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THE FUTURE OF URBAN OPEN SPACE

Across the United States, master plans and zoning maps splashed with green attest to our commitment to “public open space.” But rarely do we stop to ask the important questions: What is public open space? Who is “the public” it is intended to serve? And are the traditional forms of parks, plazas, and playgrounds relevant to late twentieth century life?

Scholars and designers from the U.S. and Europe debated these issues last fall at a two-day symposium entitled “The Future of Urban Open Space,” held in conjunction with the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley. This issue of *Places* comprises abridged versions of eleven of the papers presented at this event.

We start in the traditional location for public life—the streets and squares of the inner city. Such spaces in Copenhagen have seen a remarkable flowering of public life in the past 25 years. Jan Gehl was largely responsible for persuading the city to eliminate vehicular traffic from Stroget—the city’s narrow medieval “main street”—to traffic in 1962. He and his students of urban design carried out studies of street life on this street in 1968 and again in 1986.

In his paper, “Changing Street Life in a Changing Society,” Gehl recounts the substantial increase in public life in these downtown spaces, and suggests that the need for public life is even greater than it once was: families are smaller, working hours are shorter and more flexible, the proportion of retired people is growing. With relatively little expense, streets and squares in Copenhagen were converted to pedestrian use, and people poured into them.

The results confounded the critics who believed there was no tradition and therefore no call for public street life in Scandinavia. “The Danes are not Italians,” skeptics argued. This phrase caught the imagination of many at the Symposium: could Americans “be Italians”? Is our Euro-nostalgia misplaced, or could we, like the Danes, be tempted into the streets, given the right settings and locations? Somehow, this Northern European success story excited the audience and counted for more than the inevitable slides of Siena, San Marco, and the Spanish steps. If a culture with a relatively short summer, no tradition of public street life, and a location far removed from the shores of the Mediterranean could so heartily embrace walking, sitting, watching, talking, and playing in downtown streets and squares, perhaps there is hope for a revival of traditional public life in North America.

As Gehl's work illustrates, public space is of little import without people. Two papers address the basic questions: What is public life? And how and where does public life occur in contemporary U.S. cities? Lyn Lofland discusses the history of public life before and after the Industrial Revolution and argues that public life has diminished as a result of the cult of domesticity. As private life and the family home rose to prominence in late nineteenth century America, the life and populace of "the streets" began to be denigrated, and fewer activities took place in the public spaces of our cities.

Mike Brill, while agreeing with this position, argues that the public life of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe never did cross the Atlantic and our nostalgia for what has been lost in the public sphere is somewhat misplaced: a vibrant European-style public life may never have existed in this country. A different kind of public life is emerging, however, in forms and places we hardly recognize as "public space." It is taking place via the media (call-in talk shows, interactive television, grand public events reported on the news); and it is taking place in shopping malls, flea markets, local festivals, beaches, and sporting events. Public life, Brill argues, is not dead, not diminished, but transformed. As planners and designers we must look at the places to which the public is attracted and enhance those settings if we want to support public life.

Also looking to the past and to Europe to understand contemporary public life in this country, Mark Chidister describes the use of city squares in medieval and later periods. He suggests that the modern day plaza can never be wholly successful because its very form is modelled on the piazza of long ago, when a multitude of activities and types of people called this space home. Now, in the homogeneous office districts of downtown America, the corporate plaza used by lunching bureaucrats for a short period each day is a pale reminder of what city public life once was.

But as Chidister was questioned after his talk, does this matter? If lunch-hour, brown-bagging is what we do in downtown plazas, let us celebrate, encourage and enhance it. Who knows what mental health benefits accrue to the office worker allowed one hour in the open air after four hours in front of a computer screen. Does it matter that city squares were once "something else" if the public life they currently foster benefits at least one important group?

While plazas based on models from the European past may be questionable in contemporary U.S. cities, so too may the parks we have inherited from the nineteenth century. Michael Laurie suggests it is time to rethink and redesign our monumental parks, often poorly maintained and perceived as unsafe. His controversial paper proposes we allocate land in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park for farms and affordable housing.

In research conducted and reported by Louise Mozingo in her paper "Women and Downtown Open Spaces," evidence is presented that indicates men and women perceive and use downtown public space in different ways. Although many designers are experienced in making adaptations to the environment for handicapped users or the elderly, very few are aware that certain environmental conditions are more appealing to women than to men.

The implications of Mozingo's findings are very significant if we plan to provide public space, as we must, for both men and women. She argues that we must provide a continuum of places from the very public to the quite secluded to allow freedom of choice for all users. What of other variables about which we know even less, one participant asked. Should we design for gender differences when we know little about ethnic, cultural, or personality differences? Hopefully, it was argued, the greater the variety of downtown open spaces, the more will each individual be able to find his or her particular niche.

