Public Spaces: How They Humanize Cities

Authors:
Debra Efroymson
Tran Thi Kieu Thanh Ha
Pham Thu Ha

Editor:
Lori Jones

Photography:
Debra Efroymson

HealthBridge - WBB Trust
Dhaka, October 2009

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 4

Part I. Happiness is not for sale: public spaces in urban places ........................................ 6
  A tale of two cities: questioning models of progress ........................................ 7
  What makes people happy? ........................................................................ 9
  Richness in variety: types of public spaces ............................................ 15
  How public spaces enhance urban life ................................................ 19

Part II. Types and design of public spaces .......................................................... 26
  Sometimes the path is the destination: streets and sidewalks ......................... 27
  Streets and sidewalks in children's education ........................................... 32
  Unscripted places: parks, public gardens, and plazas .................................. 36
  There's more to commercial transactions than buying and selling: markets .... 43

Part III. Who uses public spaces? ...................................................................... 50
  Addressing the needs of urban children ................................................ 51
  Enabling exercise and socializing for adults ........................................... 59
  Ensuring healthy and social spaces for the elderly .................................. 62
  Play for all ages ................................................................................. 68
  Experiencing the city ........................................................................ 77

Part IV. Economy and equity .......................................................................... 83
  Money ......................................................................................... 84
  The importance of informal work: vendors ........................................ 88
    To ban or not to ban? .................................................................... 89
    A service to customers ............................................................... 92
    Social security ........................................................................ 95
  Sometimes people are equal: equity ................................................ 101
  Making the most out of the least: efficiency ...................................... 105
  Fee or free ............................................................................... 112
INTRODUCTION

Bhaktapur, Nepal

"The more diluted and scattered the exchange opportunities, the more the city begins to lose the very thing which makes it a city: a concentration of exchange opportunities. What makes a city efficient, and an exciting place to be, is this diversity and density of potential exchanges."  (Engwicht 1999)

"Experiencing other people represents a particularly colorful and attractive opportunity for stimulation. Compared with experiencing buildings and other inanimate objects, experiencing people, who speak and move about, offers a wealth of sensual variation... Furthermore, it concerns the most important subject in life: people."  (Gehl 2001)
This book is about public spaces in cities — sidewalks, parks, squares, traditional markets, and small plazas — and how people use them. It is meant to be illustrative rather than academic; as such, it does not attempt to address detailed design issues or to offer recipes as to how many parks and plazas are needed per thousand inhabitants. Rather, in light of increased urban expansion, it is meant to inspire people to work to save existing valued public places and to seek ways to create new ones in areas that lack them.

Being about public places, this book is also about cities and their special qualities that cause people to love, cherish, value, and protect them. It is about how urban public spaces serve to enhance human happiness and to promote a sense of concern about others, without which it is impossible to ensure civility in cities.

Finally, this book is about people: sketches of the ways in which people work and play and of the daily interactions that bring joy to their lives and make them essentially human. It includes quotes and wisdom from numerous books on public spaces, as well as quotes from research interviews and descriptions from observations of public spaces conducted by the authors.

Ultimately, this book sets out to share the belief of its authors that public spaces matter, that people can be mobilized to save and expand them, and that there is always hope for the future...especially when people learn to cherish and work to preserve the rich variety of public spaces in their own often rapidly-changing, modernizing, noisy, tumultuous and colourful city.

PART I.
HAPPINESS IS NOT FOR SALE:
PUBLIC SPACES IN URBAN PLACES

Kathmandu
A TALE OF TWO CITIES: QUESTIONING MODELS OF PROGRESS

Left: Bangalore, India; Right: Hanoi, Vietnam

"But a state exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only." –Aristotle

"...people and human activity are the greatest object of attention and interest. Even the modest form of contact of merely seeing and hearing or being near to others is apparently more rewarding and more in demand than the majority of other attractions offered in the public spaces of cities and residential areas. Life in buildings and between buildings seems in nearly all situations to rank as more essential and more relevant than the spaces and buildings themselves."

(Gehl 2001)

The heart of a city, graced with parks, small lakes and plazas. Children chasing each other across a field. Young people posing for photos under a flowering tree. Elderly women seated on low stools sipping tea and gossiping. Clusters of people gathered to watch men fishing. Vendors selling bright balloons, peanuts, and cut fruit mixed with red chilli powder.

