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## Jane Jacobs, *Cyclist*

We should have known the famed urbanist loved the bike

Peter L. Laurence

<https://commonedge.org/jane-jacobs-cyclist/>



Fig. 1. Jane Jacobs, cycling in the West Village, 1963. Photo courtesy of Bob Gomel.

In 1956, when car-ownership and the suburban development that this enabled were just being embraced as American cultural ideals, pioneering urbanist Jane Jacobs wrote that the United States was becoming “an unprecedented nation of centaurs... Our automobile population is rising about as fast as our human population and promises to continue for another generation.” She continued, “the car is not only a monstrous land-eater itself: it abets that other insatiable land-eater— endless, strung-out suburbanization.”<sup>1</sup>

Anticipating more than a half-century of suburban sprawl, Jacobs was an early critic of car-dependency and its impacts on the built environment and land use in general. But more than that, Jacobs’s analogy of drivers as centaurs has become all but real today. In Greek mythology, as iconically depicted on the friezes of the Parthenon, centaurs were vicious half-men half-animals at war with mankind. As Jacobs observed, the car could turn a man half-vehicle and less than fully human in his relationship with others. “Road rage” is

perhaps the most familiar of car-induced pathologies. But in recent years, US car culture has produced and normalized new forms of sociopathy. Vehicle manufacturers and after-market automotive product manufacturers now design and offer products made to make vehicles actively intimidating and threatening to other drivers and road users: Vehicles have become not just larger but more aggressive looking and sounding. Cars have “evolved” to become more “angry” in appearance.<sup>2</sup> Car and truck owners modify their vehicles’ exhaust systems to growl, roar, produce popping sounds reminiscent of gun shots, and purposefully disturb the peace for a radius of several miles.<sup>3</sup> The “murdered out” look, which started as an after-market modification but which has been adopted by car manufacturers (even for Toyota’s Prius), is a popular styling that blackens every inch of the car, including the windows, dehumanizing the invisible driver and making the vehicle appear as an autonomously threatening presence.<sup>4</sup> The “murdered out” vehicle also dehumanizes everyone outside the vehicle by evoking the idea that pedestrians and cyclists could be run down, and the anonymous driver never identified. Similar modifications for vehicles include products to make peaceable-looking cars more angry-looking; “teeth” and “fangs” for car and truck grills; exhaust modifications to blast pedestrians and cyclists with smoke (aka “coal rolling”); and even long sharpened spikes to replace standard wheel lugs that, like spinning knives, are arguably genuine weapons.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 2. Wheel spikes add another level of intimidation to a Ford F-450 Turbo Diesel dually pick-up truck, one of the largest “passenger” vehicles one can buy. Peachtree, GA, 2024. Photo by the author.

In other words, driving-induced road rage has been replaced with endemic expressions of anger and hostility to others that are at once independent of the frustrated driver but also anticipate his behavior. And it does not seem coincidental that, in the past decade, alongside these trends, a long list of vehicular homicides and injuries explicitly directed at pedestrians occupying public space in peaceful protest have been recorded. Perhaps the most infamous was the Charlottesville car attack, described by the US Attorney General and the director of the FBI as an act of domestic terrorism, in which Heather Heyer was murdered.<sup>6</sup> But a Wikipedia article lists over 100 incidents of drivers ramming protesters during the 2020 George Floyd protests alone.<sup>7</sup> Motivated by partisanship, politics, and a complete disregard public health and welfare, perhaps the most insidious form of normalizing vehicular sociopathy was promoted in 2021 by Republican legislators in Oklahoma and Iowa, who “passed bills granting immunity to drivers whose vehicles strike and injure protesters in public streets.”<sup>8</sup> Such developments might have been unthinkable to Jacobs when she used the centaurs metaphor in the 1950s— as a horrific attack on public space, public life, and dissenting voices. However, she was familiar with the use of violence against protesters during the Jim Crow era and was herself arrested twice for protesting the Vietnam War, before moving to Toronto in 1968.

