



Last Exit Magazine

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5 QUESTIONS

Kent Barwick

When Kent Barwick steps down as president of the [Municipal Art Society](#) next year, he will have held some top job at the nonprofit for the better part of four decades. We sat down to talk with him about the Society's current exhibition on Jane Jacobs and what New Yorkers in this age of explosive development can learn from her simple call to watch and learn from the living city.

By Keach Hagey

1

There have been a lot of “sold out” signs next to the events from the Jane Jacobs series. Why do you think it’s been so popular?

Obviously it’s striking a responsive cord. A lot of people who come to the exhibit, come to the programs, I’ve noticed have the paperback [of Jacobs’ “The Death And Life of Great American Cities”] tucked under their arm. So there’s been a lot of rereading by older people and reading for the first time by younger people, and I think her observations have held up pretty well. But that would have been true 10 years ago. I think what’s maybe different now is that there’s this feeling of vague unease despite — or maybe because of — this excessive wealth, and a lot of development and a feeling of rampant gentrification. I think there’s a feeling that somehow we may be losing qualities of the city that we cherished.

Before we did the show, as it happened, there was another show that opened, about a year ago, the [Robert Moses show](#). And that got a lot of press. And a lot of the press seems to be centering on maybe Moses wasn’t so bad after all. And maybe there was a lot to be learned. Maybe we need a Bob Moses. So we were afraid — I was particularly afraid — that somehow the Jane Jacobs thing would come along, and somehow that’s the brackets of the argument: should it be Bob Moses or Jane Jacobs? And that didn’t happen. I was really surprised at that. But this is a long way of saying that there was some kind of theme in Jane Jacobs, other than being the “other than Bob Moses” that people clearly were picking up on.

There’s clearly something going on, and it’s not reaction to Bob Moses. So I’m just guessing that it comes out of people’s sense that, with all this extreme development, that somehow the lessons of Jane Jacobs are being forgotten. Now, I’m projecting my own feelings because when this opportunity came up to do this show, it came at a time when we were very conscious that some of the lessons that we thought had been very well established in New York, on how you do large-scale development, seem to have been forgotten. And Atlantic Yards was a wakeup call for us, because you would have thought, by now it’s well established that you don’t close down a street, you open them up. That was the mistake they made after the first Battery Park City, the mistake they tried to rectify after 9/11 in Lower Manhattan. Let’s put the streets back. The whole 1950s idea that you could aggregate the streets and create all these little precincts apart from the city you would have thought was pretty discredited, was back here on the table in the Atlantic Yards project.

2

A week after Jacobs died, New York Times architecture critic [Nicolai Ouroussoff](#) offered this gentle criticism: “The threats facing the contemporary city are not what they were when she first formed her ideas, nearly 50 years ago. The activists of Ms. Jacobs’ generation may have saved SoHo from Mr. Moses’ bulldozers, but they could not stop it from becoming an open-air mall. The old buildings are still there, the streets are once again paved in cobblestone, but the rich mix of manufacturers, artists and gallery owners has been replaced by homogenous crowds of lemming-like shoppers. Nothing is produced there anymore. It is a corner of the city that is nearly as soulless, in its way, as the superblocks that Ms. Jacobs so reviled.” His description of SoHo seemed to me like it could apply to most of Manhattan these days, and increasingly large swaths of Brooklyn. I wondered, can Jane Jacobs’ ideas really save us from the new kind of soullessness that he’s talking about?

He seems to be a journalist in the tradition of [the late Times architecture critic] Herbert Muschamp who thinks that it’s somehow unprofessional to do any research or check any facts, so I don’t think he’s highly regarded as a thinker. So his description, if you had to parse what he just said, is: Jane Jacobs and her followers saved SoHo. They didn’t really have anything to do with it. The ‘60s saved SoHo,

and Jane Jacobs is in the '60s and therefore activist activity is part of the '60s and so, she couldn't save SoHo.

SoHo is an example of how you can save the scale of something, but if it's too successful, it loses diversity. Now, one of the key elements in Jane Jacobs' thinking is diversity. I'm not sure where he's going with that, but if the point is that there's no sense trying to maintain diversity in the city anymore, and we should just give up because it can't work, then I would say that would be a terrible mistake.

Several of the instruments that tried to maintain SoHo as a physical place – a place for the production of art – we created, such as fostering a zoning district that treated artists as manufacturers. We created the M1-5A, a new district that said, hey, if you are working with pieces of steel or pieces of canvas, you're a manufacturer. And you couldn't live in SoHo unless you were certified as an artist, and there was a whole process for certification that I served on 5 years ago. Which was very difficult because you can't say, 'Oh, this work is crap, so I can't certify it.'

