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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 com-
prise a remarkable lack of diversity. Virtually no 
waterfront spaces, no parks and no streets are pro-
filed (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 crite-
ria 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 con-
temporarily with William H. Whyte’s studies of 
New York City spaces, underscored the import-
ance 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, invent-
tiveness 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, sur-
prisingly, 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 tradi-
tional urbanism is still alive, or in the problematic 
places where such urbanism has never had a 
chance to take hold.

— Todd W. Bressi