



## Looking at Barcelona through Jane Jacobs's eyes: Mapping the basic conditions for urban vitality in a Mediterranean conurbation

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### ABSTRACT

Jane Jacobs' quest for urban vitality has had an indisputable influence for urban researchers and planners especially in the Anglo-American context, yet her theories have reached smaller audiences in other parts of the world. This is especially the case in the Mediterranean context, in which her principles for urban vitality would very well correspond to the traditional attributes of these urban settlements, even though their inherent vital nature has been progressively challenged under the paradigm of modernity. In order to contribute with the efforts conducted in the past few years aimed at empirically testing Jacobs' ideas, we consider of special interest to question the nature of these new urban configurations by analyzing Barcelona (Spain) through Jacobs's eyes. An analysis of urban vitality throughout a systemized approach has allowed a detailed spatial interpretation of a conurbation that combines both the attributes of traditional Mediterranean cities and the conflicts that modernity brought with it. The approach that Jacobs provided has proven useful to highlight that this urban area is far from homogeneous, and therefore is also presented as a useful framework for other researchers and urban practitioners to study urban vitality in different geographic contexts, especially in those areas where the logics of modern city building may still persevere.

### 1. Introduction

One of the most influential yet controversial figures in the history of urban planning is neither an architect nor an urbanist, but instead a magazine journalist who, in the 1960's, was able to grasp the true nature of what cities consisted of. This is no other than Jane Jacobs, whose strife against New York's head of planning Robert Moses became known worldwide as her legacy transcended the activist sphere to become a central part of present-day urban theory (Klemek, 2007). The ideas she eloquently expressed in her seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) are now widely considered as benchmarks in urban and planning studies, and in consequence have been periodically re-discovered and re-visited (Danieri, 2000; Hirt and Zahm, 2012; Klemek, 2007; Page and Mennel, 2011; Schubert, 2014; van den Berg, 2016). City administrations worldwide are at the time explicitly or implicitly incorporating Jacobs' principles in their agendas, mainly by promoting higher densities, mixed-used and pedestrian oriented developments, street-level and local economies and bottom-up community action (Schubert, 2014). This can be viewed as a response to the social, environmental and morphological challenges that urbanization

under the paradigm of twentieth-century modern planning brought up (Fainstein, 2005; Marans, 2015).

Consequently, Jane Jacobs' theses are also back on the table for researchers in urban studies, as seen in the past few years with several efforts being made to empirically test her ideas using present-day sources and methods. The most recent examples have aimed to link her conditions for vibrant streets to everyday walking patterns at different urban scales (Sung et al., 2013, 2015; Sung and Lee, 2015). Similarly, her theories have been more recently used as framework in innovative approaches, for instance by tracking human activity throughout cellphone data (De Nadai et al., 2016). Her views on city life have also been regarded as appropriate basis in other disciplines, for example in the studies of criminal activity (Faria et al., 2013) or in the arena of public health (Putnam and Quinn, 2007).

Jane Jacobs' quest for urban vitality has had an indisputable influence worldwide, yet this has been especially acute in an Anglo-American context, considering that her own experience in the United States and Canada has served as basis to the interpretations of post-modern planning currents such as those advocating for smart-growth (Downs, 2005; Hirt and Zahm, 2012). On the contrary, we consider that

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Jacobs' theories have reached smaller audiences in other parts of the world. This is especially the case in the Mediterranean context, even though her principles for urban vitality would very well correspond to the attributes of traditional urban settlements in this context (Schubert, 2014), where cities are well-known for their mixed-used and compact urban models (Martín-Ramos, 2012; Morelli and Salvati, 2010; Pallares-Barbera et al., 2011; Salvati et al., 2013).

In the past few decades, Mediterranean cities and their traditionally inherent vital nature have been progressively overcome by urban areas developed under the paradigm of modernity, being characterized by lower densities, higher degrees of morphological and social fragmentation and now more than ever dependent on high-capacity transportation infrastructures (Cardozo et al., 2010; Delclòs-Alió and Miralles-Guasch, 2017; Méndez, 2009; Nel-lo et al., 2017; Vich et al., 2017). In this context, we consider of special interest to question the nature of the urban configurations resulting from these processes by analyzing them through Jacobs's eyes. This paper is therefore set to explore how vital neighborhoods and districts of a Mediterranean metropolis are, considering that they present both historical urban fabrics, inherently provided with the morphological attributes that Jacobs valued and, secondly, that from a planning perspective it might be useful to confront more recent urban developments with the same optic in order to assess their potential success as vibrant environments. For this purpose, in this paper an integrated approach is developed in order to map and spatially analyze Jacobs' conditions for urban vitality in the specific case of the conurbation of Barcelona, and hence contributing to the growing interest aimed at studying her ideas from an applied perspective. This is conducted based on the systematization of Jacobs's separate conditions and also synthesized in a final indicator of urban vitality. Altogether, using a rather comprehensive approach yet simple in its conceptualization, we intend to provide a useful framework for other researchers and urban practitioners to study urban vitality in different territorial contexts.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a brief overview of Jacobs's basic and complementary conditions for urban vitality, Section 3 presents materials and methods for the analysis of these ideas in the conurbation of Barcelona, Section 4 presents results of both separate conditions and the synthesized score and Section 5 is left for the discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Jane Jacobs' conditions for urban vitality

