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# How to Revitalize a City

By Jan Gehl, Lars Gemzoe, Sia Kirknaes & Britt Sondergaard

## Introduction by Jay Walljasper

*Danish architect Jan Gehl is one of the world's leading authorities on creating great cities. He and longtime collaborator Lars Gemzoe have chronicled the evolution of Copenhagen's highly successful public spaces in precise detail. His firm Gehl Architects ([www.gehlarchitects.dk](http://www.gehlarchitects.dk)) specializes in "urban quality consulting" to help cities from London to Melbourne to Amman to New York improve public life. In a recent book *New City Life*, Gehl, Gemzoe and their colleagues Sia Kirness and Britt Sondergaard, outline their findings about what can be done to make our communities more vital and pleasurable. This article about Copenhagen's turnaround is adapted from *New City Life*, which can be ordered (in English) from the Danish Architectural Press: <http://www.arkfo.dk>.*

Public spaces-city space-were once a necessity in people's lives; today they are merely an option. In the past, people had to use the streets, squares, markets and parks of the city regardless of these place's quality and attractiveness.

So what is the purpose of the public realm in the 21st century? Why do some city spaces continue to be used extensively and others are forgotten and neglected? What meaning and function does life in the public arena offer us today? What are the changing expectations for city space?

In many ways, planning of public spaces and city space in our era is an entirely new field, emerging in response to major changes in society. It bears little resemblance to urban planning before World War II when a lively public realm was a universal fact of life. Now-with the proliferation of the private auto, suburban shopping malls, numerous home entertainment offerings, spacious backyards and many other incentives for us to simply stay at home-people venture out in public because they want to rather than because they have to. That creates a new necessity to make city space pleasurable and inviting. Mediocre public spaces will be places no one bothers to visit. Great ones, however, will continue to draw people and foster a sense of urban vitality and community.



1880: Stroget, Copenhagen's main shopping streets, is the center of the city's public life.



1960: Automobiles have invaded Copenhagen en masse, diminishing the lively spirit of the Stroget.



1968: Six years after being made a pedestrian street, one of the first in Europe, the Stroget is once again the heart of the city.



2005: The stroget, now lined with sidewalk cafes, is more popular than ever. Gehl's studies show that the center of Copenhagen is now used by three times as many people as in 1962.

## City space in Copenhagen

Copenhagen is the laboratory where we have studied what's happening to city life. Researchers from the School of Architecture at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts conducted detailed studies of city space changes in the spaces of the city in 1968, 1985, 1995 and 2005, making Copenhagen the first city in the world where public life has been charted over a span of decades so that developments and ongoing changes in city life can be understood.

Copenhagen was one of the first cities in the world to make an effort to ensure better conditions for pedestrians shortly after the large-scale invasion of private autos in the 1950s. The first streets and squares were converted into pedestrian promenades in 1962. These early improvements to city space have since been followed by a large number of streets and squares converted to pedestrian use.



1954: Gammeltorv square and Nytorv square were once used as parking lots.

Thus Copenhagen today is one of the cities that has made the most targeted efforts to transform its public spaces by adapting to changes in society and the character of city life. Copenhagen was one of the first of what we call “reconquered cities”-, cities that actively work to strike a better balance between pleasurable city life and car traffic.



2006: These squares are now beloved gathering spots in a city that has been radically revitalized.

## The transformation of city space

Seen in a long-term historical perspective, city space has always served three vital functions – meeting place, marketplace and connection space. As a meeting place, the city provided opportunities for social exchange of information of all kinds. As a marketplace, the city facilitated commercial exchange of goods and services. And finally, public spaces enabled access to and connections between all the functions of the city. The pattern can be detected in the earliest urban settlements and is clearly visible in what remains of ancient Greek and Roman cities, medieval cities, renaissance and baroque cities as well as cities from the age of enlightenment and the industrial age.

City spaces have always teemed with people and functions throughout history. Copenhagen in the year 1900 shared many features in common with street life today in Asian, African and South American cultures. Necessary activities dominated city space, as is always the case in societies that are less developed. Public spaces fulfilled their role as meeting place, marketplace and connection space. The streets were crowded with people carrying goods and packages. Goods are sold from booths or by street peddlers. People of all ages were on the streets and squares to take part in city life, to see what was going on, or simply because there was not enough room inside their crowded dwellings, small shops and cramped workshops.

In affluent societies, meanwhile, people's use of city space is characterized by leisure activities. Pedestrian streets were introduced in the 1960s in response to city space changing from a necessity in people's lives to an option to be used only if it was enjoyable. City streets at that time were considered mostly for shopping, and pedestrianization allowed people to shop to their hearts' content without interference from traffic.

New patterns in Copenhagen's city space began to emerge as early as 1968. The first outdoor cafés arrived, and student uprisings and the flower power movement brought people into the streets for political and cultural happenings. The trend was reinforced as car parking was gradually reduced in Copenhagen making more room for enjoyment of city space. . Within a span of only a few decades, a city devoted primarily to working city and basic necessities has been transformed into a city of leisure and enjoyment. Of course, the picture is not quite that simple because working and shopping still go on, but not as the sole focus of city space in Copenhagen.

When we asked people in our interview surveys in the 1970s and 1980s for their primary reason for being in Copenhagen's city centre, their response was: "shopping". Asking the same question in 2005, the response is more likely : "being in the city". These days, cityspace is a goal in itself, a worthwhile activity in its own right.

Looking generally at the development of city life over the past 40 years, we see that more people use the central city and spend more time there, including evenings and weekends when the shops are often closed. There's even more use in the winter, when people used to stay indoors. All in all, this is a dramatic and remarkable development that offers lessons for other cities that want to improve their public spaces as a way to enliven and enrich the experience of urban life.

*Adapted from **New City Life**, 2006, Gehl, Gemzoe, Kirknaes & Sondergaard.*