

Cities for People: A Q&A With Architect Jan Gehl

BY Greg Lindsay

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Whatever you think of the Manhattan pedestrian mall known as Times Square (love it or hate it), you have Jan Gehl to thank. The Danish architect's name doesn't loom as large as Jane Jacobs' or William H. Whyte's or even Andrés Duany's, but no one has done more in the last decade to retrofit cities for cyclists and pedestrian than his eponymous consultancy in Copenhagen. While visiting New York this week for the American publication of his latest book *Cities for People*--a kind of manual for making walkable cities--Gehl invited me to sit with him in Bryant Park to observe the sidewalk ballet and discuss what he calls "the needs of the urban habitat of homo sapiens."

Reclaiming a space like Bryant Park in the middle of Manhattan's grid is easy; how do you do the same in auto-driven cities like Phoenix or Houston?

It's not complicated. We can use the example of Times Square. If you look into the fabric of a city, there is so much leftover space—parking lots, or in this case a street. Why have two streets with traffic going in the same direction, and one at a funny angle? We were commissioned to

survey how pedestrians and cyclists were faring in the city [in 2007] as part of PlaNYC. Two weeks after Janette Sadik-Khan was named commissioner [of the Department of Transportation], she popped up in Copenhagen to see a city that, since 1962, has done a lot of thing to invite people to walk and cycle as much as possible. It's a city dominated by people, and not dominated by traffic.

What's interesting about New York is that not much had happened along these lines between Jane Jacobs and 2007. Having worked with many cities [e.g. London, Melbourne, Mexico City, Seattle, and San Francisco] it all comes down to visionary leadership, and the political courage to make a change. It's amazing that it took this long in the United States when European cities have been at it for 20, 30, 40 years, and they've done miracles in Australia. The same things can be done here.

In the developed world, why were Americans the last to embrace this, especially when many of our cities are older and smaller than Sydney or Melbourne?

Ever since planning was professionalized around 1960, instead of adding new streets and new houses to existing cities, they switched to big scale stuff--big buildings, new districts, and handling the influx of automobiles. They were good at handling big blocks, but weren't paying attention to people. In the book, I talk about three levels in city planning: the big story seen from above; the medium story--the site plans, and the little story--the people landscape seen at eye-level. Planners tended to the two bigger scales, but would not come down to eye-level and see the results. And architects became more and more interested in single buildings and in forms than in society. They were concerned with the skyline than the sidewalk. But the people scale is the most important scale, because that's where the biggest attractions are--other people--and that is exactly the scale that has for years been forgotten and mishandled. Nobody has been commissioned to look after it in any systematic way.

We know more about the habitat of panda bears and mountain gorillas than we do about cities at eye-level. It's intriguing why so little research has been done on the urban habitat of homo sapiens in urban settings. Since Jane Jacobs, maybe 10 people have studied it seriously: Holly Whyte; Christopher Alexander; Allan Jacobs and Donald Appleyard among them. Ten years ago, we started our consultancy firm to put all of their theories to work. And we've learned a lot about what works and doesn't work. It's partly a cultural question and partly it's a matter of biology and what kind of animal we are--how far we can move, and see. Why is it that shops are four or five meters apart on all the good shopping streets all over the world? Because if you're walking past, there is a new experience every four or five seconds, which is ideal from a stimulus point of view.

How do social networks, ambient awareness, augmented reality and other communication technologies change our experience of the city? It's interesting how the surge of interest in walkable urbanism has happened in places where residents pride themselves on their connectivity.

Ever since the emergence of cyberspace, there's been all these predictions that public space was redundant and cyberspace would take over. We have no evidence whatsoever that this is taking place. On the contrary, I think that all these indirect contacts possible inspire people to experience something themselves, rather than sit and look at pictures of it.

There's been a renaissance in public spaces over the last 20 years worldwide--wonderful boulevards, parks, and squares. Whenever it's done properly, we have seen people come by the thousands. If we go back a hundred years, there was enormous activity in the streets

because people were forced to be there. They were forced to drag their merchandise to the street, forced to walk, forced to play. The quality of the public spaces wasn't an issue, because people were forced to be there, regardless. Today, we have a very different situation. Sometimes we call it the "leisure time" or "experience-oriented" society--a consumer society. We live more scattered and isolated, and households are shrinking. In Australia and Denmark, every other household consists of just one person. But the one thing homo sapiens has always been interested in is other people. The number one attraction in any city isn't the buildings, the parks, the sculptures or the statues. It's people. First we need people, then spaces, then buildings.

But cities in the developing world are experience just the opposite. Three billion people will urbanize in the next 40 years, and countries like China face a choice of building cities as fast as they can, or else risk cities of vast slums, like Lagos. How do you apply the lessons of Copenhagen and walkable places to cities like Shenzhen or Lagos?

If we're not looking properly after people here, the challenge is so much more urgent in these developing cities, where every day more and more traffic comes in, and people with no access to transportation become more downtrodden. We've seen it happen here in the 1960s and 1970s. As some people became more mobile, others became less mobile.

Many of the things I'm writing about are a mindset, and it costs nothing. The major investment is to simply think about it. We are presently working in China educating planners, because this is a set of truths they have never thought about or heard about. And they never thought it made any difference. They have these ideas that most of them should have a car and that bicycles aren't a sign of progress. They have forbidden bicycles in a number of cities, but hopefully they'll start to reverse this. I am absolutely sure that they can never make those cities more mobile in any conceivable way by simply adding more cars. That has already been tried. But perhaps they will have to try for a while before they realize that is not the way forward.

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