On the sidewalks, a lively scene: people walking, eating, talking, shopping. An abundance of tropical fruits with evocative names in almost endless variety sold by vendors and in open markets, the fruits changing with the changing seasons: papaya, pineapple, endless varieties of banana, wedges of coconut. In the local market, plentiful fresh vegetables and a wide variety of edibles: live seafood and chickens, meats, grains, fresh noodles. Clothing, shoes, handbags. A hair salon. Children's toys. Souvenirs.

Daily life in a thriving city, a city where people pause to greet strangers, where adults look out for the children of others, where people live their lives in the presence of and in frequent interaction with others.

A traditional city, threatened by the erection of shopping malls and elevated roads, by the destruction of open markets to make way for tall office buildings and “exclusive, luxury” apartments, where parks and squares and public gardens and plazas can for the most part be found only in the city centre, while those living beyond its fringes have few if any public places to go for a little rest, recreation, exercise, and free socializing. A city whose streets have been taken over by motorbikes and cars and the consequent fumes and noise. The city could be one of countless cities around the world, undergoing seemingly endless transitions, its residents trying to adjust to their new and too often discordant surroundings.
What makes people happy?

"Once at US$5,000 income per capita, it does not seem that further increases in income per capita bring about increases in happiness. The measure of success of a society cannot be its level of economic development but rather its happiness. We will have to seriously consider other measures of success, such as time spent by children with their grandparents." (Peñalosa 2004)

"In our dense cities, recreational spaces are essential components of healthy and sustainable urban environments. Longer working hours, reduced vacation time, and growing health concerns are just some of the reasons why the need for public spaces in the centers of cities is increasingly important. ... Recreational activities determine the quality of one’s life.” (Ryan 2006)

Vast changes have occurred in cities around the world over the last two decades. Whereas children used to walk to school and play in the streets, such activities are now rare. Motorcycles and cars have made transportation more convenient in some ways, but have brought in a host of new problems including traffic danger, air pollution, and reduced independent movement for children and the elderly.

The changes in cities are part of a model of progress that believes that economic growth is vital to improvements in livelihood, and that the environment — natural and urban — must be sacrificed to make way for the industry that will allow the economy to grow. Among the victims of such beliefs are the public spaces otherwise so vital to cities.

According to liveable cities expert Michael Douglass, there are two main competing models of cities (Douglass 2009) which coincide with the two main theories of economics: one focused on economic growth and the other on meeting basic needs within the context of limited natural resources, on preserving small businesses and the environment, not promoting growth. One model is based on consumption, whereby people use advertising to choose an array of products that will bring them personal and individual pleasure. They work hard to afford those purchases, and in being able to buy the goods that are constantly promoted, they believe they will experience happiness, which at a national level is measured albeit rather indirectly through economic growth.

The other model is based on social networks, wherein people’s links to community — interactions with family, neighbours and friends — brings a lasting contentment and even happiness. In the one, moments of pleasure and joy can be purchased; in the other, they are freely available in daily
encounters on the streets, in parks and in other public spaces. In the one, possessions represent the highest pursuit of happiness, with a never-ending race to buy more and more in order to capture moments of pleasure, and with selfishness considered a virtue; in the other, happiness comes from interactions, from relationships, from people.

Thus, the “modern” city of luxury apartments, shopping malls, highways, and gated communities encourages consumption; the “old-fashioned” city of plazas, parks, markets, pedestrian-only walkways, and busy sidewalks encourages interaction. In the modernization view, plazas and parks represent a waste of space that could be utilized for economic purposes, and shopping malls replace open markets in the drive towards ever-increasing consumption; in the socialization or quality of life view, such open and public spaces are seen as vital for people’s interactions, health and well-being.

For those living in them, one fact has become clear: the thoroughly “modern city” fails to address many of people’s basic psychological needs: to watch, be around, and interact with others at different levels of intimacy, in order to feel part of a community and to reaffirm human connections. This is not surprising; research has shown that happiness continues to rise with income only to a certain level, and then is associated more with community and social connections than with money; further, the more people are exposed to advertising, the less happy they are (Easton 2006).

People are inherently social animals, unable to thrive without human interactions, and those interactions require a venue. It is not enough to see one’s family members and colleagues; mixing with or at least observing strangers and casual acquaintances provides the needed reassurance that one is part of a larger, vital, functional community. And how does one obtain that reassurance? Where does one go to learn about others, to gain new ideas, to expand one’s creativity? “Among the requirements that are satisfied, in part, in public spaces are the need for contact, the need for knowledge, and the need for stimulation” (Gehl 2001).

