

Jacobs Walk Essay

North Philadelphia grew tremendously in the early twentieth century as a result of an industrial boom, which brought an influx of factories and residential homes to the district just north of center city. However, the 1950's brought on a major decline in industry, which led to a mass abandonment of the area. Today, North Philadelphia is almost exclusively residential and many social problems threaten the livelihoods of its residents. Temple University lies near the heart of this fallen industrial town. Everyday, I walk 4 blocks, from my off-campus apartment on the corner of 18th Street and Cecil B. Moore Avenue, to get to Temple's campus, where I take classes. In this essay, I will analyze the conditions of these city blocks, through the lens of Jane Jacobs and her pioneering work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

One of the fundamental concepts in Jacobs' text is the concept of diversity within a city district. This diversity is necessary for success in any urban environment. Without sufficient diversity, a city district will not "create effective economic pools of use", preventing the area from achieving economic viability (Jacobs 151). Jacobs describes four generators of city diversity, all of which must be fulfilled in order for an urban district to achieve its potential. These four generators of diversity provide the baseline for my analysis of the conditions along Cecil B. Moore Avenue.

First, the area "must serve more than one function; preferably more than two" (Jacobs 152). Most of North Philadelphia is residential, with little in the way of industry and economic prosperity. This large residential pit is problematic because it serves only one, primary use: housing. However, I recognized several different uses of Cecil B. Moore Avenue. There is the obvious residential use. During my walk, I saw two Temple students enter an apartment building. There is an abundance of off-campus student housing on this street, as many buildings have signs for "student housing". However, Cecil B. Moore is not strictly used residentially. Small businesses are scattered along both sides of the street. I passed several locally owned barbershops and convenience shops during my walk. Also, I noticed a few big franchises, like Dunkin Donuts, as I neared Temple's campus. It should be noted that Cecil B. Moore Avenue is only one of two East-West streets, near Temple's campus, with any significant business use. The streets without stores fall into the single-use trap, ultimately, hindering progress due to a lack of diversity. On the other hand, Cecil B. Moore is a residential street that also has an assortment of different businesses. This helps generate diversity because the area is being used for more than one primary use.

The second generator of diversity requires that "most blocks must be short" and "opportunities to turn corners must be frequent" (Jacobs 178). Long blocks restrict the flow of traffic, vehicular and foot traffic, which limits the amount of interaction among people on the street. At the time, it was difficult to comparatively judge the length of the blocks because I was unsure of how long a normal city block was. I did notice, however, that between each of the major intersecting streets, for example from 18th to 17th Street, there was at least one side street. These smaller, segmented streets open up the flow of traffic. In fact, Jacobs commends Philadelphia for its use of "alley-turned-streets", as a way to halve the size of blocks (Jacobs 185). In order to properly address the length of blocks on Cecil B. Moore Avenue, I used Google Earth to find that the four major blocks I walked totaled approximately 1800 feet. This yields an average of 450 feet per block. By itself, this is not wildly impressive, but the "alley-turned-streets" cut the length of the blocks in half. Overall, Cecil B. Moore Avenue has very small blocks that should enhance the flow of traffic and lead to an economically diverse area.

The third generator of diversity requires that a district “must mingle buildings that vary in age and condition, including a good portion of old ones” (Jacobs 187). One of the first things I noticed while walking down Cecil B. Moore Avenue was the construction of new buildings. Two new buildings are being built between 17th and 16th Streets. Both new buildings will be used as student housing. This off-campus housing trend around Temple University has grown fiercely in recent years. In fact, I live in an apartment building, on the corner of 18th and Cecil B. Moore, which was built less than 2 years ago. These apartment buildings are fueling the majority of new construction jobs in the area. Many older buildings stand, creating a nice contrast of building age. Jacobs explains that old buildings are necessary for enterprises that are unable to afford the high overhead costs of new construction (Jacobs 188). Older buildings help sustain a small business presence in the area. Most of the locally owned, small businesses on Cecil B. Moore reside in older, low-value buildings. The healthy mixture of buildings on Cecil B. Moore Avenue helps promote the diversity of the larger community.

