

Reclaiming Pedestrian Space from Car Dominated Neighborhoods

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Abstract—For a long time as a result of accommodating car traffic, planning ideologies in the past put a low priority on public space, pedestrianism and the role of city space as a meeting place for urban dwellers. In addition, according to authors such as Jan Gehl, market forces and changing architectural perceptions began to shift the focus of planning practice from the integration of public space in various pockets around the contemporary city to individual buildings. Eventually, these buildings have become increasingly more isolated and introverted and have turned their backs to the realm of the public space adjoining them. As a result of this practice, the traditional function of public space as a social forum for city dwellers has in many cases been reduced or even phased out. Author Jane Jacobs published her seminal book “The Death and Life of Great American Cities” more than fifty years ago, but her observations and predictions at the time still ring true today, where she pointed out how the dramatic increase in car traffic and its accommodation by the urban planning ideology that was brought about by the Modern movement has prompted a separation of the uses of the city. At the same time it emphasizes free standing buildings that threaten urban space and city life and result in underutilized and lifeless urban cores. In this discussion context, the aim of this paper is to showcase a reversal of just such a situation in the case of the Dasoupolis neighborhood in Strovolos, Cyprus, where enlightened urban design practice has seen the reclamation of pedestrian space in a car dominated area.

Keywords—Urban Design, Public Space, Right to the City, Accessibility, Mobility

I. INTRODUCTION

JANE Jacobs described the qualities of living in lively cities as seen from her outlook in Greenwich Village in New York City, where she lived and she observed that cities were no longer being built as agglomerations of city space and buildings, but as individual buildings [1]. Similarly, Jan Gehl notes that shortly after the millennium, the majority of the global population became urban rather than rural and urban growth will continue to accelerate in the years ahead, so greater focus on the needs of the people who use cities must be a key goal for the future. It is equally important to strengthen the social function of city space as a meeting place that addresses the goals of physical as well as social sustainability.

Richard Rogers in his forward to Jan Gehl’s latest edition of “Cities for People” is in agreement with that view. He views cities as the places where people meet to socialize and to relax, to exchange ideas and to be creative, to work and to trade. In this view, a city’s public domain is seen as a catalyst for such pastimes and activities [2]. The concept of a compact city, which sees the integration of transit oriented development with public transport, walking and cycling emerges as a viable and socioeconomically and environmentally sustainable city form.

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However, for population densities to increase and for walking and cycling to be widespread, a city must increase the quantity and quality of its public spaces and to provide the structure that enables cities to come to life and to encourage and accommodate diverse activities, from the quiet and contemplative to the noisy and busy, while all the time respecting human scale, health and safety. Moreover, everyone should have the right to easily accessible open spaces and well designed neighborhoods that inspire people to live in them [2], while poorly designed cities are a great disservice to their inhabitants.

II. ASPECTS OF COMMUNAL LIFE AND LEISURE

In all communal life there is a dynamic between public and private activities. Although the public-private balance is unique to each culture, it will shift under the influence of cultural exchange, technology, changing political and economic systems prevalent at the time [3]. Early in the 18th century, Canaletto’s pictures of Venice portray spaces filled with life, with energy and with a sense of enjoyment of spending time in this public setting. This panoramic view conveys a picture of public life in this space of Venice, one in which everyone seems to have a place with ample room to engage in the varied activities that are captured by the artist. It is the public life that enriches the scene as well as the beautiful space in which it takes place. ” Public life enables the transmission of important public messages for people, some of them the symbolic messages of the power of the state or their own power, others, according to Whyte, the news of the local area [4].

In the nineteenth century, influenced by European planning principles – in the case of Cyprus it was British colonial practices regarding town planning – led to the appearance of public parks in order to bring more congenial settings to people confined in growing cities. Even later, emphasis was placed on play settings for the children followed by the spread of small sports parks and playing grounds to serve the growing recreational needs at the scale of the neighborhood. In the new world this kind of group life was found in the barn-raising and house-building activities that were seen as public responsibilities of a community, as well as in the formation of marketplaces to sell produce and products [5], merging with the activities of the commons.

III. 20TH CENTURY INVITATION TO CAR TRAFFIC

In the 20th century the way cities are planned and developed kept pace with burgeoning urban growth and city development was turned over to modernist ideologies, which began to replace tradition as the basis for development. Modernism introduced a vision of the city as a machine and planning professionals with traffic planners leading the way tried to ensure the best conditions for managing car traffic [6].

