

Jane Jacobs, 1916–2006



On-street greenways, like this one from Montreal, Canada, are popping up in New York City, encouraging more cycling. Page 12

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Transportation ALTERNATIVES

MISSION STATEMENT: Encourage bicycling, walking and public transit as alternatives to automobile use, and reduce automobile use and its attendant environmental and social harms.

SPRING 2006 — VOL. 12 NO. 2

ISSN #1524-1912, published quarterly by Transportation Alternatives. Subscriptions available for \$30/year, \$40 (outside U.S.). Reprints (except graphics), with T.A. credit, allowed without permission.

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JANE JACOBS TRUSTED PEOPLE AND trusted that people were the key to healthy, livable cities. Jane reminded us that cities began, and still should begin, at the human scale and that a truly well-functioning street is one that encourages human interactions, not speeding vehicles.

Jane was the first to point out that the best way to make a street safe is to maximize the diversity of people and activities on it. She discovered that “eyes on the street” are the best deterrent to antisocial behavior, a concept that is now the bedrock of modern policing and traffic calming.

Jane taught us to trust ourselves again too. She taught us that our own observations and experiences on our city streets were just as valid (and perhaps more so) than the claims of so-called “traffic experts,” who still today caution that if our streets and parks are not given over to the auto, then we will all suffer in traffic hell. Jane empowered us to speak up about our own version of traffic hell, as cars speed through our parks and endanger us as we walk and bike the streets of our city.

In *The Nation*, Roberta Brandes Gratz recently wrote about Jane:

Understanding about anything, she argued, comes only through direct observation and persistent inquiry. Her inclusive spirit emphasized the value of all participants and gave greater weight to the informed citizen than the credentialled expert. This simple truth, which she described once as “trusting the local,” assists in preventing inauthentic if not dangerous actions in our urban ecologies.

More than just meet the traffic engineers with healthy skepticism, Jane taught us how to fight back, with well-reasoned arguments and strong community organizing. In 1968 she was arrested for taking the fight to Robert Moses during a public meeting. As reported in the *New York Times* on April 18, 1968:

Mrs. Jacobs' Protest Results in Riot Charge: Jane Jacobs, a nationally known writer on urban problems, was arraigned in Criminal Court yesterday and charged with second-degree riot, inciting to riot and criminal mischief. The police had originally charged that Mrs. Jacobs tried to disrupt a public meeting on the controversial Lower Manhattan Expressway. “The inference seems to be,” Mrs. Jacobs said, “that anybody who criticizes a state program is going to get it in the neck.”

Were it not for her fiery leadership, Greenwich Village in Manhattan would now be bisected by an elevated expressway; Washington Square Park would have a highway going through it and we would have lost many more historical landmarks than we did. Through these battles and others, Jane inspired a new generation of leaders who continue to fight for a more humane city, including the founders of

Transportation Alternatives and other groups that are now on the front lines of the fight to reclaim our streets and parks.

As this magazine goes to press, T.A. is in the midst of a heated campaign to pass pending city council legislation that would make Central Park's loop car-free on a trial basis during the summer months. Cars in our parks are symbolic of how our

City still gives free reign to automobiles and confines pedestrians and cyclists to the margins. It is an excellent example of the need to continue Jane's work.

Two years ago, during one of her last interviews, Jane Jacobs gave her take on the issue:

I enthusiastically endorse the campaign to close Central Park's loop drive to traffic. We had the same sort of fight in Washington Square Park in the late 1950s and in my neighborhood here in Toronto a couple of years ago: same prediction of traffic chaos, same result of no chaos, diminished traffic counts and no counts increased elsewhere in consequence.

Isn't it curious that traffic engineers are so loath to learn something new even after repeated demonstrations? Both in Washington Square Park and in my Toronto neighborhood we got our way by pressing for an experimental trial period. A trial, with traffic counts on the Central Park perimeter streets, will be more persuasive than any amount of talk, letter-writing, resolutions, and other endless wheel-spinning.

Jane, in your memory and in the names of the 102,000 park lovers who have signed our petition, we are going to keep fighting until we reclaim the loop drive.

Sincerely,

Paul Steely White
Executive Director