

I. THE SHAPE OF A CITY: THE BASICS

When we talk about the “shape” of a city what exactly do we mean? For Jane Jacobs, it meant thinking about cities not only in terms of how they look (the “**aesthetics**” of a city), but equally in terms of how a city’s “**uses**” function and how they are spatially organized (literally, where uses are located in relation to each other). **Uses** include the businesses, residences, libraries, parks, theatres or museums that attract people to spend time in certain parts of a city at certain times.

Just as important as considering a city’s uses is thinking about **how** these uses function together (rather than in isolation), and **who** uses them. This means asking questions about the kinds of uses that attract people to spend time in certain areas. It also means asking questions about **who is not using a particular place** and why.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

There are many reasons that we should care about the shape of a city. First of all, it helps us be aware of the extent to which cities have changed over time – and are still changing! A city’s uses and functions are very much a product of the social, political and economic assumptions of different historical eras. This means that cities are still evolving and we each have an opportunity to influence the ways in which are changing – just like Jane Jacobs did.

For instance, in the 1930s and 1940s, the Great Depression and the Second World War led to rising homelessness and a serious problem with housing affordability in North America. This led governments to step in to help citizens purchase affordable homes in an effort to create more stability in society. These interventions were so “successful” that over the course of the 1950s, urban growth intensified dramatically resulting in urban sprawl, low-density suburbs, massive housing projects and the wide streets and highways that were needed to access them. At the same time, large shopping malls began to replace local shopping streets as places of encounter and social life (the first mall in Canada opened in North Vancouver in 1950).

By the time Jane Jacobs wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961, the tides were turning. The suburban model of urban development that only a decade earlier was held up as a powerful symbol of progress and economic recovery, was coming to be seen as problematic and undesirable. New ideas about the shape and uses of cities corresponded with the emerging values of the day. For example, when we think about Jane Jacobs’s famous protests against highway development and “slum” clearance, it is important to place this in the context of growing opposition to a suburban model of sprawling development. So just what are some of the key characteristics that we associate with Jane Jacobs’s thinking about the shape of the city, and how do these compare to earlier models of development? Let’s look briefly at four characteristics. In the second section of this primer, “The shape of the city today” we’ll examine whether these characteristics have as much relevance nowadays.

MIXED USE

To understand what **mixed use** refers to it is probably most helpful to contrast it with its opposite: the clustering of **single uses**. In post-war urban development, it was common practice for primary uses to be grouped together using “zoning policies” as their guide. For instance, residential uses were grouped with other residential uses, commercial with commercial, industrial with industrial. This was thought to create a more coherent and organized city – but one typically arranged around the dominance of roads and cars, the necessary mechanisms to move people from use to use. **Mixed uses**, by contrast, reflect the goal of actively grouping different uses in the same area. A major benefit of a variety of uses is thought to be that it provides opportunities for more groups

of people to intermingle at different times of day. For instance, a business district with heavy street activity only during morning and evening rush hours will suffer from fewer secondary uses (shops, cafés, restaurants), and fewer and less diverse groups of users that together create a more vibrant and animated street life. Mixed uses are also argued to promote walkability and other non-motorized forms of transportation by reducing the distances between uses. Walkability, in turn, provides more opportunities for social encounters, which is often argued to be an important offshoot of mixed uses (see the “public space” and “social life of cities” primers).

HIGHER DENSITY

The goal of higher density usually goes hand in hand with mixed uses. By grouping uses together (residential plus commercial, for example), it often follows that densities (the concentration of urban development) increase. Higher density can be a controversial and contradictory goal. After all, if you ask people what they find frustrating about their city, a common complaint will probably be that it's too crowded. So why is higher density seen to be so important? Simply put: in spite of the challenges of living side by side with so many of our fellow citizens, it is precisely the presence of large numbers of people and different uses that make cities so dynamic. Without higher densities, urban areas could not have the variety of uses they do, or serve the diversity of people they do. At the same time, an increase in the number and types of people in different parts of the city gives us the opportunity to cast light not only on **what and who is present**, but also **what and who is not**. Absences can tell us as much about a city as what and who is present! More on this in the second section of this primer.

