

Learning Responsibility on City Sidewalks

JANE JACOBS

*Architectural and social critic Jane Jacobs opposed the conventional wisdom of most architects and city planners in the 1950s and 1960s by championing the value of human interaction on “lively” city streets, streets like those of Jacobs’s own New York City neighborhood of Greenwich Village. The following passage, adapted from Jacobs’s influential book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), presents one important aspect of her argument.*

On a recent walk home, I passed a block of Puerto Rican families. Twenty-eight children of all ages were playing on the sidewalk without any event more serious than a squabble over a bag of candy. They were under the casual surveillance of adults, who were primarily visiting in public with each other. The surveillance was only seemingly casual, however, as was proved when the candy squabble broke out and peace and justice were quickly reestablished. The identities of the adults kept changing because some kept putting their heads out the windows, others kept coming in and going on errands, and others passed by and lingered a little. But the number of adults stayed fairly constant between eight and eleven during the hour I watched. Arriving home, I noticed a similar scene at our end of our block: In front of the tailor’s, our apartment-house, the laundry, the pizza place, and the fruit man’s store, twelve children were playing on the sidewalk in sight of fourteen adults.

Lively sidewalks have positive aspects for city children’s play, and these are at least as important as safety and protection. The people

of cities can, and on lively diversified sidewalks they do, supervise the incidental play of children and assimilate the children into city society. They do it in the course of carrying on their other pursuits. To waste the normal presence of adults on lively sidewalks and to bank instead (however idealistically) on hiring substitutes for them, is frivolous in the extreme. It is frivolous not only socially but also economically, because cities have desperate shortages of money and of personnel for more interesting uses of the outdoors than playgrounds. City planners do not seem to realize how high a ratio of adults is needed to rear children. Nor do they seem to understand that parks and recreational equipment do not rear children. These can be useful adjuncts, but only people can rear children and assimilate them into civilized society. It is folly to build cities in a way that wastes this normal, casual manpower for child rearing and either leaves this essential job too much undone—with terrible consequences—or makes it necessary to hire substitutes like playground monitors. The myth that playgrounds and grass and hired guards or supervisors are innately wholesome for children and that city streets, filled with ordinary people, are innately evil for children, boils down to a deep contempt for ordinary people.

In real life, only from the ordinary adults on city sidewalks do children learn—if they learn at all—the first fundamental of successful city life: People must take a modicum of public responsibility for each other, even if they have no ties of kinship or friendship. This is a lesson nobody learns by being told. It is learned from the experience of having other people without ties of kinship or close friendship take a modicum of public responsibility for you. When Mr. Lacey, the locksmith, bawls out one of my sons for running into the street, and then later reports the transgression to my husband as he passes the locksmith shop, my son gets more than an overt lesson in safety. He also gets, indirectly, the lesson that Mr. Lacey, with whom we have no ties other than street propinquity, feels responsible for him to a degree. The boy who goes unrescued in the elevator of a high-rise housing project learns the opposite lesson from his experience. So do the children in housing projects who squirt water into house windows and on passersby, and go unrebuked because they are anonymous children in anonymous grounds.

The lesson that city dwellers have to take responsibility for what goes on in the city streets is taught again and again to children on the sidewalks that enjoy a local public life. They can absorb it astonishingly early. They show they have absorbed it by taking it for granted that

they, too, are part of the management. They volunteer—before they're asked—directions to people who are lost; they tell a man he will get a ticket if he parks where he thinks he is going to park; they offer unsolicited advice to the building superintendent to use rock salt instead of a chopper to attack the ice on the sidewalk. The presence or absence of this kind of street bossiness in city children is a fairly good tip-off to the presence or absence of responsible adult behavior toward the sidewalk and the children who use it. The children are imitating adult attitudes. This has nothing to do with income. Some of the poorest parts of cities do the best by their children in this respect. And some do the worst.

This is instruction in civic responsibility that people hired to look after children cannot teach, because the essence of this responsibility is that you do it without being hired. It is a lesson that parents, by themselves, are powerless to teach. If parents take minor public responsibility for strangers or neighbors in a society where nobody else does, this simply means that the parents are embarrassingly different and meddling, not that this is the proper way to behave. Such instruction must come from society itself, and in cities, if it comes, it comes almost entirely during the time children spend at incidental play on the sidewalks.

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Writing Topic

According to Jacobs, what valuable lesson do children learn on city sidewalks, and how do they learn this lesson? What do you think of her argument? To support your position, be sure to use specific evidence taken from your own experience, observations, or reading, including the readings at the end of this unit.