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Title:

Public Spaces, Public Life...A Tribute to the Work of Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzoe [EDRA / Places Awards - Research]

Journal Issue:

[Places, 12\(1\)](#)

Author:

[Bosselmann, Peter](#)

Publication Date:

1998

Publication Info:

Places, College of Environmental Design, UC Berkeley

Permalink:

<http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/7w61h6xb>

Acknowledgements:

This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information, contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:

places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, tribute, work, Jan Gehl, Lars Gemzoe, research, Peter Bosselmann



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A Tribute to the Work of Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzøe

Last year the Environmental Design Research Association, together with *Places*, announced an awards program to recognize the best in environmental design research. In its first year the jury nominated the truly outstanding contribution made by the Copenhagen Group: Jan Gehl, Lars Gemzøe, David Yenken and, over a span of nearly thirty years, many professionals and students from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts who have helped Jan Gehl to study *Public Life and Public Spaces* in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Oslo, Melbourne, Perth and other European and North American cities.

Thirty years is a long time in the life of a city. The very nature of public life can change fundamentally in that time. In the 1960s living in the center of a major European city was like living in a village; small shops with a seemingly infinite variety of foods, restaurants, bars, pharmacies, schools and a hospital, small hotels, the undertaker, a cinema, a police station and a small post office could all be found on one street and around a few corners. Few people owned their flats or shops; most people rented. Properties were in the hands of few—religious institutions, some old families, private companies, and institutions. Public life was still heterogeneous; rich and poor lived together in relative proximity. Everyone was familiar with another. In all likelihood residents had gone to primary school together.

Whether it was the grime in the communal stairwells, disrepair of plumbing, lack of open space and parking, or simply choice that made people move to the new “dormitory quarters” on the outskirts of cities, is of small matter. The fact is that people moved out as institutions, professional offices and larger shops serving the city as a whole moved in. Even cities left largely undamaged after World War II went through a “heroic era” of replacing the old finely scaled fabric with modern structures, clean, light, spacious and new. The result was a dislocation of the remaining social groups.

In the seventies, the centers of European cities were dominated by automobiles. Pedestrians had to zigzag their way through tightly stacked cars on plazas and in narrow streets. “The traffic planners spent their most creative nights designing new circulation patterns for

cars and buses while the citizens spent their most miserable days interpreting them.”¹ Going to town and parking there became an ordeal. Supermarkets and shopping centers were built in accessible locations near new motorways that started to circle the cities in sometimes multiple rings.

Copenhagen, the authors said in the Introduction to *Public Spaces, Public Life*, is a “lucky city” and to a very large extent that is so true. The last bombs thrown in Copenhagen had been those from British ships in a battle to break Napoleon’s continental blockade. With great smartness, it seems, Danes have avoided most mistakes of postwar urban planning experiments. They did not modernize the center of their town with the kind of rigor employed by their northern neighbors in Stockholm and Oslo. After one new, wide street was built next to the stark and modern National Bank, people in Copenhagen did not initiate any more. Two high-rise hotel towers appeared in the 1960s; taking a look at their beautiful skyline, people in Copenhagen decided that more were not needed. The university and related colleges stayed in five distinct but proximate central locations. As a result 14,000 students come into the center city during the term and when they go on vacation, a nearly equal numbers of tourists take over.

Copenhagen, by European standards, ranks in size, population and economic importance in a league that includes Vienna, Amsterdam, Zürich, Hamburg, Stockholm, Edinburgh and others. All cities in that group have lost residential population, density and social diversity over the last three decades. It is no surprise that only 6,800 residents remained, or rather were newly attracted to Copenhagen’s center city living, and they live there at a density of nearly sixty residents per hectare, approximately twelve units per acre, if we assume an optimistic average occupancy of two people per flat. That is, of course, rather low compared to three decades ago, but it is much higher than today’s averages among cities in this league; Zürich, Edinburgh, Göteborg, Hamburg, Birmingham, Oslo and Stockholm have far fewer residents and lower associated densities in their city centers. Incidentally, the center of Amsterdam has the highest density (24 du/a) and Vienna the largest number of inner city residents, 20,200 total.

In the Copenhagen area, the policy has been to extend or establish bicycle lanes along all major streets, in order to offer a citywide network of comfortable and reasonably safe routes. Bicycle lanes have frequently been established at the expense of curbside parking or traffic lanes, thus promoting bicycling and discouraging car usage at the same time.

Photo: Jan Gehl, Lars Gemzøe

The greatest success story is the way the people of Copenhagen have dealt with automobile access. Car traffic volumes have been stable over the past twenty-five years, congestion is rare, and it is possible to go by car to any part of the city during the day and find parking if one is willing to pay for it. Four dollars per hour is the going rate at a curbside parking meters, yet, and this sounds like a contradiction, the city center is less accessible for motorists. There has been no increase in car trips because parking spaces have been reduced by two to three percent per year and incrementally the surface area of Copenhagen's squares has been converted to pedestrian use.

The mode of transportation for people arriving in downtown Copenhagen is divided into equal thirds: public transit, private automobiles and bicycling. The increase has been in bicycle trips. Again, this is a major success compared to the neighboring cities. People in



Stockholm depend on 8,000 public parking spaces to make their downtown work, nearly all of them in multi-story garages. Oslo has 4,800 and Copenhagen only 3,100, mainly along curbsides.

