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Title
Mistaking Community Life for Public Life

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5d67x283

Journal
Places, 14(2)

ISSN
0731-0455

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Publication Date
2001-11-01

Peer reviewed

Problems With Mistaking Community Life for Public Life

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Some time ago I was asked to review Peter Calthorpe's excellent book, *The Next American Metropolis: Ecology, Community and the American Dream*, in preparation for a public mano-á-mano (a very gracious one) about the role of Public life in the New Urbanism.

I recalled the movie *The Truman Show*, set in an inspired locale, the mythical "Seahaven Island," actually the real Seaside, New Urbanism's touchstone beautiful community. The movie is the candy-coated nightmare of Truman Burbank, whose whole, dreary, perfect private life has been—unknown to him—broadcast as a twenty-four-hour-a-day, every day, television soap opera. In this compelling parable about what is really real, the entire population of Seahaven are extras in his life-show and Seahaven–Seaside is an elaborate stage set inside a giant dome. As well as showing his public "private" life, the film shows his dreary, perfect public "public" life, strongly structured by Seaside's design, all exemplifying the strange transformation of Public life in America, and most probably in the New Urbanism. Of course, it isn't Public life at all, but something else. Valuable, but "else."

Calthorpe correctly critiqued our "deadly and fragmented-life suburbs,"[1] discussed strategies for creating walkable and livable communities, and showed completed and on-the-boards projects embodying these strategies. My response to this fine body of work focused on the Public life and public places in Calthorpe's work and thinking, since they play such a central role in presentations about New Urbanism. Basically, I argued that:

• *Many people see social relationships as either Private or Public. They don't distinguish an important third form, Community life.*

• *Most people, like Calthorpe, don't differentiate between Public life and Community life, which are fundamentally different. Public life is sociability with a diversity of strangers; Community life is sociability with people you know somewhat.*

• *With our long-term and increasing emphasis on the private realm, we are losing both of these forms of broader social relationships, and many mourn that loss.*

• *In Calthorpe's book, there seems to be more concern for revitalizing Community life than for reviving Public life, although it is often referred to as public life or public uses.*

Calthorpe's design guidelines speak of traditional public places—plazas, parks and civic buildings, place-forms that are associated with an older European ecology of high local density and social diversity, and which facilitated interactions with strangers. But this form of Public life is not really desired in Seaside, Truman's "Seahaven Island" or New Urbanism. (And, given the population density of the "new urbs," it may not even be possible.) What is really sought seems to be Community life, like that in *The Truman Show*, but certainly better.