In conventional land use planning, the design of streets was dictated by traffic flow and parking standards and treated mainly as a part of the circulation element of the general plan [7]. They can include conviviality and public life as objectives of street design. This situation came to a head for many crowded cities in the 20th century [2], as in an effort to cope with rising car traffic, substantial city space was typically appropriated for vehicular traffic and parking. Early attempts to relieve traffic pressure by building more roads and parking garages generated more traffic and more congestion, proving that the volume of car traffic has a close correlation to available transportation infrastructure. Consequently, building more roads led to people buying more cars and driving greater distances. Yet current zoning codes and business regulations often discourage such activities [8]. Planners nowadays are prompted to achieve conviviality in public space and the spontaneity of public life by changing such regulatory practices. Despite this apparent setback, cities and their residents have become very active in demanding people-oriented city planning. Gehl notes that in the 21st century cities such as London and Copenhagen have taken great strides in converting highways to city streets and city streets to pedestrian ways and bicycle lanes. In 2002 the City of London introduced road pricing for access to the city center and the immediate effect of the new "congestion charge" was an 18% reduction in the 24km² central city zone. Similarly in Copenhagen, the city began restructuring its street network by removing driving lanes and parking places and by timing traffic signals at crossings in a deliberate attempt to create safer conditions for bicycle and pedestrian traffic [2]. By 2008, 37% of personal transport to and from work and educational institutions occurred by bicycle. In both instances, the fees gathered from inner city access charges are used to improve public transport systems and pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in an attempt to induce a change in the pattern of use and modality of transportation.

IV. INVITATION TO WALKING AND BICYCLING – A HEALTHIER CITY

The evidence above, points an equally strong correlation between and expanded public domain as a result of reduced vehicular traffic and its appropriation by pedestrians and bicyclists through a new pattern of use where sidewalks may be expanded, trees are planted and new pedestrian and bicycle ways incorporated in the expanded public zone. Moreover, to ensure an extended timeframe of use that stretches into the evening hours, lighting design may also be incorporated in the design to showcase the public domain and to ensure its safety.

As an example, Gehl notes that surveys conducted in 1994 and 2004 in the City of Melbourne indicate that staying activities have increased in step with many of these urban improvement strategies and the number of housing units in the city grew by a factor of ten. As a result of the influx of new inhabitants in or around the city center the number of students enrolled in area schools also increased. New squares and promenades were opened up to serve the pedestrian traffic and offered the possibility of an extended stay in the area, while tripling the activity level on ordinary workdays [2].

Gehl also notes that the desire for a healthy city is strengthened dramatically if walking or biking can be a natural part of the pattern of daily activities [2]. Statistics demonstrate a growth in public health problems of late as a result of large segments of the population leading sedentary and inactive lives, relying extensively on the use of their car. Consequently, an invitation to walk and bike as a natural and integrated element of one's daily routine should constitute an important and integrated part in of any future unified strategy relating public health and urban design.

V. PUBLIC LIFE RECONSTITUTED

In the 18th and 19th century the cities and their inhabitants developed networks of sociability which became open to a wide public and urban amenities. These were further diffused out to broader patterns of social interaction, which were suited to exchange between strangers. According to Sennett the new "cosmopolis" – derived from cosmos as in people and from polis as in city – defines the "line drawn between public and private was essentially one on which the claims of civility – epitomized by cosmopolitan, public behavior – were balanced against the claims of nature – epitomized by the family." "To speak of the legacy of the 19th century's crisis of public life is to speak of . . . four psychological conditions: involuntary disclosure of character; superimposition of public and private imagery, defense through withdrawal and silence." He goes on to note that "the 19th century is not yet over" [9].

Along similar lines, Chidister contends that the use of such public spaces does not constitute a recurring interest in public life, that plaza use is just an "event" in the well established private life of most of the users. However, others believe that the enthusiastic use of such places is an indication of a lively interest in public life [10]. What may be problematic in affecting a shift is that many of the public activities of the central plaza, such as purchases, performances, meetings and sports, have been moved to special purpose places, such as shopping malls, amphitheaters, stadiums and hotels and conference centers [11], in a way in which public life has not so much disappeared as it has been reconstituted.

However, although the range of social and economic activities taking place in urban outdoor areas may be more limited than it was in the past, the range could potentially be considerably greater today, especially as they are being transformed into pedestrian precincts or into walking streets where vehicles or deliveries are banned from mid-morning to late in the evening and the shopping street may be transformed into an outdoor mall. In a similar fashion, surface parking areas, which are empty on the weekends, may be transformed into popular flea markets and spaces between buildings used for the residents to relax and to be socialize [3].

