
Jan Gehl (2010), *Cities for People*

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Pages: 125-128
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Jan Gehl is a Danish architect who, in parallel to his academic career, has worked through his architectural practice on the design of public spaces and urban regeneration projects all over the world, including Brighton, Newcastle and London. His interest in the quality and performance of public spaces started with a research grant from Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts for studies on the form and use of public spaces. Since then Gehl has published extensively; his success in injecting outdoor life into northern European cities has led to worldwide impact of his design guidance (Gehl, 1987; Gehl & Gemzøe, 2004, 2000; Gehl et al., 2006; and Gehl, 2010). This review focuses on two of his books: *Life Between Buildings* (2011, revised edition) and *Cities for People* (2010).

The highly influential *Life Between Buildings* was first published in 1971 with the first English translation in 1987, whilst this review considers the reissue of the book in its sixth edition last year. The book examines the relationship between patterns of space use, specifically outdoor activities, and the spatial properties of the physical environment. Gehl promotes a straightforward approach to improving urban form, which is derived from systematically documenting the performance of urban spaces and analysing what factors influence their use. Gehl uses the human dimension as the starting point for his analysis and measures the success of the urban environment by quantifying the levels of pedestrian flows, levels and length of stationary activity - including human contact and social interaction.

The book is divided into four main chapters, which range from general to specific models. In Chapter 1 – *Life Between Buildings* – Gehl introduces the concepts of necessary, optimal and social activities (Gehl, 1987, p.9), which sets the background for his analysis on the urban environment physical properties. To support his ideas, Gehl also examines the spatial properties of traditional urban landscapes.
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medieval public spaces (such as dimensions and detailed design) and relates the identified common denominators to the success or failure of contemporary examples. He then discusses the introduction of contemporary urban city planning principles and the reasons why the 20th century design ideas, such as functionalism (Gehl, 1987, p.43), were central to the lack of vitality in street life.

In Chapter 2 - Prerequisites for Planning - Gehl analyses the physical properties of human senses (such as smell, hearing, seeing) and social distances. Like many other authors (Sitte 1889, 1945; Alexander et al., 1977; Lynch, 1971), Gehl believes there must be a correspondence between the dimension of a public square and a sense of place (Cullen, 1961). If squares are too big for the number of users, they will feel empty. This leads to a further idea: the ‘self-reinforcing’ process where individual events stimulate others:

‘If activities and people are assembled, individual events will stimulate one another’ (Gehl, 1987, p.107).

In line with Gehl’s argument on the importance of the self-reinforcing process, in Chapter 3 – To Assemble or Disperse – Gehl examines a series of spatial components which will enhance or reduce pedestrian flows across and around the public space: building heights, orientation of entrances, multifunction areas and active frontages, density, modes of transport (pedestrians and cyclists), accessibility and visibility from immediate surrounding areas (Whyte, 1980; Hettiarachchie, 1987). It is here that Gehl acknowledges that well-functioning pedestrian systems facilitate the shortest distances between natural destinations and makes a rather compelling argument about the failure of Trafalgar Square before its redevelopment.³

Lastly, Gehl is aware that for public spaces to be lively and successful they need to have a combination of both moving and stationary activities. In Chapter 4 - Spaces for Walking, Places for Staying - Gehl focuses on static activities and the physical elements that will make people not only stop but also spend time with the space. According to Gehl, the ‘design of individual spaces and of the details, down to the smallest component, are determining factors to quality of public spaces’ (Gehl, 1987, p.129). Gehl also discusses preferable areas for sitting and standing as well as the edge effect⁴ and the correlation between static occupancy and levels of pedestrian movement⁵. Interestingly, although Gehl does refer to Sitte’s work (Gehl, 1987, p.43), one of the few typologies which is not explored is the concept of enclosure and irregularity principles.⁶

Cities for People was published in 2010 and it is, to a degree, a revised version of Life Between Buildings. In addition to the elements previously discussed, Gehl examines issues such as sustainability, shared spaces, mixed use, sense of security, usability and levels of pedestrian comfort. Like in his previous book - Gehl uses systematic and empirical observations of patterns of space use, often making gradual incremental improvements, then documenting them again to demonstrate what makes public spaces ‘alive’. Throughout the book, Gehl explains

