

A New Arc
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Newark, N.J.

Jane Jacobs, who died last month at age 89, was the Alexis de Tocqueville of cities. In her 1961 book "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," Jacobs predicted, among other things, that bulldozing neighborhoods and concentrating poor people in high-rises would lead to disaster.

In 1967, it did. The city of Newark, N.J., just across the river from Jacobs's Greenwich Village apartment, erupted in one of the worst race riots in American history. Afterward, Newark was dying. A lively city of almost half a million saw its population cut in half by white flight.

Richard Florida's dad was not among those who fled then. He had left Newark a few years earlier, when the city was afflicted by another aspect of urban renewal that Jacobs opposed, Robert Moses' plan to bisect lower Manhattan with an expressway. That highway was stopped, but Interstate 280 now runs over the spot where young Richard spent his early years before the family decamped for the suburbs.

His relatives still lived in Newark's north ward, however, and he spent much of his youth visiting on weekends. "When I was a kid, I always thought all cities were like Newark," Mr. Florida said. "It's the worst botch job ever."

He speaks with authority. Mr. Florida is perhaps the most prominent of Jacobs's disciples in a field where her ideas now predominate. A professor of public policy at George Mason University, Mr. Florida is the author of "The Rise of the Creative Class," which makes the case for reviving cities by attracting energetic and intelligent people. No place on earth is better situated for such a revival than Newark, he argues. "The location of Newark without question is the greatest available piece of real estate in the United States."

Like Mr. Florida, Cory Booker grew up in a North Jersey suburb. He is the son of a middle-class African-American couple who broke the color barrier. The tall, athletic Mr. Booker played football at Stanford and later studied at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. And like Richard Florida, he is a disciple of Jane Jacobs.

"She had a very strong belief in creating strong neighborhoods and communities," Mr. Booker told me a couple of days before Tuesday's election for mayor of Newark, which he won in a landslide.

As he talked about his plans for the city, we drove past empty lots and abandoned housing. Mr. Booker was imagining filling those dead blocks with some of the most conveniently located housing in the New York area. "It's quicker to get to the former World Trade Center site on the PATH train than for people on the Upper West Side or Upper East Side to get there." And it's not just Manhattan that's easily accessible. Amtrak will get you to Washington in 2 1/2 hours. Newark also has an airport, a seaport and access to every major highway on the Northeast Corridor.

So why don't builders take advantage of this prime location? "Newark has a notorious reputation in the state of New Jersey for the length of time it takes to get certificates of code compliance or certificates of occupancy for these buildings," Mr. Booker said. One woman had to wait eight months to get approval

to open a business, he noted. Meanwhile, one builder found it impossible to get his paperwork approved -- even though the work he was doing was for the city housing authority. The guy then hired a "facilitator" to move the project along, but he still got nowhere. The really frightening part, said Mr. Booker, was that the facilitator was the son of the mayor.

That mayor was Sharpe James. In his 20 years of running Newark, Mr. James managed to accumulate a Rolls-Royce, several houses and a yacht. Throughout that time, he openly opposed gentrification. He didn't want newcomers moving to the city. With good reason: They would have voted him out.

When Mr. Booker first challenged Mr. James for the mayoralty in 2002, Mr. James survived only by running what was almost certainly the dirtiest campaign of the century. He accused Mr. Booker of "collaborating with the Jews to take over Newark" and even went so far as to say of Mr. Booker on TV, "He's Jewish." He isn't. He isn't white, either. But Mr. James accused him of that as well.

The tactics won Mr. James enough of a margin in the housing projects and among city workers to beat Mr. Booker. Meanwhile the state's Democratic establishment turned a blind eye to the race-baiting and anti-Semitism. The policy of the political class toward Newark, even in Republican administrations, has been to throw pork-barrel projects at it.

Mr. James looked like he was on a roll. But then he pulled out of this year's mayoral race at the last minute. His reason remains a subject of speculation to those who follow New Jersey politics.

"There were lots of mayors like James who said, 'I'd rather keep my power base than build my city,'" says Mr. Florida. "Jane Jacobs told me the problem is that these cities are run by squelchers." By that she meant politicians who try to stamp out anything they can't control. They love big public projects, but private enterprise makes them nervous. Meanwhile the professional planners on public payrolls are squelchers of a different sort. They keep trying to remake cities in their past image.

"They're not going to bring back suburban, middle-class families to Newark," Mr. Florida says. "What you can bring in is young singles, the gay community and empty-nesters who are looking to be closer to an urban center." This is the creative class that led to the revival of such cities as Hoboken, which was almost as bad as Newark 25 years ago, but is now like a little slice of the Upper East Side transplanted across the Hudson.

Mr. Booker, though he has never met Mr. Florida, is thinking along the same lines. He wants to see private industry build thousands of units near the train stations, creating a "24-hour downtown" that will be both a social center and a center of employment for the city's poorer residents. The thousands of students at the city's two universities will stick around at night instead of taking their business back to the suburbs. "If we do this right, we can shock people within four years," Mr. Booker said.

Shock? A successful city in Newark's location shouldn't shock anyone. What was shocking was the failure.

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