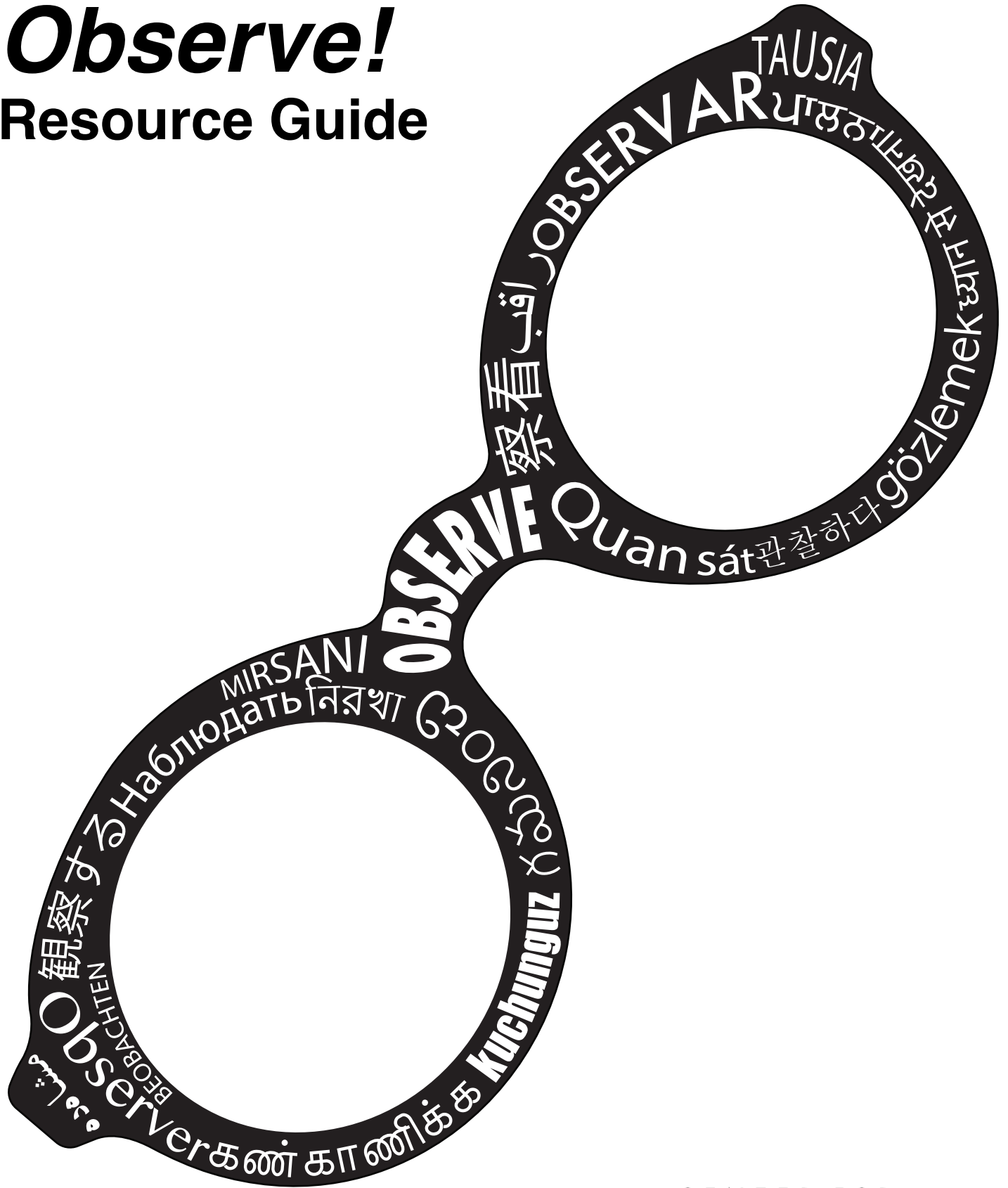


Observe!

