In Search of a Good Neighbourhood

Student Paper No. 6

by Joanne Brownlee
1995

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CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD

In our rapidly urbanizing world, a vast majority of people call the city "home." For those of us who do, the neighbourhood is recognized as the building block of the city. Neighbourhoods are places where people live close together and often share friendly or neighbourly feelings. But a neighbourhood is more than just a collection of streets, buildings and people. We all want to live, work, play and raise our families in "good" neighbourhoods—those which are safe, lively, and filled with the caring familiar faces of our neighbours. However, not all neighbours or neighbourhoods share good feelings. These areas can become anonymous, isolated and even dangerous places in which to live. What sets a "good" neighbourhood apart from a "bad" one?

In her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs puts forth her ideas about the essential components for successful cities and districts. She, along with several other authors—Whyte, Blumenfeld, Heywood and Walmsley—take a liberal standpoint in identifying the heart of the city: its people, its physical structure and buildings and its diversity. After discussing these authors' ideas, I will evaluate my own neighbourhood according to their criteria for "good" neighbourhoods.

The first two parts of Jane Jacobs' book reveal what she considers to be the essential components for "success" in any neighbourhood. These components can be broken down to three general categories: people, structure and diversity. People are essential for safety on the streets and sidewalks and for the establishment of a community or public identity. The physical structure and buildings of a neighbourhood provide for cross-use of the streets by people from a wide area, and allow for a mixture of businesses to operate. Diversity itself is the key to neighbourhood success: a "good" neighbourhood needs diversity to thrive economically, as well as physically and socially.

Jane Jacobs stresses the importance of and need for safety and contact, both of which begin on the sidewalks. The key to these activities is people. Safety must be a primary goal of good neighbourhoods; people should feel safe on its streets, despite the presence of strangers. The fewer people who use the streets, the more deserted and potentially unsafe they become (Jacobs, 1961, p. 30). The reason for this is obvious. When there are no people on the streets, there are no witnesses to crime against people or property and criminal activity is likely to increase (Jacobs, 1961, pp. 33-36). So, in order to ensure the safety of the people who use its streets, a neighbourhood must have people

*Joanne Brownlee is the winner of the Institute of Urban Studies Student Paper Award for 1993-1994.*
on the streets fairly constantly, and building windows must face the street. Both of these conditions provide "eyes on the street" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 35). That is, people—pedestrians, store keepers and residents—have full view of the street and can provide casual surveillance of its activities.

Heywood also acknowledges surveillance taking place in neighbourhoods. Strangers are subject to scrutiny and neighbours keep tabs on each other's affairs and movements (Heywood, 1994, p. 76). William Whyte finds the street to be much like a "stage" with street people the "players". When they congregate for gossip or talk of sports and politics on the street and in the businesses, not only is there a constant flow of people on the street, but a lively and congested atmosphere is also created. Whyte calls this the "social ritual of schmoozing" (Whyte, 1988, pp. 13-21, 55), which is important to street life.

People are also important for the success of a neighbourhood because through their casual contacts on the street and in its businesses, public contacts are formed. When neighbours and strangers alike socialize, admire babies, walk dogs, meet at the deli counter or talk to the grocer, they come to recognize one another by sight, name or voice. Regular contact with these people establishes identity, trust and respect among local residents. As they come to know each other they can more easily identify strangers and, perhaps, be more alert to their movements (Jacobs, 1961, p. 56).

Blumenfeld identifies the maximum sized group in which "human scale" interaction can take place to be 400 to 500 families. In such a group, there would be degrees of recognition between groups of like-aged children, housewives and shoppers, but not everyone would know everyone else (Blumenfeld, 1967, p. 178). This might be a so-called "good" neighbourhood unit size in the sense that it is small enough for meaningful social relationships to develop. Moreover, "public characters," such as the local bartender, hardware store owner or pharmacist, add to this identity and social interaction, passing news and information among interested parties. Public characters also tend to be active keepers of street peace because a peaceful atmosphere is good for their business interests (Jacobs, 1961, pp. 37, 71). Whyte lends support to this idea when he describes store owners as street people, who frequently know all about the activities happening in the area (Whyte, 1988, p. 25).