Being around others also reminds people of the “other” side of life, beyond roads and buildings: the importance of people and the need to look out for each other.

Why is the model of happiness — whether we give precedence to consumption or to interaction — important? Because it affects nearly every aspect of our lives and our choices and decisions about the design of our cities. Do we focus on making every corner of the city accessible by automobile, on providing high-end products and stores for those with the means to purchase them, and expensive restaurants, luxury shops and hotels for those wealthy enough to patronize them?
Or do we work to sustain and strengthen existing neighbourhoods and communities, to ensure that vendors\(^1\) and small shopkeepers have a place to do business and that people of all ages and incomes have attractive places to gather, outdoors, in the public realm, so as to sustain livelihoods and promote the socializing that is the fabric of our society and the greatest hope for our happiness?

Not that it need be all one or the other; a mix of the fast track and slow, the high rise and the low dwelling, the shopping mall and the traditional market, the exclusive restaurant and the corner noodle shop, all may contribute to a lively and liveable city and accommodate those with a taste for the modern, the luxurious, the new. But if the “modern” and upper class is allowed to crowd out all else, the city loses. And that is precisely what is happening in countless cities today.

But some cities are fighting back. New York City is the biggest, liveliest, most energetic and creative city in the US, a wealthy city albeit with much poverty. Central Park in New York City is a welcome oasis of green, nature, and peace in the city. It attracts cyclists, dog walkers, skaters, locals and tourists. But one big park is not enough. The mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, has been working to transform some city streets by reducing space for the automobile and giving it back to people in the form of lawn chairs on the streets in and near Times Square, street bazaars, sidewalk dining, large grassy medians, and bike lanes. If New York City, one of the most sophisticated, urbane, modern cities in the most powerful nation on the planet is doing this, what does it suggest to the world?

When reflecting on the changes in cities over the past generation — changes often caused largely by and justified in terms of the market economy — it is important to note that not all change is an improvement, and that much that is unpleasant and unethical occurs under the name of progress. Certainly one can accept and welcome positive change and progress while still cherishing and respecting beautiful and valuable traditions, but before accepting all that is labelled progress as such, it helps to evaluate whether the changes thus named are in fact likely to lead to improvements, without destroying things too valuable to lose. In considering this, it can be important to remember that sometimes money, or specifically market forces, impedes rather than generates happiness.

---

\(^1\) Vendors throughout this book refers both to those who roam the streets selling goods, and fixed sellers at small informal shops and stands.
At five o’clock in the afternoon people gather in public spaces to walk, jog, sit, and watch others. An unoccupied wheelchair seems abandoned near some benches; an old man, half bent over, practices walking. Two short chubby dogs venture to the edge of a lake and tentatively sniff the water. Three older men share a bench, their arms around each other, smiling. A small girl stops to stare in fascination at a baby being pushed in a stroller; the girl’s father jokingly explains that “he has no sandals.”

* * *

What is a public space? According to Wikipedia, “A public space refers to an area or place that is open and accessible to all citizens, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level”; that is, a place where anyone can come, and further, where most events are spontaneous rather than pre-planned, where people mix with others or simply move about or sit and watch others. Public spaces have no entrance fee, no dress code, and no script. They offer surprises and unexpected pleasures: the sight of children playing, youth strolling, the elderly chatting, the fatigued resting, the lonely and melancholy and bored escaping their troubles. There are no clear distinctions between observers and observed; all are on stage, all are part of the audience.
Public spaces include parks, outdoor plazas and public gardens, as well as streets and sidewalks. While streets and sidewalks are of course primarily for circulation — the movement of people throughout the city — this is by no means their only use. Given the amount of space they consume and the multiple needs of people, it would be wasteful and inefficient to reserve them exclusively for movement. As award-winning architect Jan Gehl reminds us, the traditional role of streets and sidewalks is not just for movement, but as marketplace and meeting place. Lively and liveable cities not only allow but encourage all three roles. And why not? If people can buy much of what they need and enjoy social interactions close to their homes and workplaces, they will have less need to travel to meet those needs. How much pleasanter to live not in a constant roar of traffic and horns, of busy people pushing their way through the crowds, but among people conversing as they buy and sell, stroll and rest, and partake in the friendly sociable patterns of a liveable city.