HUMAN SCALE: THE CITY BLOCK BY BLOCK

The size of city blocks might seem like an off-beat topic, but for Jane Jacobs it was crucially important. The argument is that small blocks provide more “navigation options” between point A and point B. Small blocks send a powerful message about what matters in a neighbourhood. By making the “human scale” count, the result is more diverse uses, more intimacy, more detail in the landscape, more types of users and activities, and more slowness. It means attuning ourselves to the rhythms of urban life. The alternative – bigger, longer city blocks with fewer or single uses (think big box stores) – is argued to have a negative impact on people’s choices about where to walk, where they stop along the way, who they interact with, and indeed whether they walk at all! Long, single use blocks often lend themselves to a predominance of car traffic. Just as small blocks can send a message that pedestrians are a priority, long blocks send a message that cars prevail – a situation that does not lend itself well to mixed uses and users.

OLD BUILDINGS

Jane Jacobs famously talked about the need for old buildings to house new ideas. Basically this means that the importance of old buildings to the shape of the city is not merely aesthetic. Old buildings can offer lower rents which is argued to have an income-diversifying effect. This means, in theory, that people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds can afford to live and operate businesses in different neighbourhoods, thereby promoting social diversity and generating innovative economic activity. Of course, old buildings with cheap rents have, since Jane Jacobs writing in the 1960s, become magnets for gentrifiers who move into lower income neighbourhoods and transform them in ways that may create more dynamism, but also puts pressure on existing residents who may not be able to stay once prices and rents start to rise.

II. THE SHAPE OF THE CITY TODAY

BACK TO THE FUTURE?

In the first section of this primer we asked whether some of the key characteristics of the “shape of the city” are still relevant today. It is safe to say, yes! At the same time, it is important to recognize that we are not living in the same world as the one that existed when Jane Jacobs first protested highway development in the 1960s. We are now living in a time of unprecedented urban complexity. With this in mind, how can the ideas of mixed use, higher densities and small block size help us better understand and respond to contemporary challenges?

AN URBAN WORLD

One of the first things to consider when thinking about the shape of the city today is that we now live in an “urban world.” This means literally, that over half the world’s population now live in cities. According to the 2007 estimates of the United Nations Urbanization Prospects (a branch of the UN that keeps track of urbanization around the world), we have now tipped past the halfway mark for the percentage of people worldwide who live in cities. In fact, it is estimated that by 2030 urban dwellers will make up roughly 60 percent of the world's population! To put this into perspective, the percentage of the world’s population who lived in cities in 1960 was about 33%.¹ But these statistics alone tell only part of the story. Even more sobering is the **uneven manner** in which the *shape* of cities is growing and changing.

THE SHAPE OF INEQUALITY

The cities that Jane Jacobs wrote about over the course of her life were – for the most part – located in one global region: North America. Changes to the *shape* of North American cities are just as important as ever to reflect upon – particularly given the current economic crises facing them. However, when we fast forward to today’s global urban landscape what we see are highly uneven patterns of development worldwide and dramatic rises in inequality. With more connections than ever before between various global regions, this means we need to think carefully about these inequalities both at a local scale and a global one, and reflect on the extent to which ideas like mixed use and higher densities may mean very different things in different urban contexts around the world.

