

# The Ballet of the Streets: Teaching about Cities at Street Level

**Patrick A. McGuire**

*Hobart and William Smith Colleges*

**James L. Spates**

*Hobart and William Smith Colleges*

## **Overview**

The urban scholar Jane Jacobs once described city life as “the ballet of the streets.” In more than a quarter century of joint teaching, we have used Jacobs’ metaphor to help our students understand that cities are living organisms created and maintained, for good or ill, by the people who live and work in them. At heart our teaching are intense encounters with cities, a “street level” experience designed to give students a chance to walk the city’s streets (especially streets far off the beaten path), and to meet its people, prominent and not, so that they can discover for themselves, in living context, the city’s culture, varying life-styles, and issues. Once students learn that cities are people, our longer term hope is that they will become active in the cities and urban regions. Given their international importance and astronomical growth over the last half century, cities are arguably the most significant social systems in the world and, as a result, are crucial for students to understand as such. The purpose of this paper is to share, first, the methodology we have developed for studying cities “at street level;” and second, to suggest how that methodology might be used in the study of cities anywhere. Starting with a course comparing New York and Toronto, we have used a similar approach to study cities in England, Ireland, Italy, Central Europe, China, and Vietnam.

## **Introduction: The View from the Street**

*... At 8 AM on a Wednesday morning in late March, we file out of the South Ferry subway station, having taken the #1 train from a hostel on New York City’s Upper West Side. The air is cool and crisp and our students are excited to begin studying New York City at street level. As we round the corner toward Bowling Green and the monumental steps of the old U.S. Customs*

*House (now the National Museum of the American Indian), we sight our guide, Seth Kamil, founder of Big Onion Tours, a company we have often used because of its guides' depth of knowledge. After handshakes, Seth instructs the students. "Take a good look at this still very impressive building. Look especially at the sculptures that frame its grand staircase. The building opened in 1907 and these images represent what were then considered to be the four great Continents of the world—Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. How can you tell which is which and what do they tell us about what the sculptor and his commissioner( the U.S. Government) thought about these Continents?" Only North America is represented as strong and forward looking. Seth goes on: "This building, placed at the very tip of this island, a few minutes' walk from Wall Street, is a remarkable piece of symbolism. It's really all about trade and money and our unquenchable desire for both, an embodiment in stone of 'The American Dream.'" So starts the first of six intense days dedicated to unraveling the story, life, and attitudes of this great world city...*

*... Five weeks later, at the same early hour on a Thursday morning, rains pours from a slate gray sky. The same students meet Mitchell Kosny, Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Ryerson University, across from Eaton Centre, the immense indoor mall that has been credited with ensuring the continuing financial vitality of downtown Toronto during a time—the late 1970s—when city residents were disappearing in droves into the suburbs, taking with them not just purchasing power and tax dollars but many of the city's businesses and retail outlets as well. Mick tells us, "We were in trouble. 'The Eaton's Story' is just one of many examples I could use that sets Canada and Toronto apart from other countries and their cities. Here we are willing to intervene in the market process if we think we can create a better life experience in our city by so doing. Downtown Toronto was dying. We didn't want it to die. So we did something to counteract the suburban exodus: we did something to entice people back. We changed behavior. That's the key difference: in Toronto we are always thinking about what a good city is and how we can create it. We accept markets, but we don't trust them to always do the things that make a city livable." And so begins our five days dedicated to unraveling the story, life, and characteristic attitudes of a very different world city...*

We created the course "Two Cities: New York and Toronto" to help students understand urban life in general and the life of these cities in particular. The course is interdisciplinary (McGuire is an economist; Spates a

sociologist) and intentionally cross-cultural because we want those who take it to see not only how different fields approach the study of cities, but how cities are shaped by different *cultural or subcultural* settings. At the heart of the course lie street level encounters. We go “everywhere,” to famous places (Wall Street, Eaton Center) and places mostly avoided (New York’s South Bronx, the poverty-stricken “East of Yonge” in Toronto).