Jacob’s last generator of diversity requires a district to “have a sufficiently dense concentration of people” (Jacobs 200). Without an adequately dense population, a district will be unable to achieve its full potential. Jacobs exposes a fundamental city planning myth: high-density population areas are correlated with slums. She uses Philadelphia as an example to disprove this commonly accepted myth. Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia’s most successful district, has the highest population density of all Philly districts (Jacobs 202). Yet, the slums of North Philadelphia have dwelling densities half that of Rittenhouse Square. As I walked down Cecil B. Moore, I asked myself if there was an adequate concentration of people here. Dozens of people walked along the street, but it was quiet and lifeless. Between the huge population of locals living in residential areas, and the population of students living on-campus or in nearby off-campus housing, one would assume that this would result in a dense concentration of people. However, the area has a relatively low population density in comparison to other Philadelphia districts. Starkly contrasting current city planning ideology, Jacobs proposes that overcrowding, which is when too many people inhabit the same dwelling, is actually more common in low-density areas than high-density areas. Families in these economically strained areas often are forced in overcrowding their home because of financial constraints. Although North Philadelphia is mostly residential, many of these homes are currently abandoned. Additionally, North Philadelphia is a large area without many high-density apartment buildings, which leads to a low population density. Overall, North Philadelphia, specifically the stretch of Cecil B. Moore Avenue, lacks a sufficiently dense concentration of people to generate sufficient diversity.

During my “Jacobs’ Walk” experience, I noticed that the four blocks on Cecil B. Moore Avenue, from my apartment to Temple’s campus, possessed three out of the four generators of diversity. The street has a balance of old and new buildings, small blocks, and a mixture of residential and commercial uses. However, the area lacks population density sufficient to generate diversity. Jacobs explains that the first three generators of diversity “will have nothing much to influence if enough people are not there” (Jacobs 205). The low dwelling density in North Philadelphia remains a major concern in the area. According to Jacobs, in order for a particular district to thrive in a city environment, a minimum density of 100 dwellings per net acre is necessary (Jacobs 211). Jacobs recommends the use of elevator apartments, which house lots of people on a small plot of land, to help maximize the area’s dwelling density. However, Jacobs also warns that other types of housing must accompany the elevator apartments in order to prevent standardization (Jacobs 214). I believe that this would be among Jane Jacobs’ main suggestions for revitalizing the North Philadelphia area, especially near Temple’s campus. The

lack of a sufficiently dense population is preventing North Philadelphia from achieving diversity, and ultimately, hindering the progress of the area as a whole. In order to solve this problem, Jacobs would likely suggest adding new buildings, such as elevator apartments, in different areas across North Philadelphia (Jacobs 216). Gradually adding new buildings to different areas provides a stable way to condense North Philadelphia's geographically spread-out population, and hopefully achieve the diversity that will help revitalize the once great North Philadelphia district.

Another major concept in Jacob's *Death and Life of Great American Cities* is what she calls the curse of border vacuums. Border vacuums are found at the borders of large single-use areas, like university campuses, and the rest of the city. Along with city diversity, and its four generators, border vacuums are relevant in the area I analyzed for the "Jacobs Walk" assignment. Jacobs explains the main problem with these single-use borders is that they "form dead ends for most users of city streets". For example, a university is a huge single-use area. If you are not a student or professor, it is unlikely that you will travel on campus because the area is only used for one thing: education. Jacobs explains that the borders of these single use areas are seen as barriers by the majority of the people on the street, creating a walled off community without any public function. This drastically alters the flow of traffic in the area and results in social division between populations who do and do not use the bordered area. These notions about border vacuums are certainly true in the North Philadelphia area that surrounds Temple University.