GLOBAL INEQUALITY

Consider that between 2000 and 2030, the urban population in Africa and Asia is set to double. Asia's urban population will grow from 1.4 billion to 2.6 billion. Africa's will swell to more than twice its size, from 294 million to 742 million. Latin America and the Caribbean will see its urban population rise from 394 million to 609 million. By 2030, 79 percent of the world's urban dwellers will live in the developing world's towns and cities. And Africa and Asia will account for almost seven in every 10 urban inhabitants globally.² The scope, speed and scale of these transformations will put tremendous pressure on these regions’ ability to provide basic services to their urban citizens, protect the natural environment, ensure a safe and reliable food and water supply, and maintain peace among increasingly diverse populations groups. So when we think about mixed uses and higher densities, we also need to think about a city – and country’s – *capacity* to respond. In more “developed” parts of the world like North America and Europe, capacity is generally higher. But this shouldn’t lead us to assume that the solutions being proposed are necessarily *better*. Cities in parts of the “developing” world – often precisely because of the scale of the challenges they face – are in many cases leading the way by proposing innovative responses to rapid urbanization that give us new understandings of what “mixed uses” and “density” can mean. More on this at the end of this section!

LOCAL INEQUALITY

In his 2006 book *Planet of Slums*, author Mike Davis paints a chilling portrait of the proliferation of “slum” settlements around the world, and their uneven distribution. Slums are generally characterized by overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation and insecurity of tenure (or the right to stay in place without being forcefully displaced). In the “developed” world, residents of slums make up only 6 percent of the city population while in the least “developed” parts of the world, residents of slums make up a shocking 78.2 percent of urbanites.³ This means that there are many countries in the world where well over half of the urban population are slum dwellers. In such contexts, does it make sense to think about mixed uses and densities as necessary **solutions** to urban pressures? Consider this photograph of São Paulo, Brazil:



Image source: <http://www.wackyarchives.com/offbeat/rich-vs-poor-in-the-3rd-world.html>

What we see are the ways that mixed uses and densities can function very differently – and indeed very unevenly – in the same city! The right side of the photograph shows mixed uses (residential uses plus green space and recreational uses) and higher densities (a high rise residence). The left side of the photograph also shows mixed uses and high densities although clearly the situation is not the same! Here, the city is informally planned, with little or no basic infrastructure, poor housing conditions, and a very different “mix” of uses. This tells us that context matters! It means that characteristics such as mixed use, density and short blocks can function as key ingredients for vibrant cities in some places, while reflecting and reinforcing social and economic disparities in others.

At the same time, we don’t need to look to the “developing” world to see increasing divides between “haves” and “have-nots.” We have many examples in our own backyard. A recent study of the City of Toronto found that it is no longer a “city of neighbourhoods” but rather a “city of disparities.” Commenting on the growing divide between incomes and socio-economic status, the study finds that Toronto is so polarized that it could be described as three geographically distinct cities made up of 20 percent affluent neighbourhoods, 36 percent poor neighbourhoods, and 43 percent middle-income earner neighbourhoods – and that 43 percent is in decline. This three-city disparity did not exist before. At the start of the 30-year period of the study (the 1970s), the majority of people in Toronto were middle income (within 20% of the city-wide average).⁴ The authors of the Toronto study identify a number of implications of the “divided city.” These

include:

- Widening gap & spatial separation of rich and poor
- Guarded enclaves of the well off & well educated
- Highrise condo citadels of the rich
- Highrise rental slums of the poor
- Sprawling suburbs of a declining middle-income group
- High crime in lower income immigrant neighbourhoods
- Neighbourhoods of the excluded, often overwhelmingly along racial and ethnic lines⁵

INNOVATIONS & SOLUTIONS

In Toronto and São Paulo – as with many other cities around the world – creative responses are needed. Mixed uses and higher densities can form part of the solution. But we must ask ourselves: who benefits from higher densities? For instance, the “highrise condo citadels of the rich” will not do much for less affluent segments of the population! We need to ask: who has access to enjoying the fruits of well-planned mixed uses? Are all people made to feel welcome? And last but not least: who gets to participate in decision-making?

