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# Cities for People

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With its legacy of forty years of improvements to the pedestrian environment, Copenhagen, Denmark, provides a living testament to both the feasibility of the walking environment and the quality-of-life improvements communities can expect if they promote it. The decision to hold the fifth Walk 21 conference there, and to title it “Cities for People,” was intended to drive home this relationship between good urban design and good walking environments.

Walk 21 is a global partnership of experts whose aim is to raise awareness of walking issues.<sup>1</sup> But this year’s conference was also hosted by the Center for Public Space Research, with major funding from the Real-ania Foundation.<sup>2</sup> The Center’s director, Jan Gehl, has long argued there can be no vitality on the streets of any town or city without exchange between people. Gehl, whose report “Public Spaces, Public Life” won an EDRA/*Places* research award in 1998, believes public-space designs that do not explicitly take the human body into account cannot possibly produce an urban environment of high quality.

“Cities for People” therefore challenged participants to address the sterile streetscape and public spaces typical of new development, and expand discussion on the benefits of walking beyond issues of health and obesity. Gehl said he felt these issues had been thoroughly explored at the last Walk 21 conference in Portland, Oregon. In Copenhagen he tried to steer the discussion toward such other themes as social encounter, joy and exploration, childhood cognitive development, environmental quality, and tourism — to name the concerns of only a few of the more ambitious presentations.

## Reclaiming Pedestrian Space

Keynote speakers at the conference recounted their experiences in a number of cities that have pursued a vibrant public-life agenda, including walking, through better design.

Rob Adams’s presentation described how strong political support, even within the constraints of a limited budget, may produce incremental, yet substantial change in the built environment. Adams is Chief Architect of Melbourne, Australia, a city that decided to change its Central Business District to a Central Activity District in the mid-1980s. The decision has resulted in a fifteen-fold increase in the number of housing units there, a renewal of interest in the conservation and retrofit of historic buildings, and an explosion in sidewalk café seats from zero to almost five hundred today. The last change was achieved despite repeated warnings by skeptics that Melbourne’s climate and culture were not amenable to displays of public life — a critique strongly reminiscent of opposition to Copenhagen’s decision to pedestrianize streets in the Central City forty years ago.

A second keynote examined the transformation of Bogota, Colombia, a city now celebrated for innovation by urban planners. Enrique Peñalosa, its former mayor, explained how much of this success has derived from strong and sustained political support for the rights of pedestrians. Bogota’s pedestrianization campaign helped renew trust in government, produce a dramatic drop in violent crime, and repopulate the city’s public spaces, he said. At a time when it is inordinately difficult to persuade U.S. politicians to invest in the public realm, Peñalosa argued the example of Bogota demonstrates how good design, especially when tied to a commitment in social equity, can improve the quality of life

for all residents.

A third keynote speaker was Barbara Southworth, an urban designer for Cape Town, South Africa, and winner of the 2003 Ruth and Ralph Erskine Award. The award, which comes with a prize of \$10,000, is given once every three years to individuals, groups or organizations working in innovative ways to produce socially progressive architecture or urban design.<sup>3</sup>

Southworth spoke of her efforts to create new and vibrant public spaces in her country’s predominantly black townships. During the Apartheid years, there was almost no public investment in these areas, and as a result there were very few public spaces in the townships where people could gather, shop, or exchange goods and ideas. To remedy this situation, Southworth had to contend with distrust among many segments of the citizenry. But she credited a combination of passion, purpose, respect for the opinions of township residents, and a strong program of public input for her success.

Today Southworth is particularly encouraged by the ways a previously ignored constituency has taken ownership of both the new spaces and the processes of creating them. Among other things, this commitment has demonstrated to politicians that urban design can become a true vehicle for public concern — and votes.

## An International View

The keynote presentations were typical of the broad geographic and topical scope of research shared at the conference. Conference organizers structured this work under three themes: Achieving the Vision, Urban Quality of Life, and Architecture and Design. Presenters in the first area focused on political structures that need to be in place and economic



arguments that need to be won if walking is to be successfully integrated into public design strategies. In the second, they examined ways to better involve residents in the planning and evaluation of the urban environment. The third area included presentations of specific strategies to create and sustain walkable spaces, as well as successful case studies from around the world.

Taken as a whole, the talks demonstrated the broad spectrum of physical, cultural, economic and political challenges facing advocates for pedestrian space. The perspectives of many different users were also represented: children, the elderly, the politically and economically disenfranchised, the tourist, the shopkeeper. But these remained tied to an understanding that, worldwide, pedestrian-oriented environments must meet common design challenges, irrespective of culture and history. Each place will demand its own solutions, ones that are sensitive to local context, but the human body's relationship to its environment remains constant across space and time.

Some of the hurdles that advocates of walking face have more to do with states of mind than physical constraints. Toward this end, David Engwicht and Daniel Sauter organized a lively preconference discussion called "Mind Matters." Engwicht is an advocate of traffic-calming efforts in Australia and North America, and Sauter is a Zurich-based pedestrian-space researcher. Together, they argued that design is not enough (or perhaps not even necessary) to achieve

a more balanced relationship between the driver and other users of public rights-of-way. Among the examples of strategies city residents can employ to reclaim their streets without the time and expense of urban design are "street-reclaiming parties," at which they may celebrate such car-defying activities as street painting, placing seating in parking spaces, and creating interesting artwork along the edges of the street.

### The Example of Copenhagen

The conference, however, offered more than just presentations and poster sessions. It also provided participants with many opportunities to experience Copenhagen firsthand through a series of (mis)guided walks, bike rides, canal tours, and metro rides.

"Mis-guiding," was the subject of a presentation at the conference by Stephen Hodge, Simon Persighetti, Phil Smith, Cathy Turner, and Tony Weaver, and was adopted by attendees as one of its quirkier themes. A mis-tour deliberately takes participants to lesser known, but equally interesting, parts of a city, and can include performances. According to the Mis-Guide website: "Mis-Guides are like no other guides you have ever used before. Rather than telling you where to go and what to see, a Mis-Guide gives you the ways to see your town or city that no one else has found yet. A Mis-Guide is both a forged passport to your 'other' city and a new way of travelling a very familiar one."<sup>4</sup>

For a first-time visitor from North America, the display of life splashed

across Copenhagen's public realm can be intoxicating. But having had the previous four months to become enmeshed in the flows of the city, I felt I bestrode two worlds — one mind firmly set in the pragmatism of American planning, the other swept up into the realm of possibility. Perhaps other participants experienced this same exciting duality and will use the resulting energy to jumpstart local pedestrian-advocacy efforts in their home cities.

"Cities for People" generated the type of discussion and dialogue that should continue to build the pedestrian space movement. The next Walk 21 Conference will be held in Zurich, Switzerland in September 2005.

### Notes

1. The name is a reference to issues of walking in the 21st century.
2. The stated mission of the Realdania Foundation is to improve the quality of life in Denmark by creating new qualities, and preserving existing ones, in the built environment. The conference was also made possible with assistance from Dyrup, a paint company, and Copenhagen X, a partnership between the city of Copenhagen, Frederiksberg Municipality, and the Realdania Foundation
3. More information on the Erskine award is available at [http://www.d-a-z.hr/ostalo/nagrade/ralph\\_erskine.htm](http://www.d-a-z.hr/ostalo/nagrade/ralph_erskine.htm).
4. <http://www.mis-guide.com/mgmain.html>

**Left:** More than a kilometer of red carpet was used during the conference as an interactive art display to invite walking in the city. Photo by author.

**Right:** Bicyclists are a typical feature of Copenhagen's morning commute. Photo by author.