

# Zoning for Clash

*What New Haven can  
teach New York*

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**Until recently, if you asked me what I did for a living, I would** say that I wrote journalism about how to avoid climate change or how to prove that it's real. On the Tuesday after July 4, 2009, I was in New Haven playing hooky from publicists who wanted me to write for the *New York Times* about the Manhattan borough president's upcoming seminar on "How Going Green Can Save you \$\$" and about how some corporate execs had wrangled a deal to install low-wattage bulbs in lampposts near a Manhattan boat basin. Such things are academic now. I knew as I pedaled uphill from Union Station that I was there to address a more elemental question: Now that climate change is upon us, how should we live with it? How can we rig our cities and serve the people in them so that we act more fairly and live more happily than we otherwise would?

The answer is by constantly forcing ourselves to confront what doesn't work in our society, and using this confrontation to take honest whacks at new solutions. This means cramming people on top of each other, inserting proof of civic failure into the view of luxury apartments, putting parks where nothing else can profitably grow, making organic food a pump for creating jobs and limiting sprawl, and forcing people to walk and dance in public whether or not they want to. In other words, by intensifying our cities.

New Haven always registered intensely in my brain—when I walked College Street in September 1989 as a college freshman, and again seven years later when I drove to a rental apartment on Orange Street where movers had already arranged my furniture, on my parents' dime, so that I could pursue an MBA. From the Green you see the storyline the whole city wants to sell: brisk commerce downtown, potent public institutions from the hospital to the train station, academic dignity up Prospect Hill. From Orange and Whitney you see the favors the government gave to Yale by allowing it to eat up a large block with an ugly parking garage in order to advance

the study of science. And you see the failings of all these approaches to lock in equity or growth.

And you could have seen me pedaling through a noisy breeze in July, gliding past 99-cent stores on lower Chapel Street and high-rises on Howe, sensing that a return to New Haven's grid would help me imagine how we can tune our cities' zoning and taxes and politics for climate change.

Stipulate that the world is growing more urban (it is) and that urban forms provide the scale that makes it possible for energy-efficient innovations to succeed (they do). What else can we generalize about how cities "work" that considers their disparities in class, education, temperament, and age? Only that at the margin, each of us changes after seeing things we didn't want to see. And that an environment that forces us to confront those things can make us sharper and fairer and, in the end, happier.

**I was in New Haven not only to shuck publicists but also to** dispose of a wraith I'd carried for too long: the ghost of an urban planner and guardian angel named Jane Jacobs. Jacobs's 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*—the most revered book ever among urban planners—made it an article of faith among city planners that neighborhoods succeed when a "ballet" of cooperation emerges among people who share a block. The thesis knocked back the onslaught of expressways and severely ugly construction projects in the 1960s. But it failed the bullshit test every day I walked to work. I lived in a cluster of "soulless" brick towers, yet I'd found warm and resourceful community there. And my daughter played with equal affection with her friends in our enclosed playground and in city-owned swimming pools. She and I benefit from being close to people or activities that teach us to be more patient and more visible.

Jacobs associates urban proximity with amusement—"the point of cities," she writes, "is multiplicity of choice." Not so today, if ever. The point of cities has to be survival amid climate change. My neighborhood

stirred me to teach my daughter about charity and patience not because my neighbors and I watched out for each other. My neighbors are a hodgepodge of hipsters, Hasids, public housing tenants, and immigrants from eastern China. I see my daughter's eyes opening as we pass stores selling knockoff dolls and steamed buns and passport photos. It's not adorable. It's hard—but possible—to understand, and it screams with inconsistency.

Jacobs famously recast shopkeepers as "eyes on the street" that twinkle in service of the author's peace of mind. And this notion floats over most civic progress in my hometown: It guided city planners to overlay a pedestrian mall into Times Square and it lets people spurn hospitals or shelters that violate a sense of ballet. Jacobs's name helped kill plans for a tall building the condo sales of which would have financed a new nonprofit hospital near eight subway lines.

