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Ballet of the Streets

ONE OF THE REMARKABLE THINGS about the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood, in the south-east corner of central Toronto, is that hardly anyone finds it remarkable. It is the largest downtown housing development built in North America in this century, it was put there only two decades ago, and it's not hidden. It begins at the city core, right behind the O'Keefe Centre for the Performing Arts, and runs east to Parliament Street. It is a big, government-organized scheme that actually works - something as rare in land development as in any other field. And, while it exists right beside the Gardiner Expressway, it embodies a philosophy that is opposed to everything the Gardiner represents.

Yet when we talk about the major events in recent Toronto history, we rarely mention the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood. Even when we speak nostalgically of 1970s reform politics, we focus on other achievements. Most of these tend to be negative, the avoidance of this or that, the saving of something. The defeat of the Spadina Expressway remains the most famous victory: that gigantic road would have ripped through much of west-central Toronto in the early 1970s if it hadn't been cancelled by a coalition of reform politicians, local property owners, artists, and an Ontario government that was about to face an election. The stopping of big, intrusive apartment developments in old residential districts has also been celebrated. But the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood was the tour de force of the reform

era, proof that on at least one occasion the reformers could deliver on their promise of a more liveable city. It is the chief monument of David Crombie's time as mayor; appropriately, part of it is named for him. It demonstrates what local government can, on its best days, accomplish.

In retrospect, it seems almost miraculous that it was built at all. A plan of this size would be hard to execute at any time, but the atmosphere of the mid-1970s made it especially daunting. A cloud of failure had gathered over the very idea of government housing. In Britain, the new towns planned with supreme confidence in the 1940s and 1950s had turned out to be disappointments at best, calamities at worst. The politicians eagerly embraced the worst ideas of planners – plain, high buildings set in what were intended to be large parks. The Labour Party of Glasgow campaigned for re-election in 1970 by boasting that it had built the highest council-flats buildings in Europe; they were thirty-one storeys, and they were later regarded as a major mistake. Michael Ignatieff has argued that the failure of social democracy in Britain was, above all, an architectural failure – the vast acres of council flats were the most visible signs of Labour Party achievement, and they impressed neither their residents nor the middle-class voters whose taxes helped pay for them. In the United States, the results of planning were even worse: housing projects in Detroit, Chicago, and many other cities had become zones of terror.

By the mid-1970s, hardly anyone had a good word to say for Regent Park, the public housing project that had replaced a few blocks of downtown Toronto slums in the 1950s. The architects and planners, following modernist principles set down by Le Corbusier and others, bulldozed the old city streets and created enclaves, isolating Regent Park from the city around it. Like many of the projects now run by the Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority, Regent Park was laid out on the principle that people living in it could be protected from social infection if they were physically separated from the old, unredeemed slums that continued to exist nearby. In the beginning, many of the developments were regarded as efficient and humane – in

1958 the maisonette towers of Regent Park South won national recognition in the form of a Massey Medal for Peter Dickinson, one of the most admired Toronto architects of the day.

Later, the reputation of the projects faded and then grew sinister. Planned with the highest hopes, they bred despair. By setting themselves apart, they loudly announced that their residents were second-class citizens. And the squares and parks at the centre of the projects – Dickinson was especially proud of the open space in Regent Park South – became glaring symbols of failure. In architects' drawings they looked attractive, but they turned out to be lifeless wasteland, which no one wanted to use or care for. Public-housing tended to be inconvenient as well. Shopping was usually kept at a distance from the apartments, and entrances were hard to reach by ambulance, taxi, or delivery truck. Today the only people who find Regent Park entirely congenial are drug dealers, who can hide there with more ease than on ordinary streets. Most dealers live elsewhere, but they come to do business in the neglected hallways and entrances, bringing violence with them.

In the 1970s this was the familiar reality of government housing everywhere. In Toronto, politicians and planners had a special reason for trepidation. Living among them, and already a good friend to several of them, was the most famous analyst of gigantic urban mistakes, Jane Jacobs. She had moved to Toronto from New York in the late 1960s, and her presence in the city was a nagging reminder that intelligent, well-meaning people can get everything horribly wrong.

