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## Places

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A Changing Street Life in a Changing Society

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Meeting other people, watching what is going on, seeing young and old; being entertained by street artists, ordinary daily street life, or the ever changing human scene: these are the subtle, traditional joys related to life in public spaces.

The squares of Rome and Siena; the streets of Venice, Europe, and North America; main streets, ordinary streets, and sidewalks: these are traditional open air public spaces, well known through history—and still around. Handed over from previous generations with their memories of days and life past, they are still, in varying degrees, part of urban life.

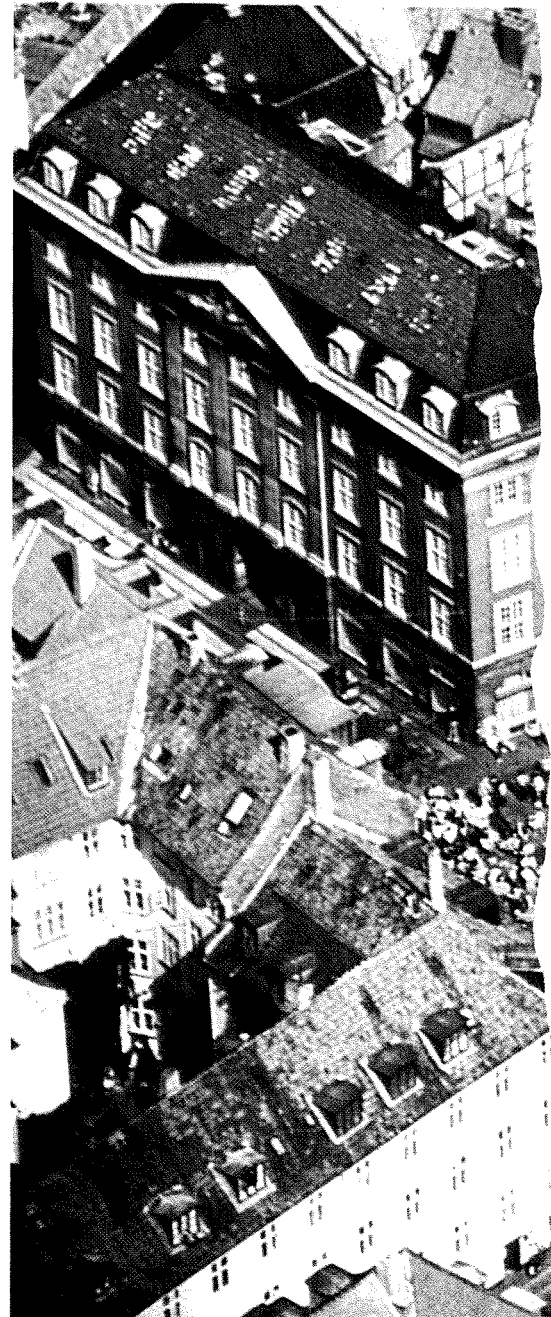
However, streets and squares, as well as street life patterns, are under heavy pressure from a number of directions.

Car traffic and parking take up space, sidewalks become narrower; spaces are being filled with danger, noise, fumes, and rude “50 miles per hour architecture.”

The number of diversions is increasing as well. The telephone, television set, 30 TV channels, and video shops offering a “six-movie Sunday pack” signal new eras. Spend the weekends at home and watch, passively, what others have personally seen.

Changing patterns of consumption from market to discount store and supermarket can be noted. Buying in bulk, or by mail or TV screen; new types of merchandise: these are the signs of growing overall consumption, but less street life is generated by these activities.

Traditional public open spaces have contemporary counterparts: shopping malls, arcades, and atriums; festival markets, underground cities, and skywalk systems. The innovations have tended to concentrate urban life in certain locations, certain hours, and certain categories of “acceptable” activities. These spaces are mostly indoor and nearly always privately-controlled, offering



# A Changing Street Life in a Changing Society



The medieval city pattern of Copenhagen has been retained over the centuries, giving the city an abundance of well-defined spaces of pleasant, useful proportions. In 1968, Grayfriars Square served as a parking lot for some 60 cars. By 1986, the square had been transformed into a resting place for an average of 420 persons on summer days. Photos and graphics courtesy Jan Gehl.