There is, therefore, a misfit between the place forms offered and the social behavior desired. There is also a high degree of design determinism
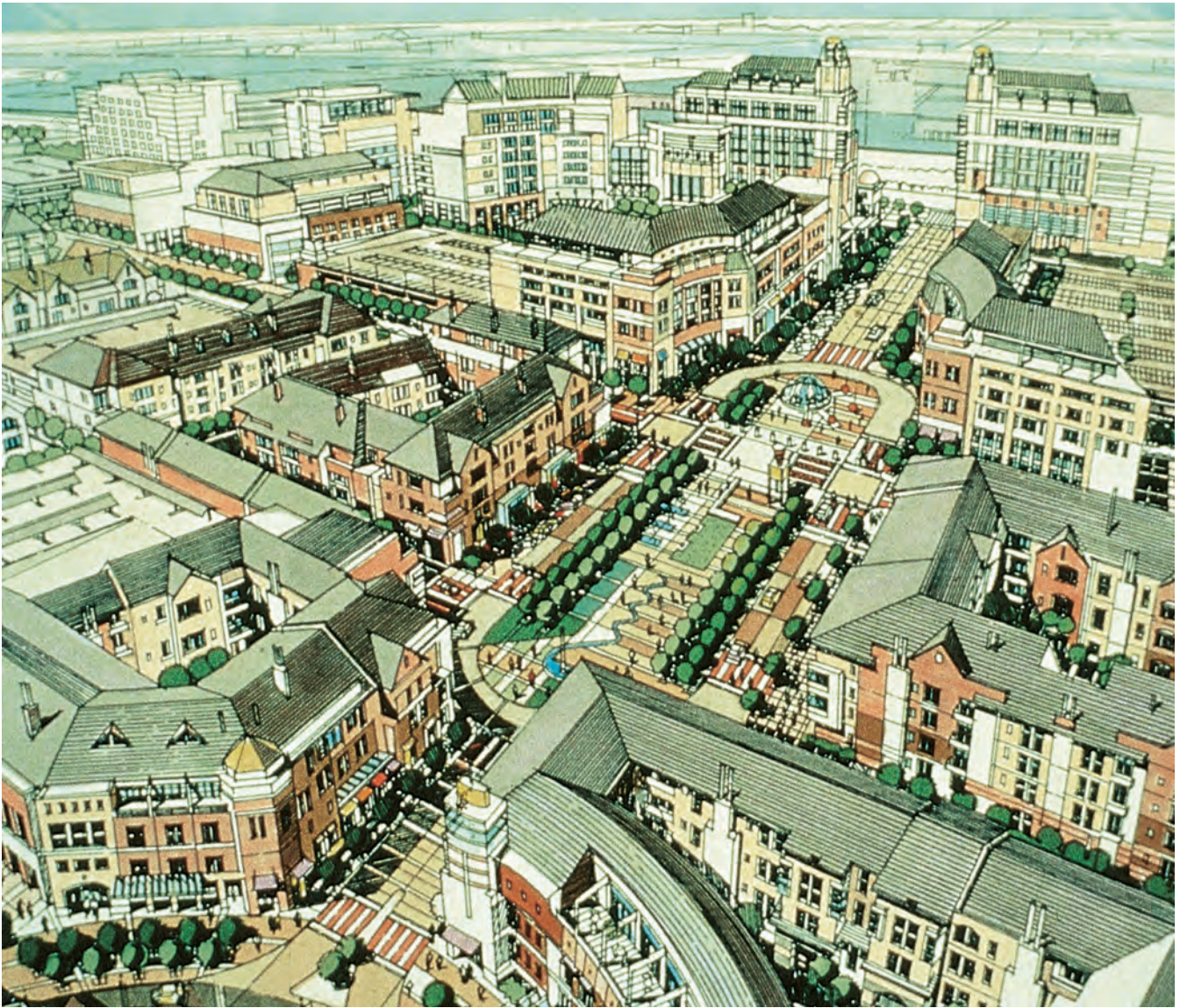
A vision for a New Urbanist town center: public square or community space?

here, suggesting that building the classical forms of Public life (or Community life) will actually generate it.

As Calthorpe and others observe, there has been some real loss of Public life, especially that which occurs in the presence of a diversity of strangers, and important graces, tolerances and social learnings are becoming lost to us. Nevertheless, there is still more Public life than social critics and designers believe. It occurs less and less in the classical venues of the street, square and park, but flourishes in alternative, less formally designed venues, many of them virtual and electronic.

Community life was already being revitalized, for people in certain social strata, by forces that precede and are independent of New Urbanism. But this revitalization often occurs in ways that diminish the possibilities for social relationships of tolerance, diversity and richness for urbanite, suburbanite and villager alike.

Thus, an important planning and design research agenda involves rethinking both places for Public life and for Community life, by

recognizing their differences, so that we can improve both the design of, and life in, New Urbanist communities. We need an expanded vocabulary of places for us to support the variety of social relationships we have, and need.

The Search for Community Life

Many people tend to think that there are two types of social relationships, Private life and Public life. However, our spatially defined social relationships have three basic forms:

Private life, with family and close friends, those we know most well and intimately, the portion of social relations least open to scrutiny because its locations are few and often privately held, like the home.

Public life, spent in the occasional company of a diversity of strangers of whom we know little more than what we see, not all of them projecting personas comfortable to engage, in locations all may use, many of them publicly held for the common good, like the square, park and street, and many privately held for common pleasure and commerce, like the night club and the Mall.