Resource Guide



CENTER FOR
THE LIVING CITY

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City Builder Book Club Reading Guide to *Genius of Common Sense*

The book *Genius of Common Sense* provides an in-depth look at Jane Jacobs' life and work and also includes more than 100 images that bring Jane's whole story and message to life. The photos and drawings are a great way for youth to gather ideas about taking action in their community. This reading guide was designed to provide a brief overview of Jane Jacobs' biography by Glenna Lang, *Genius of Common Sense*. It can be used as a supplement to reading the book, or as an introduction to learning about Jane's life. The discussion questions with each chapter summary will aid leaders to guide thought and discussion about the important concepts of this program. The questions will help students to think about how Jane modeled the power of observation in her own attempts to preserve and change the communities she cared about, and how students can practice the art of observation in their own lives and claim their voice as members of their community.

Click [here](#) to purchase *Genius of Common Sense*



CHAPTER 1

An Obstreperous Young Girl

When Jane was a young girl in fourth grade, she heard her teacher explain something that didn't make sense to her. Her teacher stated that cities always develop around waterfalls. Jane thought about Scranton, Pennsylvania, the city where she grew up and knew that most people who lived there worked in the coal mines or in something related to the coal industry. Coal was what made Scranton grow and prosper. So Jane raised her hand and confidently told her teacher that it didn't make sense that all cities formed around waterfalls because there was no major waterfall in Scranton, and the city's economy developed around coal. Although Jane could sometimes be described as "obstreperous," it was her keen observations that would one day encourage people everywhere to celebrate and appreciate their communities. "Obstreperous" means to go against the rules or norms, to be noisily defiant.

Think about your peers and classmates in school. Do you have any obstreperous classmates, or maybe you are obstreperous yourself? What benefits might there be to being obstreperous? When you know something isn't true, do you speak up and share what you know?

CHAPTER 2

Growing Up in the Electric City

Jane grew up in the booming city of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Her father was a well-known doctor, and Jane was very close to him. He taught her how to look up things she didn't know in the encyclopedia, observe her surroundings, and encouraged her to be a free-thinker. Jane loved to write, but she didn't love school. In fact, getting to school was her favorite part because she could ride the streetcar. Scranton was famous for being the first city to have an electric streetcar system in which cars ran on tracks powered by electricity throughout the city. It was also one of the first cities to use electric streetlights, giving Scranton its nickname, "The Electric City." Jane loved going to downtown Scranton on the streetcar and loved the excitement of the lively streets and variety of stores. When Jane was 12 years old, she welcomed the opportunity to visit New York. Seeing the skyscrapers, elevated trains, and bustling streets with lots of people made a long-lasting impression on her. Her love of cities continued to grow. Once Jane finished high school, she followed her passion for writing and got her first job reporting for the local newspaper. She also studied stenography, which was a kind of fast note-taking before recorders. After a year at the newspaper, Jane visited her aunt in a tiny rural community in the Appalachian Mountains. She enjoyed seeing a different part of the country, but after six months there she longed for bustling streets and felt the pull of the big city.

Scranton, Pennsylvania was nicknamed "The Electric City" because of its electric streetcar system. What makes your city or town unique? What are your favorite things about where you live? What does it mean to be a free-thinker? What are the differences living in a city versus living in a small town? Which do you prefer and why?

CHAPTER 3

Becoming a Writer in New York

When Jane was 18, she moved to New York City to live with her sister. The city had changed since she had visited before because it had been greatly affected by the Great Depression. There were a significant number of people without jobs, and jobs paid much less than they had before. Jane also found herself without a job much of the time, and spent her free time exploring parts of the city by randomly selecting neighborhoods to visit.

During this time, she also spoke to shopkeepers and business owners, taking notes on scraps of papers and writing articles that were sometimes bought by *Vogue* magazine and the *Herald Tribune* newspaper. By cultivating her talent for writing and telling people's stories as well as taking classes at Columbia University, she landed a job at *The Iron Age*, where she wrote about the metals industry. It was for this magazine that Jane wrote an article, "Scranton, Neglected City," calling attention to her home city's economic problems. She argued that Scranton was the perfect city for new and expanding businesses. Soon after Jane's article was published, she spoke at a protest rally. All her efforts paid off, and new factories opened in Scranton. Jane was becoming a writer who informed people, took action herself, and also moved others to act.