THE ARRIVAL OF Jane Jacobs, though uncelebrated at the time, was one of the happiest accidents in Toronto history. In the late 1960s she and her husband left New York because they found America in the Vietnam era oppressive – and because they had two draft-age sons. They could have chosen any city, but they picked Toronto because it seemed an agreeable place and there was work for Bob Jacobs as an architect.

The reputation of Jane Jacobs arrived well ahead of her. Anyone interested in city building knew about her first book,

The Death and Life of Great American Cities, a merciless critique of the barren new districts created by the overweening ambition of planners – and of the theories standing behind those planners. The book was much discussed in Toronto, as elsewhere; before it was a year old, teachers were referring to it in the University of Toronto town planning course. Eberhard Zeidler, whose architectural firm hired Bob Jacobs, has described the book's effect on him: "It was as if somebody had torn blindfolds from my eyes." But her presence in the city turned out to be even more significant than anyone might have expected.

Jacobs began taking part in events connected with city politics, from public demonstrations to hearings of the Ontario Municipal Board, and sometimes she affected crucial decisions – as she did in the leadership of the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood. In subtle ways, she became a potent force in city life. Her influence was spread across Toronto by architects, politicians, and journalists she saw privately, people who had been won over by her book and came to her seeking advice or stimulating talk. Beyond question, she brought a message to the city. She understood that ideas rule the world, and she wanted Toronto to sharpen its ideas about itself. She animated the discussion of a city-building by placing Toronto's concerns in the context of a long-running international argument about how cities could revive themselves. Jacobs advised her readers to focus on the details of local planning, understand the local context, come up with local solutions. At the same time, this most local of thinkers helped Toronto to see its own problems as a reflection of the state of cities everywhere. She gave Toronto's thoughts about itself an international context.

She was an unlikely intellectual warrior, a theorist who opposed most theories, a teacher with no teaching job and no university degree, a writer who wrote well but infrequently. She was the classic self-taught thinker, one of those people who try to figure everything out for themselves. When she graduated from high school in Scranton, Pennsylvania, she decided that she

had endured enough formal education and would learn the rest on her own. She went off to discover the world and herself.

In the middle of the Depression, walking the streets of New York in search of jobs, she became, by accident, a student of the diversity of city life. Slowly she found her subject, and bit by bit she found her theme: cities as organisms that appear chaotic but actually follow their own changing patterns. She worked as a secretary and began to write in her spare time. Many of her early magazine articles were on aspects of city life – articles in *Vogue*, for instance, on the fur district and the diamond district. Once she wrote an article in *Cue* magazine on manhole covers and what they indicate about life beneath the streets. In 1944 she married Robert Hyde Jacobs, and ever since they have developed their ideas together. In the 1950s, working on the staff of *Architectural Forum*, she was assigned to write about hospitals and schools and given a roll of architectural plans to study. At home she asked her husband to explain them. As they studied together, Jane learned about architecture and Bob became so enthralled that he eventually made hospitals his specialty. Since their move to Canada he has worked on major hospitals in Edmonton, Hamilton, and Toronto, among other places.

In the 1950s *Architectural Forum* published optimistic pieces on new housing developments. Jacobs went to see them, analysed them in detail, and discovered something that was fresh news at the time: they weren't working. Planners had bulldozed large slum areas and replaced them with carefully organized collections of apartment buildings and open spaces. On paper they looked fine, but when Jacobs visited them she discovered that the open spaces were empty of people. Planners had segregated residences, retail stores, business offices, and schools, an arrangement that was tidy but also inhuman and uninteresting. Amazingly, people appeared to like these projects less than they had liked the old slums. An environment created out of goodwill and careful thought had turned out to be boring, dangerous, and ultimately unliveable. The new developments had literally been planned to death: they left no room for happy accidents, and no room for life. How could such a thing have happened?

THE FIRST HALF of the 1960s produced a cluster of influential books which looked at old phenomena in new ways. All of them were acts of intrusion on specialized territory by authors who lacked academic credentials. In 1960 Paul Goodman, a poet and playwright, wrote *Growing Up Absurd*, a book about youth and delinquency so startlingly fresh in its insights that it influenced professional educators for decades after. In 1962, Rachel L. Carson, who was mainly a journalist rather than a scientist (though she had a master's degree in marine biology) wrote the book that launched the environmental movement, *Silent Spring*, an attack on the poisoning of nature by insecticides. In 1963 Betty Friedan, a freelance magazine writer, wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, which questioned basic assumptions about the role of women; it started a new wave of feminism and affected the conduct of everyday life more than the work of any professional psychologist or social scientist of the day. In 1964 Marshall McLuhan, an English professor reaching far beyond the confines of his discipline, wrote *Understanding Media*, a landmark in communications studies, so influential that its central ideas became part of the language. And in 1965 a lawyer, Ralph Nader, wrote *Unsafe at Any Speed*, a powerful book about a subject in which he held no credentials, automobile engineering.

