

Jane Jacobs explains how the world works

BY CHRIS BODNAR

OTTAWA (CUP) — Hanging up the phone after interviewing Jane Jacobs, I felt as though I could have been putting down one of her books, having just finished another chapter.

The thoughtful written dialogue, for which the 83-year-old activist is known by urban aficionados around the world, also typifies her verbal conversation.

But, admittedly, there is a bit more apprehension when speaking to this woman, who was named by renowned alternative magazine *Utne Reader* as one of the 20th century's most influential thinkers.

Jacobs is best known in urban planning circles as the person who revolutionized the way the world views cities.

Her classic 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, outraged many urban designers by challenging the conventional wisdom of the day: that planners knew how to build and manage cities and the evils they contained, and that citizens need only to follow the prescribed wisdom of authority.

Instead, Jacobs explained that cities are complex creations of social interaction, and that the best cities are planned by the very people who live in them.

She put her beliefs into action, challenging urban construction projects in New York, and then in Toronto after becoming a resident in 1963.

In her new book, *The Nature of Economies*, Jacobs is continuing her dialogue on what makes things work and this time her subjects of analysis are economies.

Undoubtedly, her practical theories are sure to challenge many tradition notions of how economies work, and give new insight into human interaction and production for many others.

"Different cultures produce different things, and even the same cultures produce different things at different times in its history," said Jacobs about her economic theories. "But the processes, which is what I'm concerned with here, occurs

throughout history and across cultures. That is the practice of development itself and the process of expansion and of self-correction."

Using Socratic dialogue throughout the book, Jacobs argues that economies are intrinsically linked to nature. She says that through a process of learning to develop products and production methods from nature — which she calls biomimicry — people will develop diversified, sustainable and healthy economies.

"You can see it in very macho societies where women's work is held in contempt and is isolated and women don't have any chance to develop it," she said. "That's part of the poverty of such societies. There aren't many men who wash diapers, but there are lots of men who will work for a diaper service."

While Jacobs contends Canadian society has succeeded in reducing many barriers of discrimination, there are still entire regions dependent upon natural resource-based economies.

She offers some observations, using the collapsed cod fishery in Newfoundland as an example, concerning what is happening in the national economy.

"Your look at Iceland which has a very similar climate and a small population and the same sort of natural resources, yet they're very prosperous and much more capable of a variety of work and they're doing it more economically successfully than Newfoundland is," she said.

And overall in Canada, Jacobs says having one national currency is detrimental to many regions across the country.

At a time when the regions don't correspond economically, she says the dollar is valued too low for major centres like Toronto and Vancouver, while it is too high for smaller economies like the prairie provinces and Atlantic Canada.

"I don't know how this can be cured," she mused. "I think it could be done fairly easily with computers, it just hasn't been done. It hasn't been figured out."

Nonetheless, Jacobs remains optimistic in her view of the world.

She says people have a much better notion of economic realities, especially in regard to human worth.

"The real capital, and this was always true but it's only becoming clear to us now, the real capital is the natural capital and the human capital. Money can't substitute for that. Money can only represent it and I think that's very wholesome thing for people to become aware of."

In addition to her optimism, Jacobs maintains a large dose of modesty.

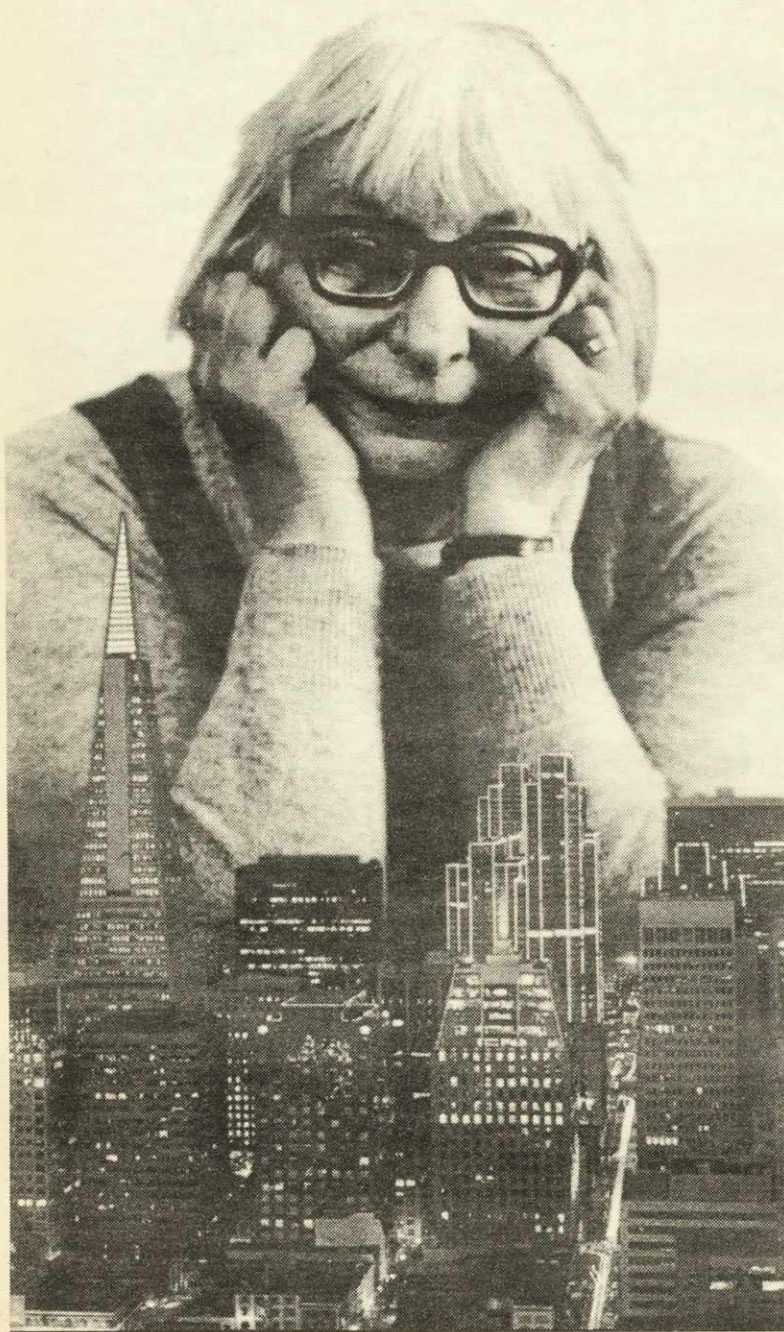
She refuses to take credit for her work in diverting the building of the Spadina Expressway that was to cut through downtown Toronto and numerous urban neighbourhoods in the 1960s.

"Any great victory of that sort, or any great social change, we can always count on it having taken a great many people," she said.

Rather, she credits her book with giving many ordinary people the credentials they needed to fight against urban planners of the time.

"Lots of people knew just as much as I did. They knew expressways were bad for cities," she said. "People who already knew these things maybe they didn't know just why some of them were true but they understood right away they now had a book that gave them some backing."

"It's a good thing to have some confidence and to be not a bad writer. And you can overcome a lot of bad thinking that way."



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