

JANE JACOBS:
CONTRADICTIONS AND TENSIONS¹

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ABSTRACT: Jane Jacobs' *The death and life of great American cities*, published in 1961, still remains an unquestionable landmark for urban studies until the present day. More recently, the book has been frequently used to justify disparate political positions concerning the urban, both theoretical and practical. This paper's main objective is to analyze how completely different accounts are covered by the book. In order to do so, I am proposing a reading of Jacobs' work that takes her thoughts' internal tensions and ambiguities into consideration.

KEY WORDS: Jane Jacobs, The death and life of great American cities, urban planning, tensions, review.

RESUMO: *The death and life of great American cities, publicado por Jane Jacobs em 1961, é uma referência inegável para os estudos urbanos até os dias de hoje. Nos últimos tempos, o livro passou a servir de justificativa para as mais diferentes posições políticas sobre o urbano, sejam elas teóricas ou práticas. Este artigo pretende analisar como posicionamentos tão distintos podem ser abarcados pelo livro. Para tanto, pretendo fazer uma leitura que leve em consideração tensões e ambiguidades internas ao pensamento de Jacobs.*

PALAVRAS - CHAVE: *Jane Jacobs, The death and life of great American cities, planejamento urbano, tensões, crítica.*

¹ A less developed version of this research paper was presented at the XVI meeting of the ANPUR, in 2015.

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2 The first edition of the book was published in 1961. The Portuguese translation was published only in the year 2000, under a Portuguese title equivalent to *The death and life of great cities*, eliminating the reference to the North-American delimitation of the subject. It was a marketing decision made by the publishers, as evidenced by Alexandre Martins Fontes (Cymbalista, 2018, p. 236).

3 See Decree n. 26.414, of April 26, 2006. Pereira Passos was Rio de Janeiro's mayor from 1902 to 1906. During his tenure, he promoted large-scale renovation plans inspired in Hausmann's urban interventions in Paris.

4 <http://www2.sirkis.com.br/noticia.kmf?noticia=4588607&canal=257&total=222&indice=220>, accessed in Jun. 06, 2018. For an analysis of Jacobs' mentions in the Brazilian media before those mentioned here, see Silva, 2018, p.172.

5 Just to exemplify: events such as the X Architecture Biannual and the Arq.Futuro conference in Brazil were inspired by Jacobs' ideas (Oliveira, 2013). The founder of the Institute of Urbanism and Studies for the Metropolis – URBEM has also declared himself an adept of Jacobs' teachings (Cariello, 2013), as did the businessman Rafael Birmann, owner of several enterprises near São Paulo's Faria Lima Avenue who intended to privatize a street in the Itaim neighborhood (Sayuri, 2014).

6 The list of attributes is extensive. For a detailing of the adjectives associated with Jacobs, see Hirt, 2012.

7 In a detailed account of Jacobs' writings prior to *The death and life...*, Peter Laurence (2016, p.289) claims that reception to the book was marked by this characteristic since the beginning: "Or, stated more accurately, parts of Jacobs' inclusive vision of the city were quickly embraced by an ideologically broad spectrum of readers. Both conservatives and liberals could find ideas in *The death and life...* that resonated with their points of view."

When running for mayor of São Paulo in the year 2000, Marta Suplicy (at the time a member of the Brazilian Workers' Party – PT, and currently a member of the Brazilian Democratic Movement – MDB, a political party known for supporting whatever government is in charge, regardless of its underlying political ideology) made a public announcement in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* to share her vision for the city in the upcoming years. São Paulo would have more "life in the street", since "the more diverse the usage of the streets, the bigger the safety" (Suplicy, 2000). This formula is accompanied by the due credits: Jane Jacobs' *The death and life of great American cities*². When José Serra, a member of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party – PSDB, known for its centrist and conservative perspectives, was elected mayor of São Paulo, immediately after Marta Suplicy's term, the very same book earned a spot in his nightstand and was recommended to his closest advisors (Segawa, 2005). After being elected mayor of Rio de Janeiro, César Maia (former member of the Liberal Front Party – PFL, a successor to the ARENA, the political party that supported the Brazilian civil and military dictatorship, and currently affiliated with The Democrats, PFL's new designation) cried out for a renovation of the Left. In an article also published in *Folha de São Paulo*, he associated the so-called "mechanical left" to Robert Moses, known for massive demolitions and road works that cut through entire neighborhoods of 1950's and 1960's New York City. The image of renovation is that of Jane Jacobs, an avid critic of Moses' urban interventions. A member of the resistance, she would have been responsible for introducing the idea of "a city of people, of neighbors" (Maia, 2004). Maia's admiration for Jacobs led him to name the building of the Pereira Passos Institute after her.³ Alfredo Sirkis (formerly of the Brazilian Green Party and presently of the Brazilian Socialist Party) calls Jacobs "a hero of our time" and says she wrote the book that would have changed his life.⁴

