

## **Winning Back the Cities - the European Experience**

**Jan Gehl & Lars Gemzøe**

### ***Abstract***

Walking: A mode of transport - but much more. Looking at walking as mainly a mode of transport, would be almost as incomplete as having a conference on housing where all the energy was spent discussing what goes on in the corridors of the dwellings, without discussing what goes on in the Living room, Dining room, bedroom and kitchen. Beyond transportation walking is a potential recreational activity. And surely walking is nearly always a social activity as well. While walking you have the time and the short distances, which enables you with your senses to see objects, details and indeed other people. Further you easily can shift from walking to several other types of activities - to standing, to sitting, to talking, to listening, to dancing at the spur of the moment.

It is important to note that most of the attractive recreational and social activities associated with walking, is depending on a good quality of the physical environment. A fine city can always be easily identified by the fact that a great number of people have stopped walking and started to enjoy the city and the presence of other people.

Based on above described links between walking, public life and city quality four very different contemporary city models are presented and discussed. The *Traditional Cities* (eg Venice, small hill towns); the *Invaded Cities* - cities inundated with car traffic to such an extent that the pedestrians are almost pushed out. (eg Madrid, Napoli and many cities in the Americas); the *Abandoned Cities* - where neither walking nor public life can be found (eg many cities in North American); and the *Reconquered Cities* - where public life and walking have been strongly reinforced or reintroduced during the past two to three decades (eg Barcelona, Lyon, Strasbourg, Freiburg, Copenhagen, Portland (Oregon), Curitiba, (Brazil) and, along the same lines, Australian cities like Perth and Melbourne). In many of these cities can be found an impressive increase in the volumes of walking and other people activities. (eg: Perth & Copenhagen)

In conclusion, there is much more to walking-than walking. Walking is the key to city quality. It is that simple.

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## **Winning Back the Cities - the European Experience**

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### *New city spaces*

It is the year 2000, a summer day in the middle of Copenhagen. The city centre, once dominated by cars, has completely changed character. Pedestrian streets, pedestrian priority streets and ordinary, narrow peaceful streets form an extensive network of comfortable walking routes. The city actually invites foot traffic. The eighteen squares in the core of the city have been stripped of parking spaces and returned to the public for recreational activities. They too invite people to come and stay awhile, and to engage in other public activities that need space.

The city has created space for many different forms of human interaction. Over the past forty years, a total of 100,000 m<sup>2</sup> once devoted to motorised traffic have been converted to 100,000 m<sup>2</sup> of traffic-free city space for pedestrians. The surfaces of streets and squares have been replaced with beautiful natural materials, and street lighting and furniture have been refined as well. The entire city centre now has a character and an atmosphere that invite people to walk and to spend time there. The streets seem to beckon: Come, you are welcome. Walk awhile, stop awhile and stay as long as you like. City space has been given a new form and a new content.

The new space is used often and used well. On this June day the streets are almost completely filled with pedestrians moving through the city at a leisurely, almost languorous pace. In fact 80% of the movement through the city centre is foot traffic. The whole of inner Copenhagen has become a pedestrian area.

Copenhagen has also become a place to stop and stay awhile. On this summer weekday there are between 5000 and 6000 Copenhageners taking advantage of the many opportunities the city offers people who want to take a break. 1500 seats on benches and 5000 sidewalk cafe chairs provide ample opportunity to sit, and they are in almost constant use. Children play, young people skate by on roller-blades and skateboards, while street musicians, artists and agitators of many kinds attract crowds to the squares. Life on the street unfolds as a colourful and varied pageant this summer day. One common trait is that all of the activities are recreational. Another is that all of the activities are social. The city's new car-free space is used for a special form of social recreation, urban recreation, in which the opportunity to see, meet and interact with other people is a significant attraction.

This summer day in central Copenhagen speaks volumes about renewed city spaces. In addition, the pattern of the city centre is mimicked in the surrounding residential areas of the city. The conversion of streets and squares has inspired new urban patterns, which in turn have breathed new life into old neighbourhoods. Similar patterns can be found in cities throughout Europe and in other parts of the world where public life is cultivated.

Renewed interest in public life and the city as meeting place, particularly as it has developed over the past 30 or 40 years, has naturally led to noticeable development in urban planning and urban architecture. They form the central theme of the descriptions of new city spaces in the following chapters.

***Traditional uses of city spaces: Meeting place, marketplace and thoroughfare***

Although the pattern of usage has varied in the course of time, despite differences, subtle and otherwise, city spaces have always served as meeting place, marketplace and thoroughfare. The city has always been a place for people to meet and greet each other, a place to exchange information about the city and society, a place where important events were staged: coronations, processions, feasts and festivals, town meetings and executions, to mention just a few.