What are some talents you have that you could use to convince people to make a change? Do you think that taking notes and talking to members of your community is important to do? Why or why not? Why do you think Jane picked places at random to discover? Is this a good way to get to know your community better?

CHAPTER 4

Cupid at the Candy-Store House

In 1943, Jane found a new job writing articles for the State Department's Magazine Branch and their magazine called *Amerika Illustrated*. Her articles celebrated democracy and helped educate other societies about American life. The following year, Jane met Bob Jacobs, her future husband, and soon became Jane Jacobs. When Bob and Jane started a

family, she began to see her community in a different way. From her window, Jane watched the life of the city while she nursed her babies at all hours of the day. She wondered about such things as what made her community's streets safe at night. She observed that her street was always in use. Jane called what she saw on the streets "an intricate sidewalk ballet." The round-the-clock sidewalk ballet was always interesting to watch – whether it was filled with young children going to school, people off to work, cafes and bakeries bustling at lunchtime, teens doing homework on the stoops after school, or pizza shops and bars in the evening. She loved the house her family lived in because it was surrounded by shops, places to eat, and other small businesses, and the neighborhood was packed with lots of different kinds of people. Jane's small everyday observations started to grow into big ideas. Those ideas would soon turn into a book that would change the way people thought about cities.

What does the "sidewalk ballet" in your town or neighborhood look like? Or your neighborhood might not have a sidewalk ballet, why is that? Jane's big ideas grew from many small observations. What do the small things in your community say about the whole community?

CHAPTER 5

Reporting and Learning at *Architectural Forum*

In 1952, with no experience as an architect, Jane began working at *Architectural Forum*, an important magazine about architecture. The editor thought that having no such experience could be an advantage because Jane had great observational skills and could look at buildings with a fresh eye. At this time in America, cities were undergoing major transformations.

After the World War II, wealthy and middle-class people were moving to the suburbs because they could afford automobiles to commute to work and live in a single-family home with a yard. They wanted to leave the city because many people felt that cities were full of crime, poverty, and disease. Working-class people from within and outside the U.S., who often had little or no money, were coming to the city in large numbers to look for jobs. Often the newcomers found only low-paying work. The buildings and neighborhoods they lived in started to look shabby as landlords failed to maintain their properties. Racial discrimination forced African Americans and other racial minorities to live in certain parts of the city. Urban planners worried that the run-down parts of cities, called slums, would spread and cause overall deterioration of the cities. Planners and officials thought the solution was to tear down whole blocks of old buildings and replace them with gleaming new structures with empty space around them. They called this process “urban renewal.” But planners and architects didn’t realize the disastrous effects that would come of destroying old neighborhoods and building sterile high-rises. These modern developments didn’t have the small shops, bakeries, businesses, and restaurants found in the older parts of the city, and there were rarely people out and about in the streets. From the windows of the high-rises, parents could not watch their kids playing outside. Vital social interactions and networks were broken. Jane felt that this “urban renewal” was destroying communities and ruining the character of city life. In fact, these attempts at getting rid of poverty and crime only made things worse. Seeing the negative effects of demolishing old vibrant neighborhoods deeply affected Jane. After visiting a number of new housing projects, she worked to get residents in New York’s East Harlem involved in planning the housing of their community so they could create the kind of community they wanted.

Why is it important for communities to have people with lots of different jobs and different amounts of money? Are there places in your city that are separated because of racial discrimination or by the amount of money that people have? Why do you think this is and what are the effects of it? Are there places in your city that are considered “older” and places that are considered “new”? When you think about these different areas in town, what do you feel? Why do you think you feel that way?

CHAPTER 6

Jane’s Good Fortune Article

In 1956, Jane had an opportunity to give a speech about urban renewal at Harvard University. In her ten-minute presentation, Jane boldly stated that the high-rise buildings planners and architects thought were saving communities were actually destroying them. She spoke about why it was important to have smaller-scale buildings and shops along the streets.