Jane Jacobs' ideas are everywhere. References to her work aren't only spread by politicians from a wide spectrum of political alignments. It isn't uncommon to find mentions to Jacobs in the public debate, especially when the subject revolves around urban interventions in the city.⁵ Her ideas act not only as *parameters* that serve to diagnose the city's problems and potentials, but also as a kind of *recipe* to achieve "good city" ideals. From the start, this points to two important elements. Firstly, debate over the book has long crossed the limits of the academic or technical discussions on urban matters. The fact that ideas from *The death and life of great American cities* gained a life of their own, appearing on the public debate disassociated from references to the book is but another indication of the ramifications of Jacobs' ideas. Secondly, her book can accommodate quite a divergent set of practical and theoretical positions, even though this is a constant source of discomfort for those who look up to Jacobs as a hero, a prophet, or a visionary.⁶ This goes to show that the book has become a commonplace resource to organize both agreement and conflict over distinct views of the city, a basis for establishing differences and over which positions can be discussed and disputed. Or, in the words of the editor of one of the few books that proposes to discuss Jacobs' work without relying on mere celebration: "many have found her to be a beckoning screen on which to project their ideologies. Jane Jacobs has had a lasting power for many reasons, but one of them certainly is that she offers something for everyone" (Page, 2011, p.4).⁷

This paper argues that the generalized praise over Jacobs' arguments in *The death and life of great American cities* constitutes an obstacle to interpretations that intend to analyze problems and limitations of her arguments. This obstacle hinders not only the overcoming of unilateral or manichaistic perspectives, but also the understanding of how the book can serve as basis for such distinct visions and proposals or, in other words, how the book "offers something for everyone". The idea is not to piece back together what Jacobs meant to say, in order to undermine some of the meanings in which her work was adopted,⁸ but to offer support for a perspective seeking to highlight the tensions in the book as elements that constitute its complexity. In order to do so, the first part of this article reestablishes the main point of the book through a couple of its most influential arguments, in order to provide elements that help situate its widespread repercussion. The second part looks into the construction of Jane Jacobs' heroic image through one of the subject's most sophisticated analysis: the last chapter of Marshall Berman's *All that is solid melts into air*. The third and final part of this article analyzes Jacobs' work to show how the author establishes a specific relationship between order and disorder, key to understanding the tensions that allow for such opposite views of the urban to be united under this common denominator.

1. POWERFUL LITERARY IMAGERY

Two instances of imagery in *The death and life of great American cities* are chiefly responsible for spreading the book's arguments. In the first one, Jacobs narrates an "intricate ballet" (Jacobs, 2011, p.65), that takes place in her Greenwich Village street's sidewalk. Dance is chosen as imagery to describe the movement of the many people that walk by throughout the day – the children who "walk by the center of the stage" towards their school, the taxi's "morning ritual", workers that take the same path every day, "character dancers" such as bearded men in motor scooters, hatted drunks or skating teens – till nightfall, when "the ballet goes on under lights, eddying back and forth but intensifying at the bright spotlight pools of Joe's sidewalk pizza dispensary, the bars, the delicatessen, the restaurant and the drug store" (Jacobs, 2011, p.65-70).