In many cities around the world these questions are being taken up with great vigour and determination. Strategies to create more “sustainable” cities, “livable” cities or “healthy” cities typically place mixed uses and higher densities at their core. In many cases, new strategies involve a re-thinking of what mixed uses mean and how they are integrated into urban landscapes and communities. For instance, the City of Belo Horizonte, Brazil is a global leader in working towards urban food security. What does this have to do with mixed uses and densities? Well, Belo Horizonte has since 1993 enshrined citizens’ rights to “adequate quantity and quality of food” and committed that it is “the duty of governments to guarantee this right.” By managing the provision and distribution of food in the city, the city has re-introduced the “uses” of food production and distribution in the form of community gardens, mobile food markets and “popular restaurants” (low-cost restaurants). These uses have added new layers of richness to what mixed use and density can mean for communities. Just as important, the municipality has engaged community groups as partners of the government, which has affirmed the commitment to the inclusive and participatory nature of the programs.

... BACK TO JANE

The final chapter of Jane Jacobs’ book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is called “The Kind of Problem a City Is.” It is in this chapter that she argues forcefully against reductive thinking when it comes to cities. What we need, she argued, are ways to approach cities as “problems of organized complexity.”⁶ So while she could not at the time have imagined the sheer magnitude of complexity that cities would reach in the subsequent decades, what she insisted upon was agility and creativity to respond to emerging challenges.

GETTING INVOLVED

▪ **Your local government** – Municipalities in Canada and elsewhere are typically required to produce an overarching planning document that details the different types of uses (zones), how these zones relate to one another and how growth and change will affect the shape of the city. These “Official Plans” (they go by different names in each province) provide an excellent high-level picture of how each city will develop over time – (or at least how this development is *intended*). Municipalities will also have produced a range of other reports and public documents that relate to the shape of the city – including documents on transportation, housing, neighbourhood development, economic activity and more. Start by searching your local city

website to see what you can find on-line.

Municipal governments also tend to focus on “shape” issues through the lens of urban design and planning. Many local governments will have separate public meetings relating design and planning issues, while other (usually smaller) cities may incorporate these sessions into their regular council meetings. Either way, these meetings are a great opportunity to learn more about specific city-building questions that are currently up for discussion. What’s more, as a resident you are encouraged to become involved in these discussions. Typically, all you have to do is notify the City Clerk or Meeting Administrator (again, the title changes) that you want to have a chance to speak.

Social Planning Councils - Various

Many cities, regions and provinces have Social Planning Councils which work on the issues raised in this paper. Poverty and the growing gap between the rich and poor, economic development and social inclusion are among the many topics and campaign areas covered in their activities. Check your phone book or search the internet for “social planning council.” These organizations are usually always looking for volunteers to help them with their work.

Globalization and World Cities (GaWC) Research Network –www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc

A UK-based research network that studies how cities relate to one-another in an increasingly globalized world. GaWC operates as a collective think-tank and publishes some excellent bulletins and other publications.

Metropolis Project – <http://canada.metropolis.net>.

Metropolis is an international network for comparative research and public policy development on migration, diversity, and immigrant integration in cities in Canada and around the world. They hold an annual conference as well as local planning meetings.

FURTHER LINKS

Aalborg Commitments: <http://www.aalborgplus10.dk>

Slum Cities: A Shifting World (CBC Radio): <http://www.cbc.ca/correspondent/060507.html>

Belo Horizonte: The Beautiful Horizon of Community Food Sovereignty. Article by Wayne Roberts and Cecilia Rocha in *Alternatives Magazine*: <http://www.alternatives.ca/article3930.html>

UN Habitat State of the World’s Cities: http://www.un-ngls.org/site/article.php3?id_article=590

UN Advisory Group on Forced Evictions:
<http://ww2.unhabitat.org/campaigns/tenure/taskforce.asp>

III. EXERCISES: THE SHAPE OF YOUR CITY

As we have seen, the shape of a city, including mixed uses, higher densities and shorter blocks are important parts of our urban landscapes.