Without little shops, people had no place to meet and talk, and there would be no feeling of community. Jane’s fresh ideas had given the urban planners, architects, and magazine and newspaper editors in the audience a lot to think about.

Some people loved her original perceptions, while others doubted her because she was a woman and they believed she didn't have enough experience with the subject matter. However, an editor at the major business magazine Fortune was impressed with Jane's ideas and asked her to write an article. Jane wrote what became a famous and widely read piece titled "Downtown is for People." Without mincing words, she declared, "You've got to get out and walk." She urged readers to fight to preserve the things that made their cities, neighborhoods, and communities unique and challenged city planners and architects to take advantage of the features that made each city different and to "treasure its individuality." She criticized large-scale plans to rebuild the cities and encouraged her readers to ask questions that got to the root of the problem and to observe their community more thoroughly. Jane's article was so original that people at the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation offered Jane a grant to write a book about her ideas on cities. Equally thrilling, an excellent editor at Random House, a big publisher in New York, wanted to publish her book.

Think about a time when you had a different opinion than someone else. How did that make you feel and what did you do about it? Think about the things that make your city unique, special, or different. Do the people in your city celebrate these things and want to preserve them?

CHAPTER 7

A Bunch of Mothers... And Children

While writing her book, Jane learned of her city's plan that would destroy Washington Square, a park in the heart of her community in Greenwich Village. A city official named Robert Moses was in charge of the project. He planned to build a four-lane highway that would go right through the beloved park. Robert Moses had a lot of power and wished to build expressways throughout the city. He saw no problem with tearing down homes and neighborhoods to make way for cars. This way of thinking outraged Jane. The proposed highway would wreck what was a major gathering place for many city residents. Jane helped to educate people about the plans through protests and petitions, and she encouraged them to write to community leaders about their concerns. Dismayed New Yorkers came together and collectively sent 30,000 postcards to city officials asking them to ban the highway construction. Robert Moses was angry to hear that his plan was in danger, and he was furious when his plan was shut down. Jane and the community were thrilled to have saved the beautiful park with its well-known fountain and marble arch, where so many people came together. Jane had become a public figure and would soon be called to action again. Shortly after saving Washington Square, Jane's son, Jimmy, learned of a plan to widen the streets by narrowing the sidewalks on Hudson Street where Jane and her family lived. Jane had observed that making more room for cars only increased traffic. She knew it would be more dangerous for children, businesses would suffer, and there would be less room for people to walk and connect on the sidewalks. Jane and her community mobilized again and formed a committee to "Save the Sidewalks." Once again, they succeeded. The citizens had learned they could lead successful efforts to stop urban renewal and preserve communities.

Have you ever been so passionate about something that you decided to do something to change it? What did you do? Did it work? If so, why do you think it did? If not, what could you do differently next time?

CHAPTER 8

An Attack on City Planning

Jane's most famous book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, focused on attacking the accepted wisdom of urban renewal, but it also described what she thought made cities work well. Jane argued against building networks of highways that would slice up cities and harm the vibrant quality that she loved so much about urban life. She said that large-scale plans were actually "anti-city" because they were so uniform, organized, and "tidy" that they got rid of the unorganized and unique districts that actually worked. She pointed out that the neighborhoods that functioned best had dense populations and organized chaos. These lively areas almost always had mixed-uses of buildings, both short and long blocks that allowed for different routes and experiences, a mix of old and new buildings, and, most importantly, a diversity of people. Current city planning called for clusters of modern buildings with residential areas separated from commercial and industrial uses, and lower density. In her book, Jane also stressed the importance of the "sidewalk ballet" for safety because it keeps "eyes on the street" no matter what time of day or night, which minimizes crime.

Why would having lot of people and "eyes on the street" minimize crime? What are some of the elements that Jane thought cities needed to work? Do you have any of those elements in your neighborhood?

