A Tribute to the Work of Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzée

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 outstanding contribution made by the Copenhagen Group: Jan Gehl, Lars Gemzée, David Yencken 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, 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, the stench of garbage, the lack of open space and parking, or simply the choice that made people move to the new "dominion-quarters" on the outskirts of cities, is of small matter. The fact that many professionals and institutions, professional offices and larger shops served the city as a whole moved in. Even cities left largely undamaged after World War II went through a "heretic" and "new" renaissance and the old finely scaled fabric with modern structures, clean, light, spacious and new. The result was a dissolution 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 packed cars on plazas and in narrow streets. The traffic planners spent their most creative energies designing new circulation patterns for cars and buses while the citizens spent their most miserable days interpreting them. 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 true. The last bombs dropped in Copenhagen had been those from British ships in a battle to break Napoleon's continental blockade. With great(shameless) humor, the authors 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 now, wide street was built next to the stark and modern National Bank, people in Copenhagen did not imitate any more. Two high-rise hotel towers appeared in the 1980s, 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, 16,000 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, Rotterdam, Paris, Copenhagen, 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 ten percent can 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 average among big 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 dwelling units per square foot) in the Netherlands and Vienna the largest number of inner city residents, 26,200 total.

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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 meter, 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

counted on. Old and young, in business attire and leisure wear, all pedaling along under shady trees, on two-meter wide, dedicated lanes, set to sidewalks and protected by newly laid curbs inside the once car-domi-
nated 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 cul-
ture are old in both of these cities. Nevertheless, Copen-
hagen’s Danes have changed their habits. The many

squares and streets of their city are now firmly under the
control of the pedestrians. In the early 1960s when the first
pedestrian street was proposed, the editor of one major
daily paper wrote, “Danes are not tolerant,” “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 a main street, Stræget, nearly
a set of old streets as old as the city. If not older, Stræget
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 polit-
ical background, to increase the surface area dedicated
to pedestrian use over the coming years.

The beginnings were modest; the one-kilometer long
Stræget amounted to 15,800 square meters of pedes-
trian area. Twenty-five years later, the pedestrian sur-
face area had grown six-fold, to 93,750 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 condi-
tions 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 650 people, that is 13 people per minute on
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 Condotta.1

In the Copenhagen area, the policy has been to extend or establish bicy-

cl e 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. Press: Jan Gehl, Lars
Gemaze

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 1965. 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

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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 public places like the Bahnhofstrasse in Zurich. At that “level of service,” foot traffic is occasionally blocked and 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 20,000 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 1969 that number had risen to 5,000 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 1990.

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 time people spent there 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 Jan Gehl 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