Cities “show” themselves as they really are only to those who make an effort to *participate* in them, by looking, listening, and thinking carefully. *Walking* the streets allows one to feel ambiance; talking to people reveals striking differences and unexpected similarities as neighborhoods shift. Our group is often not only large but distinct from the local population in ethnic and racial composition. People ask why we are there, and when told of our purpose they welcome us. In our walks, we want to impart three crucial lessons. First, cities are *living* organisms, created, maintained, or damaged by those who live and work in them. Second, people can view their lives differently in the same city depending on social and economic status and ethnicity. Third, the life-reality of the economic and sociological theories of cities matters.

## **Two Cities: Central Theories and Concepts**

We created “Two Cities” two and a half decades ago and have taught it in other countries as the course framework can be fruitfully applied to the *comparative* study of cities anywhere. Separately, we have taught “Two Cities” in Ireland (Dublin and Galway), Italy (Venice and Rome), Germany (Berlin, Stuttgart, Tuebingen), Central Europe (Cluj, Romania and Budapest, Hungary), and Vietnam (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City). We start with our New York and Toronto course, the “ground” from which all our “street level” courses sprang, then refer to courses each of us, independently, have taught elsewhere. Our intention is to present a model framework rather than recommend particular theoretical approaches. Our focus has been Economics and Sociology. However, Political Science, History, and Urban Anthropology seem naturally suited to this type of pedagogy, as Women’s Studies, Media and Society, and Environmental Studies. Finally, co-taught courses are not normative in academe, although they yield creativity. Constant interplay pushed us to new levels of thinking and teaching and our approach.

An abiding respect for the work of Jane Jacobs helped. In his urban sociology courses, Spates always used Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, while in urban economics courses, McGuire used *The Economy of Cities*. Jacobs argued that cities play a critical role in human affairs and insisted that they could only be understood from the viewpoints of the people who *actually* live in them. As Jacobs told us in a 2001 interview:

Most people don't have any idea how wonderful and important cities are, how they facilitate almost everything that is worthwhile in human life—if they are conceived and maintained properly. For a very long time, we've made a great mistake in our thinking. We've been seduced by a false rural mythology. Cities, we've been taught—Sodom and Gomorrah are prototypes—are evil places. Paradise is rural, some sort of uncomplicated Garden of Eden. That's all foolishness. Cities *can* be awful places, but that happens only when people don't understand all the fine things they do or, more importantly, understand *how* those fine things happen! Like all living things, cities are fragile, and our ignorance about them, or our greed and lust for power can destroy or maim them. But once we grasp how they work, we can make them work for all, we can create them so that they make our lives so much more delicious. That understanding is what we have to aim for.

The course begins with four weeks of studying, theory to give students a series of analytical frames to make sense of the complex urban realities they will visit. First, we outline Jacob's urban economic theory to show why and how cities evolved and the principles by which, they grow and thrive. Sociology comes next, using Plato's *Republic*, about the nature of justice and the formation of cities, and the nineteenth century British sociologist John Ruskin's insights into society's use of trade and commerce to understand not how *much* money is made or spent, but, *how* the money is made and spent. We have found that these theories best helped students focus on how cities function.

We next introduce the concept of *culture*, to show how, in its many guises, culture is one of *the* most critical elements in city life anywhere, *and is s a guideline for* behavior, not an indelible rule. Every city has a characteristic culture and to understand a city one needs a firm grasp of the central

cultural ideas which inform the people who live and work in them. It is the *comparison* of city cultures which allows us to throw the essences of each into much higher relief for analysis.

## Teaching New York and Toronto

Four weeks of theory are followed by a four week segment on New York City and a six-day excursion there. We then spend four weeks on Toronto, visit Toronto, and use one week to conclude the course.

Practical matters: 1) Each week we assign readings and show films elucidating some aspect of the history, culture, and issues that relate to our cities (for films we show both features and documentaries and make a concerted effort to use films that illuminate the “hidden aspects of city life”); 2) our Colleges are essentially equidistant from both New York and Toronto, making these logical choices; 3) McGuire grew up in New York and Spates had relatives in Toronto, providing us with initial contacts in each city; 4) we visit New York first, because it is important to minimize the “flash” of New York in students’ minds. To visit it last would leave too dominant an impression; and 5) we use the same kind of preparation for both New York and Toronto.