This passage's strength lies in being able to synthesize a series of arguments crucial to the book as a whole. The first is that different people and groups use the street in distinct ways throughout the day. If that might seem obvious, Jacobs points to the need for the streets to accommodate multiple functions so that it might in fact occur. The ballet would certainly not come to be – or at least not with the same diversity – if Jacobs' street wasn't strictly residential. As there is a combination of homes and commercial establishments of various types and sizes, the street attracts a diverse group of people who "make their entrance". The second argument pertains to the spontaneous nature associated with this ballet. For the author, this dance is interesting not for being previously rehearsed and planned in detail, "a simple-minded precision dance with everyone kicking up at the same time, twirling in union and bowing off en masse", but for being a set of paths and roles that never repeat themselves in the same way, a set that "is always replete with new improvisations" (Jacobs, 2011, p.65). Its liveliness is precisely in the unpredictable arrangement of a series of elements that make

⁸ When writing about the aesthetic wonder over ornaments and décor as symbols of social distinction, in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey (1992, p.82) argues: "I am not at all sure that this is what Jane Jacobs had in mind when she launched her criticism of modernist urban planning". For examples of research papers that lament the "misappropriation" and distortion of Jacobs' ideas in the contemporary debate, see Gratz, 2014, p.35 et seq. and Lyes, 2014, p.91 et seq.

Hudson street an interesting place to be at or to pass through. The third argument is in respect to an attentive way of looking at the mundane social relations that develop in the street's public space. One of Jacobs' main criticisms towards modern public planning is its detachment from society, an abstraction that would distance it from "common, ordinary things". Again, if the fact that the city is built on social relations sounds obvious, Lewis Mumford's account shows that Jacobs' stance was groundbreaking in the early seventies. Her role in a Harvard urban planners' conference was described by Mumford as "a fresh offshore breeze" (Mumford, 1962, p.152),⁹ because "she pointed out a fact to which many planners and administrators had been indifferent – that a neighborhood is not just a collection of buildings but a tissue of social relations" (Mumford, 1962, p.152). The fourth argument, directly related to the third, pertains to the need of attentive and prolonged observation in order to understand the dynamics of cities or even those of a particular street. Observing a street during the morning will yield substantially different results when compared to an observation during the night, for example. Since the street presents a set of social relations, it is paramount to regard them as a process that develops over time – and not as a still image. The fifth argument is that the street – or better yet, the sidewalk – is the *de facto* public space. Jacobs' focus isn't in public squares or parks, but directed towards pedestrians in public walkways. And, finally, the sixth argument: the observation would turn out completely different had Jacobs looked to Broadway at Times Square and not to a neighborhood street. In other words: there is clearly a question of *scale*. It is not about the man in the crowd at the big city avenue, but about the spontaneous ballet of smaller streets' sidewalks, where people are discernible and identifiable.

Jacobs draws an important conclusion from the diversity of usages people give the street throughout the day, which establishes the other imagery from the book to become widely popular. Besides making public space interesting, diversity is also responsible for "something everyone already knows: A well-used city street is apt to be a safe street. A deserted city street is apt to be unsafe" (Jacobs, 2011, p.44). The existence of "eyes on the streets" allows for "a marvelous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city" (Jacobs, 2011, p.183). Movement throughout the day ensures the street is permanently watched by those passing by. What Mumford considered to be a "naïve remedy" – a product of "wishful thinking", for relying in disorder as a factor of social stability (Mumford, 1962, p.170) – is today an idea widely accepted by professional urban planners.¹⁰

Both imageries are intertwined and carry a strong literary connotation: it is not without reason that Marshall Berman compares the Hudson street ballet scene with great works of western literature, such as Nikolai Gogol's *Nevsky Prospekt* (Berman, 2007, p.370). The ballet and eyes-in-the-street format points to a collective dimension, even if it is dependent on the existence of a fixed point of observation, for a period of time, in lieu of the wandering gaze of the *flâneur* (Fraser, 2012, p.25). The fixed and street-leveled gaze of the pedestrian is substantially different from the bird's-eye view of modern urban planning (Page, 2011, p.8). The books passages evoke, in the reader, the memory of observing the everyday

⁹ For works and speeches previous to *The death and life...*, see: ZIPP, S., STORRING, N. (eds.). (2016). *Vital little plans: the short works of Jane Jacobs*. New York: Random House. For a contextualization of Harvard's Urban Design Conference of 1956, see Scavassa et al, 2018.

