

I. THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CITIES: THE BASICS

Cities have historically been places of enormous **diversity** where people from different ethno-cultural, social, religious and geographical backgrounds must learn to live side-by-side. Instead of viewing diversity as a source of conflict (which indeed it can be!) Jane Jacobs saw diversity as essential glue that holds cities together.

In “**the shape of the city**” primer and “**the public spaces of the city**” primer we learned about the ways that Jane Jacobs conceived of diverse urban form including mixed use, high density, walkability, and human scale. In her view, these characteristics provided the essential building blocks needed to create vibrant city spaces. In this primer, we will take this even further by delving into what Jane Jacobs thought about *who* lives in cities and *how* we get along. We’ll call this “**the social life of cities**” to emphasize the human dimensions of the built environment that Jane Jacobs felt were so important. After all, it is the **diversity of people** who live and interact within city spaces that make cities what they are. Later on in this primer we’ll look at the social life of cities today. We’ll finish up with some exercises that will help you take the pulse of the social life of *your* city.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Throughout her life, Jane Jacobs insisted that cities should be planned for people. This may seem painfully obvious, but it’s important to remember that cities have not always been imagined as places for people – at least not for *all* people. Over the course of history, cities have sometimes been seen as places of depravity that must be “ordered” through planning. Part of this “ordering” has involved strategies to contain whatever is perceived to be the source of disorder and chaos. Unfortunately, anxieties about disorder have sometimes been unfairly linked with certain *groups of people* resulting in exclusions and forced isolation.

Examples include Chinatowns where the majority of Chinese immigrants to North America settled from the 1850s onward, as well as Jewish, Italian and Irish ghettos, among others. These were ways of forcing people of certain religious, racial or ethno-cultural backgrounds to remain only in specific areas of a city. Even though ghettos may have been sites of tremendously rich and vibrant community life, they often remained socially and economically isolated from the rest of the city, and experienced vulnerability to forced displacement by “dominant” population groups. Later in the twentieth century we saw the emergence of African American ghettos in US cities. African American ghettos were created (in part) as a result of discriminatory assumptions (and in some cases laws), but also by a failure to locate services such as banking, healthcare, supermarkets, public transportation and other essential infrastructure in “black” neighbourhoods.

Assumptions behind the creation of ghettos – however they are created and whoever lives in them – are fuelled by unfounded beliefs and stereotypes. Today, we wouldn’t find the active creation of ghettos acceptable, but this doesn’t mean they don’t exist! Remember our discussion of **informal slum settlements** in “**the shape of the city**” primer. Instead of being a thing of the past, slums – our modern ghettos – remain a feature of urban landscapes in “developed” and “developing” parts of the world.

With cities now being more complex than ever before in history, it is not surprising that concerns continue to flare about who “belongs” in cities, who gets to live in particular neighbourhoods, who benefits from social and economic opportunities, who has access to essential services, and who participates in important decision-making about cities. It was these concerns that motivated Jane Jacobs to think carefully about the social life of cities by advocating the productive uses of difference and diversity – both in built form and the people who use it.

DIVERSITY AS AN ASSET

In a nutshell, Jane Jacobs argued that diversity in cities should be treated as an asset. When Jane Jacob's used the term **diversity** she was referring mostly to the notion of "**diversity of uses**" that enable city districts, neighbourhoods, open-spaces – even sidewalks – to work well. She wrote about the problems that exist where city neighbourhoods and districts are overly constrained in terms of the number of uses. For example, residential suburbs that lack industry commerce, or neighbourhoods with such long blocks that they limit opportunities for people to access neighbouring streets – and the various businesses and activities that they might hold.

WHAT ABOUT DIVERSITY IN THE SOCIAL LIFE OF A CITY?

Although she wrote less directly about demographic diversity, Jane Jacobs did insist that *social* diversity has inherent advantages over its opposite: uniformity. This doesn't mean that she felt everyone should know one another and "get along" (clearly an impossible goal). Rather, she reminded us that one of the key features of cities is the sheer number of people – different people – that are brought within close proximity of each other. In fact, "difference" itself can be what pulls people born outside of city boundaries to make their way to the urban core in search of the various benefits that come with diversity: shared interests, mutual supports, a sense of tolerance, the possibility of new and different work. Diversity attracts diversity!