Community life (or parochial life, as it is called in the literature), spent with and among neighbors, nodding acquaintances, shopkeepers, locally resident police, fire, mail and town officials, and people in local fraternal, sporting and religious groups. Its varied locales are ones you know and frequent, a mix of both semi-public and semi-private places, like the neighborhood bar, the often-walked public street, the school PTA meeting and the church dinner.

One characteristic of modern life is an increased emphasis on physical and social isolation and the private sphere, with an attendant loss of, and a mourning for, both Public life and Community life, which critics often lump together. The distinction between Public and Community life is important, because they operate at very different scales and densities; each has different

purposes, mechanisms and customs; each requires different physical environments in order to be robust. To mistake one for another makes it easy to create a good design for the wrong purpose. Public life and Community life may be especially easy to confuse because many of us now have little of either (and therefore wouldn't much know the difference) and our mourning may be generic enough to mistakenly collapse the two into one generic form.

New Urbanism speaks of itself as a rediscovery of planning traditions, gleaned from analyses of highly livable, well-scaled and memorable communities, particularly the "traditional American town," and it "borrows from many traditions and theories: from the romantic environmentalism of Ruskin to the City Beautiful Movement, from the medieval urbanism of Sitte to the Garden Cities of Europe, from streetcar suburbs to the traditional towns of America." Calthorpe's brand of New Urbanism calls for region-knitting transit-oriented developments (TODs) small enough to be comfortable for walking and big enough to offer reasons to walk—to shops, neighbors, work, a village green and a transit stop that connects TODs to other TODs and to larger urban centers.[2]

A key concept in Calthorpe's TOD guidelines is centrally-located, pedestrian-accessible public places in the forms of "parks, plazas and civic buildings" and the less formal "village green" or "commons." These are, largely, the physical forms of classical Public life (life with a changing diversity of strangers). But on a closer reading of the guidelines, Public life with strangers is not what really seems to be desired or envisioned. Community life is. Further, when you calculate the population of a TOD, it seems highly improbable that there would be enough bodies, or diversity, to have a Public life with strangers.

In the guidelines, the Public life is not much described, only the places are. But the few descriptive phrases about Public life make it clear

that the social relationships to be supported are actually Community or parochial life: "village greens where workers meet during lunch time and shoppers see their neighbors." All the place-forms recommended for public use, even parks, are clearly intended for Community life. "Parks and plazas in TODs act as neighborhood meeting places, recreational activity centers, child-care facilities and lunch-time picnic spots."[3]

It seems like a mismatch between many of the proposed place-types and desired place-behavior. The behavior desired is about neighboring; about relationships with shop keepers that are more than merely economic; about kids playing, safely watched, in small local parks; about the nodding and chatting happening between those strolling on pedestrian-scaled streets and adjacent porches; about everyday local use by people who know each other somewhat. Yet the forms often called for are those of public, civic specialness of the plaza and park. The guidelines ask for vistas, even calling for public buildings to "be proudly located."[4]

Misappropriating these forms may well stunt the real contributions New Urbanism can make to revitalizing precious Community life, one of its clear goals. A piece of important work for us all would be to seek more appropriate forms, by understanding Community life more fully (and how it differs from Public life), in some joint effort by those in psychology, sociology, anthropology, urban design and landscape architecture, and by citizens.

Calthorpe and others call for a new approach to the forms, variety and marketing of dwelling units and for a new approach to organizing the time-space-use and scalar relationships among the various components of TODs. In the same way, might we not also re-envision the physical forms for Community life to include forms other than the park, plaza, village green, commons and proudly located civic building, forms from an earlier public tradition we seem to hold on to so

dearly? Could the same level of thought and openness to innovative concepts be brought to full spectrum of urban social relationships (and places for them)?