We begin with economic history. Over two weeks, McGuire presents an overview of how New York came to be and shows how, over centuries, it became the “living space” it is, which differs from its image in the popular mind. For two weeks, Spates then explains how the city’s unique culture developed, from a Dutch trading center to an individualistic, competitive city *nonpareil*, the famous “capital of capitalism.” In this context, he reprises Plato’s concepts of justice and Ruskin’s theories about the role of trade and money-making and spending in cities. Students will be asked to use the theories while in New York.

### New York

*There is no place like New York [former Mayor David Dinkins (1990–94), told our students when we were with him]. That doesn’t necessarily make New York better than other places, but it sure in hell is different! And it’s different not only in size and scope. I think part of the magnificence of New York, frankly, is its people! We have 178 separate ethnic identities! That’s why we have to have a parade every half hour!... All school children learn that New York is a melting pot. But it is not*

*a melting pot! My expression is that New York is a gorgeous “mosaic”...a flawed mosaic, yes, but, despite all its warts and flaws, still the greatest city in the world!*

**The New York trip:** the following description of one of our days in New York is intended to provide a *model* for how “street level” days in any city can be structured so that they illuminate both a city’s culture and theories for interpreting it.

**Thursday, our third day in New York (Manhattan and the Bronx):** *At 5:30 a.m. vans belonging to The Doe Fund, an organization dedicated to reclaiming the lives of this city’s homeless men, deliver us to Doe’s large residential facility (a revamped school) in North Harlem where we breakfast with Doe’s “clients.” Then, in pairs, our students travel downtown with some of the men to the Upper West and Upper East Sides. There, in blue uniforms emblazoned with the logo, “Ready, Willing, and Able,” the men, mostly African-American or Latino, clean the city’s streets on weekdays. Over three hours the students are to ferret out their stories, that, without exception, are grounded in grinding poverty and frequently include unconscionable child abuse and neglect, great violence (raping, beatings, killings), extensive jail time, and substance misuse. The walkabouts are safe, as the Doe teams are supervised by graduates of the program and are in constant communication with each other and the Harlem facility. Many of the students are shaken by their encounters. After lunch at the Harlem facility, the students meet Doe’s directors, George and Harriet MacDonald, who explain Doe’s mission and discuss the importance of regular and demanding work in teaching the responsibility necessary to become a functioning member of society. “Work works” is a Doe catchphrase. After telling of their experiences, very different from those of just 36 hours ago elsewhere in the city, vans take the students to St. Ann’s Church in the Mott Haven area of the South Bronx. There we meet Reverend Martha Overall, organizer of the church’s after school program for 60 neighborhood children of Latino and African-American backgrounds. As a group, we walk to a nearby school to pick up the children. This picking up is essential in this ravaged area: if not escorted to St. Ann’s or home, the children would be prey to numerous youth gangs in the area seeking “runners” for their drug trade. In St. Ann’s basement, our students work with the children on their homework for two hours. It is a delightful time. In an hour with “Mother Martha,” who is featured in three of Jonathan Kozol’s books on the plight of urban children, she tells us that, since the 1980s when the South Bronx came to symbolize American urban devastation for the world, the only*

*real change is that fires set by arsonists so that insurance could be collected have gone out. Terrible poverty (75% of area residents make less than \$15,000 a year), violence, and lives of desperation go on almost unabated. Around 5:30, we leave. Most of the children are distraught at our disappearance because they know, as do we, that we not likely to come back. We end the day with a stunning meal—sponsored for years by one of our trustees—in the finest, most expensive Chinese restaurant in the city. The students get the point.*

**Debriefing:** After three more days on New York's streets, Monday finds us back in class where we devote our next three sessions to unpacking the prior six days. The first class is given over to experiences: we share the moments that have been most powerful, impressive, and thought-provoking. In the next two classes, the students are called on to *apply* theories, NYC history, and culture material to analyze what they have experienced. Why is the financial district where it is? Why are the characters of Greenwich Village, the West Village, and Gramercy Park so different? What happened that New York has so many homeless and Mott Haven so many impoverished children, and that both populations are almost all non-white? Can these questions be answered by applying the land use or export base models and/or Plato's argument about *justice* or Ruskin's argument about how money is made and spent? What are the critical cultural beliefs motivating the New Yorkers we met? How can New York, rich and exciting, at the same time, generate immense, seemingly intractable problems (*e.g.*, the city's 25% poverty rate and its attendant suffering and violence), despite the city's long-term commitment to aiding its weaker members?

