# Jane Jacobs' Critique of Rationalism in Urban Planning

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**Abstract**: Twentieth century critiques of rationalism by thinkers such as Hayek and Oakeshott often were conducted on the level of "high theory," with little in the way of detailed analysis. This paper aims to bring their analysis down to earth, or, more accurately, down to city pavement, by demonstrating how the work of urbanologist Jane Jacobs illustrates concrete applications of many of their ideas in the context of rationalist urban planning and its failures.

**Keywords**: Hayek; Oakeshott; Jacobs; rationalism; urban planning; spontaneous order



## INTRODUCTION

There were a number of well-known critiques of "rationalism" penned in the mid-twentieth century by thinkers such as F. A. Hayek and Michael Oakeshott. But they were conducted on the level of "high theory," with little in the way of detailed analysis. This paper aims to bring their analysis down to earth, or, more accurately, down to city pavement, by demonstrating how the work of urbanologist Jane Jacobs illustrates concrete applications of many of their ideas in the context of rationalist urban planning and its failures. She showed that the ideas driving city planning in the first six decades of the twentieth century were largely unmoored, abstract visions of the city, divorced from any detailed understanding of what actually makes cities work, when they do so.

The remainder of the paper consists of four sections. In the first, we will explain what these thinkers meant by rationalism. In the second section, we will detail the rationalist nature of much twentieth-century urban planning. We will highlight figures such as Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Robert Moses. In the third, we will show how the work of Jacobs offers concrete examples of how the rationalist makes a botch of things. In particular, we will illustrate the very real, concrete harms done to urban residents by the abstract schemes of the rationalist city planners.

## WHAT IS RATIONALISM?

Michael Oakeshott and F. A. Hayek offered similar critiques of what they each called "rationalism" (Hayek sometimes used "constructivist rationalism," as we shall see later) in the mid-twentieth century. Each of the two thinkers read and was influenced by the work of the other. Let us first examine Oakeshott's analysis of rationalism, and then Hayek's. In doing so, we will not be addressing some subtle differences that are unimportant for the purposes of this paper.[1]

As Oakeshott saw it, perhaps the most important feature of the rationalist approach is the conviction that every essential aspect of any human practice can be conveyed adequately by means of a 'guidebook' comprising explicitly stated rules, formalized technical procedures, and general, abstract principles. Such a belief implies that mastering the 'correct' theoretical model of some subject is all that is required to achieve successful performances in that domain. Furthermore, the rationalist regards attending to any features of a practice other than the theoretical principles that purportedly capture the essence of the activity in question as merely thwarting the effort to conduct the activity in question rationally. To achieve rationality vis-à-vis some activity

one must begin with a *tabula rasa* upon which the correct technique for that activity can be cleanly and clearly inscribed; as Oakeshott put it, in this view, rational conduct involves 'a certain emptying of the mind, a conscious effort to get rid of preconceptions' (1991 [1962], p. 101).

Against that understanding of the relationship between abstract principles and the technical guidelines that follow from such principles and concrete performances, Oakeshott argues that the rationalist, in awarding theory primacy over practice, has gotten things exactly backwards. Theoretical understanding, he contends, is always an outgrowth of practical know-how and never its source. In fact, he sees the parasitical dependence of theory upon practice as being so unavoidable that not only is the rationalist incapable of successful performances guided solely by a theoretical model of the activity to be performed, he is not even able to stick to his purported guidelines while performing the activity poorly; instead, he inevitably will fall back on some familiar but unacknowledged existing practice in trying to realize his abstract schema.

Oakeshott's contention, that the rationalist ideal of conduct guided entirely by explicitly adopted and provably justified 'principles' is impossible to achieve, is a close kin of Wittgenstein's insight that every attempt to follow correctly a set of formalized rules necessarily is grounded upon informal customs and practices that determine what it *means* to follow a rule 'correctly'—the formal rules cannot also embody their own 'correct' interpretation because any effort to incorporate that interpretation into the first-level rules would create a set of 'meta-rules', themselves requiring meta-meta-rules to guide the interpretation of the meta-rules, and so on, in an infinite regress.[2]

But to return to our analysis of the ideal character of the rationalist itself, when he is applying his method to, say, gardening, he is oblivious to the years that the skilled gardener has spent establishing intimate relationships with his plants and tools, and tries to get by in the garden solely with what he can glean from a gardening book. As a result, he makes a botch of the flowerbeds. However, Oakeshott suggested, his repeated failures typically do not lead him to suspect that his fundamental method of proceeding might be faulty. Instead, each disappointment only spurs the rationalist to search for a new, improved, and even more 'rational' book of gardening rules.[3]

