

*Jane Jacobs needs little introduction. She's well known to planners as the author of many critical assaults on planning and urban design, which she has delivered at conferences, in numerous articles and interviews, and in books such as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs has also given us urban economic studies such as *The Economy of Cities and Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, which have helped to establish her as a leading thinker on urban issues. *Systems of Survival*, in which Jane Jacobs identifies two contradictory moral systems of government and commerce, was first published in 1992.*

# Beware of Monstrous

A Professional Planning Perspective on Jane Jacobs' Systems of Survival

**Beware of Monstrous Hybrids!**  
A Professional Planning  
Perspective on Jane Jacobs'  
*Systems of Survival*  
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This book has displayed enduring value and might already rate as a classic, especially when compared with many highly-hyped books that have had a very short shelf-life. This review has two distinct but complementary parts: first, an overview of the book; and second, a personal view of the book in the context of planning professionalism.

*Systems of Survival*, subtitled *A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics*, is intentionally provocative reading. Jacobs' expedition into economic philosophy investigates the codes that govern human behaviour and conflicting moral principles in the working world. The book presents, in the form of a fictitious dialogue, the lively musings of a group comprised of a retired Manhattan publisher, his lawyer niece, and three of his past authors (a mystery novelist, a biologist, and a radical environmentalist) who were previously unknown to each other. They agree to form a committee and meet over a period of months to discuss the everyday moral dilemmas of business and public life.

But the dialogic form isn't Platonic; there's no authoritarian, all-knowing Socrates. The characters are presented as equals because Jacobs is "convinced that we need informal democratic explorations on the part of people who must thread their way through

governmental, business, or volunteer and grass roots policies". Using this literary device, Jacobs shows a diverse group of people working together to make sense of their environment, thus giving a flavour of contemporary consensus-building. The result is readable, and Jacobs' arguments are illustrated with a treasury of fascinating examples and anecdotes. The characterization is somewhat thin – indeed, Ambruster, Kate, Jasper, Hortense, and Ben are caricatures, and I must admit I'm unsure whether or not their cosmopolitan choices of food and drink are intended to be comic. But this is forgivable, because the conversational form of the book, if a little whimsical, works well as a vehicle for presenting a compelling moral model of economic and political life.

This model is comprised of two distinct moral "syndromes": the commercial and the guardian. Jacobs argues that these syndromes, or codes, emerged from the human ability to trade, and that this ability shaped human social order so that two groups emerged: guardians and traders. The guardians, including government, police, and the military, are concerned with territorial responsibilities. Guardians preserve order and enforce rules of fairness so that traders can secure a prosperous life for all. Simply put, the role of government is to create and maintain an environment for new ideas and honest trading.

Jacobs holds that there are two ways of living: taking and trading. Each is informed by its own set of moral principles. Both the guardian and commercial systems are, Jacobs tells us, valid and necessary. In support of this hypothesis, she offers the reader an anthropological view:

"Like the other animals, we find and pick up what we can use, and appropriate territories. But, unlike the other animals, we also trade and produce for trade. Because we possess these two radically different ways of dealing with our needs, we also have two radically different systems of morals and values."

The guardian syndrome of government involves obedience, discipline, ostentation, tradition, and loyalty. The commercial syndrome of trade and industry is guided by principles such as honesty, competition, industriousness, respect for contracts, inventiveness, and the peaceful resolution of conflict. The guardian syndrome is centred on order and security, the commercial syndrome on change and efficiency. Underlying both systems are common moral virtues, such as cooperation, courage, and mercy (see Figure 1).

Another dimension of Jacobs' argument concerns what happens when the line between the two realms is crossed. In Jacobs' view, both taking (politics) and trading (commerce) are morally legitimate as long as their self-organizing systems are separate. And they must be kept separate, for allowing them to mix results in immorality and corruption. Jacobs coins the term "moral hybrids", or even "monstrous moral hybrids", for such dangerous mixing, and offers a Law of Intractable Systemic Corruption which states that "any significant breach of this integrity [of a self-organizing system] will convert some of its virtues into vices". In support of this argument, she offers a catalogue of the problems that arise whenever the systems become confused, as they have in the centralized economies of the Soviet Union and in organized crime.

Jacobs' hypothesis builds on the foundation of Plato's Republic, forming a new perspective while attempting to identify certain universal truths about human behaviour. The concept is simple, and offers a remarkable attempt to come to terms with ethics in the real world.

Whether readers choose to accept Jacobs' thesis or not – and it's well-tested by the characters in the book – the many planning practitioners who dwell on the border between the political and commercial realms are likely to recognize at least a few of the elements of Jacobs' moral principles.