## Toronto

In the following month we look at Toronto's economic history and culture. Despite being a major North American metropolis, Toronto is a *Canadian* city, an urban place that has evolved from a very different set of cultural values than those undergirding the culture of American cities. The difference is made palpable with examples. Whereas the United States was born in rebellion and placed, from the outset, prime emphasis on competition and individualism, Canada emerged without strife, moving, over two centuries from a British colony to a dominion of the same Empire to independent country status. Canadians distinguish themselves from their American counterparts, saying with pride that they had no "Wild West" to

conquer, no cowboys, no “Manifest Destiny” to actualize. Thus, while in the US a central cultural phrase is “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” Canada embraces “Peace, Order, and Good Government.” More locally, from its first days, New York was devoted to *trade*; Toronto, in contrast, from inception, was an *administrative* center for Upper Canada charged with finding out what its citizens most needed and, that determined, seeing that they got those things. We are now ready for “The Great Toronto Adventure.”

*Here’s the thing about Toronto that makes it so different from any other city I know—and I’ve traveled around the world quite a bit looking, trying to figure out what makes cities work best [former Mayor John Sewell (1978–80) told our students]. I like the special cultural understanding that frames this city. Despite its size, you can feel at home. Here—and it is not a “sentimental thing” to say this!—you can feel that you’re loved; here you can feel that you (as you) are accepted whatever your particular interests are; you can feel respected and that you are part of something larger than yourself. The disenfranchised and poor? Of course they are here. But, lamentable as that is, truth to tell, there are nowhere near as many of them as in your cities below the 49th parallel [the boundary between Canada and the US for most of their shared border]. In fact, I think we’ve done a pretty good job of providing a viable safety net for the poor in Canada (that’s one of the reasons the streets are essentially safe here, you know). And, in any event, I was brought up to think that in Canada everyone’s franchised and if somebody’s not doing well, then we’ve gotta do something to pull ‘em in...*

### **A day in Toronto**

*Friday (A Day “East of Yonge”): Up at 6 a.m., by 7:30 we have walked twenty blocks, largely through poor neighborhoods to Regent Park, the oldest of the city’s housing communities for its poor. The Christian Resource Center (CRC) has helped arrange for the students to go in pairs to areas of the city where agencies serving the poor are located to talk to the agencies’ managers and clients. Among the agencies are food banks, homeless shelters, a safe house for abused women, and an organization facilitating access to assistance money.*

*Back at Regent Park in early afternoon, we debrief the experiences for two hours, many of which have been powerful and enlightening for the students, most*

*of whom are not and never have been poor, homeless or abused. The remaining afternoon focuses on the immense revitalization program the Toronto Community Housing Association has underway for Regent Park. Originally built on a model imitative of the immense and impersonal public housing projects for city poor in the US, Toronto soon decided that such structures did considerably more harm than good. As a result, Toronto is currently spending close to \$1 billion to rebuild Regent's original 1700 units and, integrate lower income units with units for higher income residents, grocery stores, restaurants, and other services. The result, years from completion, is already remarkable for "state-of-the-art" apartments and street-level business.*

*After dinner, we meet members of an informal organization of young adults called SLAP ("Street Life Awareness Program"). Formerly street youth, the members introduce their work, then take groups of five to areas of the city never visited by tourists—to where homeless kids hang out, to places where male and female prostitution are readily available, to areas where drug dealing is common. In a dozen years of our work with SLAP we have never had a negative incident. As John Sewell said, in Toronto "the streets are safe." After three hours, we reassemble with SLAP's leaders and talk. The hours have left a powerful impression.*

