

# **BOOK. DEATH AND LIFE OF BIG CITIES**

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It took a long time to be able to read the Spanish reissue of [Death and life of large cities](#), a book that anyone who approaches the thought about the city in recent decades will find themselves referencing in no time. This reissue takes place on the fiftieth anniversary of the publication in 1961 of [The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#) and as a result of this anniversary in recent weeks we have been able to find a multitude of articles that review the author's contribution with a little perspective. And, above all, the opportunity to read the book.

Its reading fifty years later is surprisingly current and, moreover, it allows us to find points of union with some of the fundamental issues in urban policies today. His criticism of the mythical vision of the greats is striking, for example, [urban parks as green lungs](#) of cities, but also their rejection of the mythologizing of open public spaces for their own sake, without take into account a much more fundamental aspect such as the life that they allow on the streets themselves. For this reason, it is committed to the maintenance and care of small neighborhood parks as opposed to the grandeur of large metropolitan parks but, at the same time, breaking the excessively sentimental vision of the neighborhood. In its paragraphs, premonitory criticisms can be glimpsed about the danger of large monofunctional projects -at that time, focused on the construction of concentrations of cultural infrastructures- that today fulfill the fiction of making a city without being one (city of arts, city of security, city of soccer, city of culture, city of justice,...) and are, in all cases, clear examples of what Jacobs was opposed to. [Jose Fariña](#) sums it up perfectly how this discourse, without knowing it, is the precursor of a good part of the ideas about urban sustainability that we handle today, especially in terms of the mix of uses and urban compactness.



It is surely a mistake to read the book as an urban design recipe manual, even though its structure seems to be like that. Because beyond [conditions](#) that it poses as elements that allow quality urban life (the combination of primary uses, the existence of small-scale blocks, the maintenance of buildings ancient as a way of balancing the weight of renovation and the concentration of uses and people), the book is, above all, an account of everyday life. Thus, it is not difficult, despite the fact that the cases he raises refer to cities so different from other environments such as Boston, San Francisco or New York, to imagine the same observations in our own streets, becoming, in any case, more of a **observation manual** than planning. Precisely because he was a foreign person in terms of training in urban planning -perfect example of amateur professionalism or how the best expert knowledge can be in the users-, his vision is of great interest and for this reason the book is celebrated not with readings but with walks through different cities around the world ([Jane's Walks](#)). Today some of its passages may seem simplistic in light of the complex post-modern theorizations of certain literature on the city. There are no great concepts or long discussions; yes, instead, descriptions, anecdotes, names of streets and people who ultimately form the essence of the city.

Like all classics, this is a book about which much has been written for so long and a character about whom many lines have also been written. Enough time to find edges and criticism in equal parts with the support and applause it receives. [Christopher Hume](#) recalls his contribution and how his "cookbook" is selectively applied to rule out proposals that do not fit in with the dynamics of certain current urban policies. [Hallowed](#) by some and considered [the most influential urban thinker](#), studies reviewing her contributions are now being published (<http://www.planning.org/apastore/search/Default.aspx?p=4127> < a href="http://www.planning.org/apastore/search/Default.aspx?p=4127" target="\_blank" rel="noopener">Reconsidering Jane Jacobs) and celebrate her influence and the topicality of a good part of his thought at a time of extremely intense global urbanization that seems to be going against the current of a good part of his thought. A kind of contradiction considering that Jane Jacobs -influenced by her own experience of life in large cities- wrote thinking, perhaps presciently, of large cities. An extensive article by [Thomas Campanella](#) is also worth reading on this anniversary to find insights into another fundamental aspect when reading Jane Jacobs: her contribution to the downfall of urban planning as a discipline. Is Death and Life of Big Cities a hymn against planning and the planning conception of the city? Rather, it is an invitation to understand [how cities really](#)

[work](#) before proceeding to planning work and developing urban projects. In this sense, it is not a theoretical book, but a way of looking at the city and understanding why things happen. Why a park stops being used. Why a square ends up being abandoned for recreational uses and reappropriated by other users. Why some streets produce fear and others do not. Why are there streets that are useless. Why the size of a sidewalk matters. Why do the things that happen happen? For small imperceptible details many times.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=Z99FHvVt1G4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Z99FHvVt1G4)

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