The place of pre-eminence that Oakeshott assigns to rationalist influence in modern conduct may appear to be at odds with his assertion that the rationalist can never actually realize his full program, but will always, in fact, wind up acting more or less along lines indicated by some tradition. However, Oakeshott's assertion that the rationalist never really can proceed according to her avowed principles does not mean that her attempt to adhere to them will be inconsequential, but only that it will not succeed. An analogy may be helpful here: For Oakeshott, the rationalist is a character somewhat like Monty Python's Ron Obvious, who was tricked by his unscrupulous manager into trying to perform feats like leaping across the English Channel and eating Chirchester Cathedral. Ron was unable to perform these feats, of course, but that does not mean he could not injure himself trying. (A major difference is that the rationalist planner does not injure only himself, since he necessarily involves others in his attempted "feats.") As Collingwood wrote, 'A person may think he is a poached egg; that will not make him one: but it will affect his conduct, and for the worse' (1924, p. 206). Since the pronouncements of the rationalist disparage current practices, customs, and morals, insofar as they do not follow from his rational deliberations about how his society *ought* to be ordered, they will erode the spontaneous ease of the communal life that those traditions nourished, while offering in its stead only the artificial routines and regulations of a 'rational' bureaucracy, or worse. Oakeshott offered this example: 'First, we do our best to destroy parental authority (because of its alleged abuse), then we sentimentally deplore scarcity of "good homes", and we end by creating substitutes which complete the work of destruction' (1991 [1962], p. 41). As we will see, this is strikingly similar to the way in which rationalist urban planners destroyed decent neighborhoods and created substitutes for them that made things worse. Traditional ways are undermined further by the rationalist fantasy that social perfection is a realistic goal, so that any practice promoting social order, however workable it might have proved in the past, will be condemned as an atavistic relic standing in the path of progress for failing to have brought about utopia.

It does not follow, from Oakeshott's view of the rationalist project as ruinously misguided, that all traditional practices are sacrosanct, or even that they all are laudable. Traditions are like living organisms: both can suffer illnesses and other disabilities; both ought to and usually do learn and adapt in response to their external circumstances and internal tensions; or, failing to do so, both soon cease to exist. But those adaptations, if they are to successfully meet the challenges presented by novel situations, must not promote the deterioration of the very organic order they purport to be serving. An appreciation for such evolutionary adaptation does not entail denying that intellectual criticism of the

present state of some practice has a genuine and vital role to play in that process. The expert can serve to diagnose and treat ills in the area of practice in which he specializes much as a physician does with those ills he detects in his patients. But, as Oakeshott noted, citing Aristotle, 'to cure is not to transform, it is not to turn the patient into a different sort of being; it is to restore to him such health as he is naturally capable of enjoying' (2006, p. 114). Because the rationalist physician attempts to transform rather than merely heal his charge, his treatments are likely to do far more harm than good.

Unfortunately, as noted previously, the rationalist gardener's counterpart in social reform similarly is inclined to interpret the social maladies produced by his projects not as evidencing any problem with his modus operandi but, quite to the contrary, as signaling the need for an even more energetic and thorough implementation of rationalist social engineering. The engineering metaphor itself encourages the planners to regard the rest of the citizenry as parts of a machine, cogs to be readjusted and rearranged as called for by each new blueprint, each drawn up to fix the problems generated by its predecessor.[4] Since most people are disinclined to acquiesce to a life in which they are constrained to behave as an externally controlled mechanical device, the breakdown of each new, rationalist design for some aspect of society is made even more probable.

F. A. Hayek distinguished between a rationalism that recognizes the limits of human reason with respect to the ability to comprehend (and thus perhaps to control) the outcomes of complex systems, such as those found in social orders, and a rationalism that fails to recognize such limits.[5] He used various terms to designate the latter including Cartesian rationalism, constructivist rationalism, and even naïve rationalism.

> The basic conception of this constructivism can perhaps be expressed in the simplest manner by the innocent sounding formula that, since man has himself created the institutions of society and civilization, he must also be able to alter them at will so as to satisfy his desires or wishes (Hayek, 1978, p. 3).

Note the similarity to Oakeshott's point that rationalists wish to begin thinking about social life with a *tabula rasa*. Hayek elaborates on this elsewhere:

> Rationalism in this sense is the doctrine which assumes that all institutions which benefit humanity have in the past and ought in the future to be invented in clear awareness of the desirable effects that they produce; that they are to be approved and respected only to the extent that we can show that the particular effects they will produce in any given situation are preferable to the effects another arrangement would produce; that we have it in our power so to shape our institutions that of all possible sets of results that which we prefer to all others will be realized; and that our reason should never resort to automatic or mechanical devices when conscious consideration of all factors would make preferable an outcome different from that of the spontaneous process (Hayek, 1967a, p. 85).