It is therefore important to create spaces which approach the process of transformation incrementally and that make use of, strengthen or reconstitute existing networks. According to Carr a number of qualities should be incorporated in a successful public place [3], so that when possible it should be:

- Located where it is easily accessible to and can be easily seen by potential users.
- Clearly convey the fact that it is available for use and is meant to be used.
- Be engaging on both the outside and the inside.
- Be furnished to support frequent and desirable activities.
- Provide a feeling of security and safety to potential users.
- Offer relief from urban stress and enhance the health and well being of its users.
- Be geared to the needs of the user group most likely to use the space.
- Offer an environment that is physiologically comfortable regarding natural lighting and ventilation.
- Be accessible to disabled people, to the elderly and to children.
- Incorporate components that the users may manipulate or change.
- Allow users the option to care for it through involvement in its design, construction or maintenance.
- Allow use for special events or for temporarily claiming personal spaces within the setting.
- Be easily and economically maintained within the limits of what is normally expected.
- Be designed with attention paid to place as expression of visual art and place as social setting.

VI. STIMULATING PUBLIC LIFE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – THE *FLÂNEUR*

According to Oldenburg another important aspect of a successful public space is for it to allow the user to look, to gaze and to watch as part of normal stimulus-seeking behavior [12]. In this, he agrees with Gehl in that cultural and social context of this behavior has received commentary in the critical literature on the urbanism of modernity, especially aspects focusing on the relationship between the observer and the environment and how the built form was created and shaped to facilitate display of space for the *flâneur*, the person who engages in *flânerie*, “the activity of strolling and looking” [13]. For this to happen then streets and pathways need to be reconstituted as stage sets in an appropriate mix of *flânerie* that dictates the script for successful public life.

The same concept may be applied to reinvented streets and places which may carry a particular theme. The message in these reinvented places is usually that the form is only a stage set that can be easily changed and embellished to accommodate celebrations, happenings, and other such ephemeral activities [14]. Traditionally, planners have associated public life with such places and the principles of land use planning and urban design are based on this premise. Yet, increasingly public life is flourishing in private places, not just in corporate theme parks, but also in small businesses such as coffee shops, bookstores, and other such places. Conviviality as a planning goal can be used as a tool of urban design to spur economic development that benefits local business ventures [15].

Planners may therefore be able to reinvent old and languishing areas and convert underperforming streets as viable public spaces and destinations for more vigorous public life. Furthermore, they can make creative use of such mechanisms as linkage fees to provide funding for the renovation of public spaces and the public life that occurs therein. Although many developers see linkage fees as a form of exaction, increasingly they have accepted them as a cost of doing business and they incorporate them creatively in their development strategies, as for example the contribution of a percentage of project costs toward public art or for the redevelopment of local streets and parks.

VII. LIFE BETWEEN BUILDINGS – RECOVERING THE NETWORKS OF “SOCIABILITY” AND DIVERSITY

As a concept, “life between buildings” includes all of the very different activities people engage in when they use common city space: walks from place to place, promenades, shorter and longer stays, conversations and meetings, play and entertainment. But most importantly at its core walking is a special form of communication between people who share public space as a framework for interaction. A common characteristic of life in city space between buildings is the versatility and complexity of the activities allowed by such venues [16].

One simple way to look at the diversity of activities in city space is to perhaps categorize them between these activities that people have to undertake and those that people choose to undertake. The former include such actions as going to work or school, waiting for the bus, delivering goods and services, while the latter features optional activities such as promenading, sightseeing or engaging in leisurely pastimes, in which it seems that the majority of the most attractive and popular city activities belong.

A city that invites people to walk must by definition have a reasonably cohesive structure that offers short walking distances, attractive public spaces and a variation of urban functions. These elements increase activity and the feeling of security in and around city spaces as there is increased supervision from more eyes along the street. In addition, public activity demands heterogeneity. Successful public places in the city feature increased density and become very attractive to new immigrants from near or far [17]. They therefore ensure diverse urban fabric in which encounters with difference are the norm.

VIII. THE RIGHT TO INHABIT

But for the encounter with difference to really succeed, then the right to inhabit the city has to be pursued. The city offers itself as the place where diversity occurs, where people with a different outlook and with different ambitions struggle to shape the terms of access or rights of citizenship. Out of this collective effort new modes of living and inhabiting are invented. Similarly, the right to inhabit implies not only the right to appropriate the space between buildings, but to also demand housing in the buildings themselves.

