

CITY PLANNING

FOR PEOPLE

A growing number of cities are taking a human-centric approach to urban planning, and central to that strategy is making a city pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly, says **Jan Gehl** and **Birgitte Bundesen Svarre**.

For decades, the human factor has been overlooked and haphazardly addressed in urban planning. Residents in many cities across the globe today face limited space, obstacles, noise, pollution, risk of accident and generally disgraceful conditions, regardless of global location, economic viability and stage of development. This has not only made it difficult for cities to become more pedestrian-friendly, but has also jeopardised the social and cultural functions of city space such as community interaction, or even just enjoying the aesthetic experience of taking a break in a main square. Fortunately, an increasing number of cities are realising the value of a human-centric approach to urban planning, to create livelier, safer, healthier and more sustainable cities.



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The Human Dimension

After years of neglecting the human dimension, there is now growing awareness and willingness to create cities, first and foremost, for people and their needs. Urban planners and architects are recognising the importance of designing cities that reinforce pedestrianism, in order to develop lively, safe, sustainable and healthy cities. Equally urgent is strengthening the social function of city spaces as meeting places that fulfil the aims of social sustainability and an open and democratic society.

The great cities of the world such as Copenhagen and New York invite people from all walks of life to meet and spend time together, find peaceful respite, or enjoy being ‘alone together’. Offering a variety of options for walking and moving around in a city allows citizens to spontaneously socialise with an acquaintance, visit a shop or a café. Providing quality public spaces allows citizens to feel welcome, empowers people and makes them feel part of a greater community.



01 Købmagergade, a popular pedestrian shopping street in Copenhagen.

02 An open city provides opportunities for engaging with others.



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Lively, Safe, Sustainable and Healthy Cities

A city with calmer traffic, where people are able to walk, bike and stay within city space, is a lively city. The vitality of public life in a city can be measured based on people-centred metrics such as pedestrian flow, time spent lingering in an area, and the use of streets and spaces after dark. A lively city in turn provides positive side effects as a city with life also contributes to a safer, more sustainable and healthier city.



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A vibrant city that is people-friendly is a safe city. Cities which make it attractive for people to walk must by definition have a reasonably cohesive structure – one that offers short walking distances, attractive courses of space, a variety of urban functions such as places for meeting friends, and opportunities for running personal errands. These elements increase activity and the feeling of security in and around city spaces, as there are more eyes watching the street, and residents are drawn to events in the city from surrounding housing and buildings.

A lively city, where most of its people travel by foot or bike, is a sustainable city. These forms of green transport, as well as other forms of public transport such as buses, light rail and train, provide marked benefits to the economy, resource consumption, and the environment.



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A key link between the safety and sustainability of the city is that public transport becomes more attractive if users feel safe and comfortable walking or cycling to and from these modes. Good public spaces and a good public transport system are thus two sides of the same coin.



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- 01 The pedestrian plaza at Madison Square, which has brought new life to New York City.
- 02 Going to work in the City of Copenhagen, of which 41% use bicycles, 24% drive a car, 30% use public transport, and 5% walk.
- 03 A bicycle pavement in Copenhagen. The pavement continues along the place where smaller streets meet with main streets, making it safer for pedestrians.

In many parts of the world, rapid growth in public health problems can be seen because large segments of the workforce have become sedentary due to the evolution of jobs in a post-industrialised era. Cars providing door-to-door transport have further eliminated opportunities for any physical activity in the daily lives of urban dwellers. One way of addressing this problem is to make it as attractive and easy as possible for people to walk and cycle within their city. The health of city dwellers can be enhanced dramatically if walking or biking can be a natural part of the pattern of daily activities.

The cities of Copenhagen and New York have realised their visions of a more people-centric city by prioritising bicyclists and pedestrians in their city planning.

Better Conditions for Cyclists Encourages More to Cycle – Copenhagen

The City of Copenhagen has been continually encouraging its people to

bike more. For several decades, the city has been restructuring its street networks, removing driving lanes and parking places in a deliberate process to create better and safer conditions for bicycle traffic.

The entire city is now served by an effective and convenient system of bike paths, separated by curbs from sidewalks and driving lanes. City intersections have bicycle crossings painted in blue and special traffic lights for bicycles that turn green six seconds before cars are allowed to move forward. Such initiatives make it considerably safer to cycle around the city.