This brings us to the question: **what is the shape of your city?**

As a walk leader, it will be your challenge to bring different dimensions of the shape of your city to the attention of your walkers. The shape of *your* city, whether it is high density or low, mixed

or single use, will provide you with lots of opportunity connect the ideas we've talked about in this primer to the theme of your own walk. Here are two exercises that you can consider:

- **EXERCISE 1: HUMAN SCALE – WHERE DO YOU FIT?**
- **EXERCISE 2: WHAT ARE THE “USES” IN YOUR COMMUNITY, AND WHO GETS TO USE THEM?**

Keep in mind that a great way to get people thinking is to ask good questions without necessarily providing the answers! Your job is to help people “see” and experience their city differently. A good way to do this is to engage your walkers directly in the exercises by asking them to share their own perspectives on mixed uses, densities, short blocks and old buildings.

EXERCISE 1: HUMAN SCALE – WHERE DO YOU FIT?

This exercise focuses on the idea of “**human scale**.” Basically, this refers to how we “fit” into our urban landscape. Do we feel awed and overpowered by soaring office towers, or right at home sitting at a sidewalk café on our favourite shopping street? Remember that these experiences are often closely linked to the type and extent of mixed uses and densities. The exercise will require you to pre-select two specific “pit-stops” along your walk route. One pit-stop will be a long block with few “uses.” The second will be a shorter block with a higher number of “uses.”

1. Take a few moments at each of your pit-stops and ask your walkers how they feel in each place. Does either pit-stop evoke feelings of belonging and connection? Or do the pit-stops make people feel alienated and overshadowed? Try to ask people to expand on the reasons for their answers.
2. Ask your walkers to put themselves in other people's shoes. Ask them to reflect on how a person who is homeless, or who has mobility challenges, or mental illness might answer the same questions.
3. Ask your walkers what they observe as the general characteristics of the spaces around each pit-stop. For instance, how much space is set aside for pedestrians? How much for cars? How much for other uses? How much “density” is there? Ask them what difference they think this makes.
4. Ask your walkers what they would change about the two pit-stops if they could. Who do they think would benefit from the changes?

EXERCISE 2: WHAT ARE THE “USES” IN YOUR COMMUNITY, AND WHO GETS TO USE THEM?

For this exercise you can pause on a particular part of a city block, laneway or busy thoroughfare. Ask your walkers what “uses” they observe at this pit-stop. Some uses might include:

- Shops and other businesses
- Schools
- Food markets
- Parks and other green spaces
- Homes
- Playgrounds
- Public squares
- Laneways and alleys
- Paths (marked and unmarked)

1. Ask your walkers what they think works best about the mix of uses and densities. Ask what they think are the biggest challenges?
2. Ask what your walkers to reflect on who the “users” are in place in question. Ask whether they think that the place you are reflecting on is open and accessible to everyone? Who might have trouble accessing the “uses”?
3. If there are people on your walk from cities in other parts of the world, invite them (if they are willing) to share their perspectives from their home city. Ask them how the place you are examining compares to their home city. What kind of uses would that person see in a similar type of place? What are the differences? The similarities?

¹ United Nations Habitat (2007). *United Nations, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2007 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2007). Accessed January 19, 2009 from <http://esa.un.org/unup/p2k0data.asp>

² Population Reference Bureau (2007). World Population Highlights: Key findings from PRB’s 2007 World Population Data Sheet. In *Population Bulletin*, vol 62, no. 3, p. 10.

³ Davis, M. (2006). *Planet of Slums*. London: Verso, pp. 22 – 23.

⁴ Hulchanski, D. (2007). *The Three Cities within Toronto: “a city of disparities.”* Media Release: Centre For Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto. December 20, 2007. “Available on-line at wellesleyinstitute.com/files/cucs/cucsmediarelease_toronto_disparities201207.pdf

⁵ Hulchanski, D. (2008). *Toronto’s Future: One City or Three?* August 2008, presentation. Accessed January 19, 2009 from www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/redirects/gtuo_dl_one_or_three.html.

⁶ Jacobs, J. (1961). *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House & Vintage Books, pp. 432 – 440.