Though this simply may not be sufficient to guarantee a right to the city, it is a necessary step toward guaranteeing that right [18]. The right to inhabit that will then bring the people back into the city and which will infuse life to the public milieu is therefore both fundamental to and a product of social justice, which thus cannot be universal except to the degree it relates to the particular and the spatial [19]. A precise connection between city space quality and the scope of city life has been clearly documented and makes the case that pedestrian traffic and city life lead specifically to new patterns of use and more life in city space. The close connection between people's use of city space, the quality of city space and the degree of concern for the human dimension is a general pattern that can be shown at all scales of the city [2]. Just as cities can invite city life, there are many examples of how the renovation of a single space or even the mere change in site furniture and accessories can invite people to a totally new pattern of use.

IX. THE CASE OF DASOUPOLIS IN STROVOLOS, CYPRUS

The case of Dasoupolis in Strovolos, one of the major suburbs to the south of the capital city of Nicosia in Cyprus, is a case in point as a result of a number of complementary proposals that have been suggested for this area. The strategic considerations indicated in Figure 1 below include the existing residential neighborhood (marked 1) as it is juxtaposed across from a developing commercial district (marked 2). Though a more easily accessible connection is desired by these two nodes in the city, heavily trafficked arterial roads traversing the area (gray arrows, marked 3) constitute formidable boundaries that make the crossings dangerous and the promenade from one to the other difficult. The suggestion here is to rethink the nature of this corridor and transform it into a highly accessible pedestrian-and-bicycle-friendly passage that will enhance mobility in the broader neighborhood (purple arrow, marked 5), while at the same time creating public spaces that will accommodate commercial and cultural functions (red bands, marked 6) and places to rest, pause and play (green band, marked 7).

More specifically, the proposed site plan in Figure 2 below suggests the introduction of the following program in existing / adaptively reused and in new structures: 1. Recreation Field and Leisure Park (existing to be reused); 2. Cafeteria (proposed new); 3. Community Library (proposed new); 4. Community Theatre (proposed new); 5. Multi-Function Community Room (existing to be reused); 6. Local and Inter-City Bus Station (existing to be reused); and 7. Restaurant, Exhibit Space and Auditorium (proposed new). Furthermore, the stars indicate areas for pause and rest in the space between buildings; the red arrows represent purpose designed pedestrian and bicycle friendly pathways along and across the area of intervention; and the green arrows which represent integrated connections of existing green areas of leisure and play, also along and across the site.

This mixture of uses and their disposition in the area of intervention hopes to provide enhanced accessibility to nodes of sociability and interaction and to encourage people to leave their homes and to engage in public life. The architectural program in its turn aims at the synergistic interaction of existing and proposed uses and buildings and at extending the use of space into the late evening hours in a secure setting. Lastly, the architectural design guidelines adopted work at the erosion of physical boundaries and at the creation interstitial spaces that may be appropriated and where public life abounds.



Fig. 1 Site plan indicating strategic considerations in the area of intervention.



Fig. 2 Master plan of suggested uses in the target area

X. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Reclaiming pedestrian space from car dominated neighborhoods in the practice of city planning means a reengagement with the human dimension which demands direct connections between improvements for people in city spaces and visions for achieving lively, safe and healthy cities. Compared with other social investments – particularly healthcare costs and automobile infrastructure – the cost of including the human dimension as part of a sustainable redevelopment strategy is modest and investments in this area will be key while the benefits enormous. And urban mobility that integrates public transportation with walking and bicycling can provide marked benefits to the economy and the environment, as good public space and a good public transport system are simply two sides of the same coin.

Although a certain sense of chaotic behavior may have characterized public spaces such as streets and open areas in the past, they were never in such conflict with each other as they became after the advent of the automobile in the 20th century. Recent efforts, however, have been made to reverse this state of affairs with many cities attempting to recover streets for pedestrians and to relate them to new and existing dense residential areas and open spaces downtown. Life between and through buildings and along streets and pathways for pedestrians and bicyclists spells the importance of designing urban public spaces with the fundamental desires of people as guiding principles.

Essential elements that contribute to people's enjoyment of spaces in the public realm have been specified herein and they remain remarkably constant even as architectural styles go in and out of fashion and the character of the public life changes. Public life has the potential of bringing diverse groups together so that they learn from each other and other educational opportunities may be offered by public places where music and other entertainment can be programmed into their functioning. In general public places afford city dwellers the casual encounters in the course of daily life that can bind people together and give their lives meaning and purpose. By engaging all stakeholders, urban designers should be able to respond more specifically to the challenges facing them and to better understand the larger public life of cities.

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