Hayek argued that non-naïve rationalism is more effective because it does not attempt to reach beyond its area of competence.

> To the medieval thinkers reason had meant mainly a capacity to recognize truth, especially moral truth, when they met it, rather than a capacity of deductive reasoning from explicit premises. And they were very much aware that many of the institutions of civilization were not the inventions of the [sic] reason but what, in explicit contrast to all that was invented, they called "natural," i.e., spontaneously grown[6] (Hayek, 1967a, p. 84, footnote omitted).

Solving a mathematical problem or calculating a result in a controlled laboratory experiment involve a relatively small number of variables and interactions and thus a small number of possible outcomes or solutions, compared to the problem of using a central authority to effectively manage, say, the allocation of labor in the macroeconomy. In the latter case, what Hayek termed "predictions of the pattern" will be more successful than the "point predictions" that are possible in more artificial circumstances.

> Our tentative explanation will thus tell us what *kinds* of events to expect and which not, and it can be proved false if the phenomena observed show characteristics which the postulated mechanism could not produce. It will thus give us new information by indicating the *range* of phenomena to expect (Hayek 1967b, p. 11, emphasis original).

For example, if the Federal Reserve were to withdraw credit from the banking system, it is more reasonable to pre-

dict that, *ceteris paribus*, prices will fall by some not-fully-predictable amount over some not-fully-predictable period of time (a pattern prediction) than to predict that prices will fall by two percent by next June (a point prediction). While the difference between a point and a pattern prediction may be one of degree, we could say from a Hayekian perspective that a weakness of constructivist rationalism is its reluctance to recognize a basis for the distinction. One of the most important tasks of rationalism rightly understood is to recognize the limits of its competence.

Hayek did of course not limit his critique of constructivism to the economic realm. To mention but two of his extensive writings that critiqued various forms of constructivism are *The Road to Serfdom* (1972[1944]), regarding the impact of central planning on the moral proclivities of the planners (see especially the chapter on "Why the worst get on top") and his essay "The results of human action but not of human design" (1967d) on its impact on moral philosophy and legal theory.

A failure to recognize such limits was a prominent feature of early-to-mid twentieth-century rationalism. It appeared on a grand scale in the planned economies of the communist countries. On a smaller scale, it was apparent in the rationalist urban planners whom Jacobs critiqued, as we will see in the next section.

## RATIONALISM IN URBAN PLANNING

Early-to-mid-twentieth-century urban planners, possessed by the rationalist mindset, looked at city tenements, and, indeed, cities in general, and saw only un-designed chaos. As James C. Scott says of Le Corbusier, who was perhaps the leading light of rationalist urban design: "[He] had no patience for the physical environment that centuries of urban living had created. He heaped scorn on the tangle, darkness, and disorder, the crowded and pestilential conditions, of Paris and other European cities at the turn of the century" (1999, p. 106). Le Cobusier would re-create Paris as an "organized, serene, forceful, airy, ordered entity" (quoted in Scott, 1999, p. 107). This would require despotism, it is true, but an impersonal one: "The despot is not a man. It is the *Plan*. *The correct, realistic, exact plan*, the one that will provide your solution once the problem has been posited clearly, in its entirety, in its indispensable harmony" (quoted in Scott, 1999, p. 112). If someone was authoring a Hayekian or Oakeshottian morality play and depicted the rationalist planning villain talking about "the correct, realistic, exact plan" from which the solutions to all of a society's problems would automatically flow, we might accuse him of creating a caricature rather than a character, but Le Cobusier was real.

Rationalist urban planning was sometimes executed on an even grander scale that the American urban renewal projects. Scott, who draws heavily on the work of Hayek, Oakeshott and Jacobs, describes the planning of Brasília and the actual results achieved at some length. He notes that Brasília "was… designed from the ground up, according to an elaborate and unified plan. Housing, work, recreation, traffic, and public administration were each spatially segregated as Le Corbusier would have insisted" (1999, p. 118). He cites the utopian nature of the rationalist plans made for the city: "Brasília was conceived of by [its designers] as a city of the future… a realizable utopia. It made no reference to the habits, traditions, and practices of Brazil's past or of its great cities…" (1999, p. 119). The commitment to utopia has its ugly side, however, as "the goal of making over Brazil and Brazilians necessarily implied a disdain for what Brazil had been" (*ibid*).