All of these outsiders challenged the reigning assumptions of the subjects they dealt with, and all were resisted at first by specialists. In that sense, the Jacobs book was a product of its time, a moment of great hope in America, before the start of the Vietnam War and the souring of public discourse; it appeared in 1961, the first year of John Kennedy's presidency. Of the other books, it most resembled *Silent Spring*. Just as Rachel Carson was principally interested not in pest-killing chemicals but in their effects on the life forms she studied, Jane Jacobs was concerned not so much with planning theory as with the people affected by it. Jacobs depicted cities as intricate working organisms, the way naturalists see ecosystems. *Silent Spring* and *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* can be read side by side as similar commentaries on the hubris of technology.

By the time Jacobs's book appeared, criticism of the big housing developments was spreading; there had already been a few

articles on "the new slums." But those who noticed the squalor of public projects assumed that they had failed because they inadequately carried out the noble vision behind them. Jacobs took the opposite tack. The vision was wrong, she said, and it wasn't noble. "This book," Jacobs began, "is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding." She went on to demonstrate that the great planners had become so enraptured by their own dreams of order and beauty that they had failed to notice how people live. Neighbourhoods she said, can be created only out of the common experience of the citizens. They cannot be devised by a central authority. She challenged not simply the mistakes she saw around her but the very notion of a designed urban utopia, an idea to which generations of intellectuals had wistfully committed themselves. For the great movements in town-planning theory, movements that all architects studied in university, she had a startling and contemptuous word – "reactionary."

The reviews of *Death and Life* were mainly positive, sprinkled liberally with words like "richness" and "seminal." But many of the critics who admired the book felt compelled to distance themselves from it. Professionals found it hard to watch Jacobs undermine the social rationale for zoning, the carving up of cities into single-use neighbourhoods. She argued that this idea, the principal activity of city planners, was nonsense, and dangerous nonsense. It was as if she had somehow tried to persuade dentists that filling teeth did more harm than good.

Reviewers found Jacobs overly harsh in the way she dealt with those who were heroes to planners and architects, not only Le Corbusier but also Ebenezer Howard, Sir Patrick Geddes, and even the man regarded as a living saint of urbanism – Lewis Mumford. After the book appeared, Mumford's own response was eagerly awaited. In 1961, at the age of sixty-six, he was an Olympian figure in American culture, the author of grandly ambitious books on city-building and a much-studied column on architecture in *The New Yorker*. He had noted some of Jacobs's earlier work with pleasure and agreement, and perhaps he opened her book in the expectation of agreeing further. Instead he found that the entire Garden City tradition, for which he was

the most articulate advocate, was under attack. With astonishment, he read that the Garden City dream of a peaceful, orderly environment for humanity was draining the life from cities. Mumford was irked, and even more irked when he discovered that some reviewers thought Jacobs's ideas made his outdated.

Mumford began composing a reply almost as soon as he closed the book. Later he wrote to a friend, "I held my fire... for a whole year, but when I got down to write I discovered that the paper burned, in spite of the long cooling period." His biographer, Donald L. Miller, tells us that Mumford wrote not one but three long articles. *The New Yorker* persuaded him to cut them to a single piece and tone down his anger. His article, "Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies," running through twenty pages of the December 1, 1962 issue, satirized her ideas: "If people are housed in sufficiently congested quarters – provided only that the buildings are not set within superblocks – and if there is a sufficient mishmash of functions and activities, all her social and aesthetic demands are satisfied." He described her as a writer of some insight who had gone horribly wrong.

Death and Life annoyed Mumford and his sympathizers because of the ferocity and directness with which Jacobs attacked; but her message was not entirely negative. She found a luminous pleasure in city life, the "ballet of the streets." Her celebration of traditional streets as the focus of community life was essentially positive, but it set her against the modernist architectural tradition embodied in the work of Mies van der Rohe and his followers. Modernist architects ignored or erased the streets on which they put their buildings – and in doing so ignored the most vivid and potentially exciting aspect of a city's public life.

