



Q & A

Richard Florida on the Enduring Legacy of Jane Jacobs

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By Martin C. Pedersen

Richard Florida, the noted urbanist and author of the now classic *The Rise of the Creative Class*, was lucky enough to have befriended Jane Jacobs toward the end of her life. On the occasion of the Jacobs centennial (she was born on May 4, 1916, in Scranton, PA.), I spoke to Florida from his offices at the [University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management](#), about Jacobs' enduring legacy, her role in helping shape his work, the state of cities today, and his current projects.

MCP: Martin C. Pedersen

RF: Richard Florida

MCP: Let's start where everyone starts with Jane Jacobs, *The Death & Life of Great American Cities*. When did you first read it? And what kind of affect did it have on the direction of your life and career?

RF:

I was very young, and at first I didn't get it. My dad—who had very little formal education—would take me to the Newark Public Library. I discovered the area of urbanism and urban policy books and would read books on the war on poverty, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the model cities program, the Great Society. I think I first picked up [Death & Life](#) then. If not, then it was as a second semester freshman at Rutgers College, when I began to take urban studies courses. I read it and it seemed kind of old fashioned to me at the time. The way it was written didn't appeal to me. I was into a kind of heavy, academic neo-Marxist urbanism – the whole bit on the “urban crisis,” the “urban question” and the “crisis of the cities.” And the way she wrote was definitely not academic. I thought: it's kind of interesting, but it's not me. It wasn't until much later, when I was a—I'm making air quotes here—“full fledged professor,” that I came back to Jane Jacobs and saw what she was up to and how incredibly important her work into cities and the broad structure of capitalism really are.

MCP:

What you see in that book, in particular, is what a terrific, evocative writer she was. She set urban scenes like a novelist.

RF:

I think that came to appeal to me later. I had to shuck off all of the strictures of academia. I was about forty years old at the time, I came back to her, and questioning myself and my broader field of urban economic development. That field had privileged the firm. It was all about where companies located, about luring companies to a place, how clusters of companies created wealth. And I was looking around and seeing something else: People were making location decisions and those locations were having huge effects on cities. The students I was teaching at the time at Carnegie Mellon were choosing to leave a city that I loved at the time, Pittsburgh, so I wanted something that would give me insights into how human beings used the city. That's when I came back to Jane.

MCP:

What year was that?

RF:

It was the later part of the 1990s, up to around the year 2000, when I was beginning to think about what would become *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Then I read three or four of her books in a row. I went back to *Death & Life* first, and exactly as you said, I found this marvelously written book about an actual city. It explained to me how cities and human beings work. Then I read *The Economy of Cities* and *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, and those two books made everything click. That started me on a life-long project, which is still with me today, to marry the notion of the evolution of capitalism that came originally from Karl Marx and [Joseph Schumpeter](#), who felt that it was propelled by companies and capitalists and class struggle, with

the essential insights of Jacobs on cities. As she saw it, what propels innovation isn't firms, but these incredibly complicated, wonderful social organisms called cities. That's when a giant light bulb went off in my head.



MCP:

It's interesting that you brought up the other books. Andres Duany told me exactly the same thing. He said that *Death & Life* is only a portion—and arguably a smaller portion—of her larger legacy. Her other books are equally important and together they form a whole theory of cities and economics.

RF:

She saw her biggest contribution as an enlargement of our understanding of the ways that cities and economies develop, the stuff she wrote about in [The Economy of Cities](#) and [Cities and the Wealth of Nations](#). She was planning to write more on that before she died, actually. Back when I lived in Pittsburgh, a friend of mine, Bill Steigerwald, who wrote for the Tribune Review,

[interviewed her for Reason Magazine](#). And she told him, “If I were to be remembered as a really important thinker of the century, the most important thing I’ve contributed is my discussion of what makes economic expansion happen.” So, not too much later, when I got to know her, I asked her to tell me more about this. She basically said, her most basic contribution was in helping to better understand how cities and urban economies broadly evolve. I think it’s one of the most remarkable insights, not only about cities but about the very nature of capitalism. Economists like Adam Smith, she said, believe that what makes an economy grow is an ever finer-grained division of labor—basically by becoming more efficient. Then, she added, when you think about it, that’s essentially a theory of efficiency—of doing the same things better—not a theory of economic growth. What propels growth, she said, is doing something new, creating new technology, new work—in a word, new innovations. That comes not from firms, but from cities. Jane gave us a new way to think about the evolution of society, through the lens not of the nation-state, not of the giant corporation, but of the city, this fundamental human social organism.