Some may argue that some of this full spectrum of relationships in the New Urbs will just happen over time in found or unused space that groups might appropriate when needed. But since the New Urbs are fully planned from their beginnings, and are spatially tight, there will be few unused (or partially used) fragments which can be spontaneously taken over by groups for special and changing Community uses. So, appropriate places must be provided for this Community life. The New Urbs must, in the beginning, plan for, and seek good locations for places that support Community life. These may include planned locations for the flea market (the streets in a TOD are too narrow), a shell for local bands, community gardens, bleachers abutting outdoor basketball courts, skateboarders' waves, and, as well, recognizing new uses for known typologies, like shopping malls which become de-facto community centers, with the mall's center space given over to bake sales and pamphleteering for local institutions and causes. And surely further analysis will provide more place concepts for supporting community life, in addition to those now planned.

The Search for Public Life

But what of that form of Public life that involves a shifting diversity of strangers? Why is it seemingly missing from these TODs?

Calthorpe bemoans the loss of much of Public life: "Today the public world is shrunken and fractured."[5] So do many other writers, designers, social critics and citizens. They are right. We do have emptier plazas, parks and streets. Calthorpe assumes this relates to the loss of good public space being displaced by an exaggerated private domain and he criticizes most current plans and designs for their poorly conceived public space.

He offers supposedly better designs, and the assumption is, if only we did the spaces right, we would have good Public life.

Like in the film *Field of Dreams*, a dearly held assumption of designers, developers and civic leaders is "if you build it, they will come." Of course, we do build public spaces and people don't come. Still, we think, if we only made public spaces nicer, smaller, bigger, more local, more central, have more jugglers and mimes, be more picturesque, more something!, people would surely come.

There are several problems with this assumption. TODs are generally planned with a maximum radius of 2,000 feet from a central transit stop (or just a center), so that any home is within an easy ten-minute walk of transit and the center. Combining this ten-minute walk with the 18 dwelling units per acre (the recommended TOD average), you'd get about 8,000 to 10,000 people. Lyn Lofland's excellent book about Public life, *A World of Strangers*, traces the conditions necessary for the growth of Public life with strangers, and states that "a population of 8,000 to 10,000 is a lower limit" for a settlement to develop any Public life. Consequently, a TOD is probably too small to generate the number of people, not to mention the structural and temporal diversity, that real Public life requires. And they have relatively stable and economically homogenous populations, generating a fairly common value system.

My sense is that the TOD guidelines simply reflect the feelings of most Americans, who for a long time have not really wanted Public life in any sense. It's too troublesome, too fractious, not always safe or comfortable, too much a problem for the developers, too possible to have in-your-face difference to make everybody happy.

These popular feelings are mirrored in recent academic discourse about urbanity, much of which has focused on the pathology of urban life, comparing it negatively with Community life, which often seems more desirable and is treated as if it were an alternative to Public life. This discourse builds on attacks on the city and its Public life (going back several hundred years) by proponents of both the private and parochial realms. They claim that these realms are, somehow, morally superior and that Public life is morally deficient for three reasons: the presence of the "unholy and the unwashed" stranger; indiscriminate and inappropriate mixing of classes, genders and races; and excessive frivolity.

The evils of the city and its impersonal Public life have often been contrasted with the countryside's pastoral neighborliness. All projects in Calthorpe's book show a "village green" at their center, a pastoral center rather than an urban one. Galen Cranz, in her fine book, *The Politics of Park Design*, says "parks that Americans built to improve their cities derived not from European urban models but from an anti-urban ideal that dwelt on the traditional relief from the evils of the city to escape to the country." Mark Girouard points out that the Garden City, City Beautiful and Modern movements were very different, but all united in their condemnation of high-density, closely knit cities. Calthorpe's avowed precedents, and his use of the park, village green and commons as the center, is in this tradition.[6]

In truth, we've never had much Public life in the U.S: We've not had the population density (England and Italy are ten times as dense) nor popular desire, nor the physical forms nor the socio-economic structure to support it. Many of the somewhat empty public places we have built were designed for what America doesn't have: a diverse, democratic and classless public, and they don't really fit the Public life that we actually do have in our more segmented, pluralistic and stratified society.