Following page:  
A summer afternoon at the Old City Square, Copenhagen, 1986.





privatized versions of the once public street life.

Will traditional, subtle, low-key street life and the public life associated with it become more or less redundant in this process? Will the free joys of public life become nostalgic leftovers from other days and times? A number of studies carried out in Copenhagen and several other Scandinavian cities may provide background for the discussion concerning present and future roles for the street as public space.

### **Street Life in Downtown Copenhagen, 1962-1987**

Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, is a city of 1.5 million inhabitants, a figure that has remained nearly unchanged during the last 25 years.

The pattern of the downtown streets and squares as well as the dimensions of the individual spaces are more or less preserved from the medieval period. The majority of the buildings are four or five stories high, buildings dating from about 1780 to 1820, erected after a series of great fires. The main street throughout history, the Stroget, is still the main street, three quarters of a mile long and 32 feet wide.

In the 1950s, as car traffic in the city center increased, there was a rather constant decrease in the number of pedestrians using the Stroget's narrow sidewalks. The street quality was gradually decreasing and customers responded by avoiding the street or shortening their visits.

Some 25 years ago, in November, 1962, the Stroget was closed to traffic and turned into a pedestrian street.

The introduction of this, the first pedestrian street in Scandinavia, was met by widespread skepticism. Newspaper headlines such as "We are not Italians" and "Using Public Spaces is Contrary to Scandinavian Mentality"

dominated the discussion prior to closing this important street to traffic.

Almost immediately, it became evident that the skepticism was unfounded. The first year saw a 35 percent increase in the number of pedestrians and entirely new patterns of street life started to develop in the traffic-free area. It appeared that a major reason for the lack of tradition of using urban spaces in Scandinavian cities was that spaces of suitable quality had not been available for a very long time because of the intensive automobile traffic.

In 1967 and 1968, five years after the introduction of pedestrian zones, downtown street life was minutely recorded during a full year by students and researchers from the School of Architecture of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts.<sup>1</sup> This survey, carried out mainly by way of observation studies, provided very detailed insights into the use of downtown public spaces. More specifically, the study revealed that all established car-free spaces were being utilized to their capacity—and occasionally beyond.

### **A Changing City and a Changing Street Life**

After the success of the initial pedestrian scheme the entire downtown of Copenhagen has, in a number of successive steps, been transformed. New streets and squares have been added to the pedestrian network, one after the other in a gradual process of improvements. When one space proved successful and was taken into use, new spaces were added. The entire city center has gradually been closed to all through traffic except busses and bicycles.

The total length of the pedestrian network has tripled from about two thirds of a mile to two miles. The total area of traffic-free streets and squares has tripled, to 14 acres. And because of

the general reduction of automobile traffic in all the remaining streets, the entire city center has achieved a much gentler and more inviting atmosphere.

Paralleling these improvements, a gradual increase and change in people's use of public space is evident. New types of organized street life and events have evolved around the now available urban spaces: jazz festivals, theater festivals, concerts, and parades, as well as an annual grass roots carnival with a half million Copenhageners dancing, of all things, samba in the once quaint Copenhagen streets.

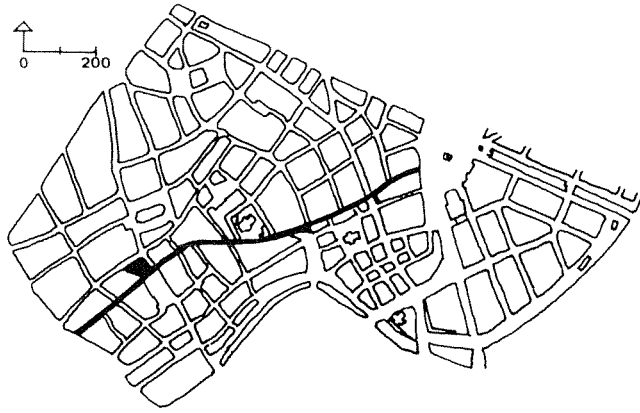
Such grand organized events represent the most easily identifiable changes to city life, but parallel to these developments, substantial changes to the ordinary daily patterns of public space use also have taken place.