On my "Jacobs Walk", I approached Broad Street, the street that divides Temple's campus from the rest of North Philadelphia, and I looked up at the newly constructed dorm building, Morgan Hall. It is an elegant, glass high rise that towers over all neighboring buildings. From my perspective, that is to say a student's perspective, Morgan Hall is architecturally impressive and it seems to be inviting people onto Temple's campus. However, this new building has no public function, like all of the other Temple buildings. Morgan Hall does not actually invite the local population to permeate through the border because they still have no incentive to do so. A beautiful building is not a valid invitation to those people who cannot use the building. Morgan Hall actually reinforces the university border. Quite literally, the building augments the sense of a walled-off community. By placing tall buildings on the perimeter of Temple's campus, the curse of the border vacuum is amplified, as these buildings further deter locals from entering the single-use university campus; ultimately, this disrupts the flow of traffic and prevents the surrounding area from achieving its potential.

One suggestion Jacobs offers to help resolve the border vacuum problem is that universities should place buildings intended for public use strategically along the perimeter of the campus (Jacobs 267). This aims to make the border more permeable for locals, who are more likely to use a building near the edge of campus rather than a building buried in the middle campus. Some Temple buildings are open to the public, such as the student activity center. However, they are not on the perimeter of the campus, so few locals actually use them. Not many locals are willing to walk into the heart of Temple's campus just to buy an overpriced meal at the university cafeteria. However, if it were strategically placed near the border of campus, more locals would be willing to use these buildings. Most of the buildings along the border of Temple's campus, including Morgan Hall, have no public function and reinforce the curse of the border vacuum. Jacobs would likely suggest that Temple move the buildings that are intended for public use to the perimeter of its campus in order to make its borders more permeable for locals.

As this is unlikely, because it would be extremely expensive for Temple to actually move these buildings, Jacobs would probably recommend an alternative way for Temple to soften its borders. In *Death and Life of American Cities*, Jacobs suggests that universities use their perimeters to open up scenes with “elements congenial to public view and interest” (Jacobs 267). This is a way to make borders seem less like barriers, helping draw in locals onto the campus. Jacobs would likely suggest Temple incorporate outdoor artwork and seating at each of its major border entrance points, creating a practical, useful, and inviting scene on the perimeter of the campus. Ultimately, this will help contrast the barrier-like image locals have of the campus perimeter, while encouraging more locals to permeate through the border. However, so long as the campus remains a single-use area, it will be difficult to fully integrate a population of locals that cannot use the area for its main purpose of education.

Jane Jacobs’ flagship work, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, directly informed my analysis of four blocks, between my apartment and Temple’s campus, along Cecil B. Moore Avenue. Two major problems exist in this area, which are hindering it from achieving its potential. First, the area lacks sufficient population density to generate the diversity needed to thrive as a city neighborhood. The low population density means that there are simply too few people to achieve a self-sustaining economy in the given area. In order to address this problem, Jane Jacobs would suggest adding new buildings, such as elevator apartments, to different areas in North Philadelphia, in order to help concentrate the population density in a few specified locations. The second problem is the border vacuum that exists around the perimeter of Temple University’s campus. This border acts as a barrier for the local population, who do not use the single-use campus. These barriers drastically alter the flow of traffic within the area and socially divide the population of students/professors from the population of locals who do not use the university. In response to this problem, Jacobs would likely suggest making the border more permeable by placing inviting scenes near the perimeter of the campus. These strategically placed scenes will help draw locals onto the campus, which would help soften the perimeter of the campus. However, it should be noted that this would not solve the border vacuum problem, as the campus will still be a single-use area with little to offer any locals not interested in pursuing a college education. North Philadelphia, a once vibrant and successful city district, has dramatically changed over the past half century, still recovering from the deindustrialization of the 1950s. Today, North Philadelphia is a vast residential area, largely comprised of slums. Analyzing North Philadelphia’s prospects of economic viability in today’s world, specifically along a four-block stretch of Cecil B. Moore Avenue, through the perspective of urban renewal expert, Jane Jacobs, several causes for the areas’ perpetual stagnancy come to light. In order to help revitalize North Philadelphia, it is necessary to condense the population of its residents into smaller areas and also soften the borders of Temple’s campus, maximizing the flow of traffic.

Works Cited:

Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House, 1961. Print.