MCP:

How did you meet Jane?

RF:

I was on this quest to figure out what was new about cities. And like anyone who admires someone who is older and established, I was a bit scared to even inquire about meeting her. At some point I was invited to give a speech in Toronto, and I met Mary Rowe, who recently stepped down as the head of the Municipal Art Society. She was a close friend of Jane’s and told me: I think Jane would be willing to meet with you. So we had a meeting at her house in the Annex in Toronto. My book hadn’t come out yet, but she had marked up [a paper that I had written with Gary Gates](#) on the association between gays, tolerance, openness, and diversity, and she asked incredibly smart questions. We sat and talked for hours. Around the same time, I was invited to have a public conversation with her in Toronto at [Artscape’s Creative Spaces + Places Conference](#) in 2003. I recall someone referring to it as “Lunch With Dick and Jane,” but I’m not sure if that’s how it was actually billed. We sat up on the riser, and I just let her go. I didn’t talk much. And what she wanted to talk about was her next project after [Dark Age Ahead](#), which I believe she had finished. She talked a lot about the legacy of plantation society, how plantation society and slavery were imprinted upon us in ways that we couldn’t fully understand, and were affecting many of the things that we saw as challenges in our society and our cities. She was going to develop this theme in the next book she was planning to write. She was actually planning two more books.

MCP:

She had obviously read Creative Class?

RF:

At least the precursors to it. She had some of the working papers marked up in her kitchen. I asked her a lot about the challenges of cities, because this was right before the last economic crisis. Cities were booming, but not in quite the way they are now. You didn't have quite the housing price points in Manhattan and Brooklyn and San Francisco of today, but things were still getting expensive. We were still talking about people getting priced out. I asked her about this, and she said a couple of interesting things. She essentially said, I am paraphrasing from memory here: "First of all, Richard, a city like New York is very big, and this creative class you talk about moves around. So maybe SoHo is becoming dull. Maybe it's becoming a shopping mall, as you say, but there are lots of other neighborhoods." Jane tried to distinguish between what she called "good" and "bad" gentrification. She was also keenly concerned about how we renovate our suburbs, which to her seemed like an even bigger problem than urban renewal. The cities have density, they have downtowns, they have cores. The suburbs are these faceless, to use Jim Kunstler's famous phrase, [geographies of nowhere](#).

MCP:

Jacobs was the person who championed the idea of bottom-up planning. Her writing discredited the experts and offered up a different way. Is that the only equitable way to build cities, or are there other ways as well?

RF:

I'm from Newark, but I consider myself a New Yorker, and I was very concerned in the wake of 9-11. I was working with the Regional Planning Association on what downtown Manhattan could become. I asked Jane at one point: What should we do with the site? What's your vision? "You've asked the wrong question, Richard," she said, again paraphrasing from memory, very kindly and politely. "It's not about what I think, or what you think, it's about the people who use the site, the commuters who traverse the site, the workers on the site, the residents of the neighborhood. They're the ones that matter; it's their knowledge and input that's key."

What she was talking about was the importance of information gathering. As a student of the Toyota production system, [my earliest books with my great colleague Martin Kenney](#) were about modern Japanese management. The Americans took power away from factory workers. They carried out time and motion studies on assembly lines and they automated them. The Japanese were much smarter. They saw that the worker on the production line is the true source of innovation. Let's empower them to make their work more efficient, they said. Jane was saying the same thing about cities and neighborhoods. People know best about how their neighborhoods should evolve. And the other thing I should add is that planners typically know worse. Planners, with their top-down plans, she liked to remind us, often do more damage by not consulting with the neighborhood than anyone could have predicted.