### **A Changing Society: The Second Survey of Street Life in Downtown Copenhagen**

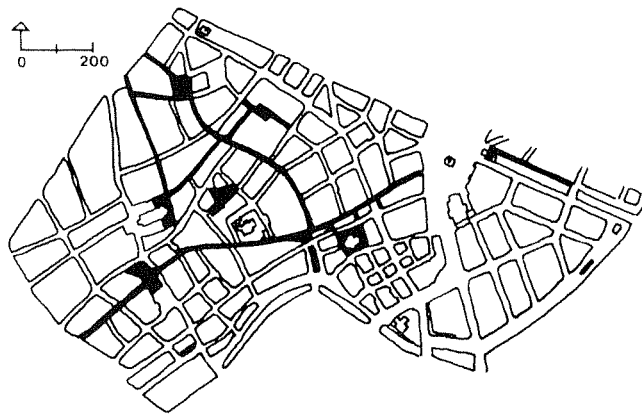
A second survey of downtown street life was organized in 1986, 18 years after the previous survey. It was conducted in the same areas, during the same periods of the week and year, and under the same weather conditions as in the 1968 survey—but in a society that had changed in a number of ways, which could be expected to influence the use of public spaces.

The average size of households in Denmark has been declining throughout the century. Around 1900 the average household size was 4.9 persons; by 1986 it had dropped to 2.2. In major cities like Copenhagen, the 1986 household size was 1.7 persons, indicating that the majority of all households are now made up of one or two people.

Important changes in the work place also have taken place. Many jobs have become more repetitious, mechanized and rationalized, and thus emptied of



The pedestrian street network in Copenhagen's city center in 1968. The total length of the pedestrian street is 1,100 meters. The total area of traffic-free streets and squares is 18,800 square meters.



Traffic-free streets and squares in 1986. The length of the pedestrian network has been extended to 3,115 meters, an increase of 183 percent. The network now contains 11 fully or partly traffic-free squares; the pedestrian area now totals 56,900 square meters, an increase of 203 percent.

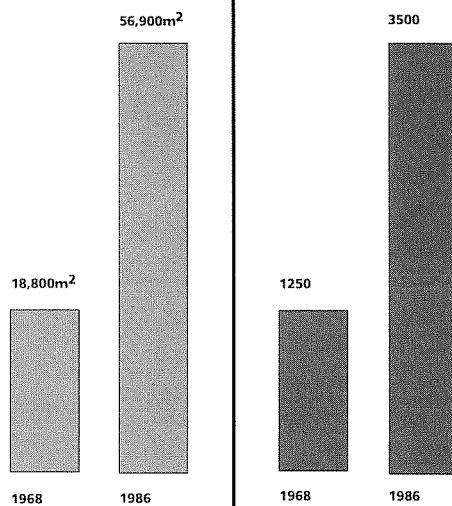


Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 1. The total area of traffic-free streets and squares tripled between 1968 and 1986. Figure 2. During the same period the number of people standing and sitting in the area tripled, as well. (Average number of persons standing and sitting between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. on summer Tuesdays).

1986. Copenhagen's public spaces are used in new, more active ways. The two photos are examples of small-scale, popular activities.



important elements of personal involvement and creativity. On the other hand, technical developments have led to a situation in which working hours are reduced and leisure time increased.

These changes mean that social and creative opportunities offered outside the home and work place are gaining increased importance.