I don't think his [Ouroussof's] observations about SoHo, accurate as they are, are indication that the principles of Jane Jacobs aren't important. It's evidence that they are important, it seems to me.

Incidentally, SoHo in its present condition is a much more interesting and diverse place than it would have been if the city had its way. And everything would have been demolished and it would have been like that area at the south end of NYU there. That's its alternative future.

For a number of years, what saved SoHo actually, initially, was this guy Chester Rapkin, he was a urban planner who taught at Princeton. He did a study – he was on the planning commission – and found that there was this form of recycling in which people would go around to factories and get the rags and resell them. It turned out that there were more unskilled jobs in the neighborhood than anywhere else in the city. That saved SoHo the first time. But the controls weren't strong enough to prevent – once the market took hold – the SoHoification of America, where suddenly you weren't a real city unless you had one of these zones.

I once went to Chicago to give a talk, and at a drink beforehand, I was up in the world's tallest building, the Sears building, at that time. And someone led me over to the window, and said, that's going to be our SoHo, and pointed out of the world's tallest building down at this two-story factory on the ground there. The cultural discovery that you could convert factory space into cool living space was celebrated in the fashion magazines, design magazines, in shelter books, newspapers, all over the world. There's nowhere in the world that's safe from factories being converted to living space.

I was cheerfully a part of that. I lived in an unheated factory near the Bowery. We thought we were cool. We were inadvertently part of a market force that made it very, very unaffordable for manufacturing. Jane Jacobs probably, of all the people that should bear responsibility for that set of events, she isn't one of them.

3

What tools are out there to maintain diversity today in the face of this overwhelming, diversity-squelching success?

On the whole subject of retail diversity — what can you do, there's a bank going up on every street corner, the whole world is one big Starbucks, etc. etc. — what we did is bring in people who were retail experts. They were full of stories from other cities, as well as from this city, of measures that worked.

Again, it's not things that are easy. But there is a set of problems, and if you want the city to be a diverse place, then you have to address the problems. Sometimes they can be addressed with rezoning. Sometimes they can be addressed with tax strategies. I'm not saying its easy, that it's just pull out this

pamphlet and here's what we do, but you can't believe it's impossible. I don't think it is impossible. I think there are tools.

We had one that was employed on Fifth Avenue, years ago. There was a time when Fifth Ave. was rapidly converting to banks and airline ticketing purchasing offices. Every inch of 5th Avenue looked like it was going to be converted to airline ticket offices and banks. So the city passed a zoning district that limited the street frontage of airline ticket offices and banks, so that the most you could get if you were doing an airline ticket office or a bank was a little space on the ground floor and more on the second floor, because they were protecting the retail preeminence of Fifth Avenue.

In Little Italy, it's been far from successful, but what they did was to preclude the building of large storefronts. To a large extent, that's worked out. I moved there in '72 and very few of the merchants, unless they owned their buildings, who were there in the late 70s, are there today. Now there are the dress stores and handbag shops of Elizabeth Street. But there's still energy and diversity and character. So there's no solution forever.

The great thing about Jane Jacobs is that she didn't have a set of prescriptions. She'd be the first to say, that's what you did 20 years ago, let's not necessarily do that now. Her lasting gift to all of us was, use your eyes. Watch the street. Watch what's going on. See what's happening and figure it out.

4

You'd mentioned that the Atlantic Yards proposal was one of the wakeup calls that inspired this series. But you've gotten some heat for not coming out totally against that project. What good do you think can come of it?

There's the [Develop Don't Destroy Brooklyn spokesman] Daniel Goldstein school of thought, which seemed to us to be well represented, and they were going to go ahead and do the lawsuit and everything. And there were principles that members of [Develop Don't Destroy](#) shared that we didn't necessarily share. For instance, we thought that it was a good place for high-density development. You've got all the subways there. If Brooklyn wants to have an arena, for whatever combination of emotional and psychological reasons — and it's true of Brooklyn, the loss of the Dodgers is a defining event for longtime Brooklynites — it's a good place for an arena. It's not a great place for a rail yard. The rail yard had divided Brooklyn in two. So, there was a lot to recommend the general direction the project in city planning terms. In detail, it was all over the top.

There wasn't anybody playing the role of the government. And so the developer [Bruce Ratner of [Forest City Ratner](#)] was allowed to do whatever he thought best. He has a lot more expertise in some areas than others. If you look at Atlantic Center or Metrotech, you can realize that his company is a lot more comfortable in suburban settings than urban settings.

Anyway, we thought the biggest problem with this project was that it was way over the top, it's overreaching and there wasn't anybody paying attention to it.