The city was also a marketplace, where goods and services were offered and exchanged. Finally, the city was a thoroughfare providing access to and connecting the various uses of the city. People walked about and goods were hauled from one place to another.

In the past, when most movement was conducted on foot, there was often a good balance between the three uses of the city. Pedestrians were able to walk where they needed to go, meeting, trading, talking and taking in the sights all in the same trip through town. The uses of the city were conducted simultaneously in the same public space.

However, in the 20th century, particularly in the industrialised nations, conditions for the three main uses of city space changed. New patterns of traffic, trade and communication were so radical that they interrupted centuries of tradition as to how people used the city.

Electric trolleys and bicycles, introduced at the end of the 19th century, gave people a wider range and allowed the city to expand significantly in area. Once cars were introduced at the beginning of the 20th century, there was no denying that transportation patterns had changed for good. Particularly after the Second World War, car traffic in the city developed by leaps and bounds and the use of city space changed drastically. Heavy car traffic does not coexist peacefully alongside the uses of the city as meeting place and marketplace. Uses that had been in balance for centuries were now in open conflict.

The city as marketplace also underwent dramatic changes in the last century. Trade from open booths was gradually moved to small shops along streets and squares, then to increasingly larger shops and supermarkets, and finally to giant shopping centres, usually far from the heart of the city. In those cases where shopping centres were established within the city, they closed in on themselves and were no longer part of the public arena. Trading takes place in indoor enclaves through a labyrinth of private walkways complete with small squares, bubbling fountains, muzak and air conditioning. In the process, the marketplace with its attendant 'public life' has become strictly controlled, with all activities and human interaction regulated by security forces. Quite literally, the market was taken from the public arena and moved to the private sphere.

The 20th century also decisively changed the conditions for the city's use as meeting place and information exchange. The rapid and extensive development of print and

electronic news media have made it possible to provide people with an endless stream of information about the community and the wider world. No town crier needed here. At the same time, a seemingly endless stream of opportunities for indirect communication from person to person emerged: first the telegraph, then the telephone, the cell phone, E-mail, the Internet. Individual mobility provided by cars and other forms of transportation and the development of cheap forms of long-distance travel provided new opportunities for people to meet other people. The traditional role of the city as an important meeting place for its citizens has changed completely.

Here at the dawning of the new millennium, these massive changes in society within only a century make the vitality of city life in central Copenhagen of special interest. The many people on the streets and in the squares have chosen to be there, to walk and spend time in city spaces. Despite the many developments and changes in patterns of use, as a marketplace and meeting place the city continues to offer a significant alternative, a valuable supplement to other options.

### ***Current uses of city spaces***

A look at different cities and cultural patterns in countries where communications, marketplaces and transportation have undergone radical changes in the last century gives a varied picture of the current uses of city spaces and the conditions for the use of the city as a public arena.

Using a good measure of simplification, it is possible to observe and describe four very different types of cities.

- The traditional city - where meeting place, marketplace and thoroughfare continue to coexist in balance, more or less.
- The invaded city - where a single use, usually car traffic, has usurped territory at the expense of the other uses of city space.
- The abandoned city - where public space and public life have disappeared.
- The reconquered city - where the powers that be are working to find a new, up-to-date balance between the uses of the city as meeting place, marketplace and thoroughfare.

### ***The traditional city***

In the Middle Ages, towns emerged on the premises of pedestrian traffic. Streets were adapted to foot traffic and squares tailored to uses that needed space: markets, town meetings, military parades, religious processions and so on.

Even today, particularly in Europe, there are still many cities whose structure was formed during that period, and thus the centres of many European cities still have the character of the Middle Ages, as do many villages and small towns. Isolated examples of intact Middle Age cities continue to function, with Venice as one of the best-known examples. Common to the cities and city spaces of that period are that they are still well suited for all types of pedestrian activities. The scale of these cities, the dimensions of the streets, the distribution of uses along streets and squares, the scale and detail of buildings are in harmony with human proportions and opportunities for movement, and they support the comings and goings of pedestrians very directly.

In these cities throughout time, city spaces have served simultaneously as meeting place, marketplace and thoroughfare. In those cities in which car traffic has not been allowed to take over, we can still see modern versions of the traditional uses of city space.

