One insight is that improving communities with multiple disadvantages is no small task—and the goalposts are always shifting, as Cohen’s detailed narrative makes vividly clear. Reformers like Logue certainly learned from experience and shifted their approach. But the world around them changed constantly, so even a program or policy successful in one period was not viable in another. Places had changed physically and socially compared to earlier rounds of renewal, residents had different expectations, businesses assumed different roles, and the federal government changed strategies and generally scaled back its financial and policy commitments. With less federal attention, state and local governments, and an increasing number of nonprofit agencies, stepped in. But they brought different interests and experiences to urban renewal. This is why improving urban areas is so difficult—and why urban planners have moved to emphasize developing processes for improving communities.

Another large question is the role of experts in defining problems, proposing solutions, and working toward justice. Cohen proposes that “as Logue learned from hard experience over his career, the fate of cities cannot be left solely to top-down redevelopers or government bureaucrats or market forces or citizens’ groups. Rather, the goal should be a negotiated cityscape built on compromise.” One part of this negotiation is about good design. Logue began his career attracted to stripped-back modern design, but over time came to embrace rehabilitation and designs that, more than early modernist experiments, signaled a sense of home to their prospective residents. Cohen richly describes the various places and projects Logue worked in and on; as I read I found myself gravitating to my computer where I could find images, zoom in to maps, and search recent aerial photography of the communities today.

Cohen’s overriding interest lies in the possibilities for social reform. The programs she examines and people associated with them defy easy categorization. There were liberals and conservatives for urban renewal and against it, depending on the context. Logue himself embodied contradictions: he was an often difficult person and a committed social reformer, a design modernist and a pragmatist, a strongly principled person willing to push the boundaries of programs for the greater good. Today, when inequality is on the rise, Saving America’s Cities warns against easy solutions while offering hope that people can improve the places where we live—and with that, people’s lives.

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Claude the cat keeps watch while Thomas works on her sewing.

during their stay and later wrote two ethnographies on the !Kung: John Marshall went on to a career in anthropology, and chronicled daily life in the Kalahari through documentaries. The family’s work provided an invaluable account of the !Kung before their traditional lifestyle disappeared in the late twentieth century. An exhibition highlighting that contribution, “Kalahari Perspectives: Anthropology, Photography, and the Marshall Family,” was held at the Peabody through this past March (see “Shifting Sands,” September–October, page 84).

All told, Thomas herself spent almost three years among the Ju/'hoansi, in three separate trips. She picked up some of the !Kung language and spent her days observing their day-to-day lives. “Women weren’t allowed to have anything to do with hunting,” she explains. “We think of hunting as the big exciting thing, but I went gathering with the women and it was incredibly interesting....They knew everything about their ecosystem.” She remembers how people dug deep into the ground to find a specific species of poison grub, and squeezed its insides onto hunting arrows, carefully avoiding the tip so it wouldn’t accidentally scratch someone. “A scientist from Harvard came there much later and he interviewed some of them and ended up saying they know almost as much as we do,” Thomas reports. “Well, I have never heard such bullshit in my life. They knew a hundred times more.”

She calls the !Kung lifestyle “the old way,” a reflection of how humans lived before agriculture and permanent settlements, when their task was to focus on the present, the world immediately around them. It “clings to us still, in our preferences, in our thoughts and dreams, and even in some of our behavior,” she wrote in her book, The Old Way (2006).

Thomas’s experiences also made her see humans as part of the natural world, not separate from—or masters of—it. “If you’re a hunter-gatherer,” she says, “you can’t think of yourself as having dominion over animals”: there was no such thing as domestication. She noticed the careful interactions of animals in the wild, the ways they negotiated with one another and made decisions about how to use their energy. And she saw how tiny changes in the balance of resources can shift how they relate to one another. She remembers noticing that the lions and people there didn’t harm each other. She wondered why. Some of her !Kung hosts told her that “if we don’t bother them, they don’t bother us,” she remembers, “But I don’t think so.” She thinks it was because in the Kalahari, water is scarce, and humans and lions needed to share water holes. If they attacked one another, then one group would have to leave, she explains, and the lions might be forced to battle another group of lions for access to their water. “Lions are very smart. Very. They are very, very observant.”

Some of what Thomas has written about the Ju/'hoansi is not uncontroversial. In The Old Way, she treated the culture as though it were frozen in time, a faithful representation of how humans lived as semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers before the agricultural revolution. She attributed facets of the culture to human evolution, rather than to the development of one specific society, because, as she puts it, “there are only so many ways you can live as a hunter-gatherer.” But these speculations are highly questionable, argued Emory University anthropologist Melvin Konner, Ph.D. ‘73, M.D. ’84, in The New York Review of Books: “Kung society “probably resembles just one of the environments of evolutionary adaptation,” he wrote. “Most of our ancestors lived in richer environments: some had high enough population densities to develop some social stratification, which does not exist in Bushmen societies...The Bushmen are relevant, but they are not, as Thomas implies, the entire story of our Old Way.” But for Thomas, the academic claims are less important than what she learned directly from the people she got to know and lived among: such as how to raise children (kindly, without harsh disciplining and scolding) and how to repress negative emotions for the good of the group. It opened up to her a whole new way of being in the world. As Konner further notes, “The Old Way is at its best when read as a fluid, evocative narrative of an adventure with people whose extremely challenging way of life is now gone.”