We have ties to Bruce Ratner. He and I were in the Koch Administration together. Several of my trustees were personally friendly with Bruce and members of the Ratner family. We had a number of trustees who were former Koch people. So there was a feeling on our part, yeah, everyone likes Frank Gehry as a person. And Laurie Olin was a very fine landscape architect who has done a lot of fine work in the city and elsewhere.

So we weren't dealing with the usual schlock, let's-rape-the-site-and-get-out-as-quickly-as-we-can developers, using anonymous architects and landscape architects. There was clearly a greater set of ambitions here.

We were invited out to the neighborhood by these groups. We were kind of apprehensive because it's easy to dismiss us as some Upper East Side group, with headquarters on Madison Avenue. You're always vulnerable to that. We didn't tell anybody anything. It was kind of a Jane Jacobs thing, even though we didn't know it. So we said, OK, let's look at the plan. Let's look at the parks in Brooklyn and see which ones work and which ones don't work and why. Let's look at the streets. We used examples. We went through the whole idea of we need multi-use retail, we need parks to be close to major thoroughfares, and people really responded. And that's when we came up with the idea to say, let's set up an alternative voice. Not the pro-Ratner, pro-Marty Markowitz. Not Develop Don't Destroy. We knew they were going to do what they were going to do. But there seemed to be a need for a third voice. But there are a lot of people uncomfortable with "No, we don't want anything, no."

So we think it was finally a useful thing to do. We haven't felt so much heat. Norman Oder, who writes the [Atlantic Yards blog](#), is harsh with us, but he's supportive. He attends almost all these Jane Jacobs things. So I feel we've been fairly treated. I am proud of the work that we did. I'm glad we did it, and I think it will lead to more. I think there's a growing feeling in Brooklyn that the city by itself is not going to adequately plan. There's so much change going on that there needs to be a broader context, a broader set of discussions. Most offensive about Atlantic Yards was the failure of the city to do anything, the failure of the state to engage in the communities. The communities were just ignored. It was really offensive.

5

What do you think of the Bloomberg Administration's Coney Island plan?

I think they tried to do the right thing there. I'm impressed. We're in a funny position vis-a-vis Bloomberg, who we so admire — I admire him personally and I like him personally — and we're so often at odds with their development strategies. Again, it's not the original idea, it's how it plays itself out. It's a good idea to rezone Greenpoint. It's a bad idea to have 40-foot buildings at the water's edge. I think in the case of Coney Island, they've really — as far as I can see, from reading the papers — made an effort to hang onto the essence of what's important about Coney Island, and to carry that spirit forward. And more power to them. "A" for effort, and maybe more.

Reader Comments [4]

1. 1.

Kent says: "Not the pro-Ratner, pro-Marty Markowitz. Not Develop Don't Destroy. We knew they were going to do what they were going to do. But there seemed to be a need for a third voice. But there are a lot of people uncomfortable with "No, we don't want anything, no."

Kent knows this is nonsense; he knows very well that DDDDB (DEVELOP Don't Destroy Brooklyn) favors development over the rail yards, including dense development. DEVELOP is in our name. It was DDDDB that found the only developer to compete with Forest City Ratner in bidding for the Vanderbilt Rail Yards. All he'd ever want to know about that is here: <http://dddb.net/php/community/extell.php>

This all occurred before his organization noticed there was a controversial development proposal in Brooklyn called Atlantic Yards.

d. goldstein · Dec 1, 05:29 PM <#>

2. 2.

Maybe Barwick is unfair. Or maybe DDDDB is perceived as being a bunch of vitriolic radicals that can't be dealt with or trusted to play by the rules. The members of DDDDB carry with them a self righteous zeal that makes it somehow acceptable to interrupt meetings, yell and scream, and spit in someone's face. Whatever DDDDB's position, it seems easily confused with "No, we don't want anything, no."

Pro Ho Pro Tem · Dec 4, 06:23 AM · <#>

3. 3.

I'm glad someone was willing to call out Ouroussoff in no uncertain terms on his attempt to bury Jane Jacobs' legacy along with her. His preferences are so out of step with the average New Yorker, and so thoroughly discredited except in the world of architecture-nonsense, that it is disgraceful he is the main voice of the Times on these issues.

Oldmark · Dec 4, 06:33 AM · <#>

4. 4.

I couldn't agree more Oldmark. Ouroussoff clearly has an ideological agenda and doesn't want the facts to get in the way of it. Then again this is so common in the art/design/architecture world, unfortunately is it really any surprise?

Poncho · Dec 5, 02:18 PM · <#>

