



# URBAN NATURALIST GUIDE



**American Planning Association**

*Making Great Communities Happen*



Through everyday observations, Jane Jacobs discovered what made neighborhoods vibrant, safe, and interesting places to live and visit. Her ideas were often critical of the planning projects of her time, and she changed the way many people thought about cities. This Urban Naturalist Guide provides instruction for observing community characteristics similar to those Jane Jacobs critiqued in the communities where she lived and visited. It is based on *Genius of Common Sense*, by Glenna Lang and Marjorie Wunsch, which describes Jane Jacobs's life and her insightful ideas about communities.

In order to use this guide, you will need to read *Genius of Common Sense* and select a neighborhood to study. The neighborhood you select does not necessarily need to be the neighborhood that you live in, but it should be a neighborhood that you can easily get to and observe for a few days at different times of day. You will need a regular pencil and colored pencils for drawing or a camera for taking photographs.

## SEEING THE NEIGHBORHOOD THROUGH JANE'S GLASSES

### Infrastructure and Public Services

Read pp. 27-28

Complex systems deliver services to people in your neighborhood. Streetlights, toilets, refrigerators, and school buses would not be able to function without these systems. When you brush your teeth in the morning, you use water that goes down the drain. But where does that drain lead? There are many miles of plumbing that bring water through the faucet for you to brush your teeth and another system of plumbing that carries the water away to a treatment plant. What infrastructure do you notice in your neighborhood? Do you see electric lines, storm drains, pipes, or other kinds of what Jane Jacobs called "spaghetti"?

*Find two examples of infrastructure in the neighborhood. In the spaces below, map these two types of infrastructure and describe their purposes. Begin by drawing a street map of the area. Then draw the path of infrastructure onto the map. Some parts of the infrastructure may be underground or otherwise concealed from view. Find out where these "invisible" sections are.*

#### Infrastructure observation #1

What is its purpose? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### Infrastructure observation #2

What is its purpose? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Jane Jacobs noticed the manhole covers in New York City, which she called “lowly waffles.” By reading what was written on the manhole covers, she discovered what was below them; some had water, some electricity, and some gas lines. She called this infrastructure “underground spaghetti.”



## Focal Points

*Read pp. 53-54*

Jane Jacobs stressed the importance of focal points such as fountains, clocks, and unusual buildings that made neighborhoods interesting. Focal points can be landmarks that help make a place unique. What are the focal points in the images below?



**Focal Points** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Focal Points**

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*What focal points or landmarks do you notice in the neighborhood?  
Draw or photograph two areas that have neighborhood focal points.*

**Focal Point Observation #1**

What are the focal points? \_\_\_\_\_

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**Focal Point Observation #2**

What are the focal points? \_\_\_\_\_

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## Uses

Read pp. 37-41

Buildings and land can have a variety of different uses, including homes, schools, playgrounds, offices, restaurants, and grocery stores. During Jane Jacobs's time, some planners thought it was best to separate these uses from one another, but Jacobs believed that the presence of different land uses within neighborhoods made those places vibrant and attractive. She found that areas with mixed uses were safer because they attracted people to an area during different times of day. For example, an area that is used only for offices may be very quiet and inactive during the late evening hours and weekends when people are not at work, but an area that has both offices and restaurants can be used during business hours, evenings, and weekends.

*What uses can you walk to in the neighborhood? Are there parks or playgrounds? A grocery store? A school or post office? Are there offices? Restaurants? List all of the different types of land uses that you can walk to within the neighborhood.*