MCP:

So what is planning's role, in an equitable city?

RF:

I think we probably need a new word and I don't have it. But it certainly isn't "planning." Planning by its very definition is top-down. It has to be something more collaborative and, more importantly, neighborhood-based. We don't fully understand the interplay of neighborhoods and their evolution, how their boundaries and borders come together to make cities. I have a PhD. in urban planning. I learned a lot of social science, but I didn't learn a lot of physical planning. Architects tend to do that. We need to bring these disciplines back together and create a robust, technology-enabled way to better understand our cities. We have Jane Jacobs' insights, which have shaped me, but we don't have robust science.

MCP:

Some of the research around the built environment is pretty skimpy and not very scientific, in a lot of cases.

RF:

Right. And it's done by architects who are terrific, but are basically looking at it from the building level. We need a whole research agenda. A century or so ago John Hopkins University invented the teaching hospital, modern medicine. They said, medicine could be advanced by underpinning the way doctors treat people and develop clinical methodologies, with a solid, scientific research base. Think of it as a system that runs from laboratory to bed-side. We don't have that for cities and urbanism. But at the same time we know that the city is the key economic and social unit of our time. Billions of people across the world are pouring into cities and we are spending trillions upon trillions of dollars building new cities and rebuilding, expanding and upgrading existing ones. We're doing it with little in the way of systematic research,. We lack even the most basic data we need to compare and assess cities around the world. There's no comparable grand challenge that we have so terribly under funded as cities and urbanism. We need to develop everything from the underlying science to better understand cities and their evolution, the systematic data to assess them and the educational and clinical protocols for building better, more prosperous and inclusive cities. Right now, mayors are out there winging it. Economic developers are out there winging it. There's no clinical training program. There are some, actually, but they're scattered about and they're not having much impact. It's going to take a big commitment. But we need to build the equivalent of the medical research infrastructure, with the equivalent of "teaching hospitals" for our cities. When you think of it cities are our greatest laboratories for advancing our understanding the intersection of natural, physical, social and human environments—they're our most complex organisms. This is going to be my next big research project: I'm calling it the Urban Genome Project. It's what I hope to devote the rest of my career doing.

MCP:

What are you working on now?

RF:

I'm writing a book called *The New Urban Crisis* for Basic Books. It will come out after the election. The new urban crisis is different that old one. The clustering of talent and innovation in cities, what I would call the spikiness or unevenness of economic growth and development, the creation of these great superstar cities like London and New York, and technology hubs like San Francisco, all of that is happening on steroids. What's so perplexing and paradoxical is that the same clustering of people that drives innovation and wealth creation and creativity, all of these good things, is also the driver of underlying inequality, rising segregation, sorting, gentrification, the pricing-out of people. So this new urban crisis is no longer just a crisis of urban failure, it's in many ways a crisis of urban success.

That means that we not only have to think about bolstering our cities, adding transit and density, we have to think about ways to deal with the distributional inequities within them and even more so about the inequalities between them. When you look at the work on wealth inequality, the research increasingly shows that new wealth is coming from those who own and control land. It's not fertile soil, or river deltas, like the old days, but the urban land on which talent and capability and knowledge institutions are massed. We're seeing a staggeringly brutal competition for space, and the people who win this competition are those who hold the gold.

It's funny. We have, on the one hand, the urban optimists, the people who think that cities are going to save us. I would put myself in that camp, along with Ed Glaeser, Bruce Katz, and others. Then you have this group of urban pessimists: David Harvey, Mike Davis, Jim Kunstler—the people who say that we are all going to hell-in-a-handbasket, cities are being gentrified, squashed, crushed. It's time to admit that both sides have some truth to them. Our cities are a great source of innovation and economic growth, but they're also a source of terrible tensions and traumas. We have to overcome this deadening dialogue between the urban “yaysayers” and the urban “naysayers” and develop a new understanding of cities as complex, contradictory entities. We need a better understanding of how they work, what they do that's good, and the problems and contradictions that they generate.

Author Bio



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