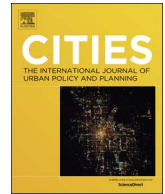


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# The (ir)relevance of economic segregation. Jane Jacobs and the empirical and moral implications of an unequal spatial distribution of wealth

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## ABSTRACT

Cities are economically segregated to various degrees. Segregation translates into greater homogeneity of neighborhoods: the rich and the poor usually occupy separate parts of the city. In response, urban-renewal policies often focus on creating an economically more heterogeneous neighborhood composition by replacing lower-income with middle-income households. Arguably with little or mixed success, as those policies seem to focus more on places (i.e. neighborhoods) than on the people who live there. In this regard, Jane Jacobs writings on “slums” and the conditions that favor “unslumming” processes are illuminating. Although in the last decades the word slum has gotten out of fashion (at least in developed countries), her contributions remain relevant in order to address the moral and empirical implications of an unequal spatial distribution of wealth. The paper discusses three aspects of Jacobs' writings and develops them further into three reflections on current ideas about segregation and policies trying to combat that. It concludes that debates and policies may benefit from 1) less focus on the economic *differences* between neighborhoods (and more on the living standard of each neighborhood and the people who live there); 2) more attention to the neighborhood population's own regenerating and development potential rather than the negative effects of segregation processes on neighborhood residents; and 3) a dynamic rather than static view on the neighborhood.

## 1. Introduction

Jane Jacobs has written extensively on the issue of “slums” – economically homogenous and poor neighborhoods – in cities and the way slum neighborhoods can reinvent themselves and “unslum” without large-scale government intervention that tries to coerce neighborhoods into economic heterogeneity (Callahan & Ikeda, 2004; Cozzolino, 2015; Flint, 2011; Glaeser, 2000; Jacobs, 1961; Zukin, 2006). She deems the latter to be ineffective in genuinely improving the lives of people in neighborhoods (Jacobs, 1961, p. 409): “Planners must [...] aim at unslumming the slums, by creating conditions aimed at persuading residents to stay by choice over time. [...] They must regard slum dwellers as people capable of understanding and acting upon their own self-interests, which they certainly are. We need to discern, respect, and build upon the forces for regeneration that exist in slums themselves”. However, in practice we see many examples of local governments pursuing policies aimed at social mixing, through (forced) relocation of the existing low-income population in exchange for newcomers with a higher income. These interventions do not seem to benefit the remaining neighborhood population nor the people that were displaced to

other neighborhoods (Atkinson, 2004; August, 2008; Freeman & Bracconi, 2004; Uitermark, Duyvendak, & Kleinhans, 2007; Musterd & Ostendorf, 2008).

Jane Jacobs' writings on ‘slums’ and ‘unslumming’, especially in *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* from 1961, are still relevant today. However, knowledge and experience have progressed since. Many of her ideas back then do now have a stronger, theoretical, empirical and philosophical underpinning and have been developed further (implicitly or explicitly). Embedding her pioneering and often intuitive ideas within both the moral-philosophical literature on poverty (e.g. Frankfurt, 1987; Sen, 1983) and the empirical and theoretical neighborhood literature (e.g. Cheshire, 2007; Van Ham & Manley, 2012) sheds a refreshing light on many of today's urban-renewal debates and practices. We discern three elements from Jacobs' writing on slums (see next section) and will develop them further on the basis of (part of) the body of knowledge created since.

The first and foremost important idea is her very focus on the concept of ‘slums’. The word slum has gotten out of fashion in relation to poor neighborhoods in developed countries; it has become reserved exclusively for poor neighborhoods, usually informal settlements, in

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developing countries. In developed countries, the abandonment of the word slum seems to indicate a shift in attention away from *absolute* neighborhood poverty to *relative* neighborhood poverty or segregation instead.<sup>1</sup> In other words, from a neighborhood's wealth level to wealth differences between neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup> Absolute neighborhood poverty can even be seen as the primary reason for the emergence of modern urban planning in the late nineteenth century. Urban planning came about as a coordinated action to deal with the poverty, misery, poor sanitation and dreadful living conditions in most industrial cities (Hall, 2014). Although poverty levels have indeed risen since the beginning of the twentieth century, it does not mean that the notion of focusing on *absolute* neighborhood poverty has become irrelevant. Making sure that no person and no neighborhood is below a socially defined poverty threshold – even though that threshold rises with the passage of time – is a worthy moral ideal. This notion and its policy implications is developed further in Section 3.

Second, she looks at the possibilities of neighborhoods to reinvent and change themselves from inside, as the first paragraph of this introduction shows, rather than on the negative impact of city-wide segregation processes in the form of (negative) 'neighborhood effects', a subject that has received much attention in the literature in recent years (Section 4). And third, her evolutionary approach makes us more aware of the dynamic nature of life and neighborhood trajectories. A static snapshot of wealth levels does not tell us much about the direction that both individuals living in that neighborhood as well as the neighborhood itself are heading toward (Section 5). The aim of this paper is to develop those three ideas further, in order to reflect on current ideas about segregation and about neighborhood policies aimed at targeting segregation.