¹⁰ For an example, see the declarations of José Armênio de Brito Cruz, former president of the São Paulo branch of the Brazilian Architect's Institute (IAB-SP), and those of Guilherme Wisnik, a teacher at the University of São Paulo's Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism and one of the curators for the X Architecture Biennial, in the already cited Oliveira, 2013. For Brito Cruz, "when people living in the common environment, violence doesn't take place, because everyone relates with everyone, something Jane Jacobs called the eyes on the streets". Jan Gehl (2010), in one of the most acclaimed books about urbanism in the last few years, also defends Jacobs' ideas. A group of MIT researchers ran a survey to test Jacobs thesis, as seen in: Nadai, Dragicevic et al, 2016.

movement of the city, as well as the reminder of the feeling of safety offered by a busy street. The sense of identification the imagery provides can help explain the book's wide repercussion.¹¹

Another important matter concerns the synthesis of Jacobs's criticisms of urban planning. The first line of *The death and life of great American cities* seems to leave no doubt as to the purpose of the book: "This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding." She doesn't just criticize the main ideas and methods planners use in their urban interventions, but questions their very foundation. If the openly declared targets are "modern, orthodox city planning and rebuilding", they are understood as merely another expression of the ideas that gave birth to urban planning at the turn of the nineteenth century. To use Jacobs' terms, "virtually all modern city planning has been adapted from, and embroidered on, this silly substance" (Jacobs, 2011, p.26). In regards to the foundations, there would not be any substantial differences between Ebenezer Howard's garden city and Le Corbusier's modernist city. Both would be equally "silly". Besides defending the rigid separation between the city's different usages, the self-sufficient housing unit projects and the abandonment of the street as a basic unit of the urban landscape in favor of squares and lawns, such distinct proposals can be brought together as Jacobs considers them abstract ideals that overlook the day-to-day life of cities. In this sense, urban planning's history might be seen as a series of models which justify and impose an order alienated from the existing city, with varying degrees of utopianism or technical development.¹²

Both imageries contain this critique. The ode to spontaneity contrasts with order-oriented urban planning that sees no vitality in apparent disorder. The figure of the specialist is destabilized when faced with the pedestrian's knowledge, which derives from the experience of living in the city. The legitimacy of modern urban planning is questioned, and it is for this reason that *The death and life of great American cities* is associated with a scientific paradigm shift in urban planning (Page, 2011, p.7; Hirt, 2012, p.1) – a change in the "rules of the game" (Cymbalista, 2018, p.9) – that would have anticipated criticism towards the instrumental rationalization of life that gained momentum after 1968.

2. THE HERO AGAINST THE "EXPRESSWAY WORLD"

The epithet of hero given to Jane Jacobs is based on several factors, chiefly on the fact that Jacobs did not keep her standpoints limited to her books: she was an ardent militant, especially when her neighborhood was threatened by the construction of an automobile expressway. She was frequently seen in New York's planning commission's public hearings, being thrown out a couple of times and even arrested in 1968, for disturbing a public meeting pertaining the construction of an expressway through Lower Manhattan that would result in the removal of many families in its path (Martin, 2006). Besides all the protests that make up her path as an activist – a source of inspiration for several movements in New York and other cities worldwide – her mythical figure was structured mainly in strong opposition to that of Robert Moses. While their actual confrontations were, in fact, quite rare (Page,

¹¹ For an in-depth discussion about the literary character of Jacobs' works, see Rowan, 2011.

¹² The problem is formulated by Richard Sennett (2018), in his new book, as a contrast between *ville* and *cit *, in which both poles – on one side, the built environment, on the other, the life in the cities – constitute the narrative of the argument. To Sennett, Jacobs is an example of the practical-theoretical arrangement in which the *cit * predominates over the *ville*.

¹³ The analysis of the antagonistic relationship between Jacobs and Moses, reminding us of David and Goliath, is not exclusive to Berman, although he was most likely the first to put the matter in these terms. For a more recent interpretation following the same line of argument, see Flint, 2011.

