

# TWO VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN CITY: JANE JACOBS' *THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES* AND ROBERT VENTURI'S *LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS*

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This talk\* is inspired by two key books concerning American urban life, both by persons associated with the architectural world. The first is Jane Jacobs' 1961 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.<sup>1</sup> Jacobs was for many years editor of *Architectural Forum* magazine.

The second book is Robert Venturi's 1972 *Learning from Las Vegas* (which he wrote with his wife Denise Scott Brown and his colleague Steven Izenour).<sup>2</sup> The three are partners in a Philadelphia architectural firm famous for some of the more interesting postmodernist architecture to be found in the United States. Venturi was principal author, so, for convenience sake, I will refer to the book solely using his name.

The key difference between Jane Jacobs' and Robert Venturi's books is that while Jacobs yearns for an America that barely exists, Venturi celebrates, in Las Vegas, America at its most extreme. Jacobs craves those aspects of American cities that are, for want of a better term, «European», while Venturi believes we have created in Las Vegas a unique and valuable urban aesthetic of our own.

Jane Jacobs dedicates her book «To New York City» –which shows immediately where her urban preferences might lie. Indeed, much of the book concentrates on New

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1. New York: Random House, 1961.

2. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1977.

York City and even more so on Boston, the oldest Anglo-Saxon city in the New World. Jacobs barely mentions any city that is not on the East Coast of the United States, and she never mentions Las Vegas in her 460-page book. Robert Venturi, on the other hand, never once mentions New York or Boston in his book. So it would seem that the lines are clearly drawn between these two books as to where their interests lie and what they choose to celebrate.

Robert Venturi may not necessarily love Las Vegas, but he feels, as his title implies, that there is much that can be learned from it. His book is one of the first great exercises in popular culture studies, where scholars began to accord everyday life in the present the same respect as noteworthy artifacts from the past. Rather than decrying a city full of dazzling lights and signs, a city eleven miles long by only a few blocks wide—the ultimate strip architecture—a city which, approached from the air, puzzles airline passengers as to which is the city, which the landing strip, Venturi finds in Las Vegas a curious beauty.

But, more important for our purposes, Venturi feels that Las Vegas is the most American of cities, that it represents typical American ideas and values in its lack of a center and its being organized around the needs of the automobile. Of course, Las Vegas represents everything Jane Jacobs deplores and wishes to reform in American cities. Thus my talk today is, in a sense, about that age-old American problem: whether to craft a civilization by borrowing the best ideas of the Old World or to create a wholly new civilization.

It is wise to remember that Americans have always had a certain antipathy to urban life, associating it with what they have considered decadent European values. Thomas Jefferson deplored cities and felt that they were only fit to enslave, for he felt that concentrations of population inevitably invite authoritarianism. And the dominant American architectural tradition has always been anti-city, not just out of a Jeffersonian desire to see individual family units living off the land but, as well, in the growth of what is perhaps the singlemost important American contribution to world architecture: the suburbs.

Frank Lloyd Wright, our greatest architect, was also no respecter of cities. In his book, *The Living City*,<sup>3</sup> Wright argued for the absolute decentralization of cities. He saw centralized cities as «breeders of parasites», its citizens, «slaves to the herd instinct» who «create nothing». He called New York «the biggest mouth in the world» and «a vast prison with glass fronts.» He said that in the «living city» there would be one acre for each man, woman and child. He even envisioned farms and golf courses in the middle of the city—which sounds fine, except one wonders how a city sprinkled with farms and golf courses could be any kind of city at all. In contrast, Jane Jacobs begins her book by saying, «I like dense cities best and care about them most.»

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3. New York: Horizon Press, 1958.

It is instructive that Wright's name for his hyperthetical city was «Broad Acres.» Further, he singles out Broadway in New York for his disapproval, a street Jane Jacobs admires precisely because it is the one Manhattan avenue that is not straight; Broadway diagonals down the island, crossing other avenues and creating little squares along its entire length. Except for the fact that it is a single purpose city, Las Vegas is not entirely unlike the city Frank Lloyd Wright might have built. Wright's original title for *The Living City* was «The Disappearing City.» Frankly, that would have been a more appropriate title for his book, for a Frank Lloyd Wright city would have constituted the very antithesis of urban life.

