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Social Sciences

Cities for People
Jan Gehl
Island Press
978-1-59726-573-7
(August 31, 2010)

What would a modern city look like if it was designed around people instead of traffic, around public spaces instead of roads? Why are some European cities so full of people walking and cycling? Architect and author Jan Gehl presents a convincing proposal for how to make desolate urban spaces attractive to people by using the physical limitations of the human body, or, as he puts it, “the human dimension.”

Gehl argues that because humans look straight ahead most of the time, what’s at eye level should catch a pedestrian’s interest enough to want to linger a while on a city street. Such spaces must also be safe, sustainable, and healthy for human occupation. Flat walls of glass and buildings higher than four stories are not only uninteresting (except perhaps for touristy gawks at skyscrapers) but cold and uninviting. Such areas make people want to hurry past instead of stop and look around. Gehl notes that urban areas built with cyclists and pedestrians in mind first are more often used than those with motor vehicle traffic patterns as the foundation of their design.

Gehl has spent the last four decades studying how people use public spaces in cities, as well as the potential for increasing the utilization of those spaces. His designs have revivified urban areas in Melbourne, Copenhagen, London, and New York City as well as others. His previously published books include *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space and Public Spaces, Public Life.*

Cities for People delineates an important dynamic for urban life: a city survives only if its residents make use of its public spaces on an ongoing basis, and those residents will only do so if the city feels clean, safe, and interesting to them. Gehl’s emphasis on starting with people instead of traffic when designing or redesigning urban areas makes eminent sense.

Gehl’s prose is easy to follow, with few technical terms. Students of architecture, urban planners, or anyone interested in how human activity centers—small downtowns and

metropolises alike—could be improved should find a lot to ponder in these chapters. Plentiful illustrations illuminate Gehl's points in each chapter, and a "Toolbox" section functions as a kind of starter kit for city planners.

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