The second survey was carried out between February and October, 1986—covering all four seasons.<sup>2</sup> As in the first survey, direct observation was the preliminary method. Every Tuesday with good weather, all the pedestrian streets and squares were surveyed from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

The findings and conclusions presented here are based on activity observed in the summer, which, in the Scandinavian two-season culture, is the all-important period. The good summer

climate allows city users to engage in a wide range of “optional” activities while “necessary” activities predominate in the other seasons.

### A Spectacular Increase in the Use of Public Space

By 1968 the Stroget was filled to capacity. Most summer days pedestrian traffic was close to the point of serious crowding. By 1986, the Stroget was competing with more recently established pedestrian streets. However, it was still filled to capacity and beyond. A 10 percent increase in pedestrian traffic was recorded. The street simply could not accommodate any more pedestrians.

The other and newer pedestrian streets were found to be almost as crowded as the Stroget, and altogether the pedestrian traffic in the major streets of the city increased by 25 percent from 1968 to 1986.

The most remarkable change, however, was not the increase in pedestrian traffic flows, but the increase of the number of people staying in the streets and squares. All available squares of good quality were filled to capacity every day, as were all available outdoor cafes and benches. The number of persons standing, sitting, or lingering in public spaces on the average summer weekday had tripled. This indicates that the average time each individual used public spaces has increased considerably.

The situation of the city can be compared to a party. Some parties are considered not worth going to at all. Others turn out to be dull, with the guests leaving rather too soon. At best, guests will stay for a long time because they are enjoying themselves.

The tripling of the staying activities in Copenhagen indicates that the people visiting downtown have found many more places and opportunities for having an enjoyable time in the city. People





will choose to stop, stand, and sit for an extended period of time only where public spaces of reasonable quality can be found.

### **Public Spaces are Used in New, More Active Ways**

In the 1960s, downtown streets were used almost exclusively for activities like visiting stores and window-shopping. Squares were used primarily for what could be termed “passivities,” such as sitting on benches and standing around.

Today, a higher proportion of the people present on ordinary days are active: street vendors, theater groups, circus troupes, musicians; people with all kinds of talents, skills, and viewpoints are using public spaces as a forum for small scale exchange of goods, talents, and opinions.

The types of activities that flourish are the small scale events generated by groups and individuals from all over the city who have something to tell, something to show, or some small item to sell or exchange. Every tenth person standing or sitting in Copenhagen public spaces on an ordinary summer day was found to be actively involved in some small scale activity aimed at fellow citizens; many of the other persons and other activities were found to be centered around or oriented towards these new urban activities.

The city streets and squares have attained an extra role as a public forum for a very wide range of direct communication and cultural exchange, and as a meeting place and exchange point for the people of the city.

### **The Quality of Public Spaces is a Decisive Factor in Use Patterns**

The third, and in many ways most important, finding concerns the spectacular correlation between the physical

qualities of a public space and the volume and character of life there.

The survey found that a tripling of traffic-free open space had been followed by a tripling in the numbers of persons choosing to spend time in the city. A closer look at the data from the various spaces shows that this correlation is by no means arbitrary. A close correlation can be found right down to the individual street and square. All spaces of good quality in the city center are virtually filled to capacity every summer day, all day.

The presence of a number of factors determining the quality or “usability” of each space was found to be closely correlated with the large number of persons using a place day after day: location in relation to main pedestrian flows, the local climate, the spatial qualities, the dimensions, and, foremost, the provision of furniture and details supporting staying activities.

### **“The New Street Life”**

The Copenhagen street life survey from 1986 describes an interesting success story. The quality of city spaces has improved as a part of a long term strategy—making the city center somewhat better each year.

Demand for using the city has been growing annually. Any space cleared of traffic and given over to popular, pedestrian use has been utilized, indicating that it is the number of public spaces and their quality that have determined the volume and character of street life. The crowded spaces found in the 1986 survey indicates that quite a few additional spaces appear to be required to meet existing demand.

