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One legacy of Jane Jacobs: community walks around the globe



Toronto Star Syndicate, Jane Jacobs.

By **Renée Loth** Globe Columnist May 01, 2017

When the famed urbanist Jane Jacobs was a young woman scraping out a living as a freelance writer, she would roam New York City's streets for hours, gathering material for her keen portraits of workers in the diamond district or flower district (published in *Vogue* magazine, no less). These peregrinations were some of her first forays as "an urban naturalist," as she later called herself. To understand a city, [she wrote](#), a person need only have "an observant eye, curiosity about people, and a willingness to walk."

It is in this spirit that cities the world over will be hosting a series of “Jane’s Walks” this week, which would have been her 101st birthday. In the 10 years since they began, in Toronto, these free, citizen-run walks have been organized from [Calgary to Calcutta](#) — a global festival of architecture, open space, civic engagement, and local history. Some walkers have an activist agenda; some walk at night to promote public safety; some are simply basking in hometown pride. All are participants in what Jacobs called the “sidewalk ballet.”

Though derided by opponents as “nothing but a bunch of mothers,” in the 1960s Jacobs and her followers managed to save Greenwich Village from rapacious developers like Robert Moses, stop ruinous highway projects, and alter forever the way American planners think about cities. In this centennial year, Jacobs is getting a lot of attention: new biographies and reconsiderations of her influence abound. “Citizen Jane,” a documentary coproduced by Robert Hammond, a creator of New York’s wildly popular High Line, opens this week; critics have called it “inspiring and urgent.”

Closer to home, Jane’s Walks are planned this weekend in West Roxbury, Roslindale, and Somerville. In Worcester, a week’s worth of events, under the rubric “Jane Jacobs in the Woo,” include a community clean-up, a pop-up parklet, and a “flash tour” of Worcester City Hall. The walks are not typical guided tours with one informed docent pointing out notable landmarks, but conversations among neighbors, with all comments welcome.

In Roslindale, advocates are hosting [a walk](#) to promote a long-dormant idea for a new connecting path between Roslindale Square and the Arboretum. With its bustling local commercial district and commuter rail stop, the square would be a natural feeder for the bucolic “tree museum,” except that access to the park is often difficult, poorly signed, or dangerous. Sunday’s walk will trace a proposed new Roslindale Gateway Path, continue through the Arboretum, and examine potential new connections into the [Southwest Corridor Park](#), where Roslindale meets Jamaica Plain. For years, these neighborhoods have been enduring the reconstruction of the crumbling William J. Casey Overpass, which has been brought down to grade level, and now residents can begin to envision a reknit community, with safe passage into both parks.

“We want to get people more devoted to the idea that this is their neighborhood,” said Matt Lawlor, cofounder of WalkUp Roslindale, the local advocacy group organizing the walk. “If you don’t speak up for it, who will?”

The Jacobs legacy of “citizen planners” is not without its faults. It can lead to NIMBYism, blind faith in populist amateurs, and blanket disdain for institutions. But if it weren’t for Jacobs and the neighborhood preservation movements she inspired, the walkers of Roslindale would probably be navigating the Southwest Expressway, not looking for ways to connect to the Southwest Corridor Park.

At a time when a “master builder” is president, promising to pave the nation and slash funds for urban amenities like pedestrian paths and parks, walking itself can seem like a radical act. But as Jane Jacobs taught us, we don’t have to walk alone.

Renée Loth's column appears regularly in the Globe.