Although Jane generally wasn't comfortable in front of a camera, some of the most relaxed photos show her with her Raleigh bicycle. She clearly enjoyed the freedoms and joys of the bike. No surprise, bicycling was part of her childhood in Scranton, Pennsylvania, but unlike the typical American who gave up the bike at age sixteen when they acquired a driver's license, Jane didn't.<sup>9</sup> She never learned to drive. Although her father, a physician, was an early adopter of the automobile and purchased his first car in 1910, when Jane married Robert Jacobs at her Scranton family home in 1944, the couple rode off on their bicycles for a cycling honeymoon in upstate New York.<sup>10</sup> According to their eldest son, Jim, born four years later, both Jane and Bob were "avid" cyclists.<sup>11</sup> One of the many things they had in common was the bike. Before meeting Jane, Bob had done a number of bike tours in the 1930s, traveling between youth hostels; he made one cycling trip to Mexico while he was an art student to see the murals of Diego Rivera and another in 1936, to Holland, Belgium, and Germany, to see the Bauhaus, while he was an architecture student, a trip on which he acquired a German NSU (NeckarSulm) bike that he brought home.<sup>12</sup>

Cycling holidays later continued with their children who rode, Dutch-style, on the back of Jane's and Bob's bikes when they were still too young to keep up on their own wheels. In the 1950s, the family would escape the August heat of the city on bikes, cycling to Grand Central Station, loading their bikes for Cape Cod, then the ferry to Nantucket. Jim recalled, "Saturday morning was a mad whirlwind of selection and packing. Everything for four weeks, including us children, had, somehow, to be carried on the two bicycles."<sup>13</sup> When asked in an interview what was her most memorable holiday, she replied that "the most memorable were bicycle trips my husband and I took in Narragansett Bay, Chesapeake Bay, and Pimlico Sound, alternating the bike-riding with hitch-hiking on commercial fishing boats."<sup>14</sup>

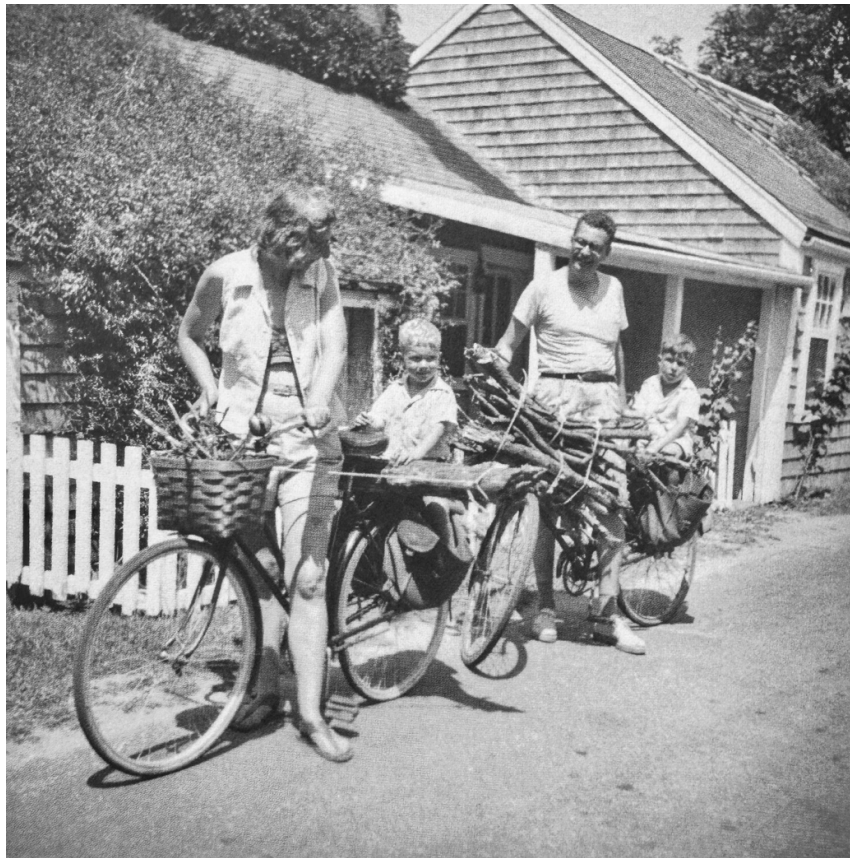


Fig. 3. Jane and Bob Jacobs, with sons Jimmy and Ned, on a cycling trip and summer holiday, Nantucket, August 1954.  
Estate of Jane Jacobs.