In this sense, the social life of cities can be thought of an endless series of permutations that change with each passing generation, each wave of immigration, each demographic shift. The result of these shifts is an ever changing palette of colour, sounds, and tastes of the city – its storefronts and restaurants, its festivals and celebrations, the uses of its public spaces, its neighbourhoods and its mechanisms of governance. At the level of daily lived experience, it is this **diversity and multiplicity of people** that Jane Jacobs argued resulted in safer and more vibrant streets, more opportunities for informal interactions, and a greater sense of place and belonging.

BOTTOM-UP COMMUNITY PLANNING

An even more fundamental contribution was Jane Jacobs's insistence that ordinary people from all walks of life must be involved in decision-making about how cities are planned. This is often referred to as "**participatory planning**" or "**bottom-up community planning**." Basically, these approaches represent a challenge to traditional planning approaches that at the time were (and some would argue, still are!) seen as expert-driven and "top down." By paying attention to people's "real life" rhythms and experiences of neighbourhoods, Jane Jacobs believed that plans and policies would come to better reflect the needs and desires of residents. She believed that better community development resulted from local intelligence and expertise, instead of relying on distant "experts" who do not live and interact in the places being transformed. At the same time, by insisting on opportunities for local residents to meaningfully contribute their efforts to the planning process, she felt that citizens would be empowered, resulting in more pride in place, and stronger networks of trust and reciprocity. Jane Jacobs called this "social capital" (1961: 138 – 140), making her one of the first to coin the term.

The central message here is that **participatory planning** was argued by Jane Jacobs to have tremendous value both as a **process** (by including local people most affected by planning decisions) and an **outcome** (by resulting in more responsive and appropriate development for communities).

II. THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CITIES TODAY

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING & THE ROLE OF “COMMUNITY”

Although diversity was identified by Jane Jacobs as an asset, she did not go so far as to claim that the goal was to create one great big harmonious “social life” of the city. Disagreements and conflicts happen, after all! Instead, she recognized that the complicated nature of personal and neighbourly relationships in cities. Sometimes with neighbours, there is a call to “togetherness” and other times – whether for privacy, “tradition,” or other reasons, people prefer the company of those they relate most too (1961: 66). At the same time, She presented a caution, suggesting that, as good as it is to talk about difference, we need to be careful about looking at other communities from afar – for they are not always as “naturally cohesive” as they may look to outsiders (138).

These observations effectively foreshadowed what would become a dominant characteristic of contemporary cities: the fact that many of us typically belong to **many communities at once**. Cities, unlike smaller towns and villages, have always been places where people of different backgrounds intermingled. In the 21st century, the lived experience of diversity has expanded considerably. This recognition has important implications for the “social life” of cities. For instance, it leads us to ask how we define “community?” Which places and groups of people are included? And who gets to participate in planning decisions?

COMMUNITY OR COMMUNITIES?