Thomas’s love of the natural world also goes back farther, to the summer/weekend house in rural New Hampshire that Laurence Marshall built for the family in the 1930s. Although she grew up a few blocks from Harvard Yard, it was the woods around Peterborough where she felt most at ease. “I only wanted to be here,” she remembers. It was where her father taught her to be still, to sit silently for hours and listen for the quiet footsteps of wildlife nearby. Once, they saw the fresh tracks of what Thomas was sure was a panther in snow.

Thomas has lived in the house full-time since the early 1980s—with her husband, Stephen Thomas ’54 (who died in 2015), and many cats and dogs. There have been hard times there, too. Peterborough was where her daughter, Stephanie Thomas ’80, at age 17, was riding in the bucket at the front of a
Thomas's family owns a large stretch of land in New Hampshire, which is conserved and sustainably managed through a state program.

While crisscrossing continents during the past few decades, the new Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) president has always found her Harvard “home.” “I’ve been a member of Harvard clubs everywhere I’ve lived—Washington, D.C., Ottawa, London,” says Alice Hill ’81, A.M. ’88, Ph.D. ’91, “and when I moved to Melbourne, Australia, I only knew two people: my husband, Mark Nicholson [M.B.A. ’87], and my classmate Dana Rowan.”

Rowan urged her to join efforts to reinvigorate the Harvard Club of Victoria, which Hill gladly did, ultimately helping to boost membership and events, and serving as president from 2004 to 2008. Hill has also chaired the club’s fellowship program, which each year sends local leaders of nonprofits to a weeklong management course at Harvard Business School. “Our club started this scholarship from nothing,” she says. “What I love about being part of this Harvard community is that people will come together to do things.”

She joined the HAA’s board of directors as director for Australasia in 2008, and spent four years on the executive committee before becoming HAA president in July. This year, she will travel and work with alumni, including the 60,000 graduates who live and work internationally, as the first Australian, first Canadian, and first person from the Asia Pacific region to lead the HAA.

“Access to the alumni association has meant a lot to the international community, and the outreach, especially over the last five years, has been amazing,” she says. “I’m really thrilled about what it says about the HAA and the University that someone like me would have the opportunity to do this.”

It was while roaming meadows and forests near her house that Thomas began gathering anecdotes and scenes of nature and animal life, like those in her The Hidden Life of Deer (2009). “You don’t need scientific training,” she insists. “You need to keep your eyes open and sit there and watch.”

These assertions have sometimes made her unpopular with scientists. She challenges the rejection of “anthropomorphism” in biology—the idea that it’s wrong to assign human attributes, emotions, or internal experiences to animals. Twentieth-century scientists largely stuck instead to observable and quantifiable behavior, rather than the squishy potential subjectivity, of animals. For Thomas, the two are inseparable.

Increasingly, the scientific community has come around to a similar view, and is conceiving new methods for studying animal consciousness. In 2012, for example, an international group of scientists issued the “Cambridge Declaration on Animal Consciousness,” which stated that nonhuman animals have the neurological structures required for consciousness. But Thomas has never made
Thomas thinks it’s clear that animals evolved minds and emotions, just like humans.

academic claims: she is more interested in writing entertaining stories and promoting empathy for animals than in scientific precision. She thinks it’s clear that animals’ minds and emotions evolved, just as humans’ did, and if we can’t access these qualities directly, we can use our imaginations. Her writing begins with simple observations about what animals around her are doing and what she gathers they might be thinking and feeling. Her prose is short, light, and cut to the bone; Montgomery calls it a “laser beam into what she sees as true.”

In *The Hidden Life of Deer*, for example, Thomas describes how deer use humans to their advantage: “Once, a deer used us for-purpose work,” which includes founding the Early Years Education Program, which helps at-risk children realize “their full potential and ensure that they enter school as confident and successful learners, developmentally equal to their peers.” She also says, they were “adamant” that their two daughters go to college as well, and sent them to prepare at Concord Academy, near Boston. “They expected I would go back to university in Canada, but when I was accepted at Radcliffe,” Hill adds, “my mother said, ‘Well, we can’t say no to that.’”

She concentrated in economics. Outside class, she helped establish the Canadian Club, was a yearbook photographer, played on the women’s soccer team, and was a founding member of Harvard’s women’s ice-hockey team, coached by Joe Bertagna ’73. Hill quickly found her niche at left wing defense (“The enforcer,” she laughs; “It makes you a little bit fearless”), and scored the first goal in the first match of the varsity team’s inaugural 1978-79 season.

Hill earned a master’s in economic history at the London School of Economics, then returned to Canada and worked as a political assistant to the minister of state for social development before pursuing her doctorate in business economics, on the good advice of then-professor of economics and business administration (and soon-to-be dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences) Michael Spence. While at Harvard a second time, she also met Nicholson, a native Australian.

As a microeconomist, she has worked at the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation, and McKinsey & Co., among other firms. In 2004, she and Nicholson (by then married, with two young sons—Hamish ’20 and Alasdair ’17) settled in Melbourne, to be closer to his extended family. He is currently a non-executive director with several investment firms and not-for-profits.

Since then, Hill has pursued what she calls “full-time, unpaid, for-purpose work,” which includes founding the Early Years Education Program, which helps at-risk children realize “their full potential and ensure that they enter school as confident and successful learners, developmentally equal to their peers.” She also serves as a director of other nonprofit social-justice and educational organizations, and of The Antipodean Family Foundation, which she and Nicholson established to serve “people in need.”

“I just decided that there was nothing I could do that would have more impact than protecting the early childhood development of vulnerable children,” she says. “It’s all about doing good wherever you are. You might not solve all the problems in the world, but you can do your bit.”

Alice Hill

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