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Gary Hack

# Search and Research





*facing page, this page:* **Pedestrian-friendly squares and streets in Copenhagen. The *Public Spaces, Public Life* project involved systematic, long-term study that produced not only design solutions but also a body of knowledge and theory that can be applied broadly.**

*Photos:* **Jan Gehl, Lars Gemzøe**

The search for information, or data, or examples, or a guiding notion for design, does not equate to research, contrary to what many of the EDRA/*Places* Awards submissions tacitly assumed. To be sure, a great deal of useful knowledge can be gained from dialogues with clients or occupants, by observing how environments are currently used or by interaction with people in newly completed environments.

But research implies much more. In Webster's terms, it means the "careful, systematic, patient study and investigation in some field of knowledge, undertaken to establish facts or principles." What distinguishes research from other fields of endeavor is the desire for theories that go beyond the specific instance — facts or principles, or, others might say, theories and models, from which particular solutions can evolve. The notion of a field of knowledge is as central to research as site and client are to design. Good research contributes to an evolving body of knowledge, reframing the way we see things, and enriching the field for future design and inquiry.

Several of the EDRA/*Places* submissions stand out as examples of how research can shape design. The Bryant Park Restoration Project, a fine design in its own right, was built on the foundation of years of studies of public spaces in New York City. Begun by William H. Whyte and colleagues, continued by scores of faculty and students in the environmental psychology program at the City University of New York Graduate Center, these have produced a wealth

of important theories about why public spaces work or fail. The results have been documented over the years through films and publications, tested through a range of small experiments in which spaces were modified and observed, and tried in temporary improvements to Bryant Park before the current reconstruction. The result is by now a substantial body of knowledge about how to create hospitable and safe urban public spaces. By learning to see and manage parks differently, it became possible to design Bryant Park in a new way. The importance of this work goes well beyond New York City; it is rooted in more general theories of behavior in public places.

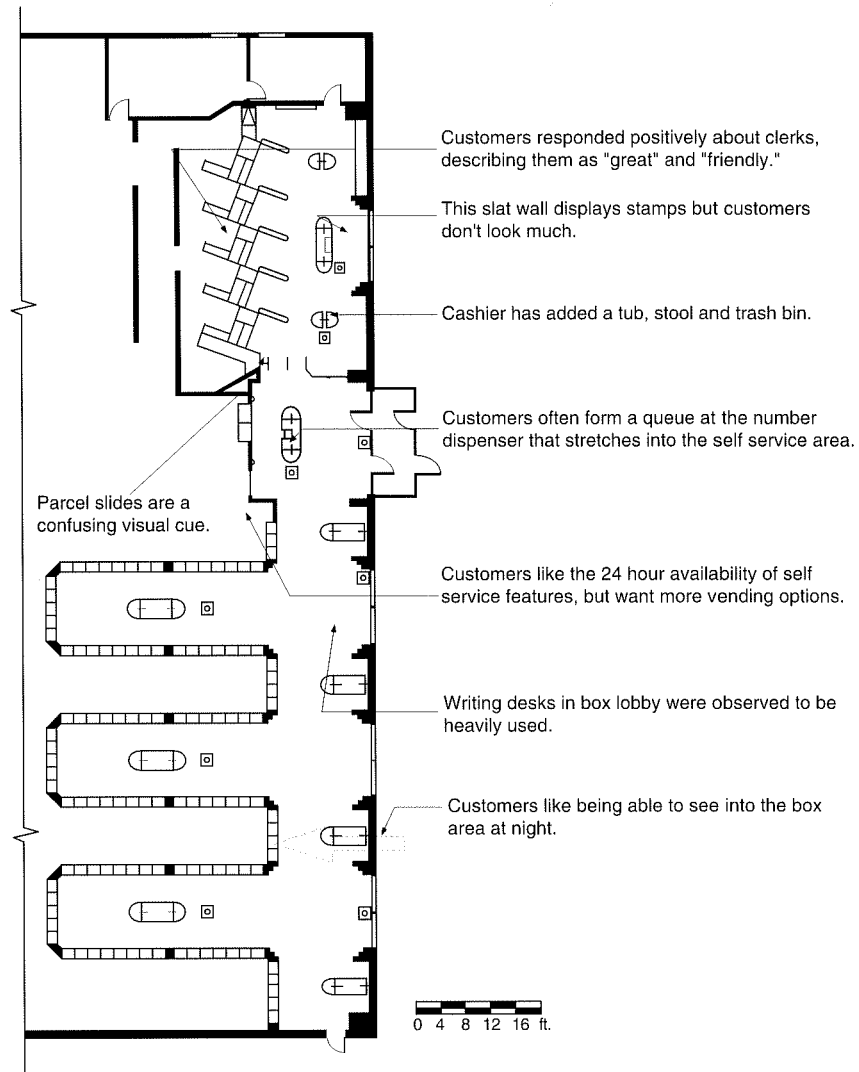
An even more ambitious and systematic process of research, paralleling the building of public spaces, may be found in the Copenhagen *Public Spaces, Public Life* research document. The changes to public spaces in central Copenhagen — a series of changes that have extended over twenty-seven years and, through dozens of projects — have been based on a constantly evolving set of notions about sociable spaces. Each project has been carefully studied after reconstruction to test whether the design ideas were sound. The report on the project is a fine textbook on public life in urban spaces.