2011, p.9), literature – especially from the academia – portrayed them as in an all-out war between two entirely opposite visions. As I established before, Marshall Berman’s analysis is the most influential and complete in this sense, and therefore will serve as a guideline for this part.¹³

To Berman, the seventies can be organized by two radically different orders of urban symbolism (Berman, 2007, p.338). One of those orders is represented by Robert Moses, responsible for public works of the “hack your way with a meat ax” style, a last representative of a line of builders remounting to Baron Haussmann (Berman, 1982, p.294). While Moses personifies the modern and its driving spirit that doesn’t see any obstacle in the way of progress, Jane Jacobs is the embodiment of the resistance. And not just any resistance, mind you: to Berman, *The death and life of great American cities* “perfectly expresses” an opposition based on a source “just as modern as the expressway world”: the everyday life of the street (Berman, 1982, p.314). This way, at first glance, the clash between these two figures would shape the very struggles internal to the modern project.

Berman attributes to Jacobs “many apt prophecies and intimations” (Berman, 1982, p.318), a product of her genius and radicalism. Among the prophecies, the use of the spontaneity of dance to represent the city would be a subject to many artistic movements by the seventies. Another “crucial prophetic theme” would be to “give us the first fully articulated woman’s view of the city” (Berman, 1982, p.322), which would allow for the rehabilitation of the domestic world as part of modernity, as well as the anticipation of matters that would become important to the feminist movement.¹⁴ In this sense, the importance Berman gives the book is quite evident:

I believe that her book played a crucial role in the development of modernism: its message was that much of the meaning for which modern men and women were desperately searching in fact lay surprisingly close to home, close to the surface and immediacy of their lives: it was all right there, if we could only learn to dig. (Berman, 1982, p.315).

The problems of a dual approach that stems from this complete mirroring of two characters appear only in the final chapter of *All that is solid melts into air*. In order to account for the bucolic atmosphere of the book, one of the main appropriation points for “New Right” ideologists that made Jacobs “one of their patron saints” (Berman, 1982, p.324), Berman must first break the heroic image he himself built: “beneath her modernist text there is an anti-modernist subtext, a sort of undertow of nostalgia (...)” (Berman, 1982, p.324). Then, Jacobs’ image must be nuanced through the relationship between text and subtext. The critique that puts in opposition an abstract form of urban planning – disconnected from social bonds – and the pulsating life of the big city inhabits the book’s surface, while under it lies the desire of returning to a bucolic way of life where neighborhood and family are more valued, itself seen as an antimodernist view. The Hudson street dance shows a significantly close interaction between neighbors and shopkeepers that know each other on a first-name basis. The pedestrian’s rhythm is apprehensible. Anonymity is not a theme. There are no marks of the “intensification of

¹⁴ See Fainstein, Servon, 2005, p.1 and Bucker et. al., 2018.

nervous stimulation”, as Simmel (1950, p.409) recounts by the turn of the century: passerby show no air of *blasé* and haven’t lost their ability to react to the big city’s stimuli – quite the contrary, they seem always predisposed to look out for the children playing in the sidewalks, to guarantee safety and to interact in such a way as to maintain established social standards. Conflicts are sporadic and remedied by this cohesive social structure. To quote Berman, a view of the city “before the blacks got there”: “her world ranges from solid working-class whites at the bottom to professional middle-class whites at the top. There is nothing and no one above; what matters more here, however, is that there is nothing and no one below – there are no stepchildren in Jacobs’ family of eyes.” (Berman, 1982, p.324).¹⁵ Unlike *Nevsky Prospekt*, Hudson Street’s description has no phantasmagoria or strangeness.

Although Berman recognizes the multiplicity of layers the book offers, it seems that text and subtext can be distinguished and completely separated, as if there was no interpenetration between them. As such, Berman first positions Jacobs and *The death and life of great American cities* as representatives of a moment that had a “crucial role in the development of modernism” (Berman, 1982, p.315) without bringing any antimodernist elements to the foreground. The visionary prophet and the middle-class woman bound to traditional and domestic bonds do not seem to converge. If the matter were to be posed in these dual terms, the image presented by the book would conclude a contradiction of difficult conciliation.

