questions, I went a step further in my thought experiment and imagined walking with Jane Jacobs, looking for the type of life she wished for city dwellers in a neighborhood designed along Chakrabarti's vision. We might, for example, walk through Penn South, a cooperative development in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan. Built in 1962 through a joint effort of the City of New York and the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, this cluster of ten 24-story high buildings houses 2,820 apartment units for moderate-income residents, with rents that are about one third of market rates. I know some people who live there and consider it a perfect urban ecosystem and a community: the buildings accommodate public indoor spaces for day care centers and recreational activities; outside, the park-like green spaces include playgrounds, basketball courts, and flower and vegetable gardens. On warm days, benches are full of people talking to each other; neighbors inquire about families and keep an eye on the children. One day last July, the place was aglow at night with millions of fireflies, which for some reason made that ecosystem their home. It is a diverse community of all ages, races, and ethnicities, actively engaged in self-management of their commons. I would like to live there, and so would, I am sure, our imaginary professor, but it takes twenty years on a waiting list to qualify for an apartment.

What makes Penn South work? For one thing, it is located in the center of the city, totally integrated into its life and infrastructure. There are no boundaries, real or de facto, around it; other buildings are interspaced with the Penn South buildings, including a small ancient church. For a passerby on the street, this is not a “project,” but simply a continuation of the city landscape of tall residential buildings. Second—and this is the heart of the matter—the apartments are affordable because of the special tax subsidies from the City, and because this is a not-for-profit cooperative. The fact is that market forces alone, with all the design and policy innovations described in *Country of Cities*, cannot produce affordability in the affluent cosmopolitan cities of the world. We must confront this reality if we want our cities to offer good life for generations of working- and middle-class residents to come.

What would Jane say about Penn South? I think that she would like it, despite the heights she found so inimical to community life. In fact, she might even agree with me that if these buildings were much taller, this community would be just as cohesive and personal as it is now. From the design perspective, Vishaan Chakrabarti would also find a lot to like in Penn South, and a lot to learn from it. I hope that his next tall and dense design project can strive to reproduce this thriving urban community. I also hope that his next book will take us on a virtual tour of a daily life in such a community, one that Jane Jacobs and I would like to read.

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## About the Author



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## About the Publication

Published as a Book Review by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

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Cite as Halina Brown, "What would Jane Jacobs Say?," review of *A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for an Urban America* by Vishaan Chakrabarti, *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2014), <https://greattransition.org/publication/what-would-jane-jacobs-say>.

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