At the building scale, an important body of knowledge is evolving through the research and design of assisted living environments for Alzheimer's patients in a succession of New England projects. And a set of experiments with new U.S. Postal Service retail outlets (not chosen for an award) demonstrates how useful knowl-

## Academy Station

this page, facing page: **Examples of plan use analyses from the U.S. Postal Service Retail Lobby Evaluation.**

graphics: **Jay Farbstein**



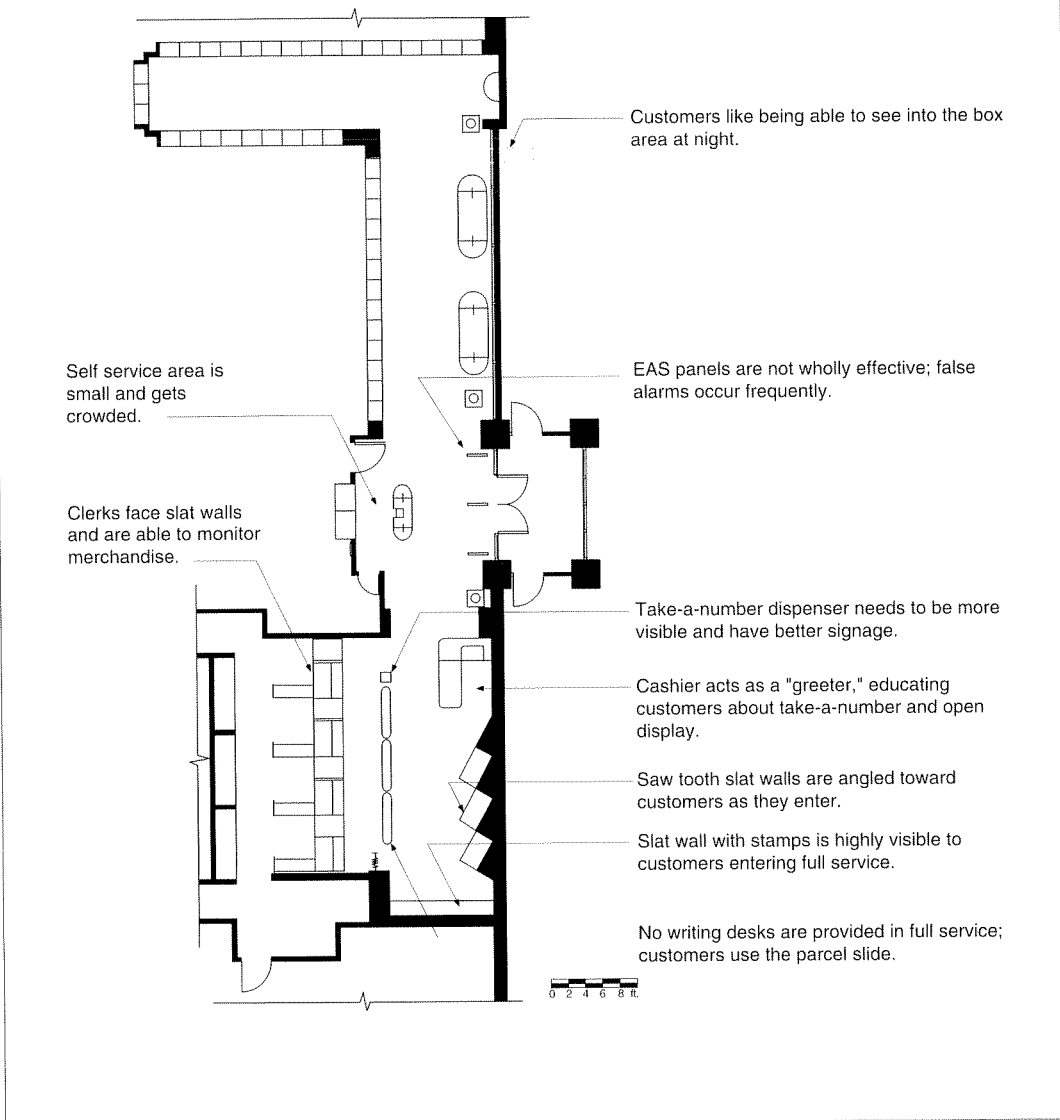
edge can be gained through creative experiments with even common building types.