Jacobs came down firmly on the side of the spontaneous inventiveness of individuals, as against abstract plans imposed by governments and corporations – an argument she was to make later, in a different way, when she wrote on economics. A theory of social organization, based on the humblest sort of observation, was embedded in her book.

Eventually *Death and Life* reached far beyond planning issues and influenced the spirit of the time. In 1982, in a widely admired book of social theory, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, the New York critic Marshall Berman wrote that Jacobs played "a crucial role in the development of modernism" – the late version of modernism that began emerging in the 1960s and was eventually called "post-modern." She did this, Berman argued, by demonstrating that the meaning for which modern people search lies close to home, in the perpetual motion and change of the city, an "evanescent but intense and complex face-to-face communication and communion."

Peter Blake, who worked with Jacobs on *Architectural Forum* and found her "a wonderfully likeable, contentious, opinionated woman," described the impact of her ideas in his memoirs, *No Place Like Utopia*. In the 1940s and 1950s, he recalled, the great planning schemes of the century, like Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, seemed altogether rational. The central beliefs of modern urbanism were accepted by just about everyone connected with architecture. "Only a very few among us were ready to challenge Le Corbusier's diagrams – and the brightest of these critics, by far, was Jane Jacobs." While other journalists enthusiastically promoted utopian diagrams for urban renewal, Jacobs raised more and more questions – "until, in 1960, she spoke out passionately at an urban design conference at Harvard and challenged virtually all the notions up till then accepted."

When Jacobs put these challenges in her book, she "completely altered the discourse on the nature and future of cities." Blake, a conventional modernist, found her advocacy of a form of creative chaos unsettling. "It took me several years to come to terms with her extraordinary vision of a truly free, egalitarian society...." When a German architect visited Blake in New York, he demanded to meet Jacobs, whose book had created a storm of discussion across Europe; twenty years later, when Blake worked on a major urban renewal project in West Berlin, everyone connected with it was conscious that the ideas of Jacobs were shaping their plans. Jane Jacobs had become a factor in town planning everywhere – and in Toronto most of all.

SHE AND HER FAMILY settled in the Annex, a district that illustrated Jacobsian principles even before she identified them. They bought a house on Albany Avenue. By coincidence, that was the same street where Eric Arthur — the New Zealander whose role as the city's architectural guide and conscience was similar, in earlier decades, to the part Jacobs was to play from the 1970s to the 1990s — had lived with his family in the 1930s.

Within a few years, she became part of Toronto folklore. One story demonstrates not only her views but the vigorous and imaginative ways she put them to work. Like many stories from the period, it concerns a threatened chunk of the architectural past, a row of houses on a street that was splendid through much of the late nineteenth century and squalid through much of the twentieth. In the early 1970s a property developer acquired the right to demolish some worn, old houses on Sherbourne Street, just north of Dundas, and replace them with apartment buildings. When some of the politicians who were trying to save downtown neighbourhoods heard of that decision, they set about getting it reversed. But they were afraid that the houses would be torn down while they were working their way through the bureaucracy, so they planned a protest demonstration.

Early on the cold, dark morning of April 5, 1973, about eighty demonstrators assembled at the site. Among them were Alderman John Sewell, Alderman William Kilbourn, and Jane Jacobs. Once the protesters gathered, they were unsure of what to do. Jacobs heard a lawyer in their group remark thoughtfully that, by law, demolition could proceed only if the houses were enclosed by hoardings, the boards that hide and protect the site. That was all Jacobs needed. She turned to Kilbourn. "They can't do this if the hoardings are down," she announced in her loud, American twang. "Here, give me a hand."

Kilbourn and Jacobs went to work, others joined them, and in no time the hoardings lay on the ground. By the time the wrecking crew arrived, the houses to be demolished stood exposed to the street. Apparently the union agreement did not allow demolition workers to replace the hoardings. The houses were saved for the moment, and that temporary reprieve won by Jacobs and her fellow demonstrators eventually turned into

a permanent pardon. The city bought the houses from the developer, restored them, filled in spaces around them with more housing, and created a low-rent development that holds more people than would have lived in the planned apartment buildings. That little strip of history will stand, well into the twenty-first century, as evidence both of Toronto society in the 1870s and of the intense save-our-city politics that developed a century later. When the city builds a monument to Jacobs, it should probably go there.