## 2. Jane Jacobs on slums

Slums can be seen as the urban manifestation and materialization of deprivation. This state is either temporary or more structural. Jane Jacobs looks at the city as a complex self-organizing system that adjusts its internal order as new circumstances arise (Desrochers & Hospers, 2007; Ikeda & Callahan, 2014; Cozzolino, 2015; see also Jacobs, 2000): clear demonstrations are the cases in which slums are step-by-step rehabilitated and improved without direct planning interventions. In this regard, the author invites the readers of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* to reflect on unslumming processes in cities; that is, the way through which run-down and poor city districts change unexpectedly, improve and become more attractive and richer as time passes. She does so by confuting the main orthodox ideas of her time about slums, segregation and urban renewal (Alexiou, 2006; Ikeda, 2004).

She uses the example of the North End in Boston, a place that was "officially considered Boston's worst slum" (1961, pp. 8–9): "Twenty years ago, the general effect was of a district taking a terrible physical beating and certainly desperately poor. When I saw the North End again in 1959, I was amazed at the change. Dozens and dozens of buildings had been rehabilitated. [...] Mingled all among the buildings were an incredible number of splendid stores". Stunning changes occurred despite the opinions of experts who looked at the North End as an irrecoverable place or, even worse, "a civic shame". Planners believed that "everything they have learned as planners told them the North End had

to be a slum in the last stage of depravity". Bankers maintained that there was "no sense in lending money into the North End because it was slum" (ibid., p. 11).

Assessments of this kind were the result of superficial comparisons between the real physical conditions of certain areas with abstract ideas about how (acceptable) neighborhoods should look like and, most of all, *be*.<sup>3</sup> Above all, as Jacobs maintains, these assessments did not consider the local social capital, neither the complexity of different plans, investments and efforts made by individuals to improve their life and their dwellings. In this way, experts reduced the complexity of the social system into simple aggregated problems (ibid., pp. 428–448), without considering which, in practice, were people's real opportunities. In general, what Jacobs demonstrates is that the issue of poverty in cities is a more complex matter. What in the 1960s was often assumed to be a slum, in reality was offering chances and space for improvements.

In short, while orthodox planners looked at the presence of slums as a problem to be solved, Jane Jacobs recognizes certain genuine and beneficial role for such places, above all for newcomers who, with the passage of time, are often and soon assimilated in city's life. However, not all slums are positively perceived by Jane Jacobs. She underscores when and why the concentration of poor people may become a public problem: only in these cases, she speaks of 'perpetual slums'. In doing so, Jane Jacobs proposes a clear distinction between neighborhoods open to unslumming processes and places of perpetual state of poverty, i.e. "slums which show no signs of social or economic improvement with time, or which regress after a little improvement" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 272).

Perpetual slums are the opposite of unslummed or unslumming neighborhoods. Negative common features of all perpetual slums are 'unattractiveness' (an overall lack of people living in other places willing to frequent the area; for instance, "wholesale desertions by their nonslum populations", Ibid., p. 273), 'low sense of belonging' (the diffused will/ability of people to move away: "a ghetto is a place in which most people of spirit will not stay entirely willingly", Ibid., p. 284)<sup>4</sup> and simultaneously falling population and increasing overcrowding (Ibid., pp. 276–277).

Jane Jacobs identifies three main negative conditions that contribute to existence of perpetual slums. The first condition regards the spatial configuration of the neighborhood. She contends that neighborhoods that are built and designed in such a way that *civilized* public life in the street is discouraged are less prone to undergo unslumming processes. The issue is that without extensive and complex networking among people (both within the neighborhood and between different neighborhoods) there are fewer possibilities that a sense of community will emerge.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, the rise of lively and cohesive environments is more likely to emerge when the spatial configurations of neighborhoods facilitates intense and spontaneous interactions among people (Ibid., pp. 200–240). From this perspective, the main idea of Jane Jacobs is that configurations of this kind emerge organically over time and rarely are built all at once from scratch (see Ikeda, 2004).

The second condition for the persistence of slums is discrimination. This condition regards a widespread negative judgment about particular groups of people (for instance ethnic groups). When this occurs in cities, specific social groups are segregated and isolated from the rest of city's life, reducing enormously their opportunities for new exchanges

<sup>1</sup> Segregation can be defined as the extent to which particular groups are over or underrepresented in particular neighborhoods. The most common measure of segregation is the 'dissimilarity index' (i.e. 'segregation index') which measures "the evenness with which two identified groups are distributed across geographical components (e.g., census tracts, postal codes, neighborhoods) that together make up a larger geographical area (e.g., city, municipality, metropolitan area)" (Buitelaar et al., 2017).

<sup>2</sup> It is a shift that is similar to what we see in the general economic-inequality debate. Recently, relative poverty (i.e. income or wealth inequality) has become a dominant theme (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Piketty, 2014; Atkinson, 2015), while absolute poverty used to be the primary focus long into the twentieth century.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, experts underscore that "the North End bumps right up against industry", "working places and commerce are mingled with residences", "high concentration of dwelling units", "little park land" or "children play in the streets", etc. (Jacobs, 1961, p. 8).

<sup>4</sup> "Perpetual slums are unable to hold enough its population for unslumming"; "Dull neighborhoods inevitably fail to draw newcomers by choice" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 273).

<sup>5</sup> A "sense of community can be defined as a particular state where individuals realize that all other human beings are potential collaborators and they are capable of recognizing the mutual benefit of cooperation" (Mises, 1949, pp. 143–165).

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