Bicycling as a mode of transit into the city center has increased by sixty-five percent since 1980 and this has been made possible by adding nearly 100 kilometers of bicycle lanes on major city streets to the 200 already in existence in 1960. Within a thirty-minute biking radius from the center, a person in Copenhagen resides never more than 500 meters away from a major route. And there they go, in numbers that cannot be overlooked by motorists. At all times of day, bicyclists are a force to be

counted on. Old and young, in business attire and leisure wear, all pedaling along under shady trees, on two-meter wide dedicated lanes, next to sidewalks and protected by newly laid curbs inside the once car-dominated right of ways.

If a person is not an owner of a bicycle, and that is rare, or needs one on a moment's notice, a "Citybike" is there for the taking at the same fee that could have purchased the right to park a car for an hour, and the user can return the "communal" bicycle and get the money back anywhere he or she likes at one of 125 bike stands. Two thousand of these specially designed and easy to distinguish vehicles are in circulation. One of them was given on a permanent loan to the President of the United States on a recent visit. Called "Citybike Number One," it is parked at the U.S. Embassy.

The bicycle culture of Copenhagen has now exceeded that of Amsterdam, but of course the roots to that culture are old in both of these cities. Nevertheless, Copenhagen's Danes have changed their habits. The many squares and streets of their city are now firmly under the control of pedestrians. In the early 1960s when the first pedestrian street was proposed, the editor of one major daily paper wrote: "Danes are not Italians." The people of Copenhagen are not likely ever to use public squares. "Pedestrian streets in Copenhagen—it will never work."

In the summer of 1967 Copenhagen celebrated its 800th birthday and for that occasion a one kilometer long table was set up on its main street, Strøget. Really a set of old streets as old as the city, if not older, Strøget forms a long "S" curve through the center and connects five major squares. The people of Copenhagen invited each other to lunch and sat under many red and white flags. The concept of a one-kilometer long car-free center spine took firm hold in the minds of the citizens and they supported their politicians, regardless of political background, to increase the surface area dedicated to pedestrian use over the coming years.

The beginnings were modest; the one-kilometer long Strøget amounted to 15,800 square meters of pedestrian area. Twenty five years later, the pedestrian surface area had grown six-fold, to 95,750 square meters. Contrary to skepticism, Danes have used their newly gained public spaces. Pedestrian counts made on the same day of the year under comparable weather conditions show little variation over thirty years, and indicate that the pedestrian streets are filled to capacity. A five-minute count in July 1990 at 12:25 to 12:30 resulted in a total of 653 people, that is, 13.1 people per minute per available meter of walk way cross section, just as many as counted in Rome on a Saturday afternoon in June of the same year on the Via Condotti.²



New Harbour, Copenhagen. On a typical day, 65 people / minute pass through, and 962 are stationary. *Photo: Jan Gehl, Lars Gemzøe*

Danes use their walkways just as efficiently as Italians. The counts simply do not go much higher anywhere, including Barcelona's Ramblas or other major European people places like the Bahnhofstrasse in Zürich. At that "level of service," foot traffic is occasionally blocked but there are plenty of baby carriages being pushed along, and between surges it is possible to move swiftly.

Interesting is another set of figures: when Copenhagen had only 20,500 square meters of pedestrian streets in 1968, a surface area that included basically two perpendicular streets and only one square, Gehl and his students counted an average of 1,750 people sitting down or standing between 12:00 noon and 4:00 p.m. In 1996 that number had risen to 5,900 during the same time period and the surface area available for such activities had grown to 71,000 square meters. As space became available, the people of Copenhagen have used it. The utilization of space has grown, 12.4 square meters per stationary activity in 1968 to 13.9 square meters per stationary activity in 1996.

Gehl's research on public space and public life has been continuous since 1967. It has resulted in publications that have monitored the transformation of the city. Every time city government decided on creating a new public place, a record was made of how people used it. Students counted how many people walked through, how frequently people sat down, where they sat or stood, what times were busy in the life of the new place, what times were slow? Systemic and repeated observation over a long period of time in a variety of locations have produced a substantial body of knowledge; it is physical determinism at its best. The researchers observed and counted people in one environment, the environment changed, and as a result people's behavior changed.

On file with the EDRA awards committee is a letter from the City Magistrate of Copenhagen. The mayor responsible for traffic acknowledged that the research played a major role in putting the concept of public life and public places on the political agenda in her city.

Other cities commissioned similar results; the findings grew exponentially and gained in strength: Stockholm and Oslo have equally sized downtown areas, a similar climate, and culture. Perth and Melbourne followed, two cities with very different urban centers, but again, additional counts in additional locations added to the certainty of the findings: people attract people; design people-friendly places and public life will result.

The researchers at times have actually designed such public places, but more influentially they have helped to plan and give advice to politicians about the making of public places. They have exchanged notes and inspired researchers in other countries—William H. Whyte, Clare Cooper Marcus, Rolf Monheim, David Yencken, to name just a few. Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzøe have turned their research into a formidable movement.

Therefore this award, for a sustained research program that documents how design can support public life in cities.

Notes

1. Observed by Lisa Rouchi, in her contribution to Donald Appleyard's book on the "Preservation of European Cities," (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979).
2. Counted by Allan Jacobs, *Great Streets* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 315-317.