### *The invaded city*

In old cities and urban areas where car traffic has gained the upper hand, city spaces have inevitably changed dramatically. Car traffic and parking have gradually usurped space along streets and in squares. Not much physical space is left, and when other restrictions and irritations such as dirt, noise and visual pollution are added, it doesn't take long to impoverish city life. It becomes unpleasant and difficult to get around by foot, and spending time in public spaces is made impossible by lack of room and environmental problems. The result in city after city is that only the most crucial foot traffic battles its way between moving and parked cars, and only a severely amputated selection of other activities is even offered.

Numerous studies have shown the obvious correlation between city quality and city life. City spaces with many qualities on offer and few disadvantages inspire a broad spectrum of urban activities. Side by side the activities that warrant the bulk of foot traffic, for example, are the many recreational and social activities, because city spaces provide attractive walking routes and places to stop along the way.

In impoverished city spaces, most of the social and recreational activities disappear completely, leaving only the remnants of the most utilitarian and vital pedestrian activities. People walk there because they have to, not because they want to. In most of the cities besieged by cars, the quality of city spaces has become so problematic that people avoid the city centre altogether, and who can blame them?

### *The abandoned city*

Where urban tradition is weaker and car culture has had time to develop without planned constraints, a new type of city develops. This city has no historic model, because pedestrian traffic has been made impossible or superfluous, and many of the other activities traditionally tied to the foot traffic of people in common spaces have disappeared completely. Public life in public places is gone.

There are many cities of this type in many places, although predominantly in North America. City centres are a sea of asphalt with parking places marking off the space between buildings. Walking is impossible and would also be unreasonable. Distances are too great and the only things an intrepid pedestrian might encounter on his way would be ugly, dirty and possibly dangerous. Such cities are not intended for walking. Sidewalks have disappeared in the city centres as well as residential areas, and all the uses of the city have gradually been adapted to serve the motorist. Transportation and life itself are totally dependent on the car in a drive-in culture. It is difficult to describe the total consequences of this type of city policy. However, it is important to point out that heavy dependency on the automobile means that children too young to drive, the elderly who are too old to drive and the handicapped who are physically prevented from driving are consigned to a life of being transported everywhere by others. Indeed, for young people life doesn't really start until the day they turn 16 and acquire their driving license!

People shop from drive-in stores along car-filled streets, by and large requiring the driver to drive and re-park at each destination. The alternative is to shop in large shopping centres outside the cities. And in fact, it is possible to walk in such centres, both from the parking lot to the centre and inside on the walkways of the covered centre itself.

As a countermeasure to the regional shopping centres and as a strategy for maintaining turnover and uses in the city centre, numerous cities have experimented with new forms of shopping environments adapted to car culture. In some cities shops have been moved indoors into atriums and shopping arcades within the city centre itself as internal shopping options. The Eaton Centre in Toronto is one example. Other cities such as Calgary, Winnipeg, Minneapolis and Atlanta have built skywalks, systems of pedestrian bridges running one or two stories above street level and connecting shops placed strategically into the buildings of the city centre. Here pedestrians are lifted up a story and can move about indoors from building to building, protected from the weather and free from streets and other public space.

A third category of centrally located, private shopping environments is 'the underground city' as the phenomenon is known in Montreal and Toronto in Canada, as well as in cities such as Sapporo, Nagoya and Osaka in Japan. These cities, often in connection with underground metro stations, set up a network of shopping centres and walkways that connect the lower stories of buildings in the city centre. Common to all of these types of shopping centres is that they are private, that they are closed outside office hours, and that both pedestrian activities and other city activities are subject to heavy restrictions conditional on the commercial character of the centres. There is no room for versatility, humour and democracy on the agenda of these modern shopping centres.

An interesting public health problem has developed in the cities where it is virtually impossible to walk or bicycle as a natural part of daily routine. Many of the urban inhabitants are overweight and in poor physical condition. Some of them try to combat the problem by jogging during their lunch breaks or spending time in fitness centres or working out on some of the many exercise machines designed to fill this need by the fitness industry.

For other segments of the population, who have neither the opportunity nor the motivation to engage in fitness activities, the problem literally grows larger and larger. Indeed, doing away with pedestrian traffic and public space - and public life to a great extent - has many direct and indirect consequences.

### ***The reconquered city***

Over the past 30 or 40 years, interest in public spaces and public life has begun to grow again, often as a direct reaction to the increasingly poorer conditions for both, and in many cities efforts are indeed being made to give pedestrians and urban life better odds.

Paradoxically enough, one important source of inspiration came from shopping centres, particularly in the USA. Already in the 1920s when the first centres were built, it was clear that customers had to be lured out of their cars and into car-free shopping streets in order to have the peace of mind to concentrate on shopping. Some of the earliest pedestrian areas in

Europe such as Lijnbahn, built in war-torn Rotterdam in the 1950s, and in German cities in the same period, had this same starting point. Many of the other pedestrian areas established in the 1960s and 1970s throughout Europe, including the pedestrian street in mid-Copenhagen from 1962, were also based primarily on this commercial concept. While true that pedestrian streets made it easier for people to get about downtown, the real purpose of having them was to get people to shop.