As Oakeshott claimed was true of rationalists in general, the rationalist planners of Brasília could not really do what they set out to do. Scott writes:

> From the beginning, Brasília failed to go precisely as planned. Its master builders were designing for new Brazil and for new Brazilians—orderly, modern, efficient, and under their discipline. They were thwarted by contemporary Brazilians with different interests and the determination to have them heard… In the end, by 1980 75% of the population of Brasília lived in settlements that had never been anticipated, while the planned city had reached less than half of its projected population… The unplanned Brasília—that is the real existing Brasília—was quite different from the original vision. Instead of a classless administrative city it was a city marked by stark spatial segregation according to social class (1999, pp. 128-130).

Two other urban planners whom Jacobs criticized, Ebenzer Howard and Frank Lloyd Wright, were perhaps less outwardly extreme in their rationalist constructivism but their enthusiasm for imposing a ideal vision of urban life was no less exuberant than le Corbusier's.

Howard was one of the first modern urban planners. He regarded both the congestion of the town life and the dullness of the countryside as pathological. Creating the right balance would, he argued, bring people voluntarily into what he called "Garden City." His solution was to cre-

ate a "town-country magnet" in the form a Garden City that retained the best and shed the worst of both worlds.

> There are in reality not only, as is so constantly assumed, two alternatives—town life and country life—but a third alternative, in which all the advantages of the most energetic and active town life, with all the beauty and delight of the country, may be secured in perfect combination; and the certainty of being able to live this life will be the magnet which will produce the effect for which we are all striving—the spontaneous movement of the people from our crowded cities to the bosom of our kindly other earth, at once the source of life, of happiness, of wealth, and of power. The town and the country may, therefore, be regarded as two magnets, each striving to draw the people to itself—a rivalry which a new form of life, partaking of the nature of both, comes to take part in (Howard, 1898, p. 347).

His carefully conceived Garden City was meant to retain the culture and economic opportunities of the city and the fresh air and open space of the country. But it also incorporated a vast system of infrastructure—roads, railways, parks, and towns specializing in particular urban functions—that had to be carefully planned and constructed on a regional scale. Jacobs notes that "He conceived of good planning as a series of static acts; in each case the plan must anticipate all that is needed and be protected, after it is built, against any but the most minor subsequent changes" (1992 [1961], p. 19).

A near contemporary of le Corbusier, the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, sought to take the urban population even farther from densely populated settlements than Howard. Drawing heavily on modern building techniques Wright imagined a "Broadacre City" of well-regulated but thinly populated suburbanish, single-family homesteads tied together via telephone, radio, automobiles, and even helicopters. Achieving that outcome, however, would depend on a significant degree of government planning.

> In the hands of the state, but by way of the county, is all redistribution of land—a minimum of one acre going to the childless family and more to the larger family as effected by the state. The agent of the state in all matters of land allotment or improvement, or in matters affecting the harmony of the whole, is the architect. All building is subject to his sense of the whole as organic architecture (Wright, 1935, p. 378).

Although le Corbusier, Howard, and Wright offered vastly different visions of the city—from densely populated towers-in-a-park to low-rise suburban sprawl—Jacobs recognized that at a deep level they all shared not only an antipathy for an urban life that none of them fully understood but also the same sort of rationalist hubris. (Or as one of our referees put it, "the rationalist may be said to unite an unthinking reformism with an uncritical conservatism.")

While we are dealing mainly with theoreticians of constructivism in urban planning, it is probably worth mentioning two outstanding practitioners of rationalist constructivism, planners who actually tried to realize their visions. (Although, as Oakeshott would point out, the results would never conform to what they set out to do.)

Baron Haussman, Napoleon III's prefect of the Seine (Paris) in the mid-nineteenth century created what we know today as "The City of Light" by ruthlessly leveling whole sections of Paris, including thousands of private residences, to make way for the Champ Élysées and other famously wide boulevards. And Robert Moses, who held a number of official positions in city and state government, did much the same thing for and to New York (Callahan and Ikeda, 2004). It is hard to deny that the efforts of both Haussmann and Moses sometimes produced benefits results for some though at great cost. The point here, however, is that they could not possibly have foreseen the actual outcome of their planning, which to this day is still emerging.