In the 1950s, in the glory days of the American automobile industry, when the Jane and Bob moved to Greenwich Village and their contemporaries were acquiring tail-fined cars and moving to the suburbs, she went to work and got around Manhattan by bike. Cycling was a daily activity. Although she could take the

subway, Jane regularly rode to work at Rockefeller Center for her job at the Time Incorporated magazine *Architectural Forum*, parking her bike in the Rockefeller Center garage. Cycling was then still common in Greenwich Village and other parts of New York, and Jim Jacobs recalled their groceries being delivered by cargo bike every Saturday afternoon. Portraits of Jane from the early 1960s show her cycling around the West Village to promote West Village Houses, an affordable housing development that she spearheaded and helped design, which was finally completed in 1975. But in her last book, *Dark Age Ahead* (2004), published when she was eighty-eight, Jacobs reflected on car-dependency as a serious impediment to a sustainable society. “In cities that underwent urban renewal in the 1950s and later and in new suburbs, stores and working places were segregated from residences, without feasible, much less enjoyable, walking or bicycling routes,” she wrote. “By the mid-1960s, simply to get to a job, or to find a job in the first place, or to buy provisions, or to get a child to school or a playground or a playmate, a car became a necessity.”<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 4. Jane Jacobs cycling past the site of West Village Houses, Washington Street, 1963. Photo courtesy of Bob Gomel.

Today, Jane Jacobs is a name that appears occasionally in cycling-city related literature, both academic and popular. Yet Jacobs’s influence has been underestimated in histories and theories of the cycling city. It is well known, of course, that Jacobs became a forceful activist who helped stop major highways from cutting through New York City and later Toronto, with her lengthy and legendary battles against Robert Moses’s Lower Manhattan Expressway in the 1960s regarded as a defining moment in a citizen uprising against Urban Renewal-era redevelopment highway-building projects in the United States. However, Jacobs’s fight against expressways was only one expression of her prescient realization that car-dependency was destroying cities, which she explained in detail, a few years before the LoMex battles, in her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Indeed, “Erosion of cities or attrition of automobiles,” a full chapter of her canonical book, can be considered one of the earliest comprehensive articulations of an argument taken for granted by many today.

As Jane was formulating the ideas that took form in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she was involved in some of her first activist projects. Among the earliest, she joined an ongoing neighborhood campaign to stop the extension of Fifth Avenue through Greenwich Village’s Washington Square and to further close it to cars, which she later wrote about in *Death and Life* in her chapter on removing cars from cities. Soon thereafter, with her children’s help, she organized her first independent activist campaign to “Save the Sidewalks,” protesting the widening of local streets for cars. (In *Death and Life*, she wrote on

this topic, “If sidewalks on a lively street are sufficiently wide, play flourishes mightily right along with other uses. If the sidewalks are skimped, rope jumping is the first play casualty. Roller skating, tricycle and bicycle riding are the next casualties.”<sup>16</sup>) These early campaigns, in other words, shared with her writing and later highway protests a clear rejection of the automobile.



Fig. 5. “Last car thru Washington Square,” celebrating the closing of the park to all but emergency vehicles following a six-year community effort, Nov. 1, 1958. Jacobs wrote about the protest and lessons learned about what is now termed “induced demand” in mobility circles. Photo Claire Tankel (of Stanley Tankel driving the car).

More broadly, Jane’s ideas were part of the larger postwar resurgence of civic design and she was among the pioneers of the then emergent practice called urban design, a neologism in the early 1950s.<sup>17</sup> Today, her formative ideas about diversity, density, and mixed-uses (sometimes abbreviated as the “Jane Jacobs block,” the more compact version of the newer and bizarrely controversial “Fifteen-Minute City”); social capital and neighborhood tenure; complexity and emergence are all part of the urban-design paradigm that—at least theoretically—prevails in urban design theory.<sup>18</sup> Whether termed place-making or tactical urbanism or bicycle urbanism, current practices are built on her ideas. And whether these ideas are implemented or not, hers were certainly not formed by observing the city through the windows of a car, nor only afoot.

As for Jacobs’s thinking about economies, the main subject of three of her books—*The Economy of Cities* (1969), *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (1984), and *The Nature of Economies* (2000)—once again, the bike is there.