**Debriefing:** We spend two more days in Toronto, then unpack the visit in three class sessions. During the first we share experiences; in the next two, we employ our theories to analyze Toronto. By now, our students are perceptive about how the residents of each city think and act differently. After visiting New York, as soon as the students heard Mitchell Kosny's "take" on Toronto, they understood that they were in a city where the local culture stressed "city and services" first and "self" second, in direct contrast to New York. This audible difference was substantiated by what they *saw*. In the downtown core, for example, the city of Toronto required that office buildings provide services and amenities (adequate wage levels, pensions, wheel-chair access, spaces for public art). A deeper lesson was apparent as well: comparison with New York revealed that Toronto was *neither* just a northern version of an "American city," nor only a "Canadian city," but, rather, as a result of its history, location, and its citizens' values, a distinct urban place with its own unique life-force. They learned that you cannot understand cities if you don't learn their cultures by walking their streets and talking to their people. This lesson can be transferred to the study of other cities in other parts of our world.

### Courses End

*Last Classes:* After the debriefing, we have three class hours left. We ask students to compare our cities, using our orienting theories to frame their comments. Drawing on Jacobs, Plato and Ruskin, the students debate which is the better of *as* a city? Views differ and sometimes the discussion gets heated!

*The BiDisciplinary Paper:* Two cities, two cultures, two disciplines, two professors. The course ends with a paper in which the students apply the semester's work to a topic of their choosing with a focus on the economic and sociological theories we have used. Over the years, students have chosen myriads of subjects, each reflecting the student's ability to see how culture has affected a particular aspect of urban life. Thus, in a paper on "Architecture in Cities: Stone and Steel Testaments to Cultural Motifs," the student uses photos to argue that architecture reflects the key values of a city (Thus, in New York architecture is almost always business driven, while, in Toronto, it is very often policy-driven. As a result, New York has more great and spectacular architecture, but Toronto has more "liver-friendly" architecture. A paper on "Chinese Immigration, Chinatowns, and Immigrant Life in Two Cities" asserts that New York's Chinese population reflects American ideology ("Give me your tired, your hungry, your poor)," and while life for the city's Chinese is varied and vibrant, many suffer difficult adjustment and deprivation. In contrast, Toronto's smaller Chinese population mostly comes from Hong Kong region, a function of the "accept anyone from the former empire" policy of Britain and its Commonwealth countries. As a result, these Chinese arrived "pre-steeped" in British values and that, along with Toronto's policy of helping all who live there, has made their absorption into the normal life of the city much easier.

A paper on "Where does the Good go? The Realities of Education in Toronto and New York" examines the collapse of New York's educational system, except in its richest neighborhoods, because of the mass suburban exodus and the loss of tax revenues. The implications for the development of critical thinking and democracy are considerable. In contrast, despite a similar suburban movement, the City of Toronto, which includes both the center city and many of its suburbs, is able to maintain better schools. Finally, a paper on "Would the Doe Fund Work in Toronto?" argues that cultural differences require different policy responses. The Doe Fund, in its attempts to rehabilitate homeless men in New York *insists* on certain behaviors. In Toronto, authoritarian directives would be seen as an infringement

of the clients' rights and an "insult to their humanity."

### **Some Effects of "Two Cities"**

Our pedagogy seeks to "make a difference," by giving students new knowledge and encouraging them to be actively involved in life, particularly after they graduate. Many former students have told us that "Two Cities" has had this effect and that they now look at cities very differently. Awakened by the course to the desperate needs of New York City's schools, a 2010 graduate subsequently chose to major in Urban Studies and post graduation, to join "City Year" to work with after school programs in Chicago. Similarly inspired to make a difference to the life of a city, a 2008 graduate moved to New York and now works for a non-profit agency. Two others also returned to New York, a 1998 graduate to seven years at the Doe Fund before pursuing a Master's in Urban Geography to develop a new approach to understanding the geography of homeless in the city, and a 1994 graduate to work as a New York City firefighter, inspired to "do the right thing" on the front lines. Finally, a 2000 graduate's decision to teach in a Pennsylvania inner city school was inspired by Jonathan Kozol's *Ordinary Resurrections* on the horrors of children's lives in the South Bronx and the walks we had taken to understand New York's social and economic issues.

### **Teaching "Two Cities" in Other Cultures**

Our off campus teaching brought each of us to different and interesting world cities where we each instinctively joined the dance to help understand them. Discussing the next version of the "Two Cities," we referred to our experiences, concluding that our method can and should be used to study cities in different parts of the world and so we began to teach the two cities methodology in our off campus programs. The adaptation of the original Two Cities to other locales was seamless and emphasized four essentials:

- First, cities can only be understood properly when they are regarded a living organisms and encountered by walking the streets.
- Second, the complexity of the human world demands an awareness of the different cultures that exist in different world cities, even cities within specific countries; and one needs to examine a city's history, its place in the wider world and how it projects itself in the literature and art of the culture.

- Third, it is crucial when teaching street level courses that students have some theoretical foundations to help interpret what they see, hear, feel, touch and smell on the streets.
- Finally, our approach works best by comparing two cities within the same country or in two different countries. No two cities have the same culture, histories, locations, and the values shared by local residents are distinct. A comparison has the effect of throwing the essential elements of each city into high relief, resulting in a clearer understanding of how each has chosen to dance its version of the ballet of the streets. Further, Jane Jacobs' *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* provides an excellent foundation for a comparative study of cities no matter their location.

### **"Two Cities" Around the World**

*... My students and I walk through Hanoi's Old City, at the northern end of Hoan Kiem Lake ("Lake of the Returned Sword"), home still, many Vietnamese aver, of the great turtle which, hundreds of years ago, rose from the waters to give the country's greatest general the sword which would allow him and his troops to defeat the much more powerful invading Chinese army (after which the sword was returned for the turtle's keeping). We have arrived in this capital city after spending three weeks in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) where our semester-long program began. There, we assiduously studied Vietnamese language, met many Saigonese, and traveled to nearly every corner of the great metropolis while studying, as the days passed, Saigon's and Vietnam's history. Saigon looks and feels a lot like a Western city, with its huge central business district, modern shops, bustling streets, and its millions of Western-culture emulating citizens. But, now in Hanoi, things are suddenly very different. Today, we are walking thousand year old streets, streets still called by the name of the thousand year old crafts once made there, and where spices, chicken and cloth are traded much as they always have been: Hang (Trade) Bac (silversmiths), Hang Bo (basket makers), Hang Ca (fishmongers), Hang Thiec (tin makers), Hang Hom (coffin makers). My students have never experienced anything like the raw (the right word!) smells and sights and cacophony of sounds they see here. Hanoi is also modernizing at a pace once unimaginable, but in remains at least a decade behind Saigon in this process. Much more conservative than Saigon, the communist government is based here and "the ways of the village"*

*are still much in evidence: in the beavies of Tai Chi practitioners who appear every morning at sunrise to exercise on the banks of Hoan Kiem, in the shrines dedicated to the spirits of the ancestors that are present in almost every home, rich or poor. If we had only studied Saigon we would have never understood how different these two cities are... (Spates)*

*...our group meets at the Deak Ference ter metro stop, in the center of Budapest. In mid-afternoon on a cloudy November day, we are well into our Central European semester. Walking along Karoly krt Street, we stop at the Dohany Synagogue, Europe's largest, to examine its impressive Byzantine architecture. A bit further on, encounter the horrors of the 20th century as we pass the Ghetto Wall erected by the Nazis in 1944 to enclose Budapest's Jews. Nearby is the Holocaust Memorial. We continue on through narrow streets, pre-World War I buildings hiding the sky. One student says the area reminds her of New York's Lower East Side — dense, crowded, with little light. Sometimes we encounter striking attempts to meld the old with the new: courtyards have been remodeled to serve multiple older buildings, people newly wealthy have moved in to this historically Jewish quarter, coffee shops and specialty food stores have sprung up next to butcher stores surely at least a century old. Yet the majority of Budapest's residents live in Soviet era concrete blocks that now also house citizens from across the former Eastern Block. Soon we are at Andrassy Street, Budapest's most famous and opulent street, a model of the modern city but seldom visited by most Hungarians. The "ballet" of the city in Central Europe's largest city has been exhilarating (McGuire).*