3 In many cities, transport and urban planners argue that there are not enough streets, and that 20-30% of a city should consist of roads. Such people fail to observe the effect of such a high quantity of roads on traffic circulation in cities with such a proportion, such as Los Angeles (with the worst congestion and air pollution in the United States) or the fact that building so many roads would require bulldozing a significant portion of the city. With 20-30% of urban space going for roads, how is one to accommodate all the other needs of people? Does it make sense to concentrate efforts and money on ensuring that people can move about, while simultaneously destroying many of the very places they were trying to access? The issue is not too few streets but too many vehicles; the problem can be solved not by tearing things down to build more streets, but by ensuring mixed-use neighbourhoods to bring needed goods and services closer and by creating disincentives for use of motorized transport.

This book also includes traditional markets in its discussion of public spaces. Why? Even though markets, like supermarkets and shopping malls, are designed and intended to inspire consumption, significant differences exist. Supermarkets and shopping malls are impersonal, often homogeneous. Many of the goods are international rather than local; the workers are mostly young attractive women. There are many rules to be followed: no lingering too long or talking too loud; the managers exercise the right to deny entrances to the shabby. One is expected to make significant purchases. Shopkeepers may be friendly and helpful but they are busy; they do not normally engage in small talk.

Markets can be dirty and messy, but they are also lively and friendly. They offer admission to all. There are low stools where one can sit and eat; there are abundant opportunities to chat at length with the sellers when they aren’t busy. Negotiating a price can be a hassle but is also an opportunity for social interaction. No purchase is too small or insignificant. All are welcome to browse and look and bargain. The sellers are independent, of ranging ages and appearance. Unlike the carefully sanitized and polished artificial atmosphere of a shopping mall or supermarket, traditional markets offer a microcosm of real life: not always pleasant but refreshing honest and inclusive, and a variety of local goods and products to happily stun the senses, at prices affordable to the lower and middle classes. A range of stimuli, opportunity to socialize, a reminder of the diversity of life: how much more valuable an experience than the orderly and stifling neatness of the over-priced and highly selective goods in a supermarket or mall.

4 For example, activists in the United States were arrested for handing out leaflets in a shopping mall promoting the buying of Nothing, in order to save the environment and counter senseless consumerism. Supermarkets and shopping malls are actually highly controlled environments and many behaviours and individuals are not tolerated on their premises.
HOW PUBLIC SPACES ENHANCE URBAN LIFE

“Shopping malls can be fun places... But when malls begin to replace public spaces as a meeting place for the community, for people in a city, it is a symptom that a city is ill and perhaps society as well.” (Peñalosa 2004)

“In a society in which increasingly more of daily life takes place in the private sphere – in private homes, at private computers, in private cars, at private workplaces and in strictly controlled and privatised shopping centres – there are clear signs that the city and city spaces have been given a new and influential role as public space and forum.

In contrast to the many indirect communications and the many widespread and private spaces, the opportunity for people to use their senses and interact directly with their surroundings is becoming extremely attractive.” (Gehl and Gemzøe 2003)

“My entire family makes the time to come to the park every afternoon for a stroll. We chat as we walk in a cool pleasant environment. It’s so pleasant, and helps keep the family close together, to allow us to understand each other better. My children love it also because they can play comfortably.

We’re busy all day; this is the time reserved for family. All of us are happier when we get back from the park. It’s such a simple thing, but I feel really fortunate that we live near the park. For those who don’t live near a park, it is no easy matter to do such a ‘simple thing’.”

While shopping centres are essentially always the same, public places are magical, always changing with weather and time of day. In outdoor places the moods of nature are ever present: the beauty and drama of a thunderstorm, shadows rippling in water, breezes rustling leaves.


Observe.

Play.

Participate, actively or passively.

Keep coming back for more. Since it is never the same, street life never gets boring.

Shopkeepers spill out of their shops, participating in, contributing to, life on the streets. They sit on chairs in front of their shops, watching, talking, knitting, eating. Their shops’ display — inside the shop but visible through large glass windows or open doors — provides further visual stimulation to passers-by. The line between public and private is hazily and sketchily drawn, full of nuances.
A family eating in their home cum shop, people cooking on the sidewalk in front of their home, private life fully visible and undivided except psychologically from the street; the merging of street life with business and play; the gentle transitions and mixing of activities that infuses a city with soul.