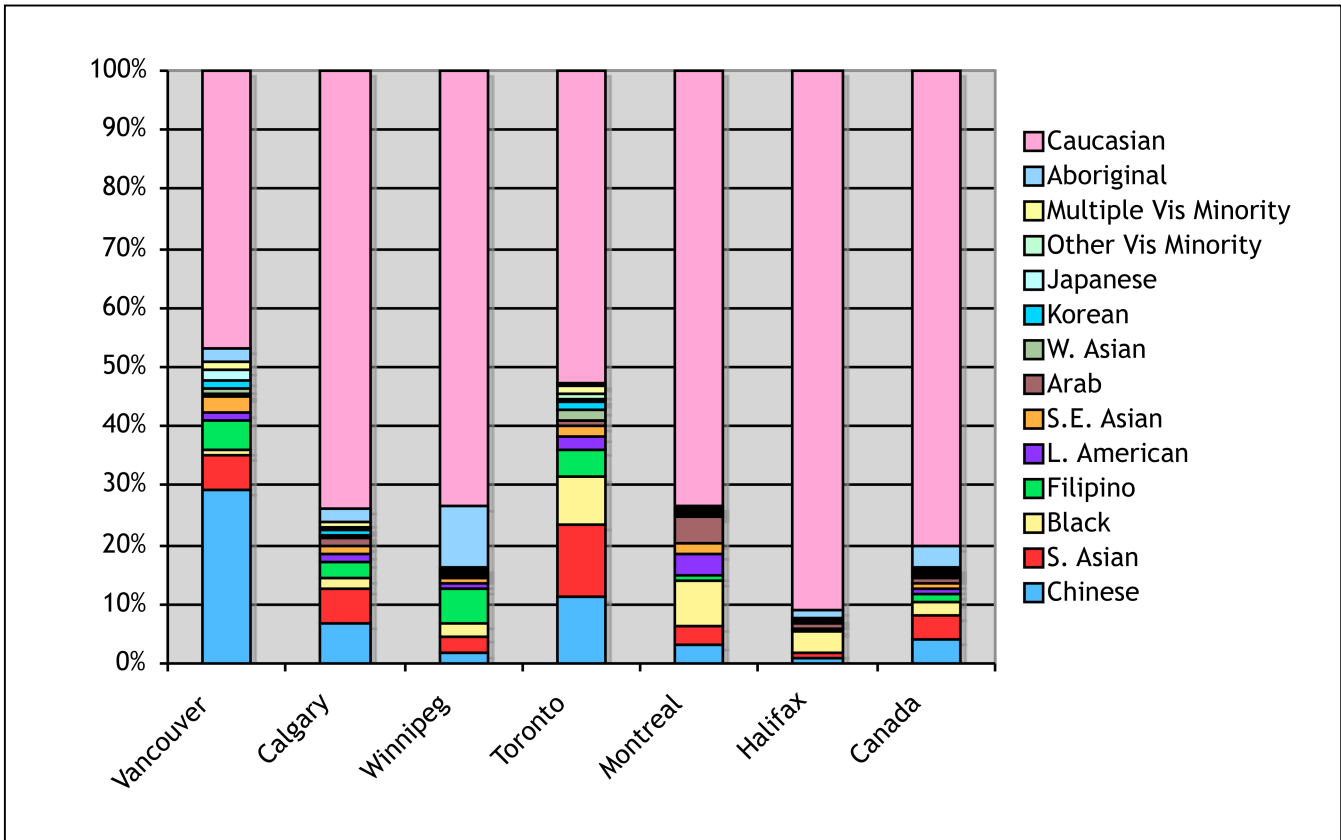
In today’s cities, we can look to two important concepts to help us unpack these ideas a little further: communities of place and communities of interest. **Communities of place** refer to the type of associations that we have with people because of where we live – be it neighbourhood, town or city. **Communities of interest** refer to the types of associations that we hold with people who are “like-minded” in one or more ways – perhaps because of a shared politics, or a particular lifestyle, or a shared ethno-cultural, linguistic, political, educational, sexual identity, age-based or religious background. Think Facebook – it’s built on the idea of communities of interest.

These two types of communities are often able to merge – at least in part. The prevalence of **artists’ districts, gay districts, little Italies and Chinatowns** across North American cities attests to the opportunity for communities of shared interest and background, as well as shared place to form. Keep in mind however, that some of these “communities” were once considered ghettos even though they may nowadays be heralded as assets of a city. In some cases they are even tourist destinations! The key message is that communities and the ideal of diversity are complex and shifting.

