A Contrarian’s Lament in a Blitz of Gentrification

By MICHAEL POWELL

SHARON ZUKIN had come to Greenwich Village and the Shrine of St. Jane not as a pilgrim but to wax sardonic.

Ms. Zukin, a Brooklyn College sociology professor, stared at the modest red-brick town house on Hudson Street that once was home to Jane Jacobs, whose 1961 book, “The Death and Life of Great American Cities,” celebrated the joyous hodgepodge of New York’s neighborhoods: the working-class tailor and the artist, the Italian grocer and the writer, living cheek by jowl.

Ms. Jacobs, who died in 2006, waged heroic war against planners who dreamed of paving the Village’s cobblestone streets, demolishing its tenements and creating sterile superblocks. Her victory in that fight was complete, if freighted with unanticipated consequences. The cobblestone remains, but the high bourgeoisie has taken over; not many tailors can afford to live there anymore. Ms. Jacobs’s old home recently sold for more than $3 million, and the ground floor harbors a boutique glass store.


Ms. Jacobs’s continuing influence on the city is clear. As Amanda M. Burden, chairwoman of the City Planning Commission, wrote a few years back, “Projects may fail to live up to Jane Jacobs’s standards, but they are still judged by her rules.”

But if Ms. Jacobs is much hailed as an urban prophet, Ms. Zukin is a heretic on her canonization. She views Ms. Jacobs as a passionate and prescient writer, but also one who failed to reckon with steroidal gentrification and the pervasive hunger of the upper middle class for ever more homogenous neighborhoods.

The pattern in places like Williamsburg, Ms. Zukin said, is dreary and inexorable: Middle-class “pioneers” buy brownstones and row houses. City officials rezone to allow luxury towers, which swell the value of the brownstones. And banks and real estate companies unleash a river of capital, flushing out the people who gave the neighborhoods character.

Ms. Jacobs viewed cities as self-regulating organisms, and placed her faith in local residents. But Ms. Zukin argues that without more aggressive government regulation of rents and zoning, neighborhoods will keep getting more stratified.

“Jacobs’s values — the small blocks, the cobblestone streets, the sense of local identity in old neighborhoods — became the gentrifiers’ ideal,” Ms. Zukin said. “But Jacobs’s social goals, the preservation of classes, have been lost.”
Gentrification and its discontents have bewitched New York City more or less since the Dutch burghers disembarked in Manhattan. (“New Amsterdam fort fixer-upper — bring your architect!”) And Ms. Zukin is a recognizable New York sort, a controversialist who loves a good argument. But her passions burn hot: She worries for New York. “Much of what made these neighborhoods unique lives on only in the buildings, not the people,” she said.

Of course Ms. Zukin has her own critics, who say she perhaps overestimates the city’s power to slow gentrification — and the influence of a half-century-old book. “Jacobs’s work was revelatory for a particular time and place,” said Samuel Zipp, an urban historian at Brown University who will be one of the panelists for a discussion of Ms. Zukin’s book scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Monday at the CUNY Graduate Center. “Many people learned to love cities through her example.”

Ms. Zukin recently acted as tour guide on a stroll through Ms. Jacobs’s urban village, where Irish and Italian grandmothers once watched from windows as children played on the streets, and milkmen delivered bottles as chain-smoking playwrights typed in grotty flats. It began just north of Christopher and Bleecker Streets in the West Village, once a working-class haven, then the black-leather heart of Queerdom, and now something like the back lot in a Paramount Studios version of New York.

There’s the Magnolia Bakery, where perpetual lines snake out the door not so much because of its excellent cupcakes as because of its appearance on “Sex and the City.” There’s Marc Jacobs, where the lines are no less endless. A Ralph Lauren, a Madden, and a children’s store with the most adorable petite $250 pants. Ms. Zukin sighed.

“It’s another Madison Avenue, or the Short Hills mall,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “Really, did we need that?”

One might shrug off her lament as a song soaked in nostalgia. But Ms. Zukin draws on new scholarship suggesting that this is not the old gentrification, the house-by-house accretion familiar to Ms. Jacobs. What happens now, she said, is powerful and breathtakingly fast — a product of upper-middle-class aesthetics, and newspapers, magazines and blogs that compete to find new “destination neighborhoods.”

She stepped into the Biography Bookshop. Beautiful and cramped, the store has graced a corner on 11th Street for a quarter-century. But its lease expired late last year, and the store is moving to a less expensive stretch of the Village. “We didn’t talk renewal,” the manager explained. “We both knew the rent would be impossible.”


On to the Hudson River’s luxury condo row and the Bongo restaurant, which boasts of its “highly curated décor” and Time Out praised for the sheer bravery of its decision to move “into relatively uncharted territory.” Ms. Zukin clapped. “Perfect! Uncharted millionaire’s territory.”

Her observations can be cringe-inducing for anyone even modestly self-aware. She limns your love of a particular coffee, and observes the secret joy in the middle-class heart when a 99-cent store closes and a hummus specialty market opens.

Ms. Zukin, who grew up in Philadelphia, lives in a Central Village loft, so it is fair to say that she makes herself cringe, too. “My husband was a furniture maker; now he’s an interior designer,” she said. “Look, there is an element of irony in a middle-class professor writing about displacement of Dunkin’ Donuts by latte bars.”
Next stop, Williamsburg, once the most industrial neighborhood in the nation’s most industrial county. As late as the mid-1990s, the area would have qualified as a Jacobsian ideal, mixing Poles, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Hasidic Jews and the usual lot of artists, writers and vaguely hip corporate lawyers.

The City Planning Commission rezoned a few years ago even as it tried to apply a gentle brake, letting gleaming condominiums rise on the river while protecting old warehouses and factories.

Still, a running bet hangs over the neighborhood: How many years before it becomes SoHo? Another factory district turned artists’ haven turned hedge funders’ habitat, SoHo has twice as many chain stores as boutiques now, and three times as many boutiques as art galleries, according to Ms. Zukin’s research.

“Williamsburg already is the East Village East,” she said. “And it’s speeding up.”

Down on the East River gold coast — “Every coast is a ‘gold coast,’” Ms. Zukin noted — she pointed out a former dockworker bar with a neon Brooklyn Beer sign in the window (Brooklyn is now branded hip) and a low-slung old granary with a MacBook-speckled coffee bar. She started to laugh.

“It’s just inexorable, this authenticity in the visual language of sameness,” she said. “We’ve gone from Jacobs’s vision to the McDonald’s of the educated classes.”

And with that, heigh-ho! Down the steps to the L train and off to another authentic ’hood.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

**Correction: February 28, 2010**

An article last Sunday about Sharon Zukin, a Brooklyn College sociology professor and critic of gentrification who argues for stronger government regulation of rents and zoning, referred incorrectly to the Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, which Ms. Zukin cited as an example of inexorable gentrification. It is a project, not a place, and city officials did not in fact rezone the property to allow the development.
Gentrification is the result of powerful economic forces. To fight gentrification, start at the source: entitled neighborhoods. Is Gentrification a Class War? In a way, yes. But the typical class analysis mistakes the symptom for the cause. The finger gets pointed at the wrong rich people. There is no grand conspiracy concocted by real estate developers, though it’s not surprising it seems that way. Real estate developers would be happy to build in already expensive neighborhoods. Here, demand is stable and predictable. A Contrarian’s Lament in a Blitz of Gentrification. Published on Friday, February 19, 2010 in The New York Times. Topics. World. New York. Community / Economic Development. Social / Demographics.