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORDER AND DISORDER

The proposal of a reading that takes the tensions internal to Jacobs’ thoughts seriously cannot come from a dual structure, where the problem of contradiction is solved by a choice of one side in lieu of the other, necessarily choosing between a modern or an anti-modern bias. In order to maintain both sides tensioned, it is necessary to closer examine the position from where the author structures her critique of modern urban planning. The relationship she establishes between order and disorder is, I believe, a good starting point for such an investigation.

As I have previously indicated, one of the main points of Jacobs’ critique of modern urban planning is based on the fact that planners overlook the social relations that take place in the cities. To the author, urban planners try to understand how the city should work according to models of their own design, instead of actually looking at how the city functions: “it is futile to plan a city’s appearance of order, without knowing what sort of *innate, functioning order* it has.” (Jacobs, 2011, p.20, emphasis added). There is, therefore, a natural order of cities that isn’t limited to appearance, which should be taken into account by any instance of urban planning seeking to overcome the state of pseudoscience.¹⁶ From the perspective of modern urban planning, however, this innate order is not perceived immediately as it arises as disorder, as part of the “seemingly mysterious and perverse behavior of cities” (Jacobs, 2011, p.19) or the enigma which urban planners cannot – and neither intend to – decipher (Jacobs, 2011, p.563-564).

¹⁵ It is certain that the book mentions matters related to race and ethnicity, especially in chapter 15, related to tenement houses (*Unslumming and Slumming*). Berman’s critique doesn’t seem to lose strength because of this. Although Jacobs mentions discrimination against people of color and immigrants in New York’s tenement houses, this issue appears only marginally in her argument.

¹⁶ Jacobs proposes an analogy between urban planning and the practice of bleeding as practiced in traditional medicine. Planning would be in the same level of superstition, sustained by “dogma” and a “foundation of nonsense” for having “not yet embarked upon the adventure of probing the real world” (Jacobs, 2011, p.18-19).

The imagery used by Jacobs is, again, quite strong:

To see complex systems of functional order as order, and not as chaos, takes understanding. The leaves dropping from the trees in autumn, the interior of an airplane engine, the entrails of a dissected rabbit, the city desk of a newspaper, all appear to be chaos if they are seen without comprehension. Once they are understood as systems of order, they actually *look* different. (Jacobs, 2011, p.489-490)

This natural order naturally reproduces and regenerates by itself – such as a living organism (Jacobs, 2009, p.488) – and is the source of vitality advocated in the book. Jacobs illustrates this point several times throughout the book: “Vital cities have marvelous innate abilities for understanding, communicating, contriving and inventing what is required to combat their difficulties” (Jacobs, 2011, p.584), or “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” (Jacobs, 2011, p.585). It is this dimension that urban planners couldn’t access. They are intent on bringing order to what they perceive as chaos through subjective forms of thought (Jacobs, 2009, p.244), be them derived from the utopic or the realist tradition (Jacobs, 2009, p.418). This artificial order created by urban planning is doomed to failure: “It is the easiest thing in the world to seize hold of a few forms, give them a regimented regularity, and try to palm this off in the name of order. However, simple regimented regularity and significant systems of functional order are seldom coincident in this world.” (Jacobs, 2011, p.489).

So far, the argument can be summarized as follows: cities are naturally diverse and it is the intervention of urban planning that distorts this vitality by opposing the interaction of usage and function, the idea of streets as the quintessential public space – streets are understood as the city’s “most vital organs” (Jacobs, 2011, p.37) – and high population density. This critique by Jacobs can be described by what Boltanski and Chiapello call an “artistic critique”.¹⁷ The genuine manifestation of the cities’ order only happens when it is free of coercion, impediments and limitations. Any external determination seems to limit the city’s possibility of self-realization. There is demand for authenticity in the critique of standardization and the loss of difference, so much so that Jacobs attacks “the Great Blight of Dullness” (Jacobs, 2011, p.54) as one of the perverse effects of urban planning. Monotony is nothing more than “the enemy of cross-use and hence of functional unity” (Jacobs, 2011, p.169). Although Jacobs doesn’t use the word “authenticity”, the theme is there¹⁸ – natural urban order is also described as “the *real* order that is struggling to exist and to be served” (Jacobs, 2011, p.21, emphasis added). Therefore, although Jacobs insists in dedicating attention to social relations, the critique’s focus isn’t the social, in a sense that social inequalities are not at its forefront. Substandard dwellings – such as slum tenements – are pictured as areas where vitality was lost, mass evictions are denounced for cleaning the neighborhoods social relations, public housing is criticized by the blandness of its architectural standards, its size and for limiting and compartmentalizing certain parts of the city. The issue is not properly the lack of housing or public services – the problems raised by Jacobs aren’t, therefore, of primordially redistributive nature.