CHAPTER 9

Saving the West Village

Only weeks after finishing her book, Jane learned that her very own neighborhood, the West Village, was being studied as one of the slum-clearance projects that she strongly opposed. She and hundreds of her neighbors formed the Committee to Save the West Village. The committee's goal was to stop the destruction of their neighborhood. People of all ages and backgrounds used their talents to join together to fight against the demolition of the West Village. Volunteers from the Committee went door-to-door asking every household about their living conditions. They documented that almost all the homes were well maintained and not slums. Smaller committees were formed within the Committee in which the groups learned how government works, looked at legal issues, translated documents, or made posters and flyers. They found out that in order for the government to bulldoze a neighborhood, they had to have "citizen participation." If any of the residents told a government official they wanted improvements to the neighborhood, the city could consider that citizen participation in favor of slum clearance. The citizens therefore banded together and replied only that they wanted the slum designation dropped. After almost a year of action and meeting with officials, all the members of the City Planning Commission voted against the West Village being declared a slum. The citizens had accomplished what many thought was unimaginable: they had fought City Hall, and they had won.

What are some of the different talents that people might have in a community? Have you worked with your peers to accomplish a goal?

CHAPTER 10

The Impact of *Death and Life*

In October 1961, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was published. Critics immediately regarded it as a groundbreaking work, but its message was highly controversial. Some people loved Jane's ideas and observations that challenged the ways many people thought about cities. Others were angry that Jane dared to question their architecture and planning expertise. Jane was certain, however, that tearing down communities to build modern high-rise housing and make room for speeding cars was not going to make cities better places to live. In her book, Jane wrote about the various and complex components that make cities thrive. One man praised Jane for seeing the city as an ecologist would. He was delighted Jane understood that every component of a city is interconnected to the others, and changes have to be made gradually with much consideration. Even though not everyone agreed with all the ideas in Jane's book, people everywhere would have a new perspective on cities and think differently about their streets and neighborhoods after reading it.

Have you started to notice things differently in your streets and neighborhoods? Does everyone have to like your idea for it to be a good idea? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 11

Fighting City Hall and the Expressway

The highway through Washington Square that Jane and her community stopped years earlier had been part of a plan for an even larger expressway by Robert Moses. This time he wanted ten lanes to cut through the entire width of lower Manhattan, destroying many communities in its path. It would allow people to live in single-family houses in the faraway suburbs to drive to the city for work every day. These homes were often referred to as "cookie-cutter homes," meaning they all looked the same. Living in these types of homes led to a very different experience from living in the city because there were fewer stores, little street life, and less community. Building the expressway would come at the cost of demolishing neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan such as Chinatown, Little Italy, and the Jewish Lower East Side. More cars would also create more pollution and more traffic. Once again, Jane and the community worked together to prevent the construction of the expressway, forming the Joint Committee to Stop the Lower Manhattan Expressway. They managed to convince the government to cease planning for the highway, but six years later, the plan for the highway came up again! Hundreds of people organized to stop the expressway for the final time. At a large hearing about the plans for the expressway, Jane led the way and spoke up. She said she was tired of these "phony" hearings because she believed they were designed to give people the sense that they had a voice in the city when the officials were not really listening. Hundreds of people stood with her at that hearing, marching peacefully past the speakers and officials on the stage who supported the expressway construction. The enraged chairman of the meeting called for Jane's arrest for starting a riot and obstructing government administration. She was eventually released, but the protesters had made a strong impression. In August 1969, the city officials finally voted to remove any and all plans for the Lower Manhattan Expressway. The victory of the citizens who cared passionately about their neighborhood showed that "the power of people was greater than the power of cars."