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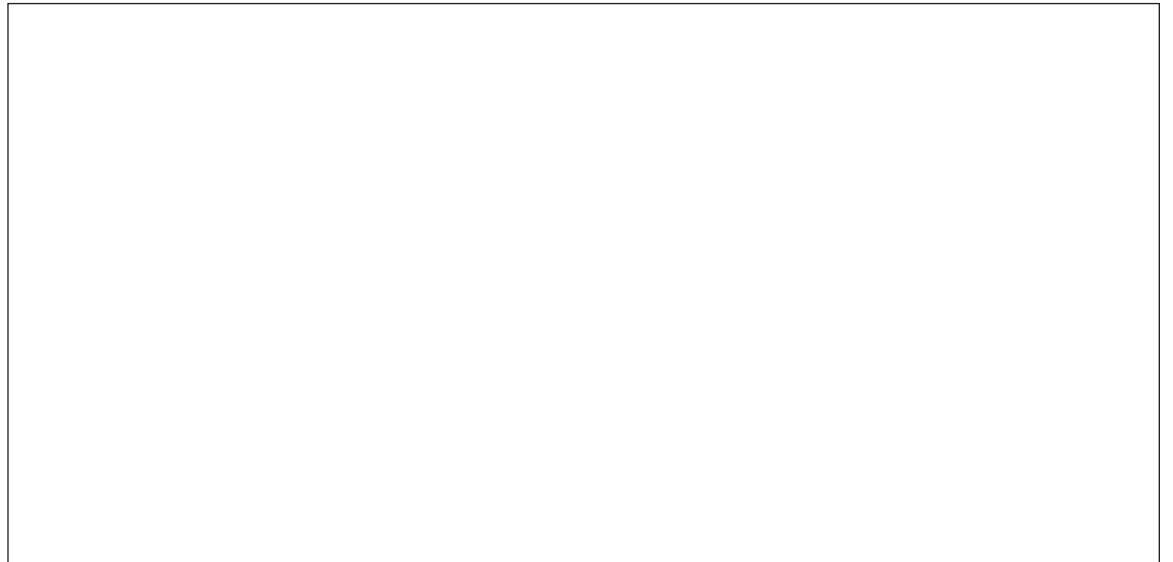
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Choose a spot in the neighborhood to observe closely. Watch this spot for 20 minutes at three different times during the day (morning, early afternoon, and evening). Is there activity in this location during different times of day? Can you tell where people are going? Does the location feel safe and vibrant? Keep a journal of your observations below.

Describe the location that you chose. \_\_\_\_\_

Draw or attach a photograph of the location below.



What types of land uses can you see from this location?

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**MORNING**

What is the exact time of day? \_\_\_\_\_

How many people do you see over the course of 20 minutes, and what is each of them doing?

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**EARLY AFTERNOON**

What is the exact time of day? \_\_\_\_\_

How many people do you see over the course of 20 minutes, and what is each of them doing?

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**EVENING**

What is the exact time of day? \_\_\_\_\_

How many people do you see over the course of 20 minutes, and what is each of them doing?

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In general, does the location feel safe and vibrant? Does it feel more vibrant during certain times of day than others? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

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### Buildings

*Read pp. 71-74*

Buildings can be used for a variety of purposes at different times. Sometimes older buildings no longer serve the purpose that they were originally built for, such as when a factory goes out of business. If the building is to be reused in these cases, it will sometimes need to be “retrofitted” to serve a new purpose. A factory can be converted into a residential living space by installing walls for rooms, appliances such as refrigerators, and other features that make a building habitable. Buildings may also expand their uses over time—as, for example, when a deck is added onto the back of a residential building to provide a place to sit outdoors.

*Find two buildings in the neighborhood that have changed or expanded uses. How did the buildings change in order to accommodate the new use or uses? You may need to interview people who live, work, or otherwise use the building in order to find out how it has changed over time. If you wish to learn how your own house has changed over time, you may use it as one of your examples.*

**Building #1**

Old Uses: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Uses: \_\_\_\_\_

Expansions or retrofits: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Building #2**