Consider, for instance, that while geographically based features (such as neighbourhood boundaries, city centres, etc.) tend to stay reasonably static in cities over time, the contours of “communities” can shift – moving place, expanding or contracting, all of which reflect the changing circumstances of a “community.” For example, Toronto’s Chinatown has literally moved “place” several times. The Jordaan in Amsterdam was once a poorer “Jewish quarter” but is now home to a diverse – and well-off array of people. Vancouver’s Bennetville of the 1930s (a shantytown named after then Prime Minister R.B. Bennett, near present day Granville Island) is now one of the most expensive postal codes in the country. What this means is that there are many pressures and competing visions at play in defining what a place is, what it was, and what it should be. These competing visions can be based on historical claims and the “traditional” identity of a place and its residents, but equally on new claims and definitions introduced by shifting “communities of interest.”

CANADA’S URBAN MAKE-UP: THE DIVERSITY OF DIVERSITY!

Another way to think about diversity in cities is of course to look at demographic changes that reflect our ethno-cultural and linguistic differences. A number of Canadian cities count themselves as among the most diverse cities in the world. If we consider ethno-cultural diversity alone, we need only look to the 2006 Census of Canada to see that much of the country’s population growth is taking place through immigration from other countries. Not only do Census data present data on newcomers, it also provides population figures for many different “communities” – those joined by language, income, education or minority status, to name a few. The following table uses data from a few of these measures (including “Visible Minority”, Aboriginal Identity and overall population data) to show the relative differences between several key regions on the basis of this measure.¹ What we can see is that the notion of diversity, in an ethno-cultural sense, is also diverse!



Source: Statistics Canada. Visible Minority Population and Population Group Reference Guide, 2006 Census. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2006. Available on-line at http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/ref/rp-guides/visible_minority-minorites_visibles-eng.cfm. Retrieved December 15, 2008.

PARTICIPATION IN CIVIC LIFE TODAY

Since Jane Jacobs’s early writings on participatory “bottom-up” planning, new models and practices have proliferated. One of the most significant effects of diversity – apart from its very existence – is the ways it has influenced opportunities to participate in civic life, and beyond that, the very notions of planning and “local governance.” Where decision-making about cities was once thought to be left to elected officials and influential “elites,” there is now a growing expectation that we all have a stake in defining how our cities should be planned, built and lived

in. This trend is picking up steam and manifesting in surprising and imaginative ways. In what follows we'll introduce just a few examples.

a. Participatory budgeting

The first participatory budgeting exercise was held in 1989 in the city of Porto Alegre, in southern Brazil. Although a number of definitions of participatory budgeting exist, in general terms, a Participatory Budget is "a mechanism (or process) through which the population decides on, or contributes to decisions made on, the destination of **all or part of the available public resources**" (Cabannes 2004: 20). This means that direct authority is devolved from elected officials to community "delegates" via official community-led forums to decide how a fixed percentage of a municipal budget should be spent. This is direct democracy! Based on principles of social inclusion and equity, this planning exercise has proven to be a powerful vehicle for local empowerment, citizen participation and engagement. In cities where participatory budgeting is practiced, community members have decided to direct participatory expenditures on such urban improvements as housing, street paving, access to water, sanitation, education, health, social welfare and urban agriculture. Participatory budgeting, as "bottom-up" city planning process, is now practiced by hundreds cities worldwide from Latin America to Europe.

b. Citizen Councils: *Partners* in urban planning and local governance

The creation of neighbourhood-based or issue-based citizen councils is another important trend. Over the years there have typically been community-based bicycling committees, business associations, seniors groups or groups working on environmental issues. What is different about today's citizen councils is that some of them now take the form of **partnerships** between local communities and government instead of arms-length entities or activist groups working in **opposition** to government. An example can be found in municipal food policy councils. We'll look at Vancouver's Food Policy Council (VFPC) as an illustration.

The VFPC describes itself as a new model of integrated local governance involving **city staff and citizen representatives**. The VFPC's mandate is to provide advice and advocacy on food system issues within the city's jurisdiction. The Council is made up of people from a variety of backgrounds, such as nutritionists, food producers, food wholesalers and distributors, food retailers and grocers, and non-profit organisations. This multidisciplinary group works in partnership with local government to build a food system that is ecologically sustainable, economically viable and socially just. In addition to education and awareness-raising strategies, the VFPC works on specific projects and goals including the Vancouver Food Charter.