In September, 1991, to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, some of her friends and admirers held a day in her honour. There was a luncheon at the University of Toronto faculty of architecture, in rooms decorated with photographs illustrating quotations from the book; there was a public symposium that went on all afternoon; and finally there was a dinner that lasted late into the evening as architects, planners, politicians, and journalists rose one after another to explain what she had meant in their lives and the life of the city.

Through it all she smiled benignly, a tall, stooped woman with the look of an ancient hawk. As usual, she didn't dress up. She wore to her own party more or less what she wears to everybody else's parties and indeed wears whenever she goes out — a large corduroy tent and running shoes. As usual, she exhibited no sense of her own importance. In 1961 she started a revolution that reached around the world, yet she insists that what she writes is only common sense. Still, it would be as wrong to call her modest as to accuse her of boastfulness. On that occasion, sitting for ten or so hours beneath a shower of undiluted praise, she seemed altogether at ease, as if she could look on her work honestly, objectively, and without false modesty. She appeared to be that rare and enviable creature, an integrated personality; her writing, not her ego, absorbs her.

EVEN SO, HER PRESENCE in Toronto is enough to make any ambitious city planner nervous. Certainly the possibility of failure was in every city planner's mind when the St. Lawrence

Neighbourhood appeared on the agenda in the 1970s. Given the disasters Jacobs had exposed, who in Toronto would have the nerve to propose that the city acquire forty-four acres, a property much bigger than Regent Park, and put 10,000 people on it? At the centre of local government there were two youngish men who possessed sufficient daring. Crombie, an alderman for three years, became mayor in 1973 at the age of thirty-seven. Michael Dennis, a lawyer, served as housing adviser in Crombie's office and became city housing commissioner in 1974, when he was thirty-two. Both of them had large ambitions, some of which were later fulfilled. Both were politically astute. While Crombie became a federal cabinet minister, Dennis turned into a major figure in the international property empire of the Reichmann family. And in the 1970s Crombie had promises to keep. Affordable housing was part of his platform.

The man who directed their attention to the properties south of Front Street, from Yonge to Parliament, was Frank Lewinberg, then on the city planning staff. It was historic land, in a sense. Just to the north, in the late eighteenth century, Governor John Graves Simcoe had laid out York, the first version of Toronto. In those days Front Street was the lakefront; it wasn't until the middle of the nineteenth century that landfill extended the city southward into the lake. Railroad yards and factories kept the new land occupied for generations, but by the 1970s many factories were closed and the landscape was dominated by scrapyards and empty warehouses. It was not an obvious place to put apartment buildings and town houses: the noisy, smelly Gardiner Expressway and the railroad defined the southern border. Nevertheless, Lewinberg suggested that it might be used for housing. He convinced his boss in the planning department, Howard Cohen, and they took it to Dennis and Crombie.

Like everyone else in this story, Dennis knew about the potential for embarrassing, large-scale failure. He also knew that an ambitious and unusual development would not easily be embraced by the bureaucrats at City Hall. He decided to hire an outside planner, and he consulted his neighbour on Albany Avenue, Jane Jacobs. She recommended a young architect, Alan

Littlewood, who had impressed her when he worked with Bob Jacobs on the design of a Detroit hospital. Littlewood had never thought of himself as a town planner, and held no planning degree; that appealed to Jacobs, whose admiration for professional planners remains severely limited. Littlewood took the job, stayed for two years, and wrote the planning specifications, after many discussions with politicians, citizens' groups, and architects; Zeidler drew up preliminary plans (and later designed one of the buildings). When Littlewood left, in 1976, the style of the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood was in place.

Early on, within earshot of Jacobs, Littlewood used the word "project" to describe what he was doing. "Don't do that!" she said. "Don't say *project*." He asked what was wrong with the word. "Say neighbourhood, as in community," Jacobs told him. "The way you think about it will determine what you do." That was typical of Jacobs, who believes that language governs us more than we know. Littlewood saw the point. He began to think of his work as a version of "infill," a relatively new idea then being promoted by a number of architects, notably Jack Diamond. The infill approach fits new housing into established streets without destroying the old environment, sometimes tucking a few apartments or townhouses into empty or badly used spaces in barely noticeable ways. Littlewood calls this "urban dentistry" – or, changing the metaphor, "invisible mending." He decided that the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood would follow infill principles, though on a much larger scale.