* * *

One indication of quality public spaces, used by many kinds of people and at different times of day and night, is that they are “flexible spaces that can accommodate different activities, whether programmed or spontaneous, and have the capacity to transform over time to encourage new uses, energizing the site at all times” (Ryan 2006). A wide range of activities occurring in many public spaces indicate that a city still has much to offer in terms of spontaneity, energy, creativity and liveability. People moving through those spaces play a dual role; “as opposed to being a passive observer of other people’s experiences on television or video or film, in public places the individual himself is present, participating in a modest way, but most definitely participating” (Gehl 2001).

* * *

People sit on the steps of a majestic building, lounging and watching the traffic. At 5:20 on a peaceful Saturday afternoon in late March, a tiny park is mostly inhabited by toddlers and their parents. The only place to sit is the steps at the centre, which is naturally a gathering place. An older woman studies the newspaper Family Doctor, a young woman looks about restlessly and tries to make a call on her mobile phone. A man photographs his young son in front of the carefully manicured flowers. A child jumps up and down the steps. A boy and girl on bicycles follow each other around the path. A woman feeds her son a sweet drink, children run on the grass and paths. On the fringes a vendor sells clothes, another guavas and green tea, and yet another pineapple with chilli powder. The father, tired of photographing his son, now focuses on the grand building.

* * *

Public spaces work best when they do not lay out a script of intended uses, but rather allow different people to make use of them in the way that suits them. The mix of people that thereby results is one of the keys to understanding the importance and vitality of public spaces: “the best and most sustainable public spaces ... [can be used] by people from diverse communities, for encouraging multiple experiences, and for fostering social and cultural exchange. [They] prompt discovery, help promote understanding and tolerance, and enhance the quality of our everyday lives” (Ryan 2006).

“*It is difficult to say what is the border between private and public spaces in a poor community. The alley in front of each house is often used for private purposes such as..."
A family eating in their home cum shop, people cooking on the sidewalk in front of their home, private life fully visible and undivided except psychologically from the street; the merging of street life with business and play; the gentle transitions and mixing of activities that infuses a city with soul.

* * *

One indication of quality public spaces, used by many kinds of people and at different times of day and night, is that they are “flexible spaces that can accommodate different activities, whether programmed or spontaneous, and have the capacity to transform over time to encourage new uses, energizing the site at all times” (Ryan 2006). A wide range of activities occurring in many public spaces indicate that a city still has much to offer in terms of spontaneity, energy, creativity and liveability. People moving through those spaces play a dual role; “as opposed to being a passive observer of other people’s experiences on television or video or film, in public places the individual himself is present, participating in a modest way, but most definitely participating” (Gehl 2001).

* * *

People sit on the steps of a majestic building, lounging and watching the traffic. At 5:20 on a peaceful Saturday afternoon in late March, a tiny park is mostly inhabited by toddlers and their parents. The only place to sit is the steps at the centre, which is naturally a gathering place. An older woman studies the newspaper Family Doctor, a young woman looks about restlessly and tries to make a call on her mobile phone. A man photographs his young son in front of the carefully manicured flowers. A child jumps up and down the steps. A boy and girl on bicycles follow each other around the path. A woman feeds her son a sweet drink, children run on the grass and paths. On the fringes a vendor sells clothes, another guavas and green tea, and yet another pineapple with chilli powder. The father, tired of photographing his son, now focuses on the grand building.

* * *

Public spaces work best when they do not lay out a script of intended uses, but rather allow different people to make use of them in the way that suits them. The mix of people that thereby results is one of the keys to understanding the importance and vitality of public spaces: “the best and most sustainable public spaces ... [can be used] by people from diverse communities, for encouraging multiple experiences, and for fostering social and cultural exchange. [They] prompt discovery, help promote understanding and tolerance, and enhance the quality of our everyday lives” (Ryan 2006).