It is evident after a closer look into the character of street activities that the new activity patterns are related to a changing society, one in which leisure time is increasingly important. The

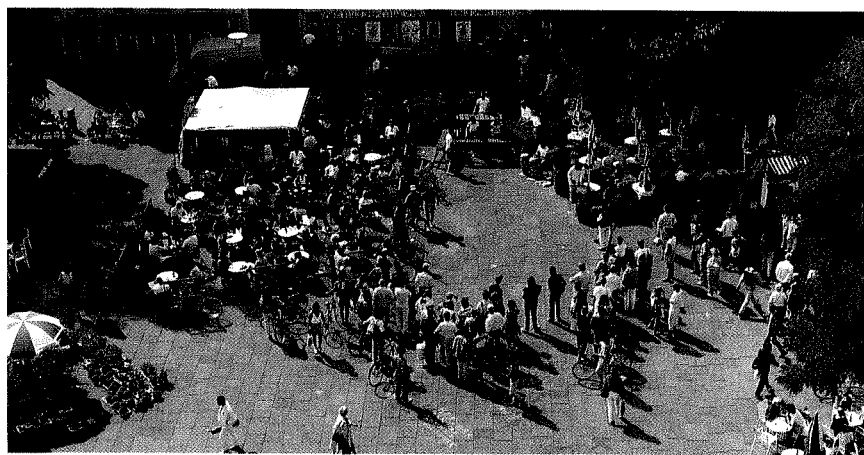
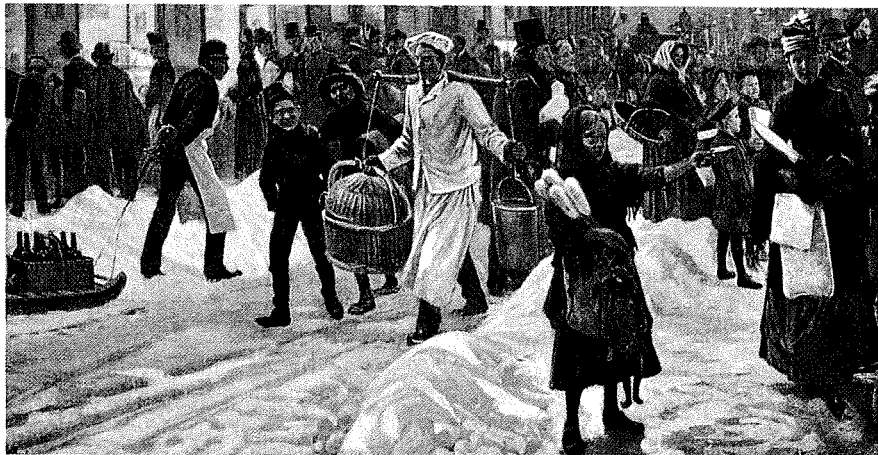
boundaries between working hours and leisure time have become increasingly fluid. Many people work harder and with more enjoyment in their “non-working” time. In this new situation, public spaces can be seen to have a new and very important role.

Three factors can be seen to have played a major role in the public’s increasing use of open space. First, the development of the pedestrian street network has been gradual, giving people time to find out step by step what public spaces can be used for. A “new” street life culture has had time to develop subtly. The Danes indeed were not Italians, but given the spaces and the time a very Italian street life has certainly evolved.

Second, the development has been carried out very inexpensively. The ordinary city fabric has been cleared of traffic and suitably furnished at no great cost. No huge private investments have necessitated the immediate influx of vast numbers of customers to generate income to pay for the investment. This slow, low-key development has given a freedom to experiment, and the street life in any given space has been allowed to develop at its own pace.

The extensive new Copenhagen street life has been taken from nowhere. No draining of users and customers from surrounding areas has been necessary. Basically, the increase has come about—not by having more visitors, but because the visitors now spend many more joyful hours in the city. Cost-intensive enterprises would surely rather welcome more visitors than see the normal crowds settle down and stay.

A final and important point will be that the development has been public. Public spaces have been changed from one public use to another. Traffic streets have become people’s streets. The municipal supervision of the urban spaces has enabled a general policy of allowing and encouraging a wide range



**Stroget, 1890.**

The street life closely reflects the social situation at this point. For many people the street was a necessary place of work, while for more affluent citizens it was used for shopping and promenades, to see and be seen.

