

Public Spaces for a Changing Public Life

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1. A Matter of Life or Death – There is a Choice!

The life or lifelessness of public spaces depends very much on the quality of the spaces and whether they are welcoming to likely users, to walk, stay, sit or otherwise enjoy the spaces. Surveys from existing city areas, as well as new towns and new city districts and developments, have shown striking differences concerning life and lifelessness. Everything points to the quality issues being of considerable importance. And the evidence likewise points to the need for a more systematic and careful treatment of the public realm in order to secure good quality and to ensure spaces are welcoming to users.

2. Roles of Public Life in Present-day Society?

Faced with the empty public spaces in many new developments, as well as the more or less abandoned mistreated existing city streets, one may well ask if access to public space as a meeting place for people is at all meaningful in the present day electronic and privatised societies with people living further and further apart using still more square meters per person, and in smaller and smaller households. Would not the abandoned and deserted public realm be a logical and acceptable answer to these new challenges? Can the digital, indirect world substitute the direct contact to other people and to the surrounding society? The multifaceted use of any public spaces of good quality will in itself be an answer to these questions. The universal finding is that whenever quality is provided people come. Access to other people, to possibilities for experience and recreation among others are in high demand, and these opportunities have important roles for upholding or strengthening the overall policies for friendly, humane, open, democratic and safe societies.

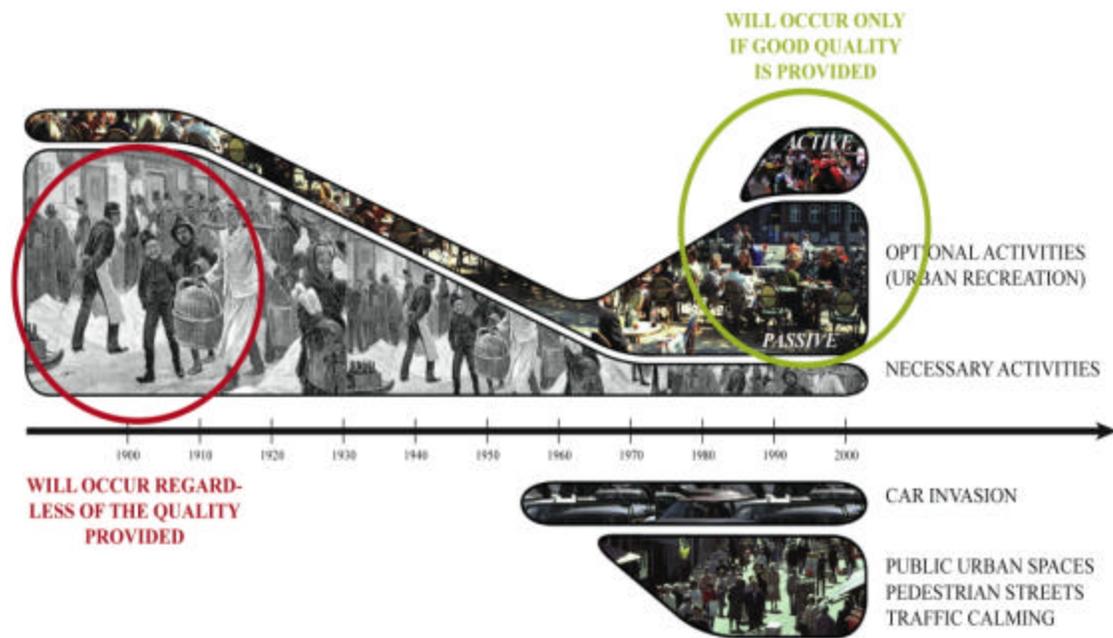


Figure 1. The changing role of public space

3. The Character of Public Life in the Present Society Situation

Comparing street scenes from the turn of the previous century with present-day street scenes, an obvious change in the volume and character of public life stands out. In the bustling street scenes from around 1900 nearly all people are engaged in some type of necessary activities. People are present because they have to be, regardless of whether quality is provided or not. Use of public spaces was an important part of daily life, and the spaces were filled to overflowing with all kinds of activities, and in the process, the public spaces also functioned as meeting places for people. These types of streets scenes – filled with people using public space out of necessity – are still to be found in many countries with less developed economies.

Street scenes from our present-day society show a distinctly different use pattern. Much fewer people use public spaces out of necessity. Some walking to and from work or using public transport would be in this category, but many others have alternative options for transport, for reaching services and for shopping. Services can be arranged over the internet and shopping accomplished in the same way or in privatised out-of-town shopping centres.

