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Public Spaces, Public Life

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All cities have a traffic department and generally they have excellent data, recorded continuously and systematically, concerning traffic and parking. Thus traffic concerns are well understood and reviewed in the city planning process.

But few cities have a department for pedestrians, or for public life. And hardly any city has data, recorded continuously and systematically, concerning pedestrian activity and public life. Thus the people who are actually using the city are more or less invisible, and for that reason they are created arbitrarily in the city planning process.

For more than 20 years, however, Copenhagen's public life has been fortunate to have had the attention of architect Jan Gehl and researchers from the Royal Danish Academy of

Fine Arts. His research on pedestrian streets, public spaces and public life has been used continuously by the city, and has been instrumental in inspiring, directing and accelerating the process of improving its public spaces.

Over the years, some of the streets in center-city Copenhagen have been closed to traffic—street by street, block by block—and Gehl and his researchers have monitored the results. Thus the design of the city and the monitoring of people's use of public space have been an interlocked, iterative process.

The broader purpose of Gehl's research program has been to develop a set of methods by which life in public spaces can be systematically recorded, evaluated and discussed—in short, a method of making the people using the city visible in the city planning process.

The research has produced a number of seminal books, articles and reports — including *Life Between Buildings* and *Public Spaces, Public Life* — that have set out basic research techniques that have been adapted by urban designers around the world.

The lesson from Copenhagen are that wherever public spaces of good quality were provided, a substantial increase in public life has taken place. The increase has been especially pronounced in regard to optional activities, or those activities people undertake by choice, which may be the best indicator of the attractiveness and comfort of public space. The findings challenge the notion that cold-weather cities like Copenhagen cannot develop pedestrian life, and suggest that even auto-dominated cities like those in the U.S. can carefully cultivate public, social life.

Gehl's studies of Copenhagen, based on the repeating the same research methods, make it possible to describe and evaluate the development of public life in Copenhagen over a period of nearly three decades. This probably makes Copenhagen the first city in which it has been possible to study the relationship between physical improvements and developments concerning the life in public spaces over a long period of time.

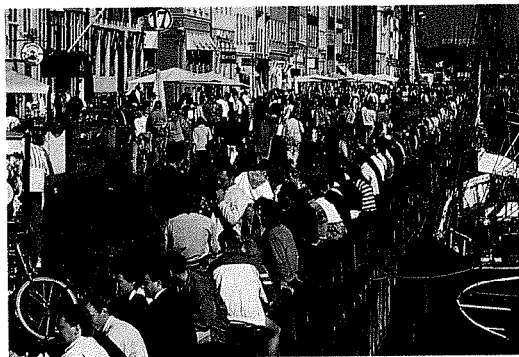
The research has centered on basic studies that investigate the character, range and diversity of the life in public spaces. The earliest studies identified three general types of activities that are useful for describing and evaluating life in public spaces.

Necessary activities, or what people have to do. These are activities with a high level of purposefulness, generally taking place regardless of the quality of the public spaces, because there is not much choice. Much of the activity in this category generates walking.

Optional activities, or what people choose to do. This group of activities is mostly recreational in nature — all the things people do in cities in order to enjoy themselves, to enjoy the spaces, the city and their fellow citizens. These activities are very sensitive to the quality of the public spaces. This category of activities has been found to be important in defining and evaluating the quality of urban public spaces.

Social activities, or the multitude of social encounters that occur in public spaces. These activities occur when people visit public spaces to engage in either necessary or optional activities. By creating good conditions for necessary and optional activities, opportunities for social activities are improved.

Studies similar to those in Copenhagen have been conducted in Copenhagen (1968, 1986, 1996); in Oslo (1987); in Stockholm (1990); in Perth, West Australia (1993); and in Melbourne (1993-4). Generally, the studies have been conducted in three stages, asking what spaces are available, how are these spaces used, and what can be done to improve the conditions for public life?



Public Spaces, Public Life

What kinds of public spaces are available? What are the general conditions offered by these physical environments? In answering these questions, Gehl and his research team found that the sectors that are recorded and assessed vary from city to city. Categories recorded included numerous items, such as scale, climate, integration of functions, presence of residents and students in the city center, aspects concerning safety, traffic, parking, furnishing, benches and outdoor cafes, paving, quality of ground floor facades facing the public spaces, and aesthetic quality.

In order to study life in the public spaces, selected aspects concerning the use of the public spaces were recorded. The studies were conducted on selected days of the week and year, and all studies were conducted in good weather. Generally, many types of activities were studied.