Left: Melaka; Right: Stockholm

“It is difficult to say what is the border between private and public spaces in a poor community. The alley in front of each house is often used for private purposes such as
cooking on the coal ovens, drying cloth or parking the bikes. ...
In the mean time, their living rooms sometimes are used as
public place, where the owners are familiar with the fact that
the neighbors can come in and out at any time as well as use
facilities without asking permission like they are in their own
house...every day, in the afternoon, people gathered for a cup
of tea and watched TV shows together in someone's house, or
they sit together right at the threshold of a house to talk.
Their conversations were usually about what happens in the
community's daily life, market prices, children, and jobs...
Community space and private space are somehow merged into
one." (Nguyen and Nghiem 2007)

* * *

Vientiane, Laos

On a Saturday evening, plazas and squares are full of
people. A vendor sells big plastic balls with which children
and youth are playing. Other children skate and ride
scooters and bicycles. Youth play football or kick a birdie.
People in groups chat and eat. While there are a lot of
children present, there are also many youth and adults and
a few elderly people including a man in a wheelchair quietly
contemplating the scene.

People watch and photograph the sunset. Children climb up
and pose on a hill made of rocks. Locals and tourists stand
on the fringes of the open area, enjoying the scene and
posing for photos. As dusk settles the small children go
home and young couples proliferate; people continue to
stroll, talking to friends and watching the others. A line of
women give each other a shoulder rub, turning to laugh at
the amusement they generate in passers-by. Squares, plazas,
and parks may be lovely on their own, but it is the people
that make them a place: “...the presence of other people,
activities, events, inspiration, and stimulation comprise one
of the most important qualities of public spaces altogether”
(Gehl 2001).

It is an ironic fact of life that people both thrive on
stimulation and may seek to avoid it. Even though people
come to life in stimulating environments where they have
no control over surrounding events or people — in places
marked by colour and variety — they may think they
would prefer a less stimulating environment. The belief may
arise from, and is certainly reinforced by, media and —
more and more often — by urban planners.
The concept of stranger danger, of the streets as threatening scary places, of the home as a fortress in which one seeks to keep self and family safe, is repeated endlessly on TV and in movies. It is reinforced by “modern” residential areas that consist of identical housing blocks, accessible only by motorized transport, that emphasize comfort, familiarity, and conformity.

Yet people need recreation, not just of the passive, lounge-in-front-of-the-TV sort, but of the active and social variety. People enjoy the stimulus of being around others. It is hard not to smile when watching a toddler learning to walk or a small child to ride a bike. The happiness of a grandmother in holding a baby, the grace and dignity of an elderly tai chi artist, the euphoria of teens polishing their hip hop moves, all are to a degree contagious, and are all a welcome and needed respite from everyday routines.
SOMETIMES THE PATH IS THE DESTINATION: STREETS AND SIDEWALKS

"Streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs... If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull." (Jacobs 1989)

"We humans are pedestrians, walking animals. Just as fish need to swim, birds to fly, zebras to run, we need to walk. Humane cities need to be made for walking. We also like to see people, to be with people. It has been found that people prefer park benches where more people walk by." (Peñalosa 2004)

When everything is somewhat grey and plain,
Wouldn't it be nice to go for a walk
And to see on the ground that
your neighbour has given you a poem.
Poem painted on a street in Freiburg (translated from German)

“I was walking one day when I suddenly developed a pain in my knee. I stopped to try to work out the pain. A beggar I regularly see asked, with great concern, if I was all right. I assured him I was and walked on. He smiled with relief, resting on his crutches, his right leg amputated at the knee.”

* * *

An exquisitely-dressed elegant young woman saunters by with an older man. Two young shop clerks sitting on the stoop of their store turn their heads to stare.

A two-year-old boy lies on his side on a long narrow piece of styrofoam on the sidewalk, pretending to sleep. Two people play badminton, a child rides on a bike and another tests his new scooter.

A man in a cane chair sits on the sidewalk in front of his shop reading a newspaper, oblivious to the noisy surroundings. An elderly lady sleeps in a low chair next to her display case.

* * *

“Cities promote a diversity of social, cultural, and economic exchanges. The design of streets determines both the diversity and efficiency with which these exchanges can be transacted.” (Engwicht 1999)
The four main groups or activities that compete for space on sidewalks are pedestrians, vendors, car and motorbike parking, and fixed shops. Each requires an appropriate solution that, in most cases, is more complex than simply banning the activity. According to Hanoi researcher Lisa Drummond, policies designed to remove the poor (beggars and vendors) from sidewalks not only further contribute to poverty by removing a potential income source, but “do nothing to address the root causes of poverty, and do much to add to the difficulties experienced by marginal populations...and these policies also contribute to widening the gap between groups in society, creating the basis for social unrest” (Drummond 2009).