This is one reason why we seldom speak of it as a civic achievement – and why many people who visit it, and even some who live there, remain unaware that it's a distinct entity with a unique history. The St. Lawrence Neighbourhood is pleasant, law-abiding, and mildly prosperous, and the turnover in rental apartments is encouragingly low. All of this is surprising in a government-directed area, but the neighbourhood's most unusual characteristic is also the one that hides it from us: its edges are blurred. Unlike every other government-directed scheme on the continent, it doesn't clearly indicate where it starts and stops. In the winter of 1995 I spoke with a woman who had lived since

1981 in a condominium at the southeast corner of Front and George Streets, on land that Dennis acquired for the city and then sold to a private developer. She didn't know, till I told her, that she has been living, all this time, in the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood.

Those who took Jacobs's work seriously had been talking about the need to mix tenants with varied incomes and buildings with varied uses in the same development. Public housing goes to pieces, they argued, when it is obviously separate from the surrounding city; streets turn dangerous when deprived of ordinary commerce. Littlewood started out with the idea of creating apartments and town houses that would be one third publicly owned, one third private, and one third partially subsidized; ideally, it would be impossible to tell at a glance which was which – and that's how it turned out. Stores, restaurants and even schools would be integrated into apartment buildings. Doors would face the streets, unlike the hard-to-reach entranceways that are standard in failed public-housing projects.

Studying successful districts like the Annex and the Beach, Littlewood and his colleagues noticed that all of them had main streets running through them. Traditional planning theory argues that traffic should be routed around residential neighbourhoods – the dead ends so common in the suburbs were laid out by planners who had absorbed this textbook aversion to ordinary roads. But the districts that work best in Toronto are not segregated enclaves, they are places people can drive through. So the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood would follow that pattern. It would also have, like most successful old districts, lanes and backyards.

To work their new buildings into the fabric of the existing city, Littlewood and his colleagues continued southward the old streets of Governor Simcoe's York. They used taller buildings, with their backs to the Gardiner and the railway tracks, as noise barriers, with triple-glazed windows and extra soundproofing. They designed The Esplanade as an east-west strip of public space, part boulevard, part park.

THERE WERE SHARP disagreements in the early days, even among politicians who were anxious to see the project go ahead. Mayor Crombie was pushing the process at a speed that some people, such as Alderman Sewell, regarded as reckless. Alderman Sewell was, in the view of Mayor Crombie, dragging his heels. A generation later, the conflict between them isn't always easy to explain. In the communal memory of Toronto, Crombie and Sewell, two famous mayors, seem to have been natural allies, because they eventually stood on the same side of so many issues. But in the 1970s they brought quite different ideas to public issues, and in everyday politics they argued more often than they agreed. Both were dedicated servants of their city, and both were conservatives in the sense that they were anxious to maintain the traditional virtues of Toronto, above all its old neighbourhoods. But while Crombie was at home in the Red Tory wing of the Progressive Conservative Party, Sewell remained outside the party system, a maverick who seemed happiest as a party of one.

Sewell entered politics almost by accident, when he was a young lawyer and was asked to do some volunteer work for a neighbourhood action committee. That experience gave him a lifelong belief in the power of organized citizen opinion, but it did not produce the knack of compromise that is essential to a political career. Sewell followed Crombie as mayor but lasted only one tumultuous term, 1978-80. Even when installed in the mayor's office, he continued to talk like an outsider, and made as many enemies as friends. Since his defeat he has been an author, a columnist for *The Globe and Mail* and for *Now* newspaper, a teacher, a royal commissioner, and a consultant. Like Crombie, he remains a much loved figure in Toronto – as recently as 1994, a *Globe* columnist suggested that he was the best possible candidate for mayor.

Crombie and Sewell were both careful and admiring students of Jane Jacobs's ideas, but they often disagreed on the way to apply them. A *Globe and Mail* clipping from November 21, 1974, conveys a whiff of the argument they were conducting in public that year. The report said Sewell had forced the executive

committee of council to hold up the design study for the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood so that community groups could become more involved. Crombie, according to the *Globe*, questioned Sewell's views on public housing, noting that recently they had been in "metamorphosis." The Crombie forces were in danger, Sewell thought, of making arbitrary decisions and imposing them from above. Eventually, Crombie's plans went through, but only after satisfying Sewell's reservations.