Each of these projects is distinguished by having a clear strategy linking research and design. In the Copenhagen public space project, the Alzheimer's housing projects and the design of postal facilities, the succession of projects allows the knowledge from one to inform the next. This is easier said than done in a world that values novelty and is often willing to discard all that is known in the interest of attracting attention.

On close inspection, the real secret of these three projects is a dedicated individual or institution, positioned to take action and determined to learn from each instance. Profit may serve as one incentive for doing

so, or it may be rooted in a strong ethic of progress and improvement. The most hopeful result of this award program is the discovery that a number of organizations have developed an internal culture that values learning through experiments.

Where the body of knowledge must cross institutional or geographic boundaries, other strategies are required. Academics can serve an important role by keeping abreast of field experiments, and periodically codifying what is known through articles and textbooks. Sometimes a large project serves the purpose of focusing knowledge on actions. The publication *Blueprint for a Sustainable Bay Area* was a remarkable compilation of research and policies on ecological sustainability at the scale of the urban region; it will serve as an important model for other cities.



Professional journals can make a point of consistently publishing reports of experiments in defined fields. The danger, however, is that while these encourage the flow of ideas among researchers, those in positions to design or commission projects may be blissfully unaware of them.

A few special purpose organizations have evolved that are dedicated to both research and action, such as Project for Public Spaces, which for many years kept alive the tradition of translating observations of public spaces into prescriptions for changes (PPS was one of the organizations that focused its attention on Bryant Park). Groups such as this need the cross-fertilization of competing ideas, lest they lapse into ideologies. Professional associations that bind together potential clients for research are important vehicles for both

compiling and disseminating the results of studies. Researchers need to shed their inhibitions and form alliances with developers, non-profit housing agencies, business improvement districts, and historic preservation groups, all of whom can benefit from their knowledge. This will require a new appreciation of how behavioral, economic and social factors intersect in decisions about environments.

Searching for the particularities of a project will always be an important prelude to design. But a body of useful knowledge will only evolve when research also becomes part of the agenda.