Pedestrian traffic was counted in ten to fifteen places, which gives a reasonable overview of the flow of pedestrians during the day and evening. Counts were made in the first fifteen minutes of each hour. Stationary activities were recorded in selected streets, squares and parks. The method for recording was behavioral mapping (i.e. recording activities on a plan of the area once every hour or every two hours, depending on the place and purpose). *Pedestrian traffic* and *stationary activities* were also documented during special activities and events, such as festivals or markets, whether planned or spontaneous.

Other issues that were examined were raised by a number of important queries. Who are the people



facing page: Amagertorv Square, Copenhagen. During lunchtime on a sunny day, 142 people pass through. Between noon and 4 p.m., 384 people can be found in the square.

this page top: Bicycling as a mode of transportation to and from the Copenhagen city center has increased by some 65 percent since 1970.

bottom: More than 50 thousand pedestrians pass through the Copenhagen city center between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. on a summer weekday. This has not changed much over the last thirty years.

Photos: Jan Gehl, Lars Gemzøe

using the public spaces? Where do they come from, and how do they arrive? What do they engage in? What are their opinions about the public spaces and the life of the city? Various methods, including interview surveys, were used in a number of the city-surveys for recording such aspects.

Recommendations for Improving the Conditions for Public Life

Based on the public space analysis and the surveys of public life that this research brought forth, suggestions for improvements were developed. The studies conducted in different cities provided material for comparisons which have since been very useful for assessments and recommendations. *Public Spaces, Public Life* summarizes this research and follows by and large the patterns described above. The chapter on recommendations is rather sketchy, because this work is research-oriented rather than oriented towards planning issues. On the other hand, the study is especially interesting because information about eleven other city centers is included for comparisons.

Public Spaces, Public Life has been published in a Danish version for local use and an English version in order to describe to researchers and planners in other countries the methods of work and its application to a city over a long period of time. With this publication, as with all previous publications in this research program, considerable care has been taken to communicate the viewpoints and findings with simple layout, photos, graphs and texts, in a way which makes the information easily accessible to the general public. Both versions in this book have in less than one year attained an unusually wide circulation, indicating, as intended, a wide range of readers.

Jury Comments

Clare Cooper Marcus: This is an excellent example of longitudinal research on public life in a major city that documents the use of streets and plazas, before and after design interventions. Copenhagen has incrementally pedestrianized its downtown streets, and this study has observed before and after how they've been used since 1965. As the submission says, there has probably been no city in the world that has had such intensive before-and-after looking at its pedestrian spaces. It's quite an astonishing piece of work, and it's very handsomely presented — accessible to researchers, designers and the lay public; it is very easy to read, and it is supported by data.

Donlyn Lyndon: It is decent research and it is really connected — to a point of view, to actions that are

being taken. At the same time, it involves perfectly direct empirical observations that confirm and extend the pedestrian way.

Clare Cooper Marcus: They make changes and observe them again; it has gone on for many years.

Samina Quraeshi: This research demonstrates one intangible that is required in the practice of good urban design, and that is patience. It has taken so much time, and this has been accumulated, and demonstrated and disseminated. One of the things that happens is that people do things and then they are forgotten, and then they're reinvented and redone, and so on, so a lot of energy is wasted. This is a good prototype for other places to study that are concerned about the issues that they discuss.

Donlyn Lyndon: Yes. It's excellent across so many dimensions, from its sustained attention, to constantly asking new questions, to re-measuring and looking at things again, and then putting it all out there in an extremely clear and elegant way.

Lawrence Halprin: It's a remarkable demonstration of a culture willing to deal with its environment. But I wonder whether this would work in America, where our culture doesn't lead us to these kinds of solutions. I'd emphasize the cultural quality of it, because I think that there's a message there that implies that you could take that and bring it here.

Clare Cooper Marcus: I want to make a comment on that, because when this work began, the designer was laughed out of town. "Close down Stroget and turn it into a pedestrian street? The Danes aren't Italians, they will not come out and parade on the streets," he was told. And that was proved completely wrong. The designer argues that it's an innate human need, this public life, and it has nothing to do with whether you are living in the Mediterranean or the frozen north. So I think that this could apply in this country, both the type of research and the results.

Gary Hack: It strikes me that if you take that as an example in the American cities, what we did was took the centers of most cities and turned them into pedestrian malls, based on no research or study or experimentation; everyone did it. Then as the downtown's weren't saved by pedestrian malls, but continued to decline, we decided that the solution was to take them all out, without any observation. So while we are jogging from fad to fad, they are actually working at this year by year, learning more, making it better, making each decision based on what they learn.