So, given that we are exploring the nature of our role as contemporary professionals, what significance does Jacobs' model have for planning professionalism?

With the emergence of a global economy, the dominance of economic rationality has placed cities in a competitive global network. Indeed, the collapse of the boundary between the commercial and public realms is characteristic of contemporary life – the very situation of which Jacobs warns. Planners live with the notion of entrepreneurial government, but can anyone imagine a dynamic, inventive, and agile guardian public sector? Or a conservative, hierarchy-respecting commercial private sector?

During the last decade, economic rationality has been a large factor in driving planners to join other built-environment professions in the private sector, thus moving planners from the realm of guardians to the realm of traders. The increasing use of private-sector consultants in public planning activities suggests in some way that the culture of the public sector may not be the arena in which to prepare

planning solutions. Jacobs' model offers a perspective from which to look at this trend.

Can the concept of professionalism acknowledge the commercial arena in which many planners now work – an arena that involves competition amongst firms, collaboration amongst multi-disciplinary teams, and productive and efficient operations? Planning is about guarding community interests; yet, looking through the lens offered by Jacobs' model, its base is moving from the guardian realm to the commercial realm. So planners are required to "syndrome-hop", as planning consultants attempt to be both dutiful (guardians) and, by necessity, commercial. Will the commercial frame of mind compromise the profession's guardian role? Planning, like the other built-environment professions, will be straddling Jacobs' two moral systems. Perhaps the first step in dealing with the ethical challenges of syndrome-hopping in an environment governed by economic rationality is to recognize when the situation arises – and, at the very least, Jacobs offers guidelines on how to do that.

Yet planners will still face the contradiction that is outlined in Jacobs' model, and that exists at the heart of contemporary professionalism: those granted autonomy and license by society in return for a disinterested commitment to the public good – an area identified in Jacobs' thesis as the guardian system – also survive by, and profit from, the marketplace services they subsequently provide – services that reflect Jacobs' commercial syndrome. A moral hybrid!

The last two decades of postmodernism have offered planners a multicultural context

within which "civil society" has emerged as a democratic force. This is due, in part, to public disenchantment with decision-making about the environment, which, in particular, indicts the planner-architect nexus of built-environment practitioners. In response, we're beginning to see a philosophical shift in public administration (from perceiving

by society as visionaries, rather than as guardian "police". In order to take this direction, planners need to help make things happen in the area guided by the commercial syndrome, working with citizens toward collaboratively-developed visions. The current working environment, led by market rationality, challenges planners to

# Hybrids!

Figure 1

**THE COMMERCIAL MORAL SYNDROME**

- Shun force
- Come to voluntary agreements
- Be honest
- Collaborate easily with strangers and aliens
- Compete
- Respect contracts
- Use initiative and enterprise
- Be open to inventiveness and novelty
- Be efficient
- Promote comfort and convenience
- Dissent for the sake of the task
- Invest for productive purposes
- Be industrious
- Be thrifty
- Be optimistic

**THE GUARDIAN MORAL SYNDROME**

- Shun trading
- Exert prowess
- Be obedient and disciplined
- Adhere to tradition
- Respect hierarchy
- Be loyal
- Take vengeance
- Deceive for the sake of the task
- Make rich use of leisure
- Be ostentatious
- Dispense largesse
- Be exclusive
- Show fortitude
- Be fatalistic
- Treasure honor

the public as "customers" to recognizing them as "citizens"), and an accompanying move from "public participation" to "citizen engagement". Yet, the role of the professional planner is far from clear.

Of the three professions traditionally involved with the built environment – planners, architects, and landscape architects – planners are in the vanguard that is responding to a call for greater public accountability. Perhaps Jacobs' model gives planners an ethical perspective from which they can lead the built-environment professions toward a praxis-directed future – expanding the modernist professional notion of the "expert", with its reliance on technical-instrumental knowledge, to include everyday, intuitive knowledge. Doing this would enable planners to take centre stage in the attempt to increase people's control over the public decisions that affect their lives.

I would argue that planners must come to the table as informed citizens – first as people, not as professional experts – who add the value of their knowledge and skills to groups constructing strategic solutions to planning challenges. It's possible that such a new direction for practice will result in planners being perceived

reconcile working for profit (often in competition with peers) with working for the common good. Planners therefore need to develop a new professional culture that will enable them to span Jacobs' moral codes. Let the debate commence!

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**Jane Jacobs**, thinly disguised as Kate in the book, identifies two moral and commercial syndromes that guide public and working life. Each comprises fifteen interconnected principles, underpinned by common moral virtues, such as cooperation, courage and mercy.