The results are reflected clearly in its patterns of use. Bicycle traffic has doubled in the period from 1995 to 2005; and in 2014, statistics showed that 41% of personal transport to and from work and educational institutions was by bicycle. The goal is to increase this percentage considerably in the years to come.



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As conditions for cyclists improve, a new bicycle culture is emerging. Children and seniors, business people and students, parents with young children, Members of Parliament and Mayors alike are riding bicycles. Cycling in the city has become the way to get around. It is faster and cheaper than other transport options while also being good for the environment and personal health.

Interplay Between City Life and The Quality of City Space – New York City

In New York City, although pedestrian traffic has traditionally dominated the streets of Manhattan, it has been difficult for city dwellers to find a spot to sit, watch and enjoy city life.

In 2007, an extensive programme was launched to encourage greater versatility in city life, with a focus to provide better options for recreation and leisure for pedestrians. For example, on Broadway, sidewalks were expanded to provide room for café chairs and places for passers-by to sit. Other new car-free areas, called pedestrian plazas, have been similarly established at Madison Square, Herald Square and Times Square.

These initiatives have almost instantly enriched city life and made it far more multifaceted. Instead of a city where people are always moving, people can now sit in the middle of bustling activity to people-watch, enjoy the cityscape, or simply take a break from their busy work schedules.



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Cities by People and for People

What is remarkable about the development in Copenhagen and New York is that it reflects a growing understanding that cities must be designed to invite pedestrian traffic and city life. These cities recognise the importance of calmer forms of traffic in creating a sustainable and healthy society, and they also acknowledge the important role that city spaces play as informal and democratic meeting places for their residents.



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In this way, planning with human beings as the point of departure – rather than cars, traffic, or different transport systems – can create environmentally, economically and socially sustainable cities.

01 Cyclists in Copenhagen.

02 The pedestrian plaza in Madison Square.

03 An aerial view of Madison Square, New York.

Four Goals – One Policy

There is growing interest in people-focused city planning, where there are direct connections between improving public spaces and enhancing the liveability, safety, sustainability and health of the city.

Such a people-centric approach can be seemingly hard to adopt in developing countries, where most of the population is forced to use city space intensively for many daily activities, in particular for motorised transportation.

However, as the cases of Copenhagen and New York have shown, compared with other social investments such as healthcare or automobile infrastructure, the cost of people-centric urban planning is modest, and its benefits, far-reaching. This shows that investments in this area can be possible for cities in all parts of the world, regardless of development status and financial capability.



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Reprioritising Pedestrians – the Singapore Advantage

Singapore is a small island with beautiful well-maintained buildings and lots of greenery. Singapore's dense urban structure and good public transportation system can enable her to further promote cycling and walking as modes of transport.

As Singapore is hot and humid, longer trips can be made on public transport, complemented by shorter cycling and walking trips. Singapore can further increase the number of bicycles allowed on public transportation such as on trains, buses and even taxis. Doing so will encourage Singaporeans to walk, cycle and take public transport even more.

With that, Singapore can be one of the first cities where dependence on motorcars can be eliminated or significantly reduced. As calmer traffic, public transportation and public spaces are closely related, a truly liveable city is possible, through implementing a people-oriented planning strategy.

*Portions of this text have been based on the book by Jan Gehl, *Cities for People* (2010), Washington DC: Island Press.*



Jan is Founding Partner of Gehl Architects and former Professor at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture. An architect by training, his approach to public space design incorporates technology without compromising the benefits that public spaces bring to people's lives. His most recent publication is 'How to Study Public Life'. Jan has collaborated on projects for many cities, including Copenhagen, London, Melbourne, Sydney, New York and Moscow. He is an honorary fellow of RIBA, AIA, RAIC, and PIA.



Birgitte is a key researcher at Gehl Architects. She holds a PhD in architecture and public space. She is the co-author of the latest Jan Gehl/Gehl Architects book 'How to Study Public Life'. She is an Associate Professor at Denmark's Technical University, is also actively involved in masterclasses and workshops, and guest lectures at various universities.

Find out more about Jan Gehl's thoughts on planning for people-oriented cities:



https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGKE0U1p8Rxj72_FgbIJgrFZ0TNHbIhVa

⁰¹ Jan Gehl shares a laugh with former ULI president Scott Dunn at the Bikeshop, organised as part of the study by CLC and ULI.