As these examples show, the method we have evolved for studying cities at street level in North America can, with adjustments, be effectively exported to cities anywhere—with, we might add, similarly positive results, as the following comments show. A 2007 graduate found his experience in the Vietnam course so compelling that after graduation he returned "...to Ho Chi Minh with less than a hundred dollars in my pocket. I spent almost two years teaching English as a second language to Vietnamese. It was wonderful. Now, I am back in Buffalo, in graduate school training to be an elementary teacher, but I can honestly say that I returned from Vietnam not only readier for this next step in my life, but as a much stronger and better human being." A 2009 graduate who took both the New York/Toronto courses and the Vietnam adaptation reported that the former "...prepared me for how

different cities in different cultures can be... but my Vietnam time taught me how different they can be in the same country! Before long I had fallen in love with the country and its people. I now live in Ho Chi Minh City, choosing it over Hanoi because it is the financial fulcrum around which the country turns.”

### **The Ballet of the Streets**

The pedagogy we have described is fairly simple. A pair of cities is selected for study along with disciplinary lenses. Following theoretical and historical study, ideas about the cities are “put to the test” “at street level” in the cities. Although the course is the most rewarding either of us has taught, it is also the most demanding because of the planning it requires. Nevertheless, the on-site visits are the sine qua non of the method and make the cities come alive for the students as living organisms they can feel as well as think about. Cities and the lives of their residents can only be grasped at street level, and even a short time spent as part of “the ballet of the streets” will be transformative for students in the best educational sense. Jane Jacobs taught us that cities are ballets, though of an unstaged sort, a complex of real-life dances reflecting the same joys and heartache, the same nobilities and their opposites as their more formal counterparts. At street level, students see cities at work, come to want to know more about them. Best of all, many want to be helpful citizens in the cities they will adopt as home.

*Toronto:* On a Saturday afternoon we cross the city’s main east-west corridor, Bloor Street, into The Annex, a lovely neighborhood. Making our way up Albany Avenue, we note Torontonians’ remarkable friendliness and propose that a student knock on a door to have a chat. The students are hesitant to try, but one finally agrees. We pick number 69, a house like the others with a small front yard, daffodils springing up, and a large porch. Diffidently, Caroline mounts the steps. Several knocks yield no answer, but we encourage her to try again. As she turns, reluctantly, once more toward the door, it opens and a smiling old lady emerges. “Oh, my God,” Caroline says, fairly dancing about the porch, “It’s Jane Jacobs!” Amazed, moments later the students are sitting with us and Jane on her porch, talking about Toronto, cities, and the importance of making a difference in your life for life. The students are mesmerized as Jane, kind and brilliant deep into her eighties, tells them that cities are fragile things, requiring hard and continual work if they are to serve alal their residents. But it is good work, she says, because as well-springs of

human civilization, they are the most important social systems in the world and should be livable and humane. Further, individuals can make a difference. “You can fight City Hall! And you can win! We won in New York when we fought Robert Moses over his Lower Manhattan expressway and we won in Toronto after I moved here [with her family in the 1960s in protest against the Vietnam War] and we fought the plan to build “The Spadina Expressway,” which would have gone straight through downtown and destroyed Chinatown, the Fashion District, and other neighborhoods you just walked through.” Toronto has had harder years recently, but Jane lists initiatives that are cause for hope in a city she loves as much as she still loves New York. “You know,” Jane says as our hour with her comes to a close, “I usually don’t do this, meet with groups. But I love meeting with you, because you students are the hope for our future, the people who, in just a few years, will make cities better.” And so, reluctantly, we say goodbye to Jane and she waves from her porch until we turn the corner. We have much more dancing to do.

## Acknowledgements and Notes

The authors wish to express their gratitude to Jennifer Morris and the editors of this journal for extremely helpful comments on prior versions of this article.

Note: In the spring of 2006, our friend—mentor to ourselves and our students—Jane Jacobs, passed away. We dedicate our course and this paper to her. Students of cities will benefit from her remarkable insights into how living cities really work for generations to come.

For copies of the syllabus for “Two Cities: New York and Toronto” and the itineraries for the city visits, contact: mcquire@hws.edu or spates@hws.edu. See also the Urban Studies site at [www.hws.edu](http://www.hws.edu).

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