In *The Economy of Cities*, a book concerned with the death and life of cities from an economic point of view and which Jane considered her most important work, she described the rise of the postwar Japanese bicycle industry as a key example of how economies grow. In turning away from imports, she explained, “The Japanese got much more than a bicycle industry. They had acquired a pattern for many of their other achievements in industrialization: a system of breaking complex manufacturing work into relatively simple fragments, in autonomous shops.”<sup>19</sup> Returning to the example in a subsequent chapter concerned with the growth of cities, she explained that “As cities grow, they replace the imports which they earn from neighboring cities, as well as from outside their nations.”<sup>20</sup> By replacing imported bicycles with locally made ones, Tokyo grew physically and economically. So did the global economy. She observed, “As far as the rest of the world was concerned, its total economic activity had neither diminished nor increased because



Tokyo was making its own bicycles. But the economy of Tokyo itself had expanded, and thus the total of all economic activity in the world had expanded.”<sup>21</sup>

In *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, Jacobs turned to the bicycle yet again. After summarizing her example of import replacement in the Japanese bicycle industry, she used the bicycle as an illustration of another incredibly culturally and economically important subject—invention. She explained, “All innovations, all new ways of economizing on materials, including energy, are inescapably masses of improvisations and experiments, some successful and some not, combined with imitations of what has already been achieved.”<sup>22</sup> Some examples, in developing countries, included bicycle-powered spinning wheels, bicycle-powered water pumps, and bicycle-powered cassava root shredders. In rural India, Java, and Colombia, such inventions made a real difference in local livelihoods where, for example, a bicycle water pump could eliminate about two thousand workdays annually and allow seven villagers to do something other than drawing water by hand.<sup>23</sup>

Historically speaking, the bicycle—as an invention and a source of invention—had far greater impacts than relatively modest labor savings, however. In a passage worth quoting at length, Jacobs observed,

To go back to the bicycle, for example, the many improvements in Europe and America that made it a practical vehicle instead of merely an awkward toy or clumsy curiosity consisted of a long, long series of improvisations, each added to imitations of what had already been achieved. Makers and tinkerers, using the means at their command in their own economies at the time, came up with ball bearings, roller bearings, pneumatic tires, chain-and-sprocket drives, differential gears, the tubular metal frame in place of the solid metal frame, caliper brakes, brake cables, drum brakes, back-pedaling brakes, and in a sense they even partially reinvented the wheel itself, gaining unprecedented lightness and strength with unprecedented economy of materials from an unprecedented way of spoking the wheel asymmetrically. These improvisations developed for the bicycle turned out to have ramifying uses. They underlie, in good part, the development of tractors, automobiles and airplanes, as well as the more obvious instances of motorcycles and mopeds.<sup>24</sup>

As this passage and her lifetime of work demonstrate, Jane loved uncovering where things came from. The bicycle wheel, which, in its modern form is a remarkable combination of compressive and tensile forces, could be traced back to a primitive first wheel.

In one of her last books, *The Nature of Economies* (2000), Jacobs wrote, “Let’s pretend we have an evolutionary tree of the wheel. Its root would be a rolling object of some kind, wood or other vegetable, yielding the differentiation of a solid wooden wheel. Branching off from it would be a lighter, stronger, and spoked wheel. In its turn, that would be a new generality, the progenitor of chariot wheels, spinning wheels, locomotive, car, truck, and airplane wheels, steering wheels, and the light, strong, tangentially spoked bicycle wheel.”<sup>25</sup>

The innovations of Henry Ford and the Wright Brothers showed how the automobile and aviation industries utilized technologies developed for the bicycle and, as the histories of a long list of manufacturing companies demonstrate, many businesses evolved from operations that started by making bicycles.<sup>26</sup> These were not just linear evolutions; what Jacobs called “co-development webs” expanded the influences of bicycle technology innovations far further.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, as she noted at the start of the long quotation above, the bicycle, like other revolutionary inventions, probably including the wheel, started as something of a toy. She observed, “Possibly even wheels were at first frivolities; the most ancient known to us are parts of toys. Hydraulics and many mechanical ingenuities and tricks were first developed for toys or other amusements... The first successful railroad in the world was an amusement ride in London... Computer games preceded personal computers for workaday use...”<sup>28</sup> For us today it seems completely plausible that toy-like devices including electric scooters, skateboards, hoverboards, and of course e-bikes—the fastest growing segment of the bicycle industry—are the harbingers of a massive personal mobility revolution. And if the history of the bicycle is repeated, this revolution does not necessarily have to wait for the infrastructure. Rather, as happened in the

1890s with the bicycle, which was the impetus for the road systems that followed the horse-and-carriage and preceded roads built for cars, people will eventually demand it.<sup>29</sup>

Until that demand appears, however, we must deal with the ruination of cities and natural landscapes that Jacobs predicted in the late 1950s.



