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DESIGNING/RESTORING

[Whole Earth, Winter, 1998 by Jane Jacobs](#)

JJ: Cities are the chief motors of economies. You can't talk about economies without talking, at least obliquely, about cities. Any human settlement is an economic equivalent to a local ecosystem. Just as ecology is the economy of nature. I've just been looking at the same thing from the opposite point of view--the nature of economies.

SB: Presumably that steps you right up to the question of global economy.

JJ: Yes. The nature of economies comes to that. But people want these prescriptions. You can't prescribe for a global economy any more than you can get a handle on prescribing for a global ecosystem. Also, if you get too abstract about these things they become meaningless. You can't put everything in one ball of wax without it becoming abstract.

SB: Is the Internet something that is interesting to you in relation to all this?

JJ: It interests me as one more remarkable self-organized system, but there are lots of other self-organized systems. When the civil mail system began, it was self-organized and was only later taken up by institutions and systematized. It got quite organized by people who would go to taverns where they knew that travelers were and earn a little money by picking up letters to deliver, especially around waterfronts or coaching stations. Then people began organizing themselves as post offices and postal carriers. One big difference was that the person who received the letter paid, which was a guarantee that it would be delivered.

SB: The history of the Internet repeated some of that because it was first created as a way to share computer resources between big computation centers. It never worked for that. It was immediately put to use for email. That's when the whole thing took off.

JJ: So this is not unprecedented at all in principle. I used the mail system because it's such an analog, but in fact almost everything when it starts is self-organized. Of course when mail

systems were institutionalized they made some improvements like imposing honesty on the carriers, which made it possible to pay for the letter before it was delivered.

SB: I'm involved in a project trying to build a 10,000 year clock and a 10,000 year library and some artifacts that help people think long term. We got to looking at institutions that have existed for a long time, like more than a thousand years. National governments don't qualify, by and large. Corporations don't qualify. Those that come up are pretty much religions and a few universities and cities.

JJ: Cities are about the most durable things we have. People think of them as superficial things, but they aren't. They're very, very basic. Rural places, which are considered more fundamental and more basic, actually are hangers-on of cities in most cases. I explained that in *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* and in *The Economy of Cities*. Cities with economies have very long lives. They aren't just artificial cities that live on taxes, or capitals. Capitals don't last long.

SB: Cities that were on a coast where the coast has disappeared, because the land lifted or got silted in, die pretty quickly.

JJ: Yes, because trade depended on those things.

SB: Are there any cities that polluted themselves to death?

JJ: I've read about ones in Mexico that are supposed to have denuded the land. And some cities in India seem to have ruined themselves by deforestation and then mud slides and so on. But you have to realize that cities are often very capable of correcting their mistakes; when you find one that just goes on doing the wrong things and gets killed by it, it also means that for some reason they've become incapable of developing

Look at the European cities that managed to overcome epidemics. And they didn't do it with one quick fix. It took a lot of different things, a lot of different measures, including control of sewage.

SB: London used to burn every few years and then they caught on and stopped building out of wood and built out of masonry.

JJ: Absolutely. Again, it wasn't just one thing. It wasn't just the change to brick and stone. It was also fire-fighting systems, which at first were self-organized. The Dutch became wonderful at having fire-fighting hoses and water, because they already were so good at pumping, due to their lowlands. That spread to other places, which made it possible for water to reach up into quite high buildings. In Amsterdam today you can look at those narrow, tall buildings, the old ones.

SB: That's the famous way to maximize real estate value.

JJ: It wasn't just real estate value. It was all the values of a city. A lot of them have to do with saving energy and saving resources--all the things that we criticize sprawl for now, the opposite of that. When I hear people talking about maximizing real estate values, I think

they're really thinking of superficiality. They aren't thinking of what's underneath that, the saving of resources.

I also think that people don't necessarily need the most dire things to inspire change. Fashion is quite important; it keeps us from doing the same thing all the time. Think how people got tired of Victorian fashions and all of a sudden they couldn't stand them anymore. They were ruthless about wiping them away.

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