¹⁷ Although I do not agree with the concept of critique as an element functional to capitalism, as adopted by Boltanski and Chiapello, the distinction they make between social and artistic critique helps situate Jacobs’s positions, especially in the chapter in which the authors write about the 1960s. See Boltanski, Chiapello, 2005, p.419 et seq., and Tavorari, 2015, p.42 et seq.

¹⁸ See Ellin, 1996, p.1-3. The author argues that *The death and life of great American cities* might be read as a reaction to the loss of meaning and sense of place in the cities, as a way to seek a community or a centrality.

Thus, there seems to be no possible place for urban planning, itself having been completely invalidated. The attack on planning is, at the same time, an attack on the State's actions in the field of urbanism. The idea that there would be an innate order in cities and that one must always turn to the internal conditions that make a city grow, prosper or simply die – “their existence as cities and the sources of their growth lie *within themselves*” (Jacobs, 1970, p.141, emphasis added), an idea exhaustively repeated in 1969's *The Economy of Cities* – characterizes the State as an external cause. As much as the author recognizes the limits to any biological analogy, the idea of the city as a self-sufficient and self-regenerating living organism suggests that the State's actions are unnecessary.¹⁹ This is why the State's actions – in the form of incentives, taxes, zoning and financing – appear only in the lesser-read third part of *The death and life*. In this part, private agents are the ones responsible for creating the condition of the cities' diversity. State planning should merely give the conditions necessary for these private agents to flourish (Jacobs, 2011, p.315).

The book doesn't refer to just any private agent: it praises the efforts undertaken by individuals, be it within their families or small companies. Big corporations and banks, for example, suffer the same criticism as the State. To Jacobs, “diversity is a small scale phenomenon. It requires collections of little plans” (Jacobs, 1981, p.224). The “small is beautiful” motto contains criticism targeted, simultaneously, at the State and at big companies. It isn't a model in which the State regulates the monopolists' predatory actions or develops public policies to meet social needs. In most passages of the book, the State is yet another agent to be contained, in its interventions, by society.

The ambiguities of this critique of the “grand scale”, in the context of the relationship between order and disorder, might help to understand how Jacobs' book offers elements to a wide variety of political views. Firstly, while it is possible to find passages in which the State is criticized *en bloc* – in 1970's *The real problem of cities*, Jacobs argues that centralization is a problem in itself, an impediment to creation and innovation, incompatible with the flexibility and randomness of life (Jacobs, 1970a, p.206-207) –, it is also possible to find arguments for the public subsidy of housing (Jacobs, 2011, p.420 et seq.). Regarding subsidies, Jacobs doesn't defend that the State should build public housing units, but that all housing provision should go through the market. Subsidies would ensure access to those who are unable to afford housing, as well as help renovate buildings in old, beaten-down neighborhoods. In Jacobs' model, every person is a homeowner paying for their mortgage and the renovation of tenement houses comes from every family's individual effort to modernize their apartment. The role of making credit available to them would be left to the State – in other words, generating the conditions for the private sector to develop its interests and bring vitality and diversity to cities (Jacobs, 2011, p.389 et seq.).

