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Review: If You Build It ...

Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzøe, *New City Spaces*,
(Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press, 2000)

There seems to have been no shortage of hand-wringing in recent years about the decline of public open space—the plazas, squares, parks and streets that are the classic elements of the traditional public realm—and public life. Yet few debates have been characterized by the confusion of passion, romanticism and multiple reference points as this one has, especially in regard to American cities.

The basic construction of the argument suggests that there was a golden age of public space and public life to which we might return, or at least refer, though when that might have been is rarely stated explicitly. In fact, it might be more constructive to regard public space and public life

as evolving conditions, and to hope always for spaces that expand, rather than contract, possibilities for public life.

In *New City Spaces*, Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzøe, students of and advocates for the remarkable transformation of Copenhagen’s downtown streets and squares over the last thirty years, offer an updated assessment of urban public spaces, primarily in Europe. (Their previous book, *Public Spaces, Public Life*, won an EDRA/*Places* Award for Place Research in 1998).

In the context of this debate, Gehl and Gemzøe’s book makes important contributions. First, the authors set forth clearly and succinctly what they consider to be the fundamental roles of public space—meeting place, market place and thoroughfare—attributes that provide a sound starting point for any discussion about what’s happening to the public realm.

Second, and just as importantly, the authors re-assert the critical relationship between public space and pedestrian life. They argue convincingly that the force acting most persistently against the cultivation of good public space is “car culture” (not the privatization of public space nor the exponential increase in telecommunication), precisely because it so thoroughly destabilizes pedestrian life. Conversely, the authors demonstrate the powerful ways in which good urban transit, which turns passengers into pedestrians at both ends of the trip, supports street life and public space—especially when coordinated with land-use policy.

Furthermore, Gehl and Gemzøe provide a useful description of the relationship between car culture, urban form, pedestrian life and public space by suggesting clear distinctions between traditional cities, “invaded cities” (whose urban pattern was established before the automobile but have been invaded by cars) and “abandoned cities” (whose physical form was established largely after the advent of automobiles, and which therefore

never developed a tradition of pedestrian life)—a differentiation that is sometimes easy to overlook. It is these latter cities, of course, that have the most difficulty in sustaining urban public spaces.

Finally, the book demonstrates convincingly that there are many cities in the world that, as a matter of will and public policy, have refused to give up on public space. It profiles nine cities which, it argues, have had more or less systematic policies of cultivating public space, and provides an album of thirty-nine significant public spaces built in those cities and elsewhere in recent years.

Yet *New City Spaces* has significant weaknesses. The case studies are wildly uneven. Portland (the only U.S. city among the nine profiled), admired by planners for many reasons, has added only a handful of significant public spaces (Pioneer Courthouse Square, riverfront parks) in the last quarter century; its greater success has been in maintaining a consistently walkable scale of streets downtown. A more convincing case could be made for San Francisco and the remarkable transformation of its Embarcadero; Chicago and its ambitious riverfront, schoolyard and park initiatives; or even New York's renewal of so many parks.

More fundamentally, the spaces profiled comprise a remarkable lack of diversity. Virtually no waterfront spaces, no parks and no streets are profiled (save streets that have been converted to pedestrian use). In demonstrating that traditional squares and plazas are still being built (the Danish title is *New City Rooms*), Gehl and Gemzøe miss the opportunity to explore the expanding range of public spaces that cities are creating. In particular, their survey offers designers and planners in “abandoned cities” little to learn about.

The write-ups on the thirty-nine spaces are generally perfunctory. Disappointingly, the criteria for selecting or evaluating the spaces in the book are not made evident; there is not even a reflection on characteristics of market place,

meeting place and thoroughfare that are posited at the outset. There is no analysis (as opposed to description) of how any of the spaces are actually used, which is particularly ironic in that Gehl's first book, *Life Between Buildings*, published contemporarily with William H. Whyte's studies of New York City spaces, underscored the importance of understanding human perception and use of space. Even for designers working on the increasing number of small urban spaces being reclaimed from parking or traffic circulation, there is a dearth of useful information about the construction, management and ownership of the spaces.

Nevertheless, *New City Spaces* offers numerous pleasures. One of them is the exuberance, inventiveness and appropriateness of so many of the design details. The light standards in Plaça del Sol (Barcelona), the variable lighting schemes for Rathausplatz (St. Pölten, Austria) and the effective combination of tree plantings, surfacing and public art in Bismarckplatz (Heidelberg) are worth keeping in mind.

The graphics, which present plans of the cities and public spaces at the same scale throughout the book, make for easy comparisons. Such attention to the legibility of graphic information is still, surprisingly, rare in books like this.

New City Spaces renews our confidence in the potential for public space, reminds us of the spirit with which they can be designed and built, and suggests the pleasure they can offer. It reinforces important, fundamental principles about transit, pedestrian life and public space. But the book offers few concrete lessons about the art of designing new spaces or providing for them as an act of public policy, either in cities where traditional urbanism is still alive, or in the problematic places where such urbanism has never had a chance to take hold.

— Todd W. Bressi