WHAT WERE THE PRIMARY BOOKS
that influenced me as a planner? Let me
pick one for each stage of a planner’s life.
Mine started with Jane Jacobs, and how
could it not? I was of the age, and The
Death and Life of Great American Cities
was the book of the times. It was a right-
eous critique of another generation’s
planners: how clear were their errors, how
misguided their intentions, how craven
their methods. It was a call to arms to end
a generation of urban maltreatment, a book
right up there on the front shelf with
Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, which
started the contemporary environmental
movement, and Betty Friedan’s The Femi-
nine Mystique, which opened a whole new
way women were to live in the world. All
three were published within a couple of
years at the start of the 1960s; all became
part of the collective text for a generation
with an influence that carries to this day.
All by utterly original American women,
which is probably why I married one,
尽管 being raised a million miles from a
great American city. Even in the heart of
the English countryside it was clear that
something was happening and I had to
find out what it was.

What did Jacobs tell planners to do?
Ensure a mix of uses, pump up the density,
keep blocks short, blend the new with the
old, foster local business, promote life on
the street, forget about the car, leave good
things alone: a simple and enduring cat-
chism for an urban passion. Death and
Life became, perhaps still is, the closest
thing we have to a bible of contemporary
planning. Though an odd bible for a profes-
sion to choose, because Jane Jacobs was
profoundly suspicious of expertise, con-
temptuous of professionals. She relied on
observation and anecdote, not theory; a
book trusting in street wisdom rather than
the sophistication of academics and civil
servants. Most of all she told planners to
get out of the way, a view that sat easily
within the dominant world view of all of
us then at university, adding to the suspi-
cion of elites, disdain for the governing
class and distrust of top-down structures
that formed the post-Vietnam baby boom
consensus.

Using it as a guide for city planning in
real time was another matter, though
initially all went well. In my first years as a
planner Jane Jacobs ruled in Toronto: suc-
cessive mayors paid her court, an intrusive
expressway was stopped, and a great hous-
ing development, St. Lawrence, was built
with her guidance. The book was much
quoted: subsequent books came, and went,
with increasing speed. And then a perhaps
inevitable estrangement grew between her
and City Hall, along with the strange trans-
formation of her text into a justification of
hostility to any major urban initiative. The
radical transmuted to the reactionary as
the local concern always trumped the lar-
gest view. Jacobs’ urban vision was
inherently grounded in the neighbour-
hood; it provided no basis for larger-scale
intervention. And even at that neighbour-
hood scale it seemed to support an
impossible circularity. If what exists is
good, why would you change it? Who
needed planners?

So not surprisingly as my generation of
planners and city builders moved into the
stage of life where we wanted, and were
able, to do something about our cities we
found another guide: Robert Caro’s The
Power Broker. This biography of Jacobs’
arch nemesis, Robert Moses, was published
in 1974 as a gang of us in Toronto City Hall
were beginning to understand just what it
took to get something actually built. What
was extraordinary about Caro’s account of
the master city builder of post-war New
York was the fine detailing of the ways
Robert Moses manipulated political power
and public finance, the prerequisites for
any major urban undertaking. The book is
a remarkable achievement since Caro was
barely sympathetic to his subject. For good
reason; Moses was a monomaniac and a
bully whose many great parks, regenera-
tion schemes and transportation projects
only barely tilt the balance against the
urban renewal and expressway manias
that blighted his later years. The debate
carries on to this day and the lines are still
drawn—there have been at least three
exhibitions of his life and work in the past
few years. Caro’s book became a kind of
devil’s bible, an intensely practical manual to working the levers of urban power. Many of us from the 1970s’ City Hall went on in various ways to help the developer Olympia and York build their great city-changing projects in New York, London and elsewhere, and then watch chagrined as the Reichmann’s over-extension let all that financial power and political positioning drain away.

The book for the later years is harder to find. For the past 20 years I have worked on cities, mostly in North America and Europe, helping them with the problems of growth or decline. I’ve watched great waves of economic and social change sweep through Detroit and Manchester, St Louis and Liverpool; witnessed the explosion of Canada’s cities into the farmland; and seen tides of globalization raise up Singapore and leave the mill towns of northern England and Ohio stranded. I’ve been helping cities develop their downtowns, their waterfronts, their cultural attractions, their quality of life, their public realm, their educational assets, their heritage districts, their transit systems, their destination attractions—helping advance all that hopeful architecture of the contemporary, competitive, creative city. Directing their growth, managing their change, enhancing their environment - applying the careful constructions of planning to the complex chaos of urban life. With a nagging sense, perhaps the inevitable sense for any planner who has been around, a sense that what we do may not have that great an effect, that there are other, more powerful forces at work. What book can give direction for such doubts? I am a sailor, mostly in the placid waters of Lake Ontario. But this summer I ventured far out into the Atlantic off the coasts of England and France. When you leave those shores behind, with their confused patterns of concatenating waves, you notice you are in the grip of much longer, slower swells. Huge waves, mountainous crests a hundred metres apart, generated by some violent storm on the other side of the ocean. Peter Hall’s Cities in Civilization is quite simply the best guide to understanding how cities work, why they thrive and fail, over those long waves of history. Published in 1998, it is a compendious volume that analyzes every leading world city from classical Athens to contemporary San Jose in Silicon Valley, attempting to explain what chemistry, what combination of technological breakthrough, immigrant arrival, geopolitics and good government led to their success. To presumptuously summarize Hall’s thousand and more pages of almost addictive detail: cities flourish as new immigrants prosper when their host city enables them to take advantage of some new technological or economic opportunity. Or as Confucius put it 1,500 years ago: the key to good urban planning is to make citizens happy and attract others from afar.

It is a profoundly important and educational book for any planner, since it places planning in its proper role in the life of a city, as a valuable, useful, contributory but not causative foundation for city building. Cities make their own history, but not entirely as they please. Just as we discover in our own lives.

Peter Hall is not only an inspired urban observer and omniscient academic but also someone who has been a practicing planner at the highest levels in the UK. He wrote this masterpiece at the end of his career, knowing that very little comes from telling people what to do but that much is possible for those who grasp just how a city really works. Yet as a planner he sees cities with the same eyes we do and with the same marvel at just what extraordinary human creations they are—and why there is no end to the pleasure and fascination of working in and on them.

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