In addition, formal neighbourhood groups may develop as a result of this network of communication and contact. People of common interests and concerns meet or are introduced and frequently organize themselves under the leadership of the aforementioned public characters (Jacobs, 1961, pp. 56-57). Heywood recognizes that citizens are important in neighbourhoods and that resident groups are influential in the community. He feels that these groups should work with local governments and planners because they are willing and able to relay information from government to
residents and back. Local groups can bring knowledge and insight into local problems to the planners in government because these groups often originate from discussions in local establishments, on street corners and in restaurants (Heywood, 1994, p. 57). These groups create a sense of belonging and loyalty to the community.

Even Blumenfeld agrees that the social health of the city depends upon identity with places and neighbourhood groups, though he fears hostility towards "outgroups" can also result (Blumenfeld, 1967, p. 75). Walmsley voices his support for public identity and belonging to the neighbourhood groups with these words: "For most people, the pleasures of mobility will never provide a sensation that can satisfy the basic human need for a sense of belonging to a particular place" (Walmsley, 1988, p. 63).

Though these other authors lend supporting statements to Jane Jacobs’ ideas about the importance of people in a good neighbourhood, they do not emphasize the safety benefits which may result. However, they are supportive of the human interaction in neighbourhoods and believe it is a key element to lively, successful street areas.

The next elements of success necessary for good neighbourhoods concern buildings and physical structure. These elements influence both the human aspect already discussed, and the diversity aspect of neighbourhoods, which will be examined later. For Jacobs, it is necessary to have variety of both old and new buildings in any area. This is to ensure a variety of uses and activities taking place. The importance of older buildings is that their affordable rents permit small, growing, and specialized enterprises to become a part of the economic community. New shops and those with specialized clientele—tattoo studios, ultra-modern galleries, and new wave clothing stores—often have less capital to invest in modern facilities and thus must start up in older ones. After becoming successful, these businesses can afford to relocate to better, more modern buildings. Other enterprises, such as antique and book stores or bars, seek out older buildings because of the character and atmosphere they impart (Jacobs, 1961, pp. 187-190). Established and high-income businesses, on the other hand, can afford to update old buildings or locate in newly constructed ones. The result is that a variety of commercial activities can take place in the area.

William Whyte discusses at length the strong link which exists between a successful retail street and a lively street life (Whyte, 1988, p. 36). He, too, asserts that the smells, sounds, hustle and bustle of sidewalks are attractive and people enjoying themselves attract even more people. Even children recognize the attractiveness of the streets. Many children choose to play on or near busy sidewalks and streets because they can watch the activities of passersby (Whyte, 1988, pp. 94, 103).

As far as neighbourhood physical structure is concerned, Jacobs discusses the benefits of short
blocks and the detriments of long ones. Short (400 foot) blocks provide various routes of travel from place to place. They offer short cuts to nearby commercial activities and facilitate the intermingling of people from neighbouring streets. The more often people’s paths cross and merge, the more interaction takes place and the more cross-use of streets occurs (Jacobs, 1961, pp. 179-181). These conditions have the obvious safety benefits of many "eyes on the street" discussed earlier. In comparison, long (800 foot) blocks isolate one another and tend to create regular, monotonous and direct routes from place to place. As such, they work against varied, cross-use patterns of travel among different groups of people. Long blocks make it inconvenient to travel to a store even on the next street because the travel distance is so monotonous (Jacobs, 1961, p. 183).

Whyte voices the same position as Jacobs. He approves of short blocks because they spread traffic out and make it easier for pedestrians and cars to co-exist (Whyte, 1988, p. 319). Even though, "tight grid and short blocks may be rigid, . . . the pattern maximizes pedestrian activity, and it provides many of the best spaces, street corners." (Whyte, 1988, p. 317).