Robert Venturi's *Learning From Las Vegas* is very much out of that anti-urban tradition that stretches from Jefferson to Wright. Venturi would have agreed with a recent *Time* magazine cover story on Las Vegas whose opening line was: «How can a large-spirited American not like Las Vegas or at least smile at the notion of it?» Jane Jacobs would have agreed with the second sentence in the article: «On the other hand, how can any civilized person not loathe Las Vegas, or at least recoll at its relentlessness?»<sup>4</sup>. It is safe to say that most Americans love Las Vegas in a manner not unlike how they love Disneyland, but it is also safe to say that those Americans of an intellectual persuasion ignore, if they do not positively despise, Las Vegas, in part because it is that city furthest from the European model<sup>5</sup>.

Jane Jacobs' book celebrates those aspects of American cities which are the exact opposite of Las Vegas. She likes short blocks, mixed use neighborhoods, population density, vast pocket parks as opposed to vast expanses of lawn, and conservation and restoration rather than building new. She likes cities designed around the needs of the pedestrian rather than those of the motorist. If you want to see what Jane Jacobs admires about some areas of Boston and New York, you have only to walk out into the streets of Sevilla.

But what Jane Jacobs likes is what America has precious little of. The reason there is so little of it is that the American city was not, like its European counterpart, built with defense in mind.

Thus we must recognize that what is charming about many European cities today has its origin in the fact that they were once surrounded by ramparts from which burning oil was poured down upon attackers. Defense is what gave European cities their concentrated aspect. Their charm has its origin in the fact that they were once, in a

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4. By Kurt Andersen, January 10, 1994, p. 43

5. If I am to be honest, I would admit that I too despise Las Vegas, along with Disneyland. But I wonder: might this come out of an antiegalitarian failing of mine? I once had a secretary who went to Las Vegas on vacation every year (she called it «my favorite place in the whole world») and proudly brought me back gifts of ashtrays and paperweights which said «Souvenir of Las Vegas.» I quickly hid these in my desk drawer whenever anyone whose in opinion I valued entered my office.

sense, great ghettos which not only kept intruders out but kept their own inhabitants in. While admiring today the charm, say, of the Plaza Mayor in Madrid—its elegant restaurants and summer night performances of Zarzuelas— one must remember that here the state once executed enemies and the church burned heretics. Similarly, there is a beautiful arch in Leon that one might pass through without cognizance of the fact that this was once in fact, not just in name, el Arco de la Cárcel. Much of architectural beauty has a dark, if not grim, past.

The southern portion of Manhattan has some of the same character as that of European cities, but this is because it once sought to protect itself against Indian attack by a walled stockade where Wall Street is now found. Similarly, Boston was originally confined to a peninsula precisely so that only a narrow isthmus needed to be protected against Indian attack. Thus, what Jane Jacobs admires about Boston—for example, its short and curving streets—was originally conceived in blood, and its sense of community was, in part, the product of an enforced propinquity.

The typical American city was conceived without defense in mind. Imagine defending the eleven mile-long strip of Las Vegas! Resistance could be overcome by a small force in minutes, simply by cutting the long, narrow city in half. The typical American city was also conceived in response to the needs of the individual rather than the community. This is especially true of Las Vegas. Las Vegas' only *raison d'etre*, Warren Beatty's recent movie *Bugsy* made plain, is pleasure.

The writer, Tom Wolfe, calls Las Vegas «the Versailles of America.» He points out that it was built «in an isolated spot . . . , out in the desert» and that it makes no pretense of having been erected for reasons other than individual fulfillment and commerce. «It is the only town in the world», Wolfe writes, «whose skyline is made up neither of buildings, like New York, nor of trees, like Wilbraham, Massachusetts, but signs. One can look at Las Vegas from a mile away on Route 91 and see no buildings, no trees, only signs».