The partnership approach embodied by the VFPC demonstrates a new way of including more people in decision-making processes about emerging urban issues. In general, such partnerships signal a transition from **government**, referring to centralized and bureaucratic forms of "urban planning," to **governance**, referring to collective forms of decision-making that involve both governmental and non-governmental (community) participants. Community participants include civil society, citizen associations and grassroots organizations and others. Although not without shortcomings, participatory governance aims to include greater – and more diverse – participants in decision-making (particularly marginalized groups) in identifying urban challenges, proposing solutions and being directly involved in implementation.

c. A new generation of civic engagement: participation using social networking tools!

In December 2008 a group of users of the social networking tool, **Twitter**, mobilized to hand out warm clothing to homeless people in downtown Vancouver during one of the most frigid and snowiest cold snaps in decades. What is remarkable about this event is that the participants were

mobilized by a two-line Twitter message! Twitter is an on-line micro-blogging site that sends 140 character “updates” to other users. In this case, what started as a two-line idea resulted in a small crowd arriving at the chosen meeting point with garbage bags full of sweaters and warm clothes to distribute to those living on the street. According to a December 23, 2008 story in the Vancouver Sun newspaper, the idea originated from Yam De La Pena. Together with fellow Tweeter, Janice Laing, the two decided to do “a tweetup with a cause.” Dubbing their effort, **Vancouver TweetupHeatup**, the message mobilized action within five minutes of it being sent! This shows the power of social media to reach people you don’t even know! This and other examples – think: the use of Twitter and Facebook in the recent Presidential election in the US – are proving to be powerful new vehicles to exchange information, solicit ideas and most importantly ... to act!

... BACK TO JANE

We can only wonder what Jane Jacobs would have made of “bottom-up” planning using Twitter and Facebook, or the ability to have direct decision-making control over a portion of a City’s planning budget. What we can safely say is that Jane Jacobs’s then radical insistence that cities be planned for people – building on citizens’ perspectives – has a rich and still evolving legacy. It’s your turn now! It’s *your* city. Get involved.

FURTHER LINKS

Local Agenda 21 (LA21)

The Local Agenda 21 (LA21) campaign is a global commitment that was adopted by more than 178 Governments at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3 to 14 June 1992. The programme promotes a participatory, long-term, strategic planning for cities. It helps municipalities identify local priorities and implement long-term action plans in an inclusive and participatory manner based on multi-stakeholder processes. LA21 commitments were reaffirmed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg, South Africa from 26 August to 4 September 2002. <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/index.htm>

Statistics Canada. *Community Profiles*. www.statcan.ca

One of the best ways to get a sense of the diversity in your community is by visiting that Statistics Canada website and searching the “Community Profiles” section for your own city or town. The profiles contain summary tables of key variables – like language, income, education, family structure, etc. – for the last three national censuses (2006, 2001 and 1996). Use them to compare cities or delve into the demographic profile of your home!

Participatory budgeting

Cabannes, Y. (2004) *72 frequently asked questions about participatory budgeting*. UN Urban Governance Toolkit Series, Global Campaign on Urban Governance, ISBN: 92-1-131699-5. www.internationalbudget.org/themes/PB/72QuestionsaboutPB.pdf

Food policy Councils

Mendes, W. (2006) Creating and implementing food policies in Vancouver, Canada. In *Urban Agriculture Magazine*, No. 16. <http://www.ruaf.org/node/1097>

Vancouver Food Policy Council and Vancouver Food Charter. <http://www.vancouver.ca/foodpolicy>

Twitter: Tweetup Heatup

<http://www.vancouversun.com/Technology/TweetupHeatup+Twitter+flash+helps+homeless/1103020/story.html>

GET INVOLVED

Join a Community Centre, Neighbourhood House or Citizen Council

Opportunities abound to get involved in participatory forums on any range of issues in your city or neighbourhood. Many of these forums are hosted by community centres or neighbourhood houses. Look them up and find out what opportunities exist to have a say in your community!