Fig. 6. Jane Jacobs handing out brochures and speaking with neighbors on Hudson Street about the proposed West Village Houses affordable housing project, West Village, 1963. Photo courtesy of Bob Gomel.

Yet, evidence clearly indicates that the bicycle offers the possibility of rehumanizing our cities and ourselves. Jacobs saw this too.

In "Pedaling Together," an essay from 1985 (when Jane was nearly 70), she spoke of the need for reducing car-dependency and for better cycling infrastructure, and moreover used the bicycle as a metaphor and model for community activism.

Addressing a conference on bicycle advocacy in Toronto, she observed that in the fight against the building of highways and road-widening projects, cycling advocates needed to join forces with other groups, including environmentalists, park advocates, transit advocates, and others with more specialized and local interests. To describe the opposite, pedaling alone, she used the metaphor and reality of the stationary bike, or "indoor-trainer" as they are now called. While recognizing that in many parts of North America people had no safe options for riding a bike other than indoors, with a television to distract them (anticipating the current popular trend of virtual cycling platforms like Zwift and Peloton), she said that "Literally pedaling alone, with videocassette scenery for comfort, becomes all too logical a sequel when cyclists figuratively pedal alone without empathy or regard for other people interested in the quality of city life, for their own or other reasons." She continued,

At present, cyclists don't have much clout in pushing for the facilities and city qualities they need and want. I think they would have more clout if they pedaled along with their many, many potential allies, getting aid from those allies in support of cyclists' needs, and in return helping their natural allies in their battles for better quality of city life: working in mutual support with people who care about bullfrogs, or about traffic lights where the schoolchildren cross, or about threats of expropriation to their working places or their homes,



understanding that the specific needs and desires of city cyclists can be furthered only within a broader context of the city as a decent place for people to live and get around in.<sup>30</sup>

Jacobs concluded by saying that “a city good for cycling is also a city good for walking, strolling, running, playing, window-shopping, and listening for bullfrogs if listening for bullfrogs is your thing.”<sup>31</sup> Jane enjoyed all those activities herself, but she was particularly fond of the bike and knew that it was the best vehicle for making a better city.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Laurence, *Becoming Jane Jacobs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 207.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Chris Gaylord, “Why people like cars with ‘angry faces,’” *The Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 9, 2008; Karla Sanchez, “15 Angry-Looking Cars You Don’t Want in Your Rearview,” *Motortrend*, Jan. 22, 2015; and Aaron Khan, “The future is full of angry fascias, gone are the days of happy cars,” *AutoBlog*, Mar. 28, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Andrew Lupton, “The ‘burble tune’ mod: Why some mufflers now sound like howitzers,” *CBC News Canada*, Sept. 1, 2022; and Ryan Cooper, “The case against American truck bloat,” *The Week*, Aug. 14, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Gerhard Horn, “Automotive Noir: Your Guide to Murdered-Out Cars,” *CarBuzz*, Aug. 13, 2023. Of course, Toyota does not call this option “murdered out,” but “Nightshade.”

<sup>5</sup> For example, Angry Eyes Replacement Grille for Jeep Wrangler, 4mudders website; Kenneth Niemeyer, “‘Rolling coal’ to blow a thick cloud of exhaust like video of a busy Texas restaurant shows is legal in most states,” *Business Insider*, Oct. 21, 2021; and spike lug nuts from VMS Racing. See also this law firm’s webpage on tire spikes; numerous law firms have the more or less the same webpage.

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlottesville\\_car\\_attack](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlottesville_car_attack)

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_vehicle-ramming\\_incidents\\_during\\_George\\_Floyd\\_protests](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_vehicle-ramming_incidents_during_George_Floyd_protests)

<sup>8</sup> See Reid J. Epstein and Patricia Mazzei, “G.O.P. Bills Target Protesters (and Absolve Motorists Who Hit Them,” *The New York Times*, Apr. 21, 2021 and Alex Pareene, “The Right to Crash Cars Into People,” *The New Republic*, Apr. 24, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Glenna Lang, *Jane Jacobs’s First City: Learning from Scranton, Pennsylvania* (New York: NYU Press, 2021), 173, 453.

