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Conference Report

International conference 'Jane Jacobs 100', Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture, 24–25 May 2016

Jane Jacobs has been a highly influential thinker in urban design and town planning debates for the past half-century. She authored publications that became classics in urban studies literature, such as *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1961) and *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (1984), and left behind a number of pioneering studies on urban economics and the primacy of cities in states.

In May 2016, Jane Jacobs would have had her 100th birthday. To celebrate this occasion, TU Delft and Erasmus University College Rotterdam in the Netherlands took on the challenge of organising a conference wholly dedicated to critically discussing Jane Jacobs's legacy and relevance for the twenty-first century. The organisers emphasised that this was the only academic conference in the world dedicated to Jane Jacobs. The conference attracted about 150 participants and was held in the marvellous buildings of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment at TU Delft. Nearly 40 presentations were divided among six parallel tracks:

- Ethics and the just city;
- Street spaces: history, heritage and memory;
- The dynamics of neighbourhoods;
- The reshaping of old urban fabrics in Chinese cities;
- Organised complexity; and
- Safety in the public space.

Aside from this broad range of topics around the ideas of Jacobs, keynote speeches, workshops and special events, such as a 'Jane's walk' through Rotterdam, completed the programme.

Keynotes: 'becoming' and reinventing Jane Jacobs

The conference opened with three consecutive keynote lectures – the most notable of which, for depth and accuracy, was Peter Laurence's opening speech. Laurence's opening presentation of his book *Becoming Jane Jacobs* constituted the perfect introduction to a programme whose value, in a genuine Jacobsian spirit, consisted of the quality and depth of exchanges among participants who – regardless of their world views and affiliation – recognise in the American thinker an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Laurence's opening speech was rich with anecdotes, analyses and interpretations of Jacobs's life and thoughts, from her early writings as 'city journalist' up to her most comprehensive contributions as a scholar. Through his contribution, Laurence set the perfect ground for a conference that remained faithful to what Jacobs embodied in both her intellectual production and her urban activism: that it is not the sum, but rather the integration, of people's ideas, along their lifelong development, that constitutes the basis for cohesive and creative transformations of both the city and how we think about it.

Professor Dirk Schubert (*HafenCity University Hamburg*) made a plea for contextualising Jacobs's ideas in contemporary urban planning, and critically re-evaluating such ideas. This provided a framework for critically discussing the conference theme – the legacy and relevance of Jane Jacobs in the twenty-first century – instead of being just a celebration. It was the explicit aim of the conference not only to 'celebrate' the figure of Jane Jacobs as urban activist, but to explore and critically question the value of her intellectual contributions for both contemporary and future urban planning.

Arnold Reijndorp, professor of urban sociology at the University of Amsterdam, was the third keynote speaker. He explored how critical reflections on the ideas of Jacobs should take place, by referring to examples from the Netherlands. These three keynote speakers complemented each other and set the scene for the other discussions throughout the conference.

Academic, activist or a symbol of women's emancipation?

On a not-too-marginal note, the three opening keynote lectures dedicated to Jacobs's legacy also caused a reaction by Delft University's students. In the main conference room, two rows of chairs sat empty and displayed the names of female scholars who had not been considered as possible keynote speakers. In the eyes of some, a conference dedicated to a pioneer of women's intellectual and social emancipation, with no female scholars chosen as keynote speakers, may have constituted notable negligence. The consequent demonstration organised by Delft University's students illustrates how international conferences dedicated to authors of the calibre and charisma of Jane Jacobs are likely to acquire not only important scholarly value, but highly symbolic

significance. Jane Jacobs was not only an urban scholar of unprecedented intuition, but also an activist and prolific journalist at a time when women's active participation in socially relevant debates was taking its first steps. This latter aspect of her 'active scholarship', we argue, should not be read solely through, or overshadowed by, the lenses of gender and emancipation. Jacobs's ideas are important because they are still innovative and fertile ideas today. Such unchallenged fertility was reflected by the academic quality of the sessions, as well as by the intense discussions which followed the heterogeneous, yet equally profound, presentations.

Sessions: Jacobs's legacy across urban themes and perspectives

The declared intent of the 'Ethics and the just city' track was consistent with Jacobs's underlying inquiry on what makes urban spaces 'just places'. However, the track was also designed to accommodate critical discussions of Jacobs's early commitment to the then emerging theory of complexity. This focused on her ideas of urban planning as a practice, not towards determining the form of urban *spaces*, but rather towards safeguarding the liberty of people generating their urban *places*.