**What are the negative effects of driving a lot? What are the benefits of walking?
What are some things in your neighborhood that you would fight for? Are there any things in your neighborhood that you would want to preserve?**

CHAPTER 12

Reviving Cities Everywhere

Jane and the Committee to Stop the Lower Manhattan Expressway had made a lasting impact. They demonstrated that when people come together and make their voices heard, they could accomplish even the seemingly impossible. Newspapers and magazines all over the country reported on the triumph of ordinary citizens preventing a major expressway from destroying their neighborhoods. This inspired many other cities to hold “expressway revolts” to convince their governments to preserve aging neighborhoods and to prioritize people rather than cars. City planners began to agree with Jane’s ideas in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Urban planners eventually turned away from the policy of urban renewal and began working with citizens to decide how their neighborhood would grow and change. They saw the value of mixed-uses, a mix of old and new buildings, shorter blocks, and density in healthy neighborhoods. But Jane’s book did not offer a recipe for fixing cities. She believed that every city was unique and every solution grew from the people who knew that community best. Paul Goldberg, an architect, summed up well what we can learn from Jane when he 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.”

What does it mean to use your common sense? Have you started to see your community in a different way? Why or why not?

Lang, Glenna, and Marjory Wunsch. *Genius of Common Sense: Jane Jacobs and the Story of The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. David R. Godine, Publisher, 2012.

Glossary

Adaptability - the quality of being able to adjust to new conditions.

“Eyes on the Street” - People whose presence in adjacent buildings or on the street make it feel safer. Jane Jacobs (1961) writes: ‘the sidewalk must have users on it fairly continuously...to add to the number of effective eyes on the street’.

Organized Chaos - a complex situation or process that appears chaotic while having enough order to achieve progress or goals.

Mixed-use - shopping, restaurants, housing, and other uses all in the same building

“Sidewalk Ballet” - Jane Jacobs coined the phrase sidewalk ballet from observations of busy city sidewalks filled with many uses and many people throughout the day, demonstrating the many layers of city life.

Urban Density - the number of people inhabiting a given urbanized area.

Urban Ecology - is the scientific study of the relation of living organisms with each other and their surroundings in the context of an urban environment.

Urbanism - The study or appreciation of the process of change in towns and cities; making towns and cities work

Urban Acupuncture / Interventions- Jaime Lerner describes urban acupuncture as mimicking traditional acupuncture theory, pinpointing areas of stress that need to be alleviated or repaired within a community. It begins with fundamental ideas of what makes cities thrive: familiar sounds, smells, gathering places, people, key infrastructure, adequate land use, and mass transportation.

Urban Metabolism - The process by which an urban area takes in resources such as water, food, and raw materials, and puts out products and wastes.

Urban Renewal - social improvements in urban neighborhoods. Renewal objectives may be wide ranging but will seek to deliver improved work and business opportunities, improved residential attractiveness, and improved public services

Walkability - a measure of how friendly an area is to walking. Being able to walk in your neighborhood comfortably has great benefits for the health of our bodies, finances, and communities.

Cowan, Robert. *The Dictionary of Urbanism*. Tisbury: Streetwise Press Limited, 2005. Print.

OBSERVE!

Using the Five Senses

Observe

Question?

Write and draw
your observations



What do you see? Who do you see?
What makes this area special?
How many people do you see?
What are they doing?
What do you like about the streets?
Sidewalks? Buildings?
What do you dislike?
Anything else?



What do you hear?
Is it Quiet? Noisy?
Do you hear any animals? Music?
Cars? People?
Anything else?

Observe



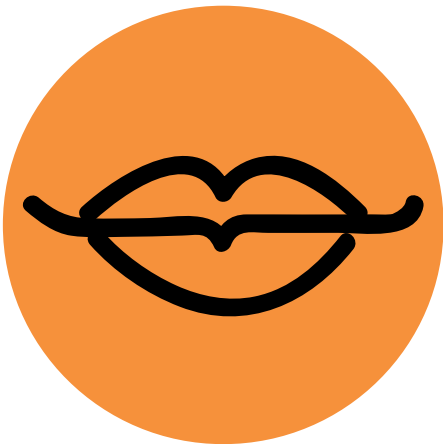
What do you smell?
Something sweet? Stinky?
Do you smell anything familiar?
Do you smell something strange?
Anything else?

Question?

Write and draw your observations



How can you move in this area?
Can a blind person get around?
Can a person in a wheelchair get around?
Does this place feel safe?
Does it feel vibrant and alive?
Anything else?