As can be seen, these three elements—people, physical structure and diversity—cannot be examined in isolation from one another because they interact and influence each other greatly. The use of old and new buildings to attract a variety of types of activities is the foundation of diversity. Large, established businesses tend to be self-sufficient and provide all the supplies, skills and services they require on their own. Smaller businesses, however, serve smaller markets, and need to draw on supplies, skills and services they cannot supply themselves. City environments provide ideal conditions for small, and diverse business activities. Jacob says this "city diversity itself permits and stimulates more diversity" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 145). Cities can support supermarkets and delicatessens; schools and offices; drive-in theatres and movie houses; specialty food stores and restaurants; as well as residential units at closely spaced intervals, provided enough people can access them easily (Jacobs, 1961, pp. 145-147). The wider the range of activities provided the more successful an area becomes, as long as certain conditions are met. First, these public places must draw different types of people to occupy the streets. Second, these people must frequent stores at different hours, particularly between two o’clock and five o’clock p.m. and during evenings and weekends. This is important, not only for the safety and interaction effects, but also for the economic stability and success of the establishments. Third, the people who come to the area—tourists, workers, residents—must travel the same streets and visit the same stores. That is, there must be a sufficient concentration of people at any given time. This pattern of concentration must also be sustained over a long-term basis (Jacobs, 1961, pp. 158, 160).

Heywood discusses the importance of diversity, not only of business but of people. Like
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Jacobs, he feels different types of people are important contributors to neighbourhoods. He states "the secret of the city's remarkable economic success lies in its open-ness and . . . the continuous infusion of new citizens [class and ethnic groups] with new ideas" (Heywood, 1994, p. 19). He also believes physical neighbourhood planning should attempt to satisfy human and social aims by providing appropriate and well placed buildings and facilities (Heywood, 1994, p. 52). Blumenfeld, however, expresses the difficulty of integrating a variety of uses into the community. The common planning tendency is often to segregate factories or offices from other land uses in industrial or office parks (Blumenfeld, 74-75).

Whyte believes "mishmashes" of activities bring people into the neighbourhood and keep the area alive (Whyte, 1988, p. 80). He goes on to describe the importance of second-storey businesses, window displays and sidewalk merchandise displays in adding to the diversity of street businesses. Second-storey businesses make lively sights: silhouettes are cast in the windows after dark, banners, coloured flags and hanging signs are used to gain the attention and patronage of people on the street below; music often filters down to street level. These sensations attract the eye and pique the interest of shoppers. Window displays attract people, stop them in the midst of other pedestrian traffic and serve to attract still more window watchers. Merchandise displayed on sidewalks attracts people by permitting them to handle, sort through or smell the merchandise without setting foot in the store. In the same way, sales pitches and bargain bins draw people to these displays (Whyte, 1988, pp. 82, 84-85).

THE CORYDON VILLAGE AREA

These examples show the attractiveness of mixed land uses and building types. It is easy to believe that such a variety of businesses and services, within close walking distances and bustling with people and activity would be attractive and successful. But do such neighbourhoods exist? Can all these conditions specified by Jane Jacobs and advocated by Whyte, Blumenfeld, Heywood and be met in the real world? I believe that these conditions can be found, to some extent, within my own neighbourhood. The area in which I live is the Corydon Village area in Crescentwood/Fort Rouge. This area is commonly referred to as "Little Italy," due to its extensive local Italian residential and commercial make-up. Jane Jacobs sings the praises of her close-knit, diversified Greenwich village neighbourhood. I feel that this Winnipeg neighbourhood would also meet with her approval.

Even though I live in an apartment block, I am an active observer of people. If my apartment block had a veranda, I would spend a great deal of time there watching the world go by along the streets. Because I am a student, I travel to and from school at different times. I participate in the early
morning transit ride downtown along with business men and women; I travel the local streets at midday with other shoppers and lunch-time crowds; I watch the residents return to the area as I leave on the late afternoon bus to work, and I wander the neon-lit streets at night, looking at the shop displays and mannequins, with other night owls. Because I am able to see and experience the activities at these various intervals, I meet and recognize many other residents and workers who are active in the area during the same periods as I am. For example, I know "Moccasin Girl" and "Goatee Guy" will get on the bus at the next stop from mine every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning. When they do not, I do a mental check to ensure I have not gotten my days confused. In the same way, I know the manager with one elevator shoe works the night shift at 7-Eleven and Alfred, the "nice" pharmacist, works days at the drug store across the street.