When I walked around a New York where rich and poor withdrew to iPods and massages, I felt intensely that a trip to a less cosseted, less adorable city would teach me how brittle Jane Jacobs's thesis had become. To show why her premise has passed its sell-by date, let her speak for herself about migration: "People are accommodated and assimilated, not in undigestible floods, but as gradual additions, in neighborhoods capable of accepting and handling strangers in a civilized fashion."

Our world is and will remain one where your choice in undigestible floods entails whether to surf or soak. In our world, undereducated people are leaving farms and rushing to cities by the billions. Some of the luckiest come to America, where schools and public health services can barely absorb them. And deceit and duplicity now obscure how multinational oil companies and utilities are reaping and wasting fossil fuels in ways that will change all our lives and deaths. Our world is one of undigestible floods, except that the affluent (wearing their iPods) can't hear the waters rising. Immigrants are not a "service," as Jacobs says, but a bloc of people

trying to survive. Urban joy will be a massive ad hoc construction project, not a street-side dispensation of “gradual additions” like so much milk and cookies.

At the time Jacobs wrote *Death and Life*, a screed was probably a wise counter to the monstrous force of Robert Moses. But as the climate changes, Jacobs would need to bargain with Moses. The dictator and the didact would have to collaborate to compel people to use resources efficiently enough to adjust to climate change. To understand how, I wanted to see a city that had not reinvented itself according either to Jacobs’s ideals or to architects’ excesses.

So I sent myself back to New Haven, to face some of the clash that I now think makes cities live.

**When people learn to constantly face things they don’t want to** see and show things they’d rather hide, the forced confrontation of everyday living impels their common living to become more ingenious, fairer, and happier. Now, I have no scientific support for this contention except this: *The Economist* ran a story over the summer documenting how people in studies turn out happier when they know more kinds of people. And the emerging field of behavioral economics shows repeatedly that people have a sense of what’s fair and try to match what other people do for them. But mostly, this idea resounds with my experience of cities: Developers and governments forcing confrontation are also creating kinds of housing and zoning and policy that seem well-poised to survive and even grow with a changing climate.

How can a city’s policies force exposure? Visually, educationally, spatially, economically. Zoning can oblige people who buy swanky condos to look at factories from their balconies or to walk past soup kitchens (even though Jacobs would call this kind of zoning imperious and a downright bummer), rig schools to cram together kids of different incomes and to cram kids into a space that adults might want to restrict to themselves, tune the tax code to force people who live

differently to live near each other, and place the production of food in the middle of the zones where people consume it.

Due in part to history, in part to zoning, New Haven does, or comes close to doing, many of these things.

Riding around New Haven last July, I coursed streets that would not always pass Jacobs’s muster as “good streets”: they are long stretches at the borders of all neighborhoods, with the Yale campus dominating how the city can flow. This does not create the sort of ballet that made Jacobs’s heart swell, but it forces the exposure I consider vital. You don’t walk out and see the cherubic butcher sweeping the sidewalk while he whistles “O Sole Mio,” but you walk out and see a housing project where nobody should ever have to grow up. You’re awake then. (I don’t mean to glorify the project, only to say that if it exists, it shouldn’t be an island.) The city’s zoning sets small parks rippling through all kinds of landscape, and its aggressive program to build new public schools and renovate the old ones has produced sleek monuments to education in rough neighborhoods. The long boulevards and compact grid force people to confront each other.

For example, by East Rock Park, one of the famously rebuilt public schools anchors a block where a power plant squats on the other side: homely, investment-repellent, but eloquently reminding all merry rowers about how patchy our electricity is in this country, and how it feeds back to the carbon cycle. This power plant reminded me of two ways a city can force confrontation. The first involves how it sustains democracy. A government, if it retains faithful civil servants who work, in place, over decades on principle rather than political instinct, can keep a reliable bead on civic input. And if it invests in savvy citizen-input forums, like New York City’s 311 complaint/question hotline, it can distinguish true citizen griping (the schools need gyms) from industry-funded advocacy for green puffery (the schools “need” wind turbines on their roofs).