Notes:
³ The ‘edge effect’ (Gehl, 1987, p.159) is widely acknowledged by a number of different researchers. In fact, Gehl adopts this terminology from De Jonge (1967). De Jonge, after observations on static occupation in a series of recreation areas (such as parks and roadside resting places) claims that ‘other things being equal, the parts of the areas near the main entrances are parking areas and used more intensively than the distance parts… This phenomenon can be called the edge effect. According to Gehl, the edge is the preferred location for standing or sitting when people first occupy the borders and edges of the public spaces, and only once they are fully occupied, do people tend to move inwards. The edge effect exists because people prefer to sit in areas facing the pedestrian flow, and therefore the location on the boundary of the public spaces will provide the best views, with extensive and richer visual fields. Gehl suggests that benches that provide a good view of the surrounding activities are used more often than benches with less or no view of others since human activities are the main attraction for users of public spaces. Although Gehl makes a distinction, claiming that the location for sitting is chosen more carefully than standing, he points out that the edge effect is observed in both cases. Refer also to Alexander et al. (1977 op cit.) and Marcus and Francis (1990).
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the methods and tools he believes are necessary to reconfigure public spaces into the environment he believes they all should be: urban meeting places, places for social cohesion and interaction.

The book follows a similar structure to *Life Between Buildings*. Chapters 3 and 4 are possibly the two chapters that the readers of JOSS might find the most innovative and significant. When stressing the importance of mixed use and active frontages, Gehl points out that mixed functions provide more activities around the clock bringing safety and protection to both residents and ‘visitor’s to the surrounding public space. As for shared spaces: Gehl is sympathetic with the idea and recognizes its benefits, however he points out that although mixing traffic (pedestrian, cyclists and vehicular) is possible, mixed traffic solutions must prioritise pedestrians.

Gehl also examines the positive relationship between well-functioning urban areas and sustainability. However, the significance of sustainability is centred on the responsible management of resources and health benefits. Gehl does not examine the social and economic benefits of sustainable city centres as a result of what adequate accessibility brings to pedestrian movement and trade as presented in the seminal work of Hillier and colleagues. Another missed opportunity is the lack of reference to city life as an outcome of its emergent morphology and the role of urban spatial configuration, both at local and global levels, on the performance of public spaces (Arruda Campos, 2000). The space syntax methodology as a design tool and its functionality, which allows the correlation of spatial elements and social variables is paramount for understanding public spaces, mainly the correlation between configuration and pedestrian movement flows and stationary activity (Hillier et al., 1993).

There is no doubt that Gehl understands the mechanisms behind ‘life between buildings’. Gehl’s human dimension as the starting point for the design of the urban environment is inspirational. Both books are engaging, logical and rich in case studies, which illustrate Gehl’s approach. If *Life Between Buildings* was and still is an outstanding contribution to the subject, *Cities for People*, despite addressing a number of current issues, could have been more engaging and informative about how the spatial morphology of the urban grid shapes the performance of urban spaces.

Nevertheless, both books are a must-read for students, designers, as well as anybody interested in the performance of public spaces and the urban environment as a whole.

Notes:

5 Gehl produced a survey of patterns of space use in public spaces in Stroget, Denmark. He notes that the levels of static occupancy of public spaces had dramatically increased over a period of twenty years and all available squares of ‘good quality’ were filled to capacity every day. He concludes that the main reasons for determining the quality or usability of each space are closely related to its location in relation to the main pedestrian flows, which had also dramatically increased in the previous twenty years, meaning that the static occupancy had increased in direct proportion to the levels of pedestrian movement.

6 A very common interpretation is that livable public spaces should observe enclosure and irregularity principles, which were derived from studies of traditional medieval squares. Sitte (1889 op cit.), Unwin (1909) and Zucker (1959) regard enclosure, defined by the grouping of architectural masses around an open space, as the fundamental property of public spaces. Only enclosed spaces could provide the users a sense of well-being, comfort and pleasure, and therefore would ultimately determine the preference by the public for such spaces.

7 See Chapter 4 ‘Cities as Movement Economies’ in Hillier (1996) and Stonor (2009).
References