## JACOBS' ATTACK ON URBAN RATIONALISM

So let us apply this critique of the rationalist approach to conduct to a particular practice, that of urban planning. The very term we currently give this field implies a rationalist blueprint (the plan) can be drawn up for a city that will make that city function as it truly should. It might seem that to reject urban planning means to reject theorizing about cities at all, and to merely let the grow as they will, and let the chips fall where they may. But the urban theorist we will examine, Jane Jacobs, certainly does not reject thinking about what makes cities work—after all, that is precisely what she does throughout her own most famous work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. What she endorses is itself a *sort* of planning, but one that regards its ability to predict and control aspects of urban life with great humility, one that is based on close observation of what is already going

on rather than on a wholesale effort to replace that life with one conforming to a theoretical plan, and one that seeks to encourage healthy growth and carefully treat diseased areas rather than to remake the urban body in the image of its own, abstract design. Jacobs argued that before anyone can think sensibly about what a city should be and how it should work she needs to first understand what a city is and how it actually does work. We might well, then, call Jacobs an "urban physician," to invent a term to oppose to "urban planner": she sought, like a good Aristotelian physician, not to turn the city she examined into a different sort of being, but to restore to it such health as it is naturally capable of enjoying. This requires deep thought and much observation; what it does not entail is dreaming up visions of imaginary cities and trying to transform the actual city one is charged with treating into a realization of that vision.

Jacobs recognized the rationalist mindset of those, such as Le Cobusier, whom she criticized: '[T]he practitioners and teachers of this discipline (if such it can be called) have ignored the study of success and failure in real life, have been incurious about the reasons for unexpected success, and are guided instead by principles derived from the behavior and appearance of towns, suburbs, tuberculosis sanatoria, fairs, and imaginary dream cities—from anything but cities themselves' (1992 [1961], p. 6). Jacobs also saw that the rationalist planner, despite his pretension of working only from first principles, in reality, as Oakeshott contended, unconsciously draws upon some tradition or other in devising his schemes. Jacobs' point here is that these planners turned to *inappropriate* traditions—and to abstractions drawn from those inappropriate traditions—since they refused to admit that they were working from a tradition at all.

As Jacobs saw it, the fundamental problem that all great cities solve is how to get very large numbers of strangers with vastly different beliefs, knowledge, and tastes to live peacefully together. Jacobs explains how this is possible without central direction.

Great cities harness the diverse "locality knowledge" (Jacobs, 1992 [1961], p. 418) of each of its individual inhabitants. (This point, of course, is essentially identical to Hayek's emphasis on "how valuable an asset in all walks of life is knowledge of people, of local conditions, and of special circumstances" (1945, H.9) What planners typically failed to see is that safe and lively urban life is largely the unplanned outcome of informal contact in public spaces. Jacobs argued that under the right conditions (see note 5) large numbers of people will choose to use public spaces—e.g. sidewalks and plazas—throughout the day and night, providing "eyes on the street" that informally monitor and constrain bad behavior. Safe, interesting public spaces attract people, who in turn attract even more people, making the spaces more interesting, and so on.

The more diverse in knowledge and tastes those people are, and the more congenial public spaces are for informal contact, the greater are the opportunities for mutually beneficial exchange of goods and of ideas. What enables contact among people who would otherwise be very socially distant are social networks that emerge unplanned at the neighborhood level—Jacobs popularized the term "social capital" to identify this (Jacobs, 1992 [1961], p. 138). Social capital, i.e. the relations among people in public space that help to generate private value, promotes trust among long-time inhabitants of a neighborhood, providing an important signal to the multitude of strangers who pour through it every day.

Jacobs observed that social capital tends to be more important the less private wealth people have. Poor people by definition have little private wealth and slums are where poor people tend to live. The wealth of slum dwellers then generally consists of social capital in public spaces—on corners, in barbershops, on stoops and sidewalks, and in bars and coffee shops—when the physical lay-out allows it to form.

But what Jacobs called "unslumming" slums, poor neighborhoods on the rise, tend to be noisy and chaotic looking—like any lively and successful city neighborhood (Jacobs, 1992 [1961], pp. 270-90). Unlike Jacobs, however, typical urban planners failed to distinguish these poor neighborhoods on the rise from poor neighborhoods in decline. An uslumming slum with its stable population and safe, lively streets with flourishing low-income commercial development, stand in stark contrast with declining neighborhoods with their empty storefronts and barren sidewalks. What each neighborhood has in common, of course, is that poor people live in them and that old, worn-down buildings far outnumber brand new ones.

As the planners saw things, the residents of tenement neighborhoods were subjected to the noisy activities of industry and commerce, disturbing their peace. Their children, living in densely built-up districts, were forced to play *on the sidewalks*! What these people lacked was fresh air, sunshine, green spaces, and quiet. The planners inadvertently tried to create a likeness of their own wealthy, suburban lives in the context of poor neighborhoods, completely ignoring the differences that made suburban life workable, such as greater wealth, ubiquitous ownership of automobiles, lower population densities, more homogeneous populations, the relative absence of strangers passing through the neighborhood, the

ability to hire private security forces or pay for greater police protection via taxes, and so on.

Therefore, these planners claimed, the 'obvious' solution to the discomforts of ghetto life was to tear down these 'slums' en masse, and in their place erect purely residential complexes, consisting of high rises separated by wide swaths of grass and trees—in other words, the giant American housing projects of the 1950s and 1960s. As Jacobs noted, the rationalist planners, blind to the concrete reality of tenement life, failed to realize that the mix of businesses and residences increased the safety of the residents by providing 'eyes on the street'—the neighborhood shopkeeper, who knew all the residents, was out sweeping his sidewalk early in the morning; the workers going to and from their jobs meant a steady stream of pedestrians; and even the neighborhood bar meant that the streets were not deserted until the wee hours of the morning. Parents transporting their children to and from school would appear on the street in the morning and again in the afternoon. Mothers with preschool children would head to the parks, workers would come out to eat lunch in the public spaces of the neighborhood, and shoppers would occupy the sidewalks as they frequented the area shops. The children playing on the sidewalks could easily be monitored by all of those people, many of whom knew those children, at least by face and lineage, if not also by name, allowing those neighborhood "security cameras" to check incipient anti-social behaviors by those children before they became habitual. What's more, given the relatively low height of most buildings in such "blighted" neighborhoods, the children's' parents were able to exercise a great deal of local control, by, say, leaning out the second story window next to which they were sewing a dress and shouting, 'Johnny, stop that nonsense!'

By contrast, the new, 'rational' housing projects were empty of life around the buildings for most of the day. The basketball courts and the lovely green parks were unsupervised because there was no one around, since the businesses that might have provided "eyes on the sidewalk" had all been zoned out of the development. The tenement mother had formerly had lived no further above the street than the fourth floor of an "inadequate" walkup, from the window of which she could supervise her children's play. But after receiving the "help" of modernist urban planners, she found herself living in a thirtieth-floor, modern apartment. From such a distance, she could not possibly regulate what her children were up to, and, therefore, she, if responsible, could not allow them to spend time in those "common" areas. The planners had tried to construct an imitation of upper-class standards for apartment living while ignoring the fact that the residents lacked "upper-class cash for doormen and elevator men," the paid security that made the upper-class apartment building safe (Jacobs, 1992 [1961], p. 42).

Planners intended none of these outcomes. So then, why did they plan this way? Because their basic approach to planning and their concept of the "rational" neighborhood or city, blinded them to the fine-structure of social life and the intricacies of interaction in public space, making it unlikely that they would anticipate to the deleterious effects of their interventions. They failed to look outside their Oakshottian "guidebooks."

As a result, the corridors and stairwells of the rationally designed housing projects (council flats) became like unwatched and deserted streets, meaning that they were lawless and dangerous places. That danger isolated law-abiding residents even more, so that parents concerned for their children's safety and character refused to allow them to go out of their apartment except when absolutely necessary, meaning that they received no benefit at all from the pleasant green spaces that the planners had thought would be their salvation. Jacobs offers a vivid illustration of this in the anger of a resident of such a project about a much-touted lawn:

> Nobody cared what we wanted when they built this place. They threw our houses down and pushed us here pushed our friends somewhere else. We don't have a place around here to get a cup of coffee or a newspaper even, or borrow fifty cents. Nobody cared what we need. But the big men come and look at that grass say, "Isn't it wonderful! Now the poor have everything!" (1992 [1961], p. 15)

The same errors of constructivism have plagued and continue to plague the approach to designing areas for public recreation.

Public parks and playgrounds are often touted as the solution to juvenile delinquency: "give the kids someplace to go, to get off the street!" But, as Jacobs noted, "When the New York Times… summed up the worst adolescent gang outbreaks of the past decade in the city, each and every one was designated as having occurred in a park" (1992 [1961], p. 76). And why is this? Because in moving from "the streets" to a park or playground, "children have moved from under the eye of a high numerical ratio of adults, into a place where the ratio of adults is low or even nil" (1992 [1961], p. 77).
Another major design failure in these projects, issuing from a constructivist-rationalist mind-set, was the lack of transi-

tional spaces between public and private ones. Rationalist planners were not unaware of the need for community spaces, but they failed to realize that a community cannot flourish faced only with the stark binary choice of either all private or all public space. The community spaces of large housing projects left one totally vulnerable to any person whatsoever who came in, but the only alternative was to stay shut up in one's apartment. By contrast, traditional neighborhoods had features such as stoops, diners, and bars, where one could be partially in public without total exposure.

Constructivist rationalism tends to produce these negative unintended consequences because the attempt to solve urban problems using a pre-determined "answer sheet" will eventually confront the unpredictable complexity and messiness of the real social order. By their nature, constructivist designs tend to be static and so cannot easily evolve and adapt to unforeseen and often rapid changes in technology, tastes, resources, and demographics. Problems get particularly bad when, as often happens, planners attempt to create a *tabula rasa* within the existing urban fabric—by bulldozing sometimes whole neighborhoods—and replace them with large, single-use structures.

Thus, among the practical consequences of the large-scale, urban planning and renewal programs Jacobs so deplored, is the creation of a massive areas devoted to single uses, which she called a Border Vacuum (Jacobs, 1992 [1961], pp. 257-69). A border vacuum in turn is a manifestation of a kind of deep homogeneity (Jacobs invokes the concept of "chaos" i.e. disorder that results from the absence of differentiation) that undermines the vitality of a city. That is, for Jacobs, the foundation of a living city—i.e. "a settlement that consistently generates its economic growth from its own local economy" (Jacobs, 1969 [1961??], p. 262)—is the diversity of how public space is used. Combined with the cohesion provided by social networks, land-use diversity affords local entrepreneurs an array of inputs from which to draw and then experimentally combine in novel ways.[7] If local authorities impose a single, over-arching plan, even one that has built-in "mixed uses," the outcome tends to be deeply homogeneous, if only because its architecture and urban design are limited to a few minds at a given moment in historical time. A living city is one in which government planning has at most provided a basic matrix within which an unpredictable variety of uses, often several in the same space over a period of decades, mingle. Trying to create an "arts district" or to "revitalize downtown" via a particular vision, no matter how creative at the moment, will inevitably result in dull border vacuums or deep homogeneity. Boring spaces, because they repel people, become dangerous and dead places.

In the final chapter of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, "The kind of problem a city is," Jacobs carefully spells out the hyper-modernist bias of the 20th century "scientific mind" shared by the growing numbers of professional urban planners of her day. As the above examples illustrate, what they failed to acknowledge or appreciate is the crucial role that the perceptions of ordinary people of their local environment—Jacobs' "locality knowledge"—plays in the effective operation of a city. Like Hayek and Oakeshott, Jacobs recognized the errors of a rationalism that treated social orders as machines rather than spontaneous orders.

To explain the nature of this error, the final chapter of Jacobs (1992 [1961], pp. 428-48) draws on Warren Weaver's distinction among three kinds of scientific problems. The first are problems of simplicity, which deal with situations involving a very few independent variables, in which the rules of ordinary algebra are appropriate. The second level are problems of disorganized complexity, which concern situations involving so many independent variables that their interactions produce random variations. Here formal statistical analysis is appropriate. Finally, there are problems of organized complexity that lie between the first two kinds of problems. This is the realm of social orders in which the movement of individual elements are not predictable but overall, non-statistical patterns are discernable. Jacobs's and Weaver's warning is that the methods appropriate to solving one problem should not be used for the solution of the others: "The theorists of conventional modern city planning have consistently mistaken cities as problems of simplicity and of disorganized complexity, and have tried to analyze and treat them thus" (Jacobs, 1992 [1961], p. 435).

Hayek has stated the problem this way in his essay "The theory of complex phenomena" as follows:

> But a simple theory of phenomena which are in their nature complex (or one which, if that expression be preferred, has to deal with more highly organized phenomena) is probably merely of necessity false—at least without a specified *ceteris paribus* assumption, after the full statement of which the theory would no longer be simple (Hayek, 1967c, p. 28).

The dominant approach to urban planning of Jacobs' day relied too heavily on simple models—e.g. to handle more cars simply widen roads—or on statistical analysis—e.g. determine how many cubic meters of fresh air healthy

people need per day—instead of viewing the city as a complex, emergent order. They treated the city as a problem of simplicity or disorganized complexity instead of a problem of organized complexity.

This is related to Hayek's insight that is exemplified in his essay "The errors of constructivism." There, Hayek distinguished three kinds of rules that people use to guide their decisions. Using our own labels we may call these "explicit rules," "contextual rules," and "tacit rules" (Hayek, 1978, pp. 8-9).

Tacit rules contain elements that are wholly or mostly inarticulable and contextual.[8] For example, the rules that tells us when a person is happy, the particular look that she has when she is happy rather than in pain or just being polite, are extremely difficult for people not skilled in facial analysis to spell out. Rules that tell us when a person walking toward us on the sidewalk is harmless or threatening are also like this. Contextual rules have more articulable elements but still rely crucially on the contextual knowledge for interpretation. For example, the rule of "pass on the right when approaching someone on the sidewalk" depends on a number of factors just to tell us when to apply it. Is the sidewalk wide enough, is there someone coming from behind that would make passing on the right difficult, or am I in New York or Tokyo? Finally, explicit rules contain information that is wholly or mostly articulable, such as the lines of code in a computer program, which leave little room for their interpretation for the "particular circumstances of time and place." (Oakeshott would here add that in practical activity, the employment of *any* of these types of rules requires judgment.)