**Stroget, 1968.**

Hardly any work activities are left in the street. All commercial activities have moved indoors and the street space functions primarily as a shopping and window watching street, a corridor for consumption, window shopping, as well as the ever present "to see and be seen" function.

**The "new" street life, 1986.**

The old pattern of public space as a necessary place of work is being superseded by new patterns in which popular cultural activities play an increasingly important role. Public space has taken on a new role as an arena for popular social and cultural exchanges in a society in which non-working activities have gained increasing importance.

of persons and activities to use city spaces, making them truly public, in accordance with a democratic tradition. This policy regards urban spaces as a valuable social and cultural meeting place for the general public, but does not neglect commercial interests.

### The Street as a Public Place

Far from being phased out by societal changes, life in public spaces can—given the necessary support—grow and develop. Traditional uses centered around working and trading have been supplemented and to a wide extent superseded by social and creative activities.

In a “leisure time” society, public spaces serve an important role as the most easily accessible places to go, to meet people and to take part in public life. Public spaces can be seen as the important first link in a chain of places to go. Further links are community buildings, schools, cultural institutions, sports facilities, and all the other facilities offered to people seeking company and opportunities for being active.

But public space can be the attractive and necessary first link. It is the easiest place to go. It is a place for everyone. It is a place in which you do not have to know anyone, or do anything in particular, except be there. It is a place where no tickets or bookings, enrollments, or invitations are needed. You can just come along in the course of your daily activities and take in the scene. If you have something to communicate, talents or viewpoints to display, you can likewise just come along.

The street is the largest stage in the city, and the most used. No other facility will—for a very moderate expenditure—offer opportunities and pleasures for a wider number of persons, from the youngest to the oldest.

Just as Frederick Law Olmsted responded to social needs of cities in the

previous century by creating urban parks that gave citizens opportunities to escape the dirty and crowded city and get in contact with natural elements, a likely response to present social conditions would be to create public urban spaces, where people who are part of small households and have more leisure time, as well as all other citizens, can meet on democratic terms and function together, enjoying their cities and each other’s personage. City streets and squares may in this context be seen as the urban parks of this century—much needed amenities which ought to be generally available.

Knowing the close correlation between the quality of a space and the public life that develops there creates quite a challenge—but it also creates a firm base: given careful consideration and sensitive designs, public street life can be substantially supported. On the other hand, if negative factors are allowed to take over, and the qualities of urban life are shaped by carelessness, neglect, or adverse planning, public life can rapidly be chased off the streets.

Given positive and negative cycles, given carelessness and neglect, and given the pressures and competition levelled on public spaces and public life, this area of concern ought to be treated in a much more conscious way than is generally practiced today. A carefully considered and implemented public space/public life policy ought to be as commonplace as are traffic, culture, and recreation policies.

I started by describing the subtle, free joys of urban life. I shall conclude by pointing to present trends that in my view constitute the most serious threats to these very free and very public joys.

One of the first and most important issues to be addressed in a progressive public space policy must be the increasing number of enterprises offering privatized versions of “street life.” Street

life indeed has been found to be so popular that this attraction has been given a major role in making private shopping centers, shopping arcades, indoor “squares,” festival markets, and skywalk systems popular. All of these ambitious, privately-operated projects need extensive numbers of visitors and generally spare no effort to divert people away from public spaces.

It does not have to be an either-or policy, but a better balance between public interests and private enterprises will have to be worked out in order to ensure that the invaluable free joys of *public* urban life will be available city-wide to all of us in the cities of the present and future.

### Notes

1. Jan Gehl, “Mennesker til fods” (Pedestrians), *Arkitekten* (Denmark) 10, 1968.

2. Bergdoll, Gehl, and Stessen, “Byliv 1986” (Street Life 1986), *Arkitekten* (Denmark) 11, 1987.