Wolfe feels that, for better or worse, Las Vegas is the singlemost important embodiment of American architecture. «Long after Las Vegas' influence as a gambling heaven has gone,» he writes,

Las Vegas' forms and symbols will be influencing American life. That fantastic skyline! Las Vegas' neon sculpture, its fantastic fifteen-story high display signs, parabolas, boomerangs, rhomboids, trapezoids . . . are already the staple design of the American landscape outside of the oldest parts of the oldest cities. They are all over every suburb, every subdivision, every highway. . . every *hamlet*,<sup>6</sup> as it were, the new crossroads, spiraling Servicenter signs. They are the new landmarks of America, the new guideposts, the new way Americans get their bearings<sup>6</sup>.

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6. From The Introduction and the article «Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't Hear You! Too Noisy) Las Vegas!!!!» from *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux), 1965, pp. xvi, xvii, 7.

Since Wolfe wrote this thirty years ago, Las Vegas' influence has, if anything, increased, for it has repackaged itself to attract not only gamblers and sin seekers but family-oriented vacationers as well. In addition to recently erecting the largest hotel in the world, the 1500-room MGM Grand, it has attached enormous amusement midways and yearround circuses to its casinos. Las Vegas today is as much a theme park as it is a city.

It is hard to say whether Las Vegas has become more wholesome or the American family has become more degenerate, but as *Time* magazine argues, «Las Vegas has become Americanized and, even more, America has become Las Vegasized.» *Time* quotes Steve Wynn, one of Las Vegas' key entrepreneurs, as saying, Las Vegas is «a perfect reflection of America... It represents all of the things people in America like.»<sup>7</sup>

If Las Vegas indeed represents what Americans like in their cities, one can imagine the pain with which Jane Jacobs might have received this news. For Las Vegas is everything that *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was written to combat. In Las Vegas, the automobile rules, and, for Jacobs, the automobile is the tail that wags the dog of American cities, and she feels that a civilization that values mobility to the exclusion of urbanity is in trouble.<sup>8</sup> Jane Jacobs is anxious to see people on the streets, not vehicles. If she had her way, all the DON'T LOITER signs in our cities would be replaced by signs that say PLEASE LOITER.

Jacobs feels that, while America may be the freest nation on earth, it is also the least cohesive and dangerously lacking in a sense of community. She finds it wonderful that people can do as they wish in the United States, but also terrible that too often this expresses itself in anti-social behavior. The perpetrators of the tragedy in Oklahoma City last year seemed to be attacking a society they believed had no right to limit their freedom of action in any way.

Oklahoma City may have been a wakeup call for the United States. Architects and urban planners are having to consider security needs in ways they never had to before. In the nation's capitol, Pennsylvania Avenue is now closed to traffic in front of the White House. And elsewhere, planners are seeking ways to balance security needs with concerns for open, accessible space.

In the past, open space has been the hallmark of American cities. But it has also kept them, in some ways, from being cities in the true sense of the word. If the city is to be *agora*, the meeting place of people and ideas, then the enforced propinquity of common defense may have, as a positive side effect, the fostering of community. It will be ironic if American cities in the future begin to more closely approximate European

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7. *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

8. Growing up in the Bronx, I witnessed how that borough of New York City was crucified by two intersecting highways, the Cross Bronx Expressway and the Bronx River Parkway, which quartered the Bronx and destroyed its neighborhoods.

ones just as European cities, certainly since World War II, have increasingly become more Americanized. Let us hope that total urban homogenization does not take place. I should not like to see Jacobs' and Venturi's views reconciled.

Luckily or not, Las Vegas suggests that we still have a long way to go. It may well be to the United States what bullfights and flamenco dolls are to Spain, *típico*. But stereotypical as Las Vegas is, it might be worth keeping –if only as a kind of museum of the American architectural imagination in its most unusual form.

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