Jacobs was then in a sense arguing that inhabitants of city neighborhoods possessed contextual knowledge about local rules and participation in social networks that urban planners tended to ignore. Hayek, extending the critique of Ludwig von Mises, applied this insight to macro-level planning in his critique of socialism insofar as it tended to treat a national economy as a giant machine, in principle programmable by a central authority. Similarly, Jacobs argued that central planning at the municipal level was subject to the same kinds of errors and ruinous consequences.

## CONCLUSION

Jacobs' work illustrates the fact that rejecting rationalism is not equivalent to defending entrenched privilege, opposing all 'progressive programs', or being a political reactionary. Jacobs is in favor of planning done with the real needs of real cities in mind; for instance, she argues that lot usages 'too big' for a neighborhood, such as a huge department store dominating a block in an area otherwise devoted to a mix of residences, small shops, and light industries, should be banned. Neither is she against all social programs aimed at helping the poor. Instead, she is arguing that programs that ignore the factors that actually make the life of the urban poor workable, and instead destroy their communities in an attempt to realize the fantasy of turning their neighborhoods into grassy, tree-filled suburbs, do much more harm than good. Jacobs is not merely interested in the theoretical issue of the philosophical errors of rationalism; she is much more concerned with its actual, destructive effects. And while Jacobs held that certain planning schemes may at least assist the creation of the spontaneous urban order she admires, she firmly rejected the idea that all that is needed is a new, improved form of master plan: '[The] cultivation [of city order] cannot be institutionalized' (1992 [1961], p. 56).

Jane Jacobs was a keen observer of modern city life, highly alert to the concrete circumstances that tend to create a modern urban life that might allow for the flourishing of the inhabitants of the modern city. Her keen awareness of such factors drove her critique of the unmoored abstractions that underlay much of the urban planning efforts of her time. As such, her work offers empirical evidence supporting the more theoretical case that condemned the rationalist misunderstanding of human conduct provided by Hayek and Oakeshott.[9]

## NOTES

1 In order not to be too mysterious, we can say that these differences are similar to those between Winch and Oakeshott described in Callahan (2012a), and turn on Oakeshott understanding all experience as more or less of a world of ideas. The material on Oakeshott's understanding of rationalism is drawn from Callahan (2012b).

2 See Wittgenstein (1994, pp. 86-107).

3 Jacobs notes this tendency in rationalist city planning: "The silliest conception of salvage is to build a duplicate of the first failure and move the people from the first failure into its expensive duplicate, so the first failure can be salvaged! This is a stage of slums shifting and slum duplicating that our cities are reaching, however" (1992 [1961], p. 393n).

4 Jacobs recognized this facet of rationalist planning as well: "[Howard's] aim was the creation of self-sufficient small towns, really very nice towns if you were docile

and had no plans of your own and did not mind spending your life among others with no plans of their own. As in all Utopias, the right to have plans of any significance belonged only to the planners charge" (1992 [1961], p. 17).

5 This helped to protect Hayek against the charge, sometimes incorrectly aimed at Oakeshott, that he was anti-reason.

6 Oakeshott similarly insisted he was not against reason but against its abuse:

"First, of course, when I argue against rationalism, I do not argue against reason. Rationalism in my sense is, among other things, thoroughly unreasonable. That reason has a place in politics, I have no doubt at all, but what I mean by rationalism is the doctrine that nothing else has a place in politics and this is a very common view. The place of reason, in politics & in life, is not to take the place of habits of behaviour, but to act as the critic of habits of behaviour, keeping them from superstition etc." (1948, par. 3).

7 Jacobs (1992 [1961], pp. 143-238) spends several chapters explaining how a neighborhood in a great city spontaneously generates land-use diversity via 1) a variety of uses to attract people at different times of the day, 2) short blocks that add intricacy and interest to urban environments, 3) a number of low-cost private spaces ("old buildings") to incubate new ideas, and 4) a high concentration of people to use public spaces in order to promote safety and demand for local services.

8 Whether it is really correct to call this tacit knowledge "rules" was taken up in Callahan (2012).

9 The authors would like to thank the participants in the 2013 COSMOS + TAXIS conference and two anonymous referees for helpful comments.

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