Our vision of Public life is partly an illusion, sustained by period movies; by the travel, history, restoration and theme park industries; and by the

penchant for world-traveling elites to be forever charmed by Italy's piazzas, while not recognizing them as part of a non-transportable social ecology. Ironically, tourists in Europe now see only a shadow of what once was, for Public life there has been undergoing a transformation for several centuries. Over one hundred years ago, Camillo Sitte, many people's favorite city planner, wrote: "the life of the common people has for centuries been steadily withdrawing from public squares, and especially so in recent times."[7]

Just as we tend to mourn the loss of a Public life that probably never was as prevalent here as we imagine, we may be blinded to alternative visions and venues for Public life that are emerging, and have made little headway in design and planning for them. More specifically:

We tend to overlook some of our Public life. Modern urban life still shapes public concepts of governance, religion and social structure, and still depends on the exchange of news and information. There is still a Public life of vigorous discourse about politics, morality and religion, but much has moved away from traditional public places and away from direct face-to-face interaction with other citizens. Much of it is in the virtual space of electronic communications radio, television and the Internet.

We do not honor some of the Public life that we do recognize because it is not for purposes we esteem, or not for everybody. The Public life that still occurs in public places tends to involve the theatrical or expressive components of Public life. These include spectacle, entertainment and pleasure, the testing of social behavior and the consumption of the objects of commerce and trade—often wedded together in a theater of consumption. Because they are more easily seen, these forms have come to be perceived as the dominant aspects of Public life, which is now increasingly visual.

There is an enhanced Public life of rich presentation (and counter-presentation) by expressive urban subcultures (punks, skateboarders, Euro-trash, goths, bikers). It is not always to everyone's taste, not always safe or comfortable, but highly important to those who participate and, often, a source of fascination for those who don't. Such expressions act as a school for social learning in which people test personas in public, gauge reactions, modify behavior and grow in complexity as individuals.

We discount the Public life that happens in spaces that are not publicly owned, and which are not the classical open spaces of the dense street, the enclosed square and the verdant park. Examples of these somewhat discounted venues for Public life include the strip, shopping malls, the atriums of skyscrapers, skyway systems, casinos, sports arenas, county fairs, amusement parks, racetracks, abandoned highway fragments, parking lots, community gardens, boardwalks and beaches. Because of their scale and their tight pre-planning, most of these are, of necessity, missing from the New Urbs.

What We Lose When True Public Life Disappears

Some of our nostalgia and mourning is not for Public life at all, not for the world of strangers; it is for something quite different, real and precious: local neighborhood life, community, a world of neighbors and friends, the parochial realm. This is really what the New Urbanism wants to recreate and enliven, and that is truly good.

But what do we lose when we don't cultivate our Public life, this important form of social relationships with a diversity of strangers?

We lose an important factor in the growth of individuals, in a culture that values individualism. The oldest forms of being with others are matedness, kin and tribe, and community. These are primary networks, all of which, through "personal knowing," exert great control over behavior and development, where conformity is expected, supported and rewarded, and the strangeness of strangerhood is suspect.

In such a situation, there is not Public life, which only becomes possible with dense, large settlement with great diversity within it and a changing population and is thus relatively recent. Because Public life is life with strangers in places outside the home and locale, it frees individuals from the social control of tight-knit groups, providing an alternative venue for alternative social learning, thus further weakening the social control of these tight-knit groups over individuals. As this process happens, Public life becomes more attractive, more informative, more theatrical.

We lose a focus of opposition to the power of the state and the corporation. Family and community are not the only social controls. The state has sole access to the legal forms of violence (military, police, courts, jails) and still exercises great control over supposedly free individuals. The corporation can engage in actions seen as economic violence.

And with this creation of the modern state and corporation, the public sphere is that realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed, which enables public criticism by a body of citizens in relation to the state and corporation. Here, the state, corporation and the public sphere confront one another as opponents. This can only happen when citizens have and welcome a wide diversity of opinions, can confer in an unrestricted fashion, have freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of expression and publication of these opinions.

If Public life offers a freeing from control by the social structure of kin, neighbors, institutions and the state, it is also a social leveler, an equalizer of power inequities, at least temporarily and locationally, and because access is relatively free, it is a generally accessible freedom.