Based on her own experience, Jane Jacobs aimed at describing "how cities work in real life, because this is the only way to learn what principles of planning and what practices in rebuilding can promote social and economic vitality in cities, and what practices and principles will deaden these attributes" (Jacobs, 1961, p.4). At that time, this was a declaration of war to city officials in major cities such as in Robert Moses' New York, who had started to rely on large housing and infrastructure projects, together with plans that sought for higher degrees of land use specialization (Hirt, 2016), as modern solutions to urban challenges such as crime, poverty or social alienation (Corbusier, 1933).

Under Jacobs' view, this was not how cities worked. Instead, she argued that round-the-clock life in its streets constituted the very core of what urbanity is about, and in order to ensure it, a certain set of requirements should be promoted. She proposed a set of four basic generators of diversity as conditions that would result in vibrant districts and neighborhoods. These, and following Sung et al. (2013) interpretation, are in turn complemented by two accessory conditions that appear throughout Jacobs' book. In this paper we will consider these six conditions as appropriate tools to measure to what degree an urban area can be regarded as vital.

The first of Jacobs' conditions for an urban area to be vital is what she called "a sufficient mix of primary uses, and preferably more than two" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 152): residences, offices, little shops and warehouses, among other functions, are equally necessary. This is in line with

traditional research on built environment, which has proposed land-use diversity as one of the main drivers for street vibrancy, mainly through walking activity (Kang, 2016; Kockelman, 1997; Wey and Chiu, 2013). This is not only referred to the district scale, but also is to be applied to its internal parts: neighborhoods and streets. As a result, people will be there for many different purposes and at different times throughout the day. This would lead not only to a more vibrant economic activity, but also to a higher degree of social interaction.

The second of the conditions argues that the urban fabric mostly has to consist of small blocks that can guarantee a certain degree of contact opportunity (Jacobs, 1961, p. 178). Put plainly, short blocks multiply the presence of streets. Frequent corners result, first, in a higher degree of possible turns, hence shorter distances and also a higher possibility of taking different paths to get to the same place. Also, short blocks and hence a higher number of intersections would create a greater supply of spots apt for local shops that would find pools of customers in more than one street. Jacobs always pointed out the need for streets to be constructed at a human scale in order to enhance a sense of place acquired through higher degrees of social interaction, and the communal sense of safety provided by what she named "eyes on the street".

Jacobs stressed as her third condition the need for a certain degree of mixture between buildings of different characteristics and ages. In this sense, she argued "cities need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 187). Beyond aesthetic arguments, she proposed that if a certain neighborhood only consists of brand new buildings, as for instance in a large-scale single-aged urban development project, this will imply that only those (dwellers, businesses) apt to meet higher rents will be allowed to occupy that space. Oppositely, if a certain mix of new and aged buildings is maintained, diversity both from a land-use and social perspective will be enhanced (King, 2013).

To our view, even though Jacobs addresses this as the fourth principle for urban diversity, concentration is probably the most basic of conditions for an urban area to be vital, since it is precisely the fact that people are present and to be close from one another that is the expression of urban vitality (Jacobs, 1961, p. 200). In this sense, Jacobs' stressed throughout her manuscript the importance of a sufficiently dense concentration of people, which will be a result not only of residents, but also of people that are there for other purposes. She argued that if this is to be achieved, not only a considerable density of residences is needed, but also a high net building density in general is to be aimed for.

Lastly, two other elements are commented throughout the book in relation to urban vibrancy. Jacobs mentions that vital cities would require a high degree of accessibility both on foot and on a higher investment on public transportation, in opposition to the at the time car-dominated city planning. Secondly, Jacobs discussed the negative effects that large infrastructure and single-use buildings or public spaces could have on urban buoyancy. This type of urban element were seen by her as border vacuums, as these could suck out the life of the streets by creating artificial impermeable borders. In this sense, she also talked about on-the-ground railroad tracks, waterfronts, extensive parks that closed at certain hours or large single-use service, administrative or commercial buildings.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Study area: the conurbation of Barcelona

In this study we apply Jane Jacobs' ideas on urban vitality to the conurbation of Barcelona. Populated by approximately 2.4 million inhabitants, this is the core of one of the major metropolitan regions in Southern Europe. Limited by the Mediterranean Sea in the south-east and the Collserola hill in the north-west, the urban continuum extends over a total of 10 municipalities, with the City of Barcelona at its center (Fig. 1). Since there is no administrative delimitation available, the

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