Once started, the neighbourhood grew quickly. Most of the major buildings were in use by 1981, seven years after Lewinberg's first report, though others have been going up ever since. Various architects were used, some chosen by public agencies, some by private developers. The architects caught the spirit of the place, an odd combination of grandeur (in scale) and humility (in tone). As Littlewood says, "We didn't think of redesigning the world. We were just making a neighbourhood." Today, after some fifteen years of construction, there's not one structure in the district that looks like an expression of architectural ego. Two early buildings helped set the style: Irving Grossman's Crombie Park, which had to accommodate two schools (public and Roman Catholic) along with apartments and stores; and Jerome Markson's David B. Archer Co-op. Markson, not long after, went north of Front Street to design Market Square, an expensive condominium complex built outside the acquisition lands. Market Square fits the neighbourhood by using brick, putting stores on the street, and limiting itself to eight storeys. In the St. Lawrence style, Markson also respected the historic environment by siting his square to include a view of St. James Cathedral, a gracious twentieth-century tribute to one of the monuments of the nineteenth.

Across the neighbourhood, architects used arches and patterns of bays to create harmony with nearby Victorian buildings. Brick wasn't specified in the by-law, but one architect after another chose it, giving the district a consistent style. At that moment, the sandblasting of old brick buildings was becoming fashionable; some people, noticing these new structures for the first time, no doubt assumed they were old

structures recently cleaned. As John Sewell wrote in his 1993 book, *The Shape of the City*, "St. Lawrence quickly became known as the new community downtown that felt like it had always been there — which of course was exactly what the planning committee had intended."

One of the neighbourhood's admirers is Roberta Brandes Gratz, a New York writer on urban affairs. In a 1994 book on current planning, *The Living City*, she called St. Lawrence "the best example of an appropriate large new construction project that I have found." Jane Jacobs took her there in 1977, when it was still largely derelict, and explained what was going to happen. "I listened skeptically," Gratz writes, "but then I saw it actually unfold over time in the way she predicted." She finds, as many visitors do, a few drawbacks: "a sameness to the look of it: all the buildings are of brick, with white-painted wood trim." It lacks the small, sometimes surprising changes that come when people alter their environment over time. These drawbacks are the reverse side of the neighbourhood's best qualities. As Jacobs acknowledges, it suffers aesthetically from having too much building from one historic period. Only age can give the buildings individuality and charm. St. Lawrence is not a perfect Jane Jacobs neighbourhood. Making a perfect Jane Jacobs neighbourhood takes a century or so.

On opening day, in June, 1979, Michael Dennis called St. Lawrence "a tremendous act of faith by the city in its downtown." He said, "This won't be the last downtown neighbourhood, but it could be the model for all the rest." Two years later a *Globe* article called the neighbourhood Toronto's civic laboratory community." But whatever was learned in this lab was not applied elsewhere. One promising idea, for a while, was the Ataratiri district, an old industrial area stretching east from Parliament Street to the Don River, which now has the derelict look that the St. Lawrence area had in the mid-1970s. Ataratiri would have followed the principles of the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood, on an even larger scale, but after years of study and planning it was abandoned. Pollution of the land by industry was an official reason for killing it, but the larger problem

was lack of leadership. Ataratiri died because it didn't have the influential supporters and the political momentum to overcome the inevitable obstacles.

A project as ambitious as the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood requires the careful orchestration of government agencies, private developers, citizens' groups, and public opinion. Any one of those forces can defeat it. The St. Lawrence Neighbourhood came into being, above all, because talented and determined leaders – Crombie, Dennis, Sewell, and a few others – committed themselves to it, risked their reputations, and would not be stopped. The St. Lawrence Neighbourhood, at Sewell's insistence, followed democratic principles and processes, involving the public as much as possible; but process didn't make the crucial difference. As Alan Littlewood said recently, "People have too much faith in process. People think if they get the process right it will all work out, but that's wrong. You need leadership – and you need talent." You also need luck. And perhaps you need Jane Jacobs cheering from the sidelines.