We lose the marvel of the stranger. Given the human desire to experience the remarkable, time spent with strangers free from social control offers a situation in which we can seek and find the extraordinary, with some, but not great, risk.

Public life offers a spectacle of strangeness, a celebration of possibility and an offering of a wide array of possible models for behavior.

In Public life, we can even become the stranger to others. In public, there is anonymity and freedom to play and to play act, to construct a personal mythos, to test what-if and engage in make-believe, all prerequisites to transformation testing.

The Public life we are losing seems to offer the following opportunities that Community life does not and that TODs can't easily offer:
• *Shaping public concepts of governance, religion and social structure, opposing institutions of power where appropriate, and taking group action.*
• *Exchanging news and information, finding out what is happening in other than local situations.*
• *Getting pleasure by being actor and/or audience for public spectacle and entertainment.*
• *Being a school for social learning, using Public life as a transformative text.*
• *Being expressive, where your actions matter.*
• *Learning of civility towards diversity, a critical form of tolerance.*

Prospects for the New Urbs

In the TODs of New Urbanism (and even in the economically stratified inner city New Urbs), there will be more Community life than now, and perhaps that Community life will be richer than it is in much of suburbia now. This will be only partly an outcome of the New Urbanism, because it is also driven by a set of long-term forces now affecting most suburban communities, forces that may well propel or be accelerated by New Urbanism.

These forces are driven largely by technologies and networks that spatially uncouple work and, increasingly, commerce, from metropolitan centers, enabling white-collar workers to work from their homes, close-to-home neighborhood satellite offices and the TODs of the New Urbanism without going downtown. With corporate

downsizing, there is also a substantial increase in outsourcing, with highly skilled, white-collar temporary employees often working from their homes.

This increases the daytime presence of adults in the community, many of whom have flexibility in their work schedules. With the rise of telecommuting, enabling work-at-a-distance, there are fewer corporate-driven household relocations. People live in one community longer, and this longer-tenured population becomes more involved in Community life and less relocation turnover means fewer strangers. This more-involved presence attracts more and higher-quality retail, food, entertainment and professional services, and suburbs (or the New Urbs) become more like full-service, rather than bedroom, communities.

But what about Public life? In the New Urbs too much is missing to have a Public life of much diversity with strangers. As the central business district's white-collar workforce declines, the city core's share of poverty continues to increase. Service workers employed in suburbia can't afford to live where their work is, and must commute now from the affordable, though deteriorating city core. As class, geographic and economic stratification increases, strangerhood decreases and a more homogenous system of values reigns. Exclusionary practices continue, with more communities advertised as physically gated and guarded, as well as having the "virtual" gate of housing non-affordability.

All this is happening now. The prognosis for an enhanced Community life (parochial life) in the New Urbanism is good, but for Public life it is bad, both in the New Urbanism and the old city core, offering an even narrower band of social relationships than we have now.

Calthorpe's work, and New Urbanism in general, are welcome departures from our unexamined planning assumptions and norms. My

concern is that Calthorpe's avowed historic precedents and sources (traditional American town, City Beautiful Movement, Europe's Garden Cities, Ruskin's romanticism, medieval urbanism, streetcar suburbs) inform but also deflect the search for appropriate and vital visions for Community life in the New Urbs. In discussing the pitfalls of easy historicism in design for Public life today, Gutman asks the critical question: "What does one do to compensate for the possibility that radical new forms of social life are constantly developing, perhaps so radical that no reasonable adaptations and adjustments in the stock of typologies will be adequate for dealing with them?"[8]

Notes

1. Peter Calthorpe, *The Next American Metropolis* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), 23.
2. Ibid., 21, 15.
3. Ibid., 92, 90.
4. Ibid., 23.
5. Ibid., 23.
6. Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), 4; Mark Girouard, *Cities and People* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 379.
7. Camillo Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, George Collins and Christine Collins (trans.) (New York: Random House, 1965)
8. Robert Gutman, "The Street Generation," in Stanford Anderson (Ed.), *On Streets* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986)