These examples illustrate that a sense of identity and recognition are present in these interactions with the local residents of the area. I trust Alfred will conscientiously provide me with the medication that I require, and am pleased when "Moccasin Girl" or "Goatee Guy" nods or smiles at me. This proves to me that others also become aware of me and recognize when my activities coincide with their own. Jane Jacobs would say that these fleeting greeting and friendly interactions are the basis for public contact and neighbourhood identity. I have also witnessed residents strike up lengthy conversations with the Food Fare butcher, resident "bag lady" or hardware store owner. This last gentleman always beams at me as though I were his favourite niece, despite the fact I have shopped there less than a dozen times. Just the same, he is one of my favourite "public characters" because he always looks delighted to see customers and treats each one as though he knew that individual personally.

The local residents organize themselves formally as the Fort Rouge Residents' Association, which meets regularly. Prominent city councillor Glen Murray attends these meetings and makes his home in the area, as well.

Jacobs' second component of "good" neighbourhoods concerns buildings and physical neighbourhood structure. Jacobs believes a variety of old and new buildings is necessary within the neighbourhood. Along the "Corydon Strip" where I live (refer to Diagrams 1 and 2) are a predominance of older buildings, some with new façades, mixed in with some newer, more modern structures. Most of the older buildings are brick and stonework structures and others are done in white, sandstone or pink-toned stucco. The newer buildings are concrete with glass frontages in square, low-rise office blocks. The medical offices, financial and legal offices, telephone workers' credit union, stylish 42nd Street Hair Designers' studio and several newly established restaurants and cafes inhabit these fancy new structures. A high-rise apartment and two mini-strip malls are also housed in comparatively new
facilities. The remainder of the commercial and residential buildings likely run from 40 to 60 years of age. For example, R. Santa Furs has been in business since 1941.

Jacobs also feels that neighbourhood structure, particularly block length, is important in neighbourhoods. She measures the benefits of short, 400 foot blocks against the detriments of longer, 800 foot blocks. In my own area, I would have described the blocks between Stafford Street east to Daly Street to be long. My original basis for comparison was my childhood neighbourhood of many bays and crescents, which produced short blocks. However, to "prove" my point that I live in an area of long blocks, I paced them out. I discovered that my calculations (based upon a 22-inch pace) showed the blocks to be between 360 and 385 feet in length. This is even shorter that Jacobs’ definition of a short block. By further comparison, her long block of 800 feet would exceed two blocks in my neighbourhood. I can imagine how this long, unbroken stretch of sidewalk would become tedious and dull. The blocks which run north and south off Corydon are nearly half as long as the east to west blocks of Corydon (approximately 200 feet in length). Therefore, once again, my neighbourhood appears to conform to the standards proposed by Jacobs for healthy neighbourhoods.

The "Corydon Strip" from Stafford east to Daly provides many of the commercial and service activities required by residents on a daily basis (refer to Diagram 2). A walk down Corydon from Stafford may take you into Chicken Delight for lunch. As you move on, you remember to check the price of roses at the florists because your mother’s birthday is just around the corner. In front of the drugstore you can mail your letter and make that phone call to your boss. The jeweller’s is your next stop where your watch is repaired. You linger in front of the travel agency, and dream of basking in the sun of Mexico depicted in the window poster. Crossing the street at Lilac, you have a key cut at Corydon Hardware. Back on the sidewalk, you notice an upcoming double coupon sale at Food Fare. Further along the block you admire the lingerie at Lady Godiva. Across the street, at the House of Siam, the wicker chair you like is on sale. The 7-Eleven parking lot is full as you pass and then you see a family of four entering Long & McQuade Music. The aroma of pizza greets you outside Primo Pizza and you rush onward. The flashing neon sign of 42nd Street Hair Design reminds you of your appointment there on Saturday. The clerks are setting up a new window display in Stella’s Bridal Salon as you pass by, before visiting the Instant Teller at the Scotia Bank.

This fictitious walk along the commercial strip illustrates the diverse range of activities and services provided to the neighbourhood people. Jane Jacobs believes that such mixed uses draw people to use the streets in sufficient concentrations throughout the day and into the late evening. She is correct. The restaurants and summer-time sidewalk cafes keep people on the streets until two o’clock in the morning. The Esso station is open until nearly midnight, as is Chicken Delight. Both the
Shell Station and 7-Eleven are open 24 hours a day. The morning and lunch hours are busy on the street with people arriving for work, then out on their lunch breaks. The street is thus well-travelled by both pedestrians and vehicle traffic from early morning until long after midnight. This means there is a fairly constant supply of "eyes on the street" and casual surveillance of activities taking place. I have few reservations about walking this strip alone even late at night, as a result. I feel secure in the dead of night or light of day. Truly this is what a neighbourhood is all about.