Something very precious is lost when we allow sidewalks to be taken over by motorbikes and cars. Something very precious is gained when we slow the pace of life in the city, incorporating enjoyment into everyday life instead of trying to make time and space for it in our rare moments of leisure.

As groundbreaking urbanist Jane Jacobs and others remind us, streets were always intended to be multi-use, and cities function better when they are: “Streets in cities serve many purposes besides carrying vehicles, and city sidewalks — the pedestrian parts of the streets — serve many purposes besides carrying pedestrians” (Jacobs 1989). Sidewalks are places to walk, shop, eat, sell, chat, sit, look, rest, play badminton, and teach a small child to ride a bike. They are also used, not always positively, to repair bicycles or motorbikes, park vehicles, accommodate spill-over from shops, facilitate other repair work and construction, and for endless other types of work.

Our use of sidewalks tells much about our choices in life. When looking for recreation or to spend money, do people go to formal restaurants or prefer to sit on a low stool on the sidewalk, observing and being observed by others? Do people in their free time focus on what they can buy in fancy shops or on finding opportunities to mix with others? Do public spaces, and especially the most commonly used, our sidewalks, promote only selfish and material values or do they also allow more spiritual or communal ones? Do city residents have the chance only to spend money or also to relax; are they always expected to follow rules, or do they have the ability to create or rework spaces according to their needs and interests?

Consider why, in cities throughout the world, sidewalk dining is so popular. One reason is surely the variety of foods available at an affordable price. Itinerant vendors roam the streets, bringing noodles, fried tofu, sticky rice with black bean or onion and corn, steamed rice cakes with coconut and molasses, and countless other foods close to their customers. Other vendors sit in a fixed spot, serving their regulars with a variety of local foods, cut papaya or watermelon, fried rice, spicy curries, creamy desserts, sugarcane juice...the choices are endless and vary with the seasons and the city.

Bangkok
Equally importantly and probably universally, people enjoy sitting outside watching others. One person’s activity becomes another’s visual entertainment. European cities encourage sidewalk cafés and many US cities either already have them or are attempting to start; they help to meet the intense psychological need for human contact and provide free entertainment with the meal, offering the opportunity to play the dual role of observer and observed. They are immensely popular and thus profitable. Sometimes happiness is good economics.

As opposed to indoor environments — contained and controlled — the outdoors feels free and open. No need for other stimulation or recreation; the unscripted life of the streets offers a continually diverse and changing scene to the eye and stimulation for the other senses. Smells, sounds, a cool breeze, a splattering of rain. No two days, no two times of the day, are the same.

Life is all about nuances, the splashes of colour between black and white. Nuance, subtlety, personality, creativity — the forces of genuine democracy, forces contrary to constant unquestioning materialism.

Planners work hard in Europe and the US to create living streets; elsewhere they work hard to stifle the existing vitality.

Streets and sidewalks in children’s education

"Children in cities need a variety of places in which to play and to learn. They need, among other things, opportunities for all kinds of sports and exercise and physical skills — more opportunities, more easily obtained, than they now enjoy in most cases. However, at the same time, they need an unspecialized outdoor home base from which to play, to hang around in, and to help form their notions of the world.

It is this form of unspecialized play that the sidewalks serve — and that lively city sidewalks can serve splendidly." (Jacobs 1989)

“If a child falls in the street we’re terrified; if she falls in the park, she leaps right up again. We know kids should explore and have adventures, but that’s just theory. How are we to make it real? When they play outdoors they eat and sleep better. When they watch TV they get bored and irritable and tired but don’t sleep well, and they lose their creativity and their ability to play well alone or with others. They lose their willingness to think, which limits their creative ability. Look at the change in their faces when they play!”
A toddler trots along the sidewalk in squeaky sandals; another, sitting on a three-wheeled bike, is pushed by her grandfather. A grandmother pushes in a stroller a toddler wearing a rabbit-eared cap. A young man contemplates the scene as he strolls along, his hands on his hips.

People work on the sidewalk: painting signs and banners, unloading goods, assembling floral wreaths, repairing bicycles and motorbikes, selling goods and meals. They talk while they work, blurring the line between work and socializing. Children watch, seemingly taking in nothing while absorbing it all.

* * *

We know that more and more children are becoming obese. We know that they are losing the ