

URBAN DESIGNER - JAN GEHL

Bio from...Project for Public Spaces (PPS)

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JAN GEHL

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PLACEMAKING HEROESSTREETS & TRANSPORTATION



Jan Gehl is a practicing Urban Design Consultant and Professor of Urban Design at the School of Architecture in Copenhagen, Denmark. He has extensively researched the form and use of public spaces and put his findings to practice in multiple locations throughout the world.

His company, *Gehl Architects -- Urban Quality Consultants*, creatively reimagines the multiple ways in which communities use the public realm. For Gehl, design always begins with an analysis of the spaces between buildings. Only after establishing a vision of what kind of public life is desired in a given space, can attention be given to the surrounding buildings and the ways the spaces can productively interact.

BIOGRAPHY

While Jan Gehl's research on public spaces and public life began in Copenhagen, it was quickly applied to many other cities throughout Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia. His ideas and approaches to design for public spaces incorporate the cutting edge of technology without losing sight of what best supports and enhances people's experience of everyday life in the public realm.

In 1960, Jan Gehl earned his BA and MA in Architecture from the School of Architecture at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and began practicing as an architect. In 1966 he received a 5-year research grant from his former school to study the form and use of public space. This work spawned his first book, *Life between Buildings* (1971, trans. 1987). From 1971 onwards he has worked at the school as Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and Professor of Urban Design. In 1998, he became director of the institution's newly-established Center for Public Space Research. Other publications describing Gehl's intensive research on the social uses of public space include *Public Spaces- Public Life* (1996, 2004), and *New City Spaces* (2008), which have been translated into multiple languages. These and many other publications offer a method for evaluating city quality, designing to encourage active use of outdoor space, and discussing the ways our sensory abilities affect our use of space.

In 1992, Gehl received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. In 1993 he won the Sir Patrick Abercrombie Prize for exemplary contributions to Town Planning and Territorial Development from the International Union of Architects, and in 1998 he received the EDRA/Places Research Award from the

Environmental Design Research Association. He is also on the editorial board of *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, *Urban Design International*, and *Town Planning & Architecture*.

PERSPECTIVES

Necessary, Optional, and Social Activity. Gehl distinguishes between necessary/functional activities, optional/recreational activities and social activities in public spaces. While necessary activities take place regardless of the quality of the physical environment, optional activities depend to a significant degree on what the place has to offer and how it makes people behave and feel about it. The better a place, the more optional activity occurs and the longer necessary activity lasts. Social activity is the fruit of the quality and length of the other types of activities, because it occurs spontaneously when people meet in a particular place. Social activities include children's play, greetings and conversations, communal activities of various kinds, and simply seeing and hearing other people. Communal spaces in cities and residential areas become meaningful and attractive when all activities of all types occur in combination and feed off each other.

Life Between Buildings. Life between buildings has become Jan Gehl's major focus of study and work. By starting with public life and the areas in which it takes place, building design becomes a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Gehl emphasizes that life between buildings is a dimension of architecture that deserves more careful treatment. It is where social interaction and perception, urban recreation, and the sensory experience of city life take place. Life between buildings comprises the entire spectrum of human activities in public space - the necessary, the optional and the social types of behaviors which Gehl has studied meticulously. These are therefore vital areas, and planning processes must begin by understanding these spaces between buildings.

Public Spaces and Public Life Studies. In *Public Spaces & Public Life* (1996), Gehl and his colleagues educate city councils and city planning departments about the value of their public spaces and the quality of public life that is taking place between their

buildings. These studies usually consist of three parts - *a quality evaluation of the public spaces, a recording of public life in the spaces and, based on these, recommendations for improvements* - which provide substantial knowledge of how the city is being used and how it can be improved. Because Gehl Architects recognize that making recommendations alone is often not enough to convince decision makers, many of the studies also entail extensive educational and pedagogical demonstrations of the recommendations' benefits. Major studies of this type have been conducted for the city centers of Copenhagen, Stockholm, Oslo, Riga, Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and London.

Gradual Transformations. Gehl emphasizes the importance of gradual transformation in urban redevelopments, in order to make changes sustainable and to give people time to adapt to physical changes, adjust their life styles, and experiment with the new ways of using the city. Gradual transformation allows for greater flexibility in the design process and facilitates attitude changes through public involvement and positive experiences.

Winter Spaces. Gehl reminds us that street life does not necessarily have to be confined to the summer months, an especially important concept in the countries of Northern Europe. He asserts that winter weather, moods, and atmosphere require particular resources and activities, such as ice-skating rinks and kiosks selling hot soups and hot drinks. He notes that these qualities are already present in many North American cities, but he also argues that special lighting and heating technologies can help us make better use of the potential of winter spaces, enabling cities to hold outdoor events, parties, movies and art throughout the year.

QUOTABLE

"Only architecture that considers human scale and interaction is successful architecture."

"First life, then spaces, then buildings - the other way around never works."

"The social changes of our era can help explain the dramatic increase in urban recreation - premium public spaces, with their diversity of functions, multitude of people, fine views and fresh air obviously have something to offer that is in great demand in society today."

"In a Society becoming steadily more privatized with private homes, cars, computers, offices and shopping centers, the public component of our lives is disappearing. It is more and more important to make the cities inviting, so we can meet our fellow citizens face to face and experience directly through our senses. Public life in good quality public spaces is an important part of a democratic life and a full life.

ACCOLADES

"The patterns of pedestrian life he has observed and the recommendations he has made are highly applicable to American cities... [Life between Buildings] is a splendid piece of work." - William H. Whyte

"In 1971... Jan Gehl was one of those lone protagonists for the humane values that he so excellently studies, formulates, and illustrates... more than a decade later we can discern an increased interest among architects and others in these values he so eminently defends. Further, over the years Jan Gehl's message has been developed with increased concentration and [achieved] the characteristic of timeless truth." - Ralph Erskine, 1986, Foreword to *Life between Buildings*.

LINK: pps.org