Is there anything in the area making your
mouth water?
Can you walk to any restaurants or bakeries?
Are there lots of places to eat that you can
walk to?
Are there lots of people you could talk to?
Anything else?

Writing a Press Release

For Your Jane Jacobs Walk

What is a press release? Why should I write one?

A press release is a formal, quick, and easy way of gaining publicity. They can announce an event, provide news, or advertise a new product. Writing a press release will help you announce and advertise your Jane Jacobs Walk and invite and encourage community members to join you for the event. A published press release may even get you media coverage—like an article in your local newspaper or a segment on local television.

Step 1: Start with a Headline.

Just like a news or magazine article, press releases start with a headline. Use action words and be creative to try to make it interesting. You want it to catch attention so that people will read the rest and be interested in what you have to say. Make the headline engaging, while still accurate.

Step 2: Write the first Paragraph.

It is important to include all of the most important facts in the first paragraph. That way, even if someone doesn't finish reading the whole document, they have all the information they need right off the bat. Include the *Who?*, *What?*, *When?*, and *Where?*. You have the rest of the article to expand on this information and to talk about the *Why?*, so focus on the hard facts for this part.

Step 3: Write the Body of the Article.

You'll want to keep the press release fairly short, so that people will read it; but you want to give enough information that people are interested in coming. Keep it under one page in length. After the first paragraph, you can expand on the information already provided. For example, how many youth will be leading the Walk? How old are you? Be sure not to give out personal information. You should also focus on the *Why?* in the body of your article. Why is the Walk important? Why is it important to talk about the places we live? Don't give too much information about the specific things you will be talking about—let people be interested enough to come to your Walk and find out for themselves! You can use quotes in your article and provide links to learn more about Jane Jacobs Walks or who Jane Jacobs is.

Step 4: Write the Conclusion.

At the end of your press release, be sure (with parental guidance) to provide contact information in case anyone wants to learn more about what you are doing. Provide one email and/or one phone number of an adult (with their permission), such as your program leader. It might even be a good idea to ask people to let you know if they will be attending so you know how many people to expect.

Step 5: Proofread.

Proofread! After you finish a draft of your press release, have your peers and an adult or two look over it to catch any grammatical errors or to see if something you wrote is confusing. The less errors and confusion in your article, the more professional you will look and the more people will trust that you have important things to say—both in your press release and on your Walk!

Step 6: Get the Word Out!

Once you have proofread your press release and you are ready to start advertising for your Walk, send it to local newspapers or TV stations. They may decide to help you advertise or even send a journalist to cover your event. Remember—the more professional and informative your press release is, the more likely they will be to help you out! You can also send your press release to people in charge of organizations or groups that would have people interested in attending. For example, you could send it to your principal at school, or to business owners near where you will be holding your walk. Your group may even decide to send it to city or county government officials and community leaders. With parental permission and guidance, you could advertise the event, using your press release, on social media like Facebook or Twitter.

Samples of Information to Include in the First Paragraph:

Who: Girl Scout Troop #1111

What: A free, hour-long guided walk and conversation about the community.

When: Saturday, March 11th at 2-3pm.

Where: Start at the library at 123 Jane Street. End at the Starbucks at 456 Jacobs Avenue.

Resource List

For more inspiration or ways to get involved explore the following!

Urban Acupuncture Network

<http://www.urbanacupuncture.network/>

Healthy Trees, Healthy Cities App

<https://healthytreeshealthycitiesapp.org/>

Social Assessment

https://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/nyc/focus/urban_nature/reading_landscape/

Urban Naturalist Guide

<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/54d3a1abe4b000d5abdf8641/54d8ea94e4b098941452c4ab/54d8ea47e4b098941452b57d/1364585196000/naturalistguide.pdf?format=original>

Pre- & Post-Assessments

Please take a few minutes before and after you participate in the *Observe!* program to tell us who you are and to help us make the *Observe!* program the best it can be.

Observe! Pre-Assessment

<https://centerforthelivingcity.typeform.com/to/hyxfHV>

Observe! Post-Assessment

<https://centerforthelivingcity.typeform.com/to/plJ8hE>