Looking at the location of public life, Brill and Lofland describe human activities as falling into three broad categories: private, public, and parochial. The latter includes neighborhood, work, and school life, all those places that fall between the extremes of the private home (and automobile?) and the public realm which is accessible to all city dwellers.

This in-between sphere is given little attention by Brill and Lofland on the assumption that it is not truly "public." But perhaps it is exactly this kind of space that should be given more attention, just because it is in-between. As metropolitan areas become larger and more complex and their streets more difficult to negotiate, the neighborhood park and local sidewalk become more precious. These are the places where we casually meet strangers, drop by for an art show, or join in a basketball game. Visits to the Civic Center and the Town Square may become more rare as public life becomes reconstituted at a local level.

As designers we need to become more attuned to this reformulation of public life. Neighborhoods are rarely parochial anymore, but just as full of strangers as the traditional Town Square. We also need to become more sensitive to the subtle cues that designate space as shared. The plaza we understand; the neighborhood park is similarly a clear model, even if we might disagree with Brill and Lofland as to whether it is "public" or "parochial." Less clear are the spaces that are communal, or shared by a specific group: the gardens in a seniors' living complex; the pool in a condominium development; the play area and lawns in a public housing project. These are the outdoor spaces that are becoming more meaningful to many city dwellers—places that they feel they can appropriate, places for which they feel partially responsible.

We have few models to draw upon as we might draw on the

“piazza,” for example, when thinking of the modern plaza. Hence, the shared or communal spaces of our cities are perhaps the least well understood in terms of design, boundaries, qualities, and appropriate use. We create a pedestrian walkway through a new housing scheme and then wonder why residents become upset and feel their territory is violated when neighbors use it as a short-cut. We create attractive courtyards in a condominium complex, and are surprised at family versus non-family conflicts over whether those spaces should be used for play. The new shared places in our cities offer a potential for local public life which is by no means understood or fully provided for.

But there are exceptions, local places that do work; all the more reason we should look at them very closely. Mark Francis reports on community gardens and on his own study comparing a Sacramento park and an adjacent community garden. The latter had more users, a greater commitment and involvement among its users, and cost less than the park to run and maintain. Tom Fox of the Neighborhood Open Space Coalition describes the use of “found” space in the city that can become locally valued for outdoor recreation places and form part of a network of open spaces running through the city.

All these authors focus our attention on places not generally thought of as “public” and on activities that may not be considered part of “public life.” But instead of dismissing such places and activities as parochial, perhaps we need to expand our definitions, or at least embrace the possibility that urban open space and its use is changing more rapidly than we have imagined—or have models for, or words to describe.

Socializing and recreating with neighbors in shared outdoor space is one important role for public space in the city. Another traditional role is to permit contact with nature. The marked increase in the pursuit of urban gardening as a hobby and the passionate concern of many city-dwellers for the protection of threatened natural environments, attest to a re-arousal of interest in nature and natural processes.

Both Lawrence Halprin and Anne Spirn are deeply committed to the expression of such processes in their designs: Halprin looks, for example, to the forms of mountain streams and rock formations to inspire his work; Spirn seeks to honor and make manifest the natural processes of drainage, erosion, and deposition in policies and plans. Since people are also part of nature, culture, too, is place-specific and must be honored and expressed in the settings we create. Randolph Hester’s paper echoes the sentiments of Halprin and Spirn, and offers socio-political arguments for consulting the user of new and modified environments so that their unique views are recognized and so that urban open space becomes meaningful—and accessible—to all.

Settings in the public realm may, in their most profound expression, enable us to glimpse the meaning of our lives, our

place in the universe. Halprin, in an inspiring conclusion to the Symposium, proposed that the landscape architect may potentially fill the role of Shaman or alchemist—taking base elements and rearranging them so as to enhance a change of consciousness in the onlooker. If we are indeed to survive as a species, to recognize our role in the complexity of natural and human systems, perhaps this raising of ecological and metaphysical awareness in public spaces is the most urgent task of design. To quote Alan Gussow on place:

There is a great deal of talk these days about saving the environment. We must, for the environment sustains our bodies. But as humans we also require support for our spirits, and this is what certain kinds of places provide. The catalyst that converts any physical location—any environment, if you will—into a place, is the process of experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings. Viewed simply as a life-support system, the earth is an environment. Viewed as a resource that sustains our humanity, the earth is a collection of places.¹

Note

1. Alan Gussow, *A Sense of Place* (San Francisco: Friends of the Earth, 1972).

The Future of Urban Open Space Symposium was held in October, 1988, at the University of California, Berkeley, College of Environmental Design and was organized by Marcus and professors Michael Southworth and Peter Bosselmann.