Stefano Moroni (*Politecnico di Milano*) discussed this exquisitely Jacobsian tenet by focusing on the issue of density and how its meaning in urban planning evolved throughout the decades. His account of Jacobs's early intuitions regarding density and 'horizontal' as factors of creative transformations, and Emma Puerari's (*Politecnico di Milano*) account of spontaneous civic initiatives in European cities as 'incubators' of fruitful public-private partnerships, consistently showed the line of continuity between the most important Jacobsian intuitions about what planning is 'meant for' as well as highlighting current inquiries on the relation between individual agency and public intervention.

On the other front of investigation, more bonded to the theoretical rigour of ethical inquiry, the important exercise of rethinking Jacobs's *implicit* idea of justice in terms of applying established theories of justice in planning, such as those underlying utilitarian, libertarian or egalitarian traditions, was excellently represented by the contribution of Sarah-Maria Schmitt (*University of Vienna*). Jess D. Linz (*University of Kentucky*) provided a different perspective on Jacobs and ethics by documenting the reframing of established meanings and identities caused by processes of gentrification in Cincinnati, Ohio, which is a city transitioning, as many others are on both sides of the Atlantic, from the pre- to the post-financial crisis that marked the first decade of the century. Marguerite van den Berg (*University of Amsterdam*) continued the reflection on gentrification through the interesting lenses of the 'genderification' of Amsterdam's urban population – while Marleen Buizer (*University of Wageningen*) proposed an original interpretation of Jacobs's legacy based on the distinct positions

of ‘seeing like a city’ and ‘seeing like the state’ for interpreting political processes of urban transformations in The Hague.

While the ‘Ethics and the just city’ track focused mainly on the two northern sides of the Atlantic, the other tracks discussed Jacobs’s legacy by presenting cases of urban conflict, activism and transition taking place from the southern regions of the Mediterranean along to India and China. Particularly consistent with Jacobs’s ‘eye’ for local economies were tracks four and five, on urban fabrics and organised complexity respectively. The themes of these presentations ranged from the spatial repercussions of evolving local economies – from those of Chinese villages to those of street markets in Bangkok – to matters of ‘operationalising’ complexity in urban planning. The association of Jacobs’s vision of the city with Vivian Maier’s view on American cities in the 1950s has been inspiring and profound. This view was recently brought to international attention thanks to the discovery of Maier’s archive of street photography, presented by Giovanni Campus (*University of Sassari*).

Jane’s walks: exploring cities and streets across today’s transitions

As the conference closed, a special event was organised by Erasmus University Campus Rotterdam, consisting of a number of ‘Jane’s walks’ through the city of Rotterdam. Faithful to the Jacobsian spirit, the ‘Jane’s walks’ consisted of unstructured city tours, during which spontaneous encounters enriched the exploration of neighbourhoods and connections with their inhabitants. Similar ‘Jane’s walks’ have been organised to coordinate with Jacobs’s ideas in various cities around the globe (see www.janeswalk.org). At the conference, students and docents of Erasmus University Campus Rotterdam led the tours. Brian Doucet, senior lecturer in urban geography, showed his personal perspective on Rotterdam, telling his story about the famous market hall, the new station area development and other vibrant parts of the city. These walks provided an appropriate and successful conclusion to what we experienced at a highly inspirational conference.

Conclusion: walking in Jacobs’s footsteps to understand current urban transitions

This was, without a doubt, an important conference for discussing contemporary urban planning and challenges in urban geography. Jane Jacobs is still – perhaps now more than ever – an inspiring reference for the research and debates lying at the intersection between those two disciplines, as well as among urban economics, urban governance and resurging urban activism worldwide. But what we think constituted

the main added value of the conference was the opportunity to complement knowledge of Jacobs with original readings and interpretations of her legacy. We dare to suggest that all conference attendants were exposed to something new, and that the conference replicated Jacobs's spirit of 'challenging the unchallenged' and of unveiling new understandings of how people can convert urban *spaces* into urban *places*.

Promoting critical academic reflection on Jacobs's work and celebrating her 100th anniversary without nurturing a sterile 'referentialism' to her figure were not easy tasks. However, in the end, the conference succeeded in accomplishing these objectives. This was most prominently noticed in the final session, where participants debated different statements on Jane Jacobs. They asked, are her ideas relevant for future cities? Should future discourses on place-making focus on urban, rural or semi-rural space? Participants were invited to walk on the two opposite sides of the main conference room to express their positions on these questions, and several others. Some moved to the left, others to the right and some remained in the middle. The session moderator gave several participants the chance to explain their opinions, and share them with the group.

We trust that if Jane had been asked where to stand, she would have stood on the side, watching this diversity of positions, and that she would have enjoyed seeing how her ideas keep bringing people together in a shared place of debate.