New Haven looks like it might do this second bit. Karyn Gilvarg,

the city's long-time planning director, told me: "A decade or two ago, we used to hear from people in neighborhoods about a problem in this or that neighborhood, and we're now hearing from groups of neighborhoods. We're now having quite a lot of activity about how to tame cars, coming across economic lines—from a largely Spanish speaking neighborhood in the Hill and from East Rock."

At the top of East Rock on the day I visited, an African-American family stood without a picnic or balloons, in a tight cluster: A man showed two children where West Rock, West Haven, North Haven, and East Haven bubble up from the ground. "New Haven is big," he said. And it is, but it's not secretive. Everybody knows there's a creek at East Rock and at West River, and that made me feel less like an inductee into a secret club when I crouched beside each one.

A city can also force confrontation by demanding that odd-sized chunks of land remain green. Apartments within walking distance of parkland have sold for premium prices since Central Park was a stable. Today, parkland soaks up carbon, so smart cities put it on top of dead industrial sites. They use nature to spike high real estate prices and to teach people about infrastructure. New Haven is compact enough that everyone can know about the marshes and greens and rocks that define the boundaries.

The killer app of forced confrontation with the natural world involves showing people the costs and inputs of what they eat. City administrator Rob Smuts told me that a vocal local-grub movement has built an infrastructure of farmers' markets and is infiltrating school-lunch policies. I learned much later that New Haven, unlike New York, has purged à la carte junk food from all its grade and middle schools—a hint that kids will have to work harder on understanding where food grows and rots, especially if they're hungry. As I biked, I cared less about godly pizza than about all the evidence I saw of crummy diets, in rich neighborhoods and struggling ones.

My first visit to New Haven set me up for a second, in late January 2010, when I visited the sparkling Christopher Columbus Family

Academy, one of the public schools refurbished through a statewide bond issue. Here was a school a publicist had promoted to me for its beauty that I was visiting in part because of its proximity to bail bonds and phone cards on the streetscape. Faux reliefs represented four winds on the exterior, and inside was a double-height inner courtyard. Columbus seemed like an oasis. School administrator Mike Golia told me the courtyard works as a pedagogical stage: Since the parks department can't "dictate what happens there," he said, it's home to a butterfly garden in the corner, a vegetable garden along the sides, and library and art sessions in good weather.

Yet as I left the building, other buildings across the street broke the lie of refuge: the bail bondsman, the House of Pain tattoo parlor, a bunch of money-transfer places, and vacant lots greeted both the students who came here because they had to and the architecture tourists who came here because they wanted to. The street may have eyes, but it also has clues. It's a classroom for us all, too.

I walked through dainty Wooster Square back uphill on Chapel Street and through Yale's open Phelps Gate. Students were crossing the Old Campus's diagonal paths at 10:25, complimenting each other's earmuffs or questioning each other's reasoning. None of them was staring into an iPhone or tapping out messages with their thumbs. They seemed ready to look up.

**We have an obligation to make our mayors, our landlords, and our engineers respond to changes in weather with more agility and collegiality. And that means we collectively have to swallow our fear or conquer it. To conquer it, we need training. We need to become tougher, and we need to become more merciful to the poor. How?**

For starters, we can live in a situation that forces us to face our failings, hear our annoyances, relearn what we'd let get vague, and reconsider what we'd concluded. That's what cities have always done, and can do with electronic reach and enlightened design now.

So I believe we should zone for clash. Zone against energy waste by cramming all the schooling, reuse, job training, and living

you can into the areas closest to transit. You will end up with the downtown vibrancy that Jane Jacobs thought she could enshrine as “civilized.” And you may end up with new goods and services to fill the gap in our damaged economy.

Some of the millionaire architects I’ve covered might think I’ve lost my bearings, now that I look for social problems rather than sexy stairways. But others—including, I bet, the designer of Christopher Columbus—know just what I mean. One big-ticket architect told me the most important task his industry can perform is to deliver high-density places wherever transit access seems possible. I’d add the task to make people face what they thought they’d left behind.