The idea of using public space as social and recreational space grew gradually and was reinforced during the decades that followed. Jane Jacob's description of development in American cities in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961, had major impact. Many American and European researchers also contributed by pointing out the importance of varied forms of public life in the public spaces of the city. The connection between city quality and the extent and character of city life were also documented during this same period.

Particularly in Europe, tradition was a third and very important source of inspiration. Many European cities continued to carry on a lively tradition of using city spaces for social and recreational activities. Throughout this period, the 1950s, 60s and 70s, more and more pedestrian streets, areas and peaceful squares were established in European cities. Conditions for pedestrians were also gradually improved in many of the other streets in major cities. Sidewalks were widened and enhanced with street furniture, flowers and shrubbery.

An important turning point for the traffic situation in cities was the oil crisis starting in 1973. The break in traffic development led to planned efforts to push back the encroachment of cars in the cities as well as other measures to ensure a better balance between motorists and other forms of transport. Interest in bicycling and public transportation grew accordingly.

Throughout this whole period, the concepts for new city spaces expanded. Once confined to narrow commercial interests, concepts now had a considerably broader focus: creating space and conditions for walking under reasonable conditions and for ensuring development opportunities for social and recreational urban activities.

Although many cities in Germany and Scandinavia pioneered efforts to push back cars from the middle of the city and create more peaceful conditions for pedestrians, it was in Barcelona, starting in 1980, that a broader concept of city spaces was formulated in a co-ordinated public policy. In the course of 50 years, city space had been conquered by cars. Now the city was fighting back, both physically and culturally. It was also in Barcelona that the concept of 'the reconquered city' was born.

In terms of both idea and specific architectural formulation, public space policy in Barcelona came to play a very big role in further developments.

What happened in Barcelona was the starting point for a new, intense period in the last 20 years of the century, in which increasingly more cities and city spaces were created and renewed, in order to ensure good public space for new types of public life.

If we are looking for patterns in the development of the most recent decades, it is clear that several European cities left their mark. In terms of city policy, the Dutch, German

and Scandinavian cities were among the first to experiment with new types of city space. More recently, many cities in central and southern Europe have followed suit. The policy of pushing back cars and giving urban life better conditions continues to be a European phenomenon primarily, but it is interesting to note that corresponding urban policy strategies now exist in cities in North and South America and Australia. Precisely because of the background in other regions on these continents, the efforts made in Portland, Oregon and Curitiba, Brazil are remarkable, and show that we really can talk about European and worldwide city strategies. Every part of the world has desolate, invaded and abandoned cities, and all over the world there are cities that have fought back by inviting the inhabitants of their cities to return and use public space.

The marked differences from city to city within the same cultural circles underlines another interesting common trait, namely that most urban improvements are carried out or at least initiated by visionary individuals or groups. It can be a mayor, a city architect, a city council, a political party or inspirational co-operation between consultants, politicians and grassroots movements, but common to the cities that have recaptured public space is visionary, targeted urban policies.

Typically, various topics are combined in these urban visions, such as traffic safety, changes in traffic patterns, public health, a reduction in resource consumption, a reduction in noise and pollution - and efforts to strengthen the role of the city as a democratic forum. Where visions and political will go hand in hand to meet a number of these objectives, it is clear that cities actually do become better places in which to live and spend time.

### ***The new city spaces - public life***

Although this report on new city spaces and public life starts out one summer day in the centre of Copenhagen, it is just one of many cities in which urban policy initiatives have raised urban quality. Traffic, noise and pollution have been reduced, foot traffic and bicycle traffic have been reinforced. Public life has blossomed on the streets and squares of the city in a way not seen 20 or 30 years ago, certainly not in the form it has today, which is not even a new version of an older urban tradition, but a truly new phenomenon. The overwhelming interest in and backing for the new public life in city spaces is certainly thought provoking.

In a society in which increasingly more of daily life takes place in the private sphere - in private homes, at private computers, in private cars, at private workplaces and in strictly controlled and privatised shopping centres - there are clear signs that the city and city spaces have been given a new and influential role as public space and forum. In contrast to the many indirect communications and the many widespread and private spaces, the opportunity for people to use their senses and interact directly with their surroundings is becoming extremely attractive. The information society is providing new meaning and significance to the city as meeting place.

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