

The Human Dimension – A Sustainable Approach to City Planning



Jan Gehl

Emeritus Professor,
The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts



Birgitte Bundesen Svarre

Research Coordinator
GEHL Architects

For decades the human dimension has been an overlooked and haphazardly addressed urban planning topic. A common feature of almost all cities is that the people who use city space in great numbers have been increasingly poorly treated. Limited space, obstacles, noise, pollution, risk of accident and generally disgraceful conditions are typical for city dwellers in most of the world's cities – regardless of global location, economic viability and stage of development. This turn of events has not only reduced the opportunities for pedestrianism as a form of transport, but also placed the social and cultural functions of city space under siege. Fortunately, several cities realize the value of putting humans first in order to create more lively, safe, sustainable and healthy cities.

THE HUMAN DIMENSION —A NECESSARY NEW PLANNING DIMENSION

After years of neglect of the human dimension, here at the beginning of the 21st century we have an urgent need and growing willingness to once again create cities for people. New global challenges underscore the importance of far more targeted concern for the human dimension. Planning with a human dimension demands focuses on the needs of the people who use cities.

The vision of ensuring lively, safe, sustainable and healthy cities has become a general and urgent desire. All these four objectives can be strengthened immeasurably by increasing the concern for pedestrians, cyclists and city life in general. A unified citywide political intervention to ensure that the residents of the city are invited to walk and bike as much as possible in connection with their daily activities is a strong reinforcement of the objectives: lively, safe, sustainable and healthy cities.

Cities must urge urban planners and architects to reinforce pedestrianism as an integrated city policy to develop lively, safe, sustainable and healthy cities. It is equally urgent to strengthen the social function of city space as a meeting place that fulfils the aims of social sustainability and an open and democratic society.

WANTED: LIVELY, SAFE, SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY CITIES

The desire for a lively city is strengthened when more people are invited to walk, bike and stay in city space. A lively city has a number of positive side effects as a city with life also can contribute to a more safe, sustainable and healthy city.

The desire for a safe city is strengthened generally when more people move about and stay in city space. A city that invites people to walk must by definition have a reasonably cohesive structure that offers short walking distances, attractive courses of space and a variation of urban functions. These

elements increase activity and the feeling of security in and around city spaces. There are more eyes along the street and a greater incentive to follow the events going on in the city from surrounding housing and buildings.

The sustainable city is strengthened generally if a large part of the people transport system can take place as green mobility, that is, travel by foot or bike. These forms of transport provide marked benefits to the economy, resource consumption, the environment, and the need for good city space.

Another important sustainable aspect is that the attractiveness of public transport systems is boosted if users feel safe and comfortable walking or cycling to and from buses, light rail and train. Good public space and a good public transport system thus become two sides of the same coin.

We are seeing a rapid growth in public health problems because large segments of the workforce in many parts of the world have become sedentary, with cars providing door-to-door transport. A whole-hearted invitation to walk and bike as a natural and integrated element of daily routines must be a non-negotiable part of a unified health policy. The desire for a healthy city is strengthened dramatically if walking or biking can be a natural part of the pattern of daily activities.

The city of Copenhagen as well as New York City have realized visions of a more human dimension in city planning by prioritizing bicyclists and pedestrians.

BETTER CONDITIONS FOR CYCLISTS MORE CYCLISTS

—Case: Copenhagen



Bicycle Priority in Copenhagen. Stoplight for bicycle turn green 6 seconds before green lights for cars



Bicycle culture in Copenhagen. Everybody bikes -ministers, mayors, businessmen, young and old

The City of Copenhagen has been restructuring its street network for several decades, removing driving lanes and parking places in a deliberate process to create better and safer conditions for bicycle traffic. Year by year the inhabitants of the city have been invited to bike more.

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. In short a whole-hearted invitation has been extended to cyclists, and the results are reflected clearly in patterns of use.

Bicycle traffic has doubled in the period from 1995 to 2005, and in 2008 statistics showed that 37% 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.

As conditions for bicyclists improve, a new bicycle culture is emerging. Children and seniors, business people and students, parents with young children, MPs and mayors ride bicycles. Bicycling in the city has become the way to get around. It is faster and cheaper than other transport options and also good for the environment and personal health.

INTERPLAY BETWEEN CITY LIFE AND THE QUALITY OF CITY SPACE

- Case: New York City



Copenhagen Style Bicycle lane in Grant Street SoHo New York



Herald Square in New York, after the closing of Broadway around this square



Times Square New York after the closing of Broadway in several blocks around this Square

Although pedestrian traffic has traditionally dominated the streets of Manhattan in New York City, it has been difficult to find a spot for sitting, watching, enjoying city life. In 2007 an extensive program was launched to encourage greater versatility in city life. The idea was to provide better options for recreation and leisure as a supplement to the extensive purposeful pedestrian traffic. For example, on Broadway expanded sidewalks have provided room for café chairs and places to stay, while a number of new car-free areas with many opportunities to stay have been established at Madison Square, Herald Square and Times Square.

In all these cases the new opportunities were adopted at once. Almost day-by-day the new invitations have enriched city life and made it far more multifaceted. Even in New York City there is obviously a need for city space and great interest in participating more in city life now that there are more opportunities and solid invitations.

CITIES BY PEOPLE AND FOR PEOPLE

What is remarkable about the development in Copenhagen as well as in New York City is that it reflects a growing understanding that cities must be designed to invite pedestrian traffic and city life. These cities want people to walk in city space, they recognize the importance of pedestrian traffic and bicyclists for sustainability and health in society, and they acknowledge the importance of city space and city life as an attractive, informal and democratic meeting place for their residents in the 21st century.

Planning with human beings as the point of departure – and not the number of cars, the number of square meters or technical specifications of different transport systems – can create more sustainable cities, environmentally as well as economically and socially.

FOUR GOALS —ONE POLICY

Concern for the human dimension of city planning reflects a distinct and strong demand for better urban quality. There are direct connections between improvements for people in city space and the strong desire for lively, safe, sustainable and healthy cities.

In developing countries, the plight of the human dimension is considerably more complex and serious. Most of the population is forced to use city space intensively for many daily activities. Traditionally city space has worked reasonably well for these uses, but when car traffic, for example, grows precipitously, the competition for city space intensifies. The conditions for urban life and pedestrians have become less and less dignified year by year.

Compared with other social investments – particularly healthcare costs and the car traffic infrastructure – the cost of including the human dimension is so modest that investments in this area will be possible for cities in all parts of the world regardless of development status and financial capability.