Because of the continued appeal of his unfettered approach to pedestrian-based design and the growing demand for his firm’s consulting work, Copenhagen architect and urban designer Jan Gehl has become something of an international celebrity. Perhaps that is why Island Press has recently released not one, but two of his books. *Life Between Buildings* is more or less a reprint of his first text published in Danish in 1971 and subsequently translated into nineteen languages. *Cities for People* was cited by the popular city planning website Planetizen as one of its top ten selections for 2010.

The real story behind both books harkens back to the year after Jane Jacobs’s book *Life and Death of Great American Cities* turned the mindset of urban planning upside down. In fall 1962, Gehl and his like-minded peers succeeded, despite vehement
resistance from commercial interests, in a radical plan to convert Copenhagen’s longest shopping street, Strøget, to a car-free zone. Their stunning victory spawned a gradual succession of street closings that ultimately led to the reconfiguration of central Copenhagen into a pedestrian-dominated precinct. Additional government-sponsored measures included the long overdue elimination of parking from the city’s medieval squares and the curtailment of off-site parking.

Gehl and his students at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts decided to continue monitoring changes in street-level activity through on-site traffic counts and user interviews. By the mid-1990s, the evidence proved conclusive: the number of people in downtown Copenhagen had more than tripled, and the amount of ground-level public space had increased by a factor of six. By then, other cities in Denmark and elsewhere in western Europe had instituted their own car-free zones.

“Life between buildings, the people and events that can be observed in a given space, is a product of the number and duration of individual events,” Gehl writes in the first book The attributes and characteristics of the ritual stroller, the frontyard gardener, the babysitter, the walker with a cane, the lunchtime sunbather, the edge-of-plaza idler, and the everyday cyclist are what matter most. Like colonies of lions, ants, and penguins, urban humans respond in predictable ways to elements of visual scale, wind, sunlight, and sound—and perhaps most of all, to the attraction to the daily walkabouts of fellow humans. These are the central themes espoused by Gehl since he first began studying Copenhagen’s streets and squares. And had not the small-scale vitality of city spaces been overwhelmed by the auto, perhaps the need to put these thoughts into words would not have been as compelling.

A later publication, one not been given the attention it deserves, is a slim paperback titled Public Spaces, Public Life, (1996, 2004 / Lars Gemzøe co-author / The Danish Architectural Press). It summarizes 37 years of successful transformation in downtown Copenhagen with before-and-after photographs maps and user profiles. This “Copenhagen model” is now used by Gehl’s consulting firm to assist an ever-widening arc of cities worldwide with similar desires to reclaim their urban spaces. By far the most stunning example of a Gehl-inspired car-free design was attempted in fall 2009 at a location where one would least expect it—Times Square in central Manhattan. Here the installation of stacked rows of bright red bleachers gave thousands of pedestrians a claim to a safe haven and lofty perch above the incessant flow of motor vehicles.

Life Between Buildings deals mostly with Copenhagen and other cities of northwestern Europe and Italy. The reach of Cities for People is global, with glances at city life in places as varied as Dubai and Cape Town, South Africa. Both books attempt to use the power of street scene photography to its best advantage, but the grainy black-and-white images of the 1970s are no match for the dazzling color images of today. The photographic aura of Cities for People is irresistible, although at times the shots seem more to provide a veneer than complement the themes or locations discussed. After all, there are only so many ways to capture the charm of hanging out at an outdoor café or coffee house.

A global view implies exploring a complicated set of themes. In Cities for People, they encompass sustainability; transportation alternatives including the resurgent popularity of urban bicycling; security and safety/social inequality as revealed in the street life of Third World cities; and the growing prevalence of obesity worldwide.
*Cities for People* is not convincing in its attempts to demonstrate how the Copenhagen model addresses these themes, especially amidst conditions of vastly differing urban cultures. Its forays are for the most part timid and inconclusive. Important user considerations such as those of the elderly, the hearing impaired or the physically handicapped, are given scant attention. One yearns for more discussion of the differences between urban street-level behaviors in a city like Melbourne, Australia, versus Mexico City. How does a sacred cow, left undisturbed in the middle of a village street in India, mesh with the Copenhagen model? And what about the impact of cell phones on urban behavior and the use of public spaces? These are some of the topic areas that beg greater consideration.

Ironically, the spontaneous images shown on the firm’s own blog convey such dimensions with an immediacy that is missing here. Hopefully the Gehl team is already on this track in compiling yet another book due for publication in 2012.

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