Get involved with an Aboriginal Friendship Centre

Many cities have Aboriginal Friendship Centres – centres that offer a range of programming, activities and meeting opportunities for Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. They represent a great opportunity to learn about the First Nations that live in your city.

National Association of Friendship Centres - <http://www.nafc-aboriginal.com/>

First Nation Information Project - <http://www.aboriginalcanada.com/culture/natfcdir.htm>

Attend a community consultation meeting on a local planning issue

When changes are afoot in your neighbourhood (for instance, major re-zonings or new developments), municipalities must post signs and / or take out newspaper ads to let the public know when opportunities will exist to publically address the proposal. Keep an eye out for such notices and exercise your right to attend a public consultation meeting – and maybe even throw in your two cents! You'll learn a lot, and meet other people in your community in the process.

Start your own “Tweetup with a cause”

For those who are technologically savvy, consider starting your own “Tweetup with a cause” and see what gets accomplished. You might be surprised!

III. EXERCISES: THE SOCIAL LIFE OF YOUR CITY

As we have seen, the social life of a city involves diversity in built form and uses, but also attention to the diversity of people in a city and how they participate in civic life. This brings us to the question: **what is the social life of your city?** As a walk leader, it will be your challenge to bring different dimensions of the social life of your city to the attention of your walkers. The social life of *your* city will provide you with lots of opportunities to connect the ideas we've talked about in this primer to the theme of your own walk.

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.

Here are two exercises that you can consider:

- **EXERCISE 1: EXPERIMENTING WITH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**
- **EXERCISE 2: MAKING YOUR OWN PARTICIPATORY BUDGET**

If you choose to use either of these exercises keep in mind that both require your walkers to do a bit of “homework” in advance of the walk, so you will need to make sure to include instructions in your “write up” to advertise the walk.

EXERCISE 1: EXPERIMENTING WITH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

What is civic engagement? It's simple: It means participating in public life and encouraging other people to participate in public life. The result is a more vibrant social life of a city! Examples include:

- Belonging to a voluntary organization
- Attending a community consultation meeting
- Starting a community garden
- Starting a recycling program at work
- Voting
- Working for a candidate in a local election
- Serving dinner at a homeless shelter
- Giving blood
- Coaching a local sports team
- Organizing a neighbourhood "clean-up"
- Participating in activities that build relationships between people in the community

For this exercise, you will ask your walkers to **engage in one act of civic engagement prior to your walk**. There are three important conditions: First, it must be legal! (No climbing fences to spray paint protest messages!). Second, it must not harm people or animals. Third, it must be something the person does not already do (if they already coach their local hockey team, it doesn't count!). Make it clear that it is not mandatory! People can still come to the walk if they choose not to try the experiment.

At some point as you plan your walk, build in some time to pause to reflect on the experiences of those who participated. Make sure you choose a place to stop that will be conducive to a group chat. Ask your walkers how their act of civic engagement made them feel? Ask whether they thought it made a difference, and to whom? Will they do it again? What could they do to inspire civic engagement on a bigger scale?

EXERCISE 2: MAKING YOUR OWN PARTICIPATORY BUDGET

This exercise also requires some preparation before the walk. In your walk write-up you will explain that you will be engaging in a mock participatory budgeting exercise (you can briefly explain what a participatory budget means using the definition in this primer).

Suggest that there is an imaginary \$100,000 available from the City budget for local decision-making in the area where your walk will take place (make sure it is clear in your write up that this is only an exercise!!).

Ask your walkers to come prepared to propose (1) how they think the funds should be spent and why; and (2) how they would design a participatory process to make sure that all members of a community – even the marginalized – had the opportunity to contribute their views. Ask what your walkers think the pros and cons would be of devolving budgeting responsibility to local communities.

¹ The term visible minority refers to “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.” It’s a concept that, while criticized for being ethnocentric (a valid concern) is nevertheless useful for exploring the nature of difference. It is considered a better marker than “ethnicity” for exploring people’s cultural origins. The graph converts the total number of visible minorities, Aboriginals and Caucasians in each region to a 100% total and presents the relative percentage.