Secondly, the praise to the small scale appears both as a defense of humanism and an anti-government stance, a position that is revealed to be more libertarian and less liberal, in a more classical understanding of the term (Holleran, 2016). In other words, it is as much a bet in the autonomous, “bottom-up”, social planning, as a defense of a State with reduced roles. It is for this reason that Richard Sennett portrays her as “a maverick with strong anarchist inclinations” (2018, p.79). On

19 Despite its problems, the biological analogy has positive meaning, if taken into account the context in which the book was written. Modern urbanists usually associate the city with a machine. The organic perspective intended both to distance itself from this vision and to denounce its lack of humanity, which negates the city as a place of encounters. For a map of these analogies, see Ellin, 1996, p.242 et seq.

the one hand, the demand for diversity as authenticity derived from the everyday life is a strong argument against any kind of external intervention, especially those coming from the State. The limitations to the unhindered development of the city as an organism could be denounced as an expansion of the instrumental rationality to every aspect of life, as the source of “the disenchantment, the inauthenticity, the ‘poverty of everyday life’, the dehumanization of the world under the sway of technicization and technocratization” (Boltanski, Chiapello, 2005, p.170). The book also puts forth a critique of technique as the only legitimate criteria for making decisions which affect people’s lives. The book constantly puts the role of the specialist in check, while holding the common person’s knowledge in high regard. Therefore, the relationship between order and disorder leaves a flank open to the questioning of urban planning as a procedure. This type of critique, which Jacobs pioneered, led to an “immediate left-wing reaction (...) to call on the planners themselves to turn the tables, and to practice bottom-up planning” (Hall, 2014, p.398). It is on such a critique that the Marxist schools of urbanism will rely on in the seventies (Castells, 1979; Harvey, 2009).

The book has strong arguments towards the democratization of the political decision-making process that affect the cities, against specialists and their abstractions, and in favor of the public usage of the city, the “human scale” and, specially, the diversity of usages, habits and architectural standards. There are also strong arguments against any type of intervention by the State, favoring privately owned agents and a diversity criterion that obscures matters pertaining material needs.

Jacobs stance is, therefore, more complex than it may seem at first glance. She isn’t reducible to a liberal in defense of the minimal State, nor to an autonomist in defense of democratic radicalism in urban planning. She also cannot be reduced to a hero of modernity, standing against technocratic planning, or the epithet of the nostalgic and bucolic anti-modern. *The death and life of great American cities* is able to “offer something for everyone” precisely for not accommodating this kind of reduction.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The death and life of great American cities is one of the most influential and widely read books on urbanism up to this day. If the hypothesis defended in this article are correct, it is owed chiefly to the fact that the book is capable of sustaining apparently contradictory positions. The contradictions are not resolved, but kept tensioned. This is also why the book began to constitute an arena where different political and theoretical stances of urban planning – and the general understanding of cities – could find a point of support. Becoming a projection screen to “offer something for everyone” speaks for – not against – the book. A book only becomes as canonical as *The death and life of great American cities* if it sparks renewed interest, if overlapping and conflicting layers of interpretation are allowed to coexist, if there is something at stake in its spoils, and if the dispute turns eyes directly to the present, and not to the past.

This statute of *The death and life of great American cities* makes the book a kind of toll all have to pay if they wish to talk about cities, be it to identify criteria to charac-

terize urban problems, or to provide instructions for reaching a certain ideal of a city. The payment for this toll, however, can be made in a variety of ways. Some people will emphasize the imageries that brought fame to the books, exalting the “sidewalk ballet” or defending “eyes on the streets” as the best urban safety policy – be it because it is a policy that requires less intervention from the State, or because it involves having a public space that is inhabited, vibrant and diverse at all times of day. Some will use the book to argue that a planner’s technical expertise is just another in a very pluralistic and complex society, demanding that the city be managed in the most democratic way possible. Others will make their own technical expertise out of Jacobs’ work, defending its principles as irreplaceable solutions.

Jacobs’ ideas are certainly everywhere. Partial interpretations of her ideas can be seen in academic thesis, activists’ speeches, technical and planning jargon and political speeches from all parts of the political spectrum, as illustrated by the opening examples of this article. Given this scenario, it is ever so important to take Jacobs’ arguments seriously and, in doing so, point out limitations and tensions internal to her thoughts. Maintaining the manicheistic opposition between modernism and anti-modernism – between the combative hero and the herald of a nostalgic romanticism devoid of social conflict – prevents us from perceiving these tensions. If Jacobs’ book became the very soil in which so many different views on the city flourish, it requires a renewed effort of the critique.

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