<sup>10</sup> Lang, *Jacobs’s First City*, 67, 454.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Jim Jacobs by the author, May 15, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> NSU, or NeckarSULm, named for the Neckar and Sulm rivers, was a manufacturer that began with knitting machines in 1873, moved into bicycles, then motorcycles and cars, before being sold to VW/Audi in 1969 ([cybermotorcycle.com](http://cybermotorcycle.com)).

<sup>13</sup> Jim Jacobs, “August,” *Jane at Home*, Caitlin Broms-Jacobs, ed. (Toronto: Estate of Jane Jacobs, 2016), 51.

<sup>14</sup> “The Way We Are: Jane Jacobs, Critic of Cities,” *Toronto Star*, Oct. 24, 1970, in *Ideas That Matter: The Worlds of Jane Jacobs*, Max Allen and Mary Rowe, eds. (Ontario: Ginger Press, 1997), 129. Jane wrote about these trips in small freelance articles such as “Islands the Boats Pass By,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, July 1945, also in *Ideas That Matter*, 38-39.

<sup>15</sup> Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead* (New York: Random House, 2004), 34. In this book, Jacobs also used the academic study of traffic engineering as an example of problems with higher education, credentialing, and the abandonment of science, a phenomenon that seemed exaggerated in 2004 but which has manifested in explicit anti-science sentiments in recent years. She wrote, “It is popularly assumed that when universities give science degrees in traffic engineering, as they do, they are recognizing aboveboard expert knowledge. But they aren’t. They are perpetrating a fraud upon students and upon the public when they award credentials in this supposed expertise” (72).

<sup>16</sup> Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 86-87.

<sup>17</sup> Laurence, *Becoming Jane Jacobs*, 190.

<sup>18</sup> As an example, Tristan Claridge’s writings about the “Evolution of the concept of social capital” (June 20, 2023, DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.8015737](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8015737)) underestimate and misunderstand Jacobs’s redefinition and popularization of the concept in 1961 (*Death and Life*, 255). For Jacobs, social capital had everything to do with long-time residential tenure, as opposed to transience, whether due to forced displacement, disinterest, development or design, and the inability, to form the social connections that allowed neighborhoods to defend themselves from destructive policies and societies to self-govern. The idea, for Jacobs, was about much more than “neighborliness” (Claridge, 4).

<sup>19</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Random House, 1969), 64-65.

<sup>20</sup> Jacobs, *Economy of Cities*, 146.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>22</sup> Jane Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations: Principles of Economic Life* (New York: Random House, 1984), 150.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>25</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Nature of Economies* (New York: Random House, 2000), 25.

<sup>26</sup> Some companies that first made bicycles or bicycle parts that have survived into the present day include Peugeot, Bianchi, Dunlop, Continental, Goodyear, Michelin, and Honda. A much longer list went defunct or were absorbed into other companies. (See “Bike-to-Car Companies,” *MotorTrend*, Sept. 5, 2010, <https://www.motortrend.com/vehicle-genres/bike-to-car-companies>). For the development of the aviation industry from the bicycle, see Margaret Guroff, “The Untold Story of the How Bicycle Design Led to the Invention of the Airplane,” *Fast Company*, July 8, 2016 (<https://www.fastcompany.com/3061592/the-untold-story-of-how-bicycle-design-led-to-the-invention-of-the-airplane>).

<sup>27</sup> Jacobs returned to Japanese bicycle manufacturing and the idea of development webs one last time late in her life in the manuscript of an unpublished book on economics preliminarily titled “Uncovering the Economy: A New Hypothesis.” See *Vital Little Plans: The Short Works of Jane Jacobs*, N. Storrington and S. Zipp, eds. (New York: Random House, 2016), 425-429.

<sup>28</sup> Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, 222.

<sup>29</sup> As Evan Friss explained in *The Cycling City: Bicycles and Urban America in the 1890s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), the “wheelmen” and “wheelwomen” demanded and helped to develop the modern road system, including the “rules of the road” that we now take for granted—although this infrastructure was soon appropriated by automobile drivers and the auto lobby.

<sup>30</sup> Jane Jacobs, “Pedaling Together,” *Vital Little Plans*, 267-275.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*