

**MIT**

# Public Spaces as a Critical Policy Element



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“Cities for People” video by Prof Jan Gehl  
 (“Life between Buildings”)

Mikel Murga  
Fall 2006

# MIT Point of departure

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- “In a world being **steadily privatized**, in some cities public spaces are gaining in importance... People respond enthusiastically to these new opportunities for walking and participating in public life in public spaces”
- “People are invited to reposses their cities and restrictions are being made to reduce parking and traffic in city areas in order to make room for more **people oriented activities**”

Jan Gehl

# MIT | Jan Gehl

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

- Architect and Head of the Urban Design Dept School of Architecture, Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen
- Author: "Life Between Buildings – Using Public Space", "Public Spaces – Public Life, Copenhagen 1996" and "New City Spaces"
- Sir Patrick Abercrombie prize for exemplary contributions to town planning by the International Union of Architects
- Consultant in Copenhagen, Vejle, Odense, Oslo, Latvia, Stockholm, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Perth, Melbourne...

[www.GehlArchitects.dk](http://www.GehlArchitects.dk)

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- Strøget as a pedestrian street?
  - But, why? We Scandinavians stay indoors, not like those in Southern Europe!
  - After all our weather is lousy

# Characteristics of a Good Place

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- Good to walk in and to stay for a while
  - Comfortable, climate protected, benches, steps, cafes
  - Pleasant facades, pedestrian continuity, lack of barriers
- Good for social and cultural exchanges
  - Space for cultural activities, *The Commons*
- Good for talking, watching and experiencing
  - Low level of noise, intimate public spaces
  - Fine views, window shops, exhibits, good details

*Lively, diverse and safe to move around with  
a wide variety of uses both day and night*

# Activities in Public Spaces

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- Necessary activities
  - Going to school, waiting for the bus to go to work, shopping, seeking medical attention...
- Optional activities
  - Urban recreation when quality is high (park benches, trees, concerts..) Acid test is how long do they stay
- Social activities
  - Watching, listening, experiencing other people, playing, talking to others, showing off...



- Every day users
  - Residents, office workers, street vendors...
- Visitors/customers
  - Shoppers, seekers of services, suppliers...
- Recreational visitors
  - Outdoor café clients, park users, runners, bikers, sun bathers, readers...
- Event attendants
  - Concerts, festivals, cultural events...

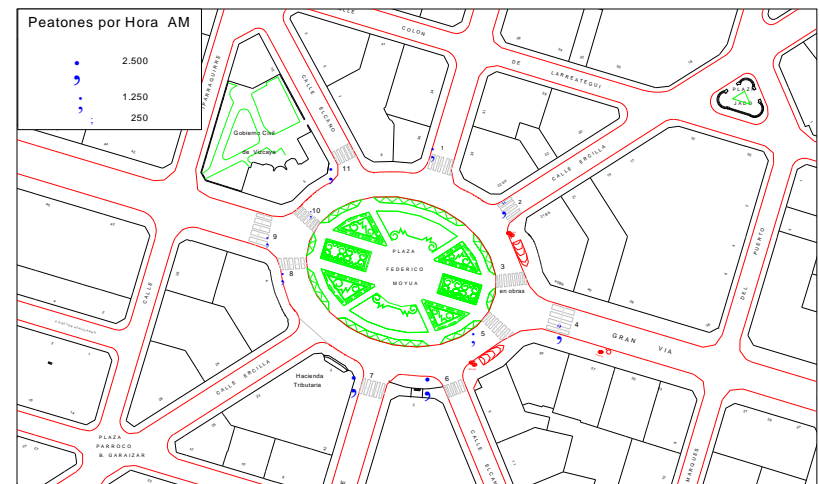
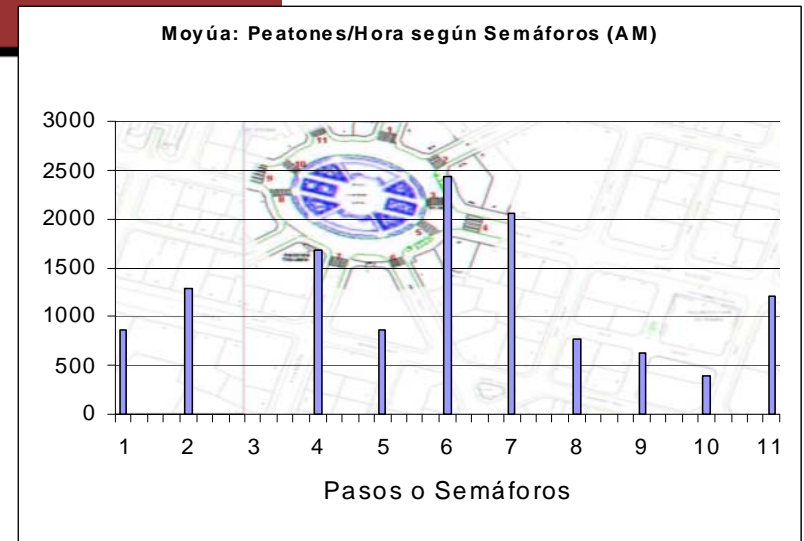
Figure by MIT OCW.

F. Salvucci, and M.Murga

# MIT Data Gathering

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- Most cities have excellent statistics about traffic flows and parking patterns.
- However, information is sorely lacking about city quality as experienced by a pedestrian and about how public spaces function





- Motorized transport flows:
  - Street hierarchy, transit network, parking...
- Pedestrians flows:
  - Test walks, wait at traffic lights push buttons, crossing times, footpath interruptions, safety...
- Facades and ground level activity
  - Quality, duration of stays, sunshine and shade areas, weather protection, trees, outdoor seating, cafes, day and night activities...

# Generic Recommendations

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- Upgrade Squares and Plazas
- Rehabilitate wide streets
- Develop transit
- Reduce through traffic
- Enhance Park Lands
- Create pedestrian and bike networks
- Mixed uses for day and night livability
- Attract residents
- Foster markets, cafes and educational institutions
- Improve ground floor frontage
- Organize public activities and events

# Some ideas from the video...

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- Human dimension in city and site planning:
  - Size and quality of public spaces, types of public activities, the city as cultural birthplace
- People as walkers:
  - Sensory experience
  - Distance for public, social, private exchanges
  - Public and private spheres, and its transition
- People, *dressed with cars*, moving at 50-60 km/hr, change the cityscape as they lack both the sensory experience and the interaction with others



Hope you enjoy the video this  
coming Tuesday!  
(in Danish!)

... and please do send me an email with just  
three ideas that caught your attention