Old Uses: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Uses: \_\_\_\_\_

Expansions or retrofits: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

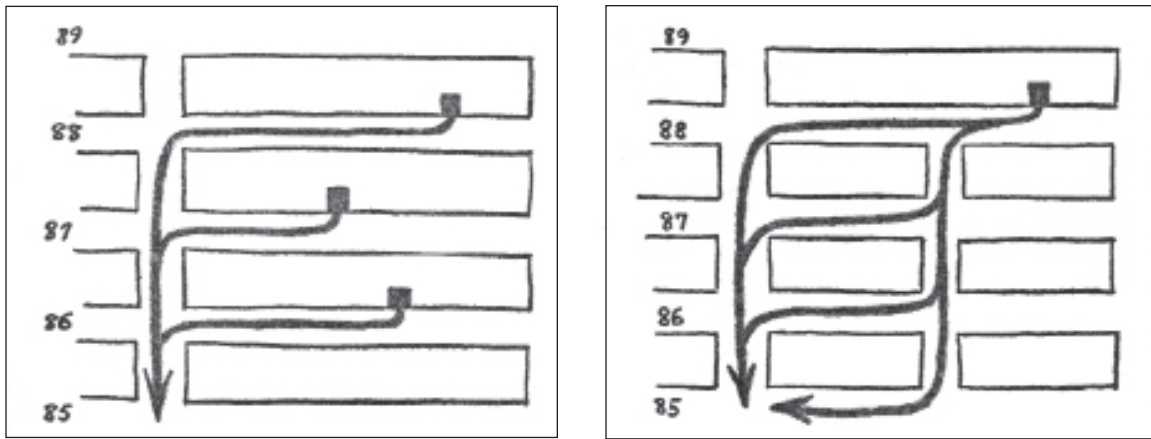


# Blocks

Read pp. 71-72

Jane Jacobs found that the size of street blocks influenced the way people interacted with one another and determined the number of choices they had when traveling to work, home, shopping, and other places. She discovered that short blocks created more opportunities for social interaction among people walking on the sidewalk and increased the number of possible routes people could take from one place to another.

Using the diagram below, Jacobs showed how short blocks generate cross streets, resulting in a greater number of possible routes and, therefore, greater opportunities for diverse experiences.



Select a starting point, such as a house or store in the neighborhood. Now select an ending point, such as a park or school. How many different routes can you identify to get from the starting point to the ending point? Draw a diagram of all the routes it is possible to take. Number each route and label the start and end points on your diagram.

*ROUTE #1*

Start point: \_\_\_\_\_

End point: \_\_\_\_\_

What experiences did you have while walking along this route? \_\_\_\_\_

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*ROUTE #2*

Start point: \_\_\_\_\_

End point: \_\_\_\_\_

What experiences did you have while walking along this route? \_\_\_\_\_

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*ROUTE #3*

Start point: \_\_\_\_\_

End point: \_\_\_\_\_

What experiences did you have while walking along this route? \_\_\_\_\_

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*ROUTE #4*

Start point: \_\_\_\_\_

End point: \_\_\_\_\_

What experiences did you have while walking along this route? \_\_\_\_\_

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How do the routes compare to one another? Were some routes more interesting than others? Describe how.

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## OBSERVING YOUR COMMUNITY

The architecture critic Paul Goldberger said, "If there is any way to follow Jane Jacobs, it is to think of her as showing us not a physical model for city form but rather ... a model for trusting our eyes and our common sense more than the common wisdom." Jacobs developed ideas about what a good community is based on observing what works and what doesn't. What elements of your community do you think work well? Which ones do not work well? Think about each of these community elements:

What do you like about the streets and sidewalks in the neighborhood? \_\_\_\_\_

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What do you dislike about them? \_\_\_\_\_

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What do you like about the buildings in the neighborhood? \_\_\_\_\_

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What do you like dislike about them? \_\_\_\_\_

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What do you like about the parks or other open spaces in the neighborhood? \_\_\_\_\_

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What do you like dislike about them? \_\_\_\_\_

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What makes the neighborhood feel safe or unsafe? \_\_\_\_\_

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What makes the neighborhood lively or boring? \_\_\_\_\_

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What other observations did you make about the neighborhood? \_\_\_\_\_

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**GETTING INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY PLANNING**

*Read pp. 57-65*

In the 1950s, New York City's construction coordinator, Robert Moses, developed a plan to build a highway through Washington Square Park in Jane Jacobs's Greenwich Village neighborhood. Jacobs and other members of her community banded together to oppose construction of the new highway by writing letters to city officials, teaching community members about the plan, and vocalizing their concerns at community meetings. The community members of Greenwich Village were successful in stopping the highway plan, and the experience helped Jane Jacobs become an important leader in her community.

Every community has local government bodies that are in charge of making sure that the interests of community members are served. Community members can learn about planning projects in their community and give input on those projects by visiting the local government’s website, writing to local government officials, or attending a community meeting. Follow the steps below to learn about planning programs in your community.

1. Go to: [www.usa.gov/Agencies/Local\\_Government/Cities.shtml](http://www.usa.gov/Agencies/Local_Government/Cities.shtml).
2. Click on the name of the state where you live.
3. Click on the name of your county, city, town, or village to bring up the local government website.

OR:

1. Go to: [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)
2. Type in the name of your community and find the community website.

In order to answer the following questions, you will need to explore your community’s website and locate contact information for officials in your community. Some examples of local government bodies are listed below. (Your local government body may have a slightly different title.)

- City/Town/Village/County Council
- City/Town/Village/County Planning Commission
- City/Town/Village/County Planning Board

Who are the officials are in your community? Is there a council or commission? A mayor?

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Interview an official in your community. For this exercise, select one of the two options below.

OPTION #1:

Ask the official the following question and record his or her response in the space below. “Are there any controversial planning efforts in the community? Please describe the efforts and why they are controversial.”

Response: \_\_\_\_\_

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OPTION #2:

Based on what you learn about your community from the community website, prepare a question to ask a community official. For example, if you learn that the community is engaged in preparing a comprehensive plan, you may wish to ask the official what the priorities and goals of the plan are. Record your question and the response below.

Question: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is the next event scheduled in your community? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

The American Planning Association is an independent, nonprofit educational organization that provides leadership in the development of vital communities by advocating excellence in community planning, promoting education and citizen empowerment, and providing the tools and support necessary to meet the challenges of growth and change.

APA's more than 42,000 members include professional planners, officials, educators, students, and other individuals interested in making great communities happen. APA members can be found in all 50 states and in 75 countries.

## **Membership**

Not only do members become part of a large national network, but local chapters connect members close to home. Divisions bring together members with similar special interests. And member benefits include discounts on select publications and training opportunities and a members-only job service.

## **Events**

APA hosts a number of events annually, including educational conferences, workshops, lectures, and symposiums. APA's National Planning Conference is the nation's premier planning event, which brings together more than 5,000 planners annually for learning and networking opportunities.

## **Outreach**

APA recognizes the importance of planners and planning both nationally and internationally through national awards and designation programs. The Global Planners Network brings together a network of national planning associations to share knowledge and build capacities for planning across the globe.

Tracking current legislative initiatives and advocating for good planning practices on Capitol Hill is part of the advocacy work done by APA on behalf of its members.

## **Resources**

APA's research projects provide practical, up-to-date information about best practices in urban and regional planning. A variety of printed and online publications explore planning in all its breadth and depth.

## **APA Planners Press**

Planners Press, APA's book imprint, publishes titles of interest to practitioners, researchers, and the general public, with the aim of stimulating readers, creating an engaged citizenry, and influencing policy development—all by telling the many stories of planning.

## **Employment**

Jobs Online connects APA members and prospective employers. This members-only benefit offers an extensive database of jobs and candidates in planning and allied professional fields.

## **APAPlanningBooks.com**

Looking for a planning publication? The online bookstore carries planning and allied professional publications ranging from day-to-day manuals to think pieces.

Learn more about the American Planning Association at [www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org).