The overall picture of the present-day public space scenes reveal that most of the people are present not because they have to be, but because they want to be; because the public spaces continue to offer valuable opportunities for people in present-day society. The optional character of most public life activities in present-day cities places very high demands on the quality offered by public spaces. If the quality is missing, people will not use the spaces. However, evidence from all over the world points to the fact that, if the quality is there – if the public spaces are well placed, well designed and inviting – people will use them. Thus, if lively, attractive and safe cities with active streets, squares and parks are to be realized in the 21st century, good quality for the pedestrian activities is vital.

4. Inviting Public Life – In Existing City Areas

The quality offered for pedestrians in existing city districts is in many cases appalling. Narrow pavements, obstacles, pavement interruptions, curbs, difficult street crossings, fences and so on make for an uninviting environment. Places for sitting or enjoyment are scarce. A method for improvement, pioneered in Copenhagen and now used widely, for example in Central London, is to record systematically how people use the city, thus making the people using the city visible. Books such as *Public Space – Public Life* and *Towards a Fine City for People, London 2004*, describe in detail how such a method can be applied and which tools to use. *Public Space – Public Life* also describes the amazing increase in the use of public spaces in Copenhagen over the past four decades, following the many quality improvements.



Figure 2. From *Towards a Fine City for People – London 2004: Quality analysis of conditions for pedestrians (and bicyclists) in Central London: Overview of activity categories to be analysed*

5. Inviting Public Life – In New City Areas

Most New Towns and new developments are planned with the explicitly stated aim of creating a lively, attractive and safe city or district. Nearly all of them appear to fail in this aim. Many factors combine to make it very difficult and complicated to achieve active public spaces in new areas – the population is spread out, densities are low, functions are segregated even where integration has been attempted, with each building frequently only housing one function, and concern for active ground floors is generally absent. Added to this is the haphazard forming of the spaces between buildings and the general neglect of climatic considerations and disregard for existing knowledge concerning human behaviour. There is no careful invitation for life and activities to be found here! People hurry through the spaces, if they venture outside at all, and a general emptiness becomes almost automatic.

It must be observed that life in present-day public spaces is a very fragile species. Only if conditions are right will walking and lingering be commonplace. Thus the planning of the public spaces must be done extraordinarily carefully. The tools have been developed. It can be done; several outstanding examples like Aker Brygge, Oslo, Skarpnäck, Stockholm and Almere, Holland can be found next to the many failures.

Traditionally, new developments have been planned based on the formula; first buildings, then spaces, then (perhaps) life. In present-day planning, this formula must be turned about, and the questions should be – in said order – what kind of life do we want here, what kind of spaces will be needed for this life, and finally, how can the buildings in this area be placed and formed to support these spaces and the life in this area? In short, the formula must be; first life, then spaces, then buildings.

References

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DESIGNING / DETAILING THE PUBLIC SPACES A KEY WORD LIST

P R O T E C T I O N	1. Protection against Traffic & Accidents - traffic accidents - fear of traffic - other accidents	2. Protection against crime & violence (feeling of safety) - lived in / used - streetlife - streetwatchers - overlapping functions - in space & time	3. Protection against unpleasant sense experiences - wind / draft - rain / snow - cold / heat - pollution - dust, glare, noise	
	C O M F O R T	4. Possibilities for WALKING - room for walking - interesting layout of streets - interesting facades - no obstacles - good surfaces	5. Possibilities for STANDING / STAYING - attractive edges - »Edgeeffect« - defined spots for staying - supports for staying	6. Possibilities for SITTING - zones for sitting - maximizing advantages primary and secondary sitting possibilities - benches for resting
		7. Possibilities to SEE - seeing-distances - unhindered views - interesting views - lighting (when dark)	8. Possibilities for HEARING / TALKING - low noise level - bench arrangements - »talkscapes«	9. Possibilities for PLAY / UNFOLDING / ACTIVITIES - invitation to physical activities, play, unfolding & entertainment - day & night and summer & winter
E N J O Y M E N T	10. Scale - dimensioning of buildings & spaces in observance of the important human dimensions related to senses, movements, size & behaviour	11. Possibilities for enjoying positive aspects of climate - sun / shade - warmth / coolness - breeze / ventilation	12. Aesthetic quality / positive sense-experiences - good design & good detailing - views / vistas - trees, plants, water	

Figure 3. Key word list concerning the quality of the pedestrian landscape. If an analysis of a public space ends up with a resounding YES to the above 12 questions, a 100 per cent place has been achieved.