The wide assortment of public places offers residents choices. They can choose from a variety of restaurants, grocery or corner stores, medical facilities, gas stations and services, including lawyers' offices, dry cleaners and florists. In addition, the art gallery, between Daly and Nassau, though outside the boundaries I have set, may attract patrons who will gravitate towards the businesses inside the zone. The Manitoba Telephone System (MTS) provides a major source of employment in the area. Shoppers can select clothing from the exclusive La Boutique or the Thriftique second-hand store. These many locations will draw people in to work in the area (MTS) and attract a variety of different types of visitors, for shopping or cultural pursuits.

The area contains enough population to support two schools—a K-8 and a French immersion. Because there are also schools west of Stafford on Dudley Avenue, south of Corydon on Warsaw and west of Stafford on Grosvenor, the natural boundaries of the "neighbourhood" for my functional purposes would be Stafford, Daly, Garwood and Corydon itself. The choices of area high schools are Kelvin and Grant Park. Both of these schools fall outside my boundary but serve the larger areas of Fort Rouge, River Heights and Grant Park. The Stafford to Daly strip also coincides with the boundaries of the Festival of Wine and Roses held yearly. This is largely because most of the commercial and service sectors fall between these streets. In addition, the area west of Stafford supports another small shopping strip, and east of Daly the area is primarily residential. I, personally, would rarely shop outside my Stafford-Daly strip, because all the services I require I can reach easily by walking.

I have shown in some detail how the elements of people, buildings, physical structure and diversity manifest themselves in my neighbourhood. I have explained why I consider these features the most important ones from Jane Jacobs' book. I support her beliefs about what is necessary for "good" neighbourhoods. However, in my neighbourhood these conditions already exist and, as Blumenfeld states, may be successful because the area is "close enough to the city centre to be easily accessible from all parts of the city" (Blumenfeld, 1967, p. 187). In addition, these areas sprang up as a result of the original settlement of the Italian community. Blumenfeld doubts that such diverse areas can exist elsewhere in the city, never mind be successful. He feels outer districts can contain "only the
establishments that can be supported by their own purchasing power" (Blumenfeld, 1967, p. 188). Outer districts will not be patronized by the masses because these districts are not easily accessible, and thus, must rely on their own residents for economic success.

I love my neighbourhood's ethnic flavour, diverse commercial activity and compactness. I feel it serves "for the safety, health, comfort, convenience and welfare of the residents" (Blumenfeld, 1967, p. 179). But I do not think it would be desirable or feasible to simply "create" new housing developments which satisfy all these requirements for success. Successful, diverse neighbourhoods like mine are settled slowly over time, develop their own characters and undergo changes to arrive in their present states. Do we or should we have the power to impose a particular way of life upon the people of an area? Wouldn't such developments be artificial or too "perfect"? Would these developments "improve" our cities and if so, should we wipe out the "bad" areas and replace them? The answers to these questions may never be agreed upon unanimously. For now, it can be said that these types of neighbourhoods can be successful, lively, "good" places to live.
REFERENCES


"Business Improvement Zones." *Information Winnipeg.* City of Winnipeg, Environmental Planning Department, March 1990.


OTHER SOURCES


NOTE: TO THE BEST OF THE AUTHOR'S KNOWLEDGE, THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THIS DIAGRAM IS ACCURATE AS OF FEBRUARY 1995
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**Legend:**
- PEDESTRIAN CORRIDOR
- DUPLEX OR 2 STOREY BLDG.
- BUILDING ENCLOSED ETC.
- RESTAURANTS OR SERVICES
- PROFESSIONAL OFFICES
- RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS
- COMMERCIAL OR RETAIL BUSINESSES
Diagram 2 - P.4

* Diagram 2 is not drawn to scale - some irregularities present *

Legend:
- PEDESTRIAN CORRIDOR
- BUILDING ENCLOSED ETC.
- PROFESSIONAL OFFICES
- COMMERCIAL OR RETAIL BUSINESSES
- DUPLEX OR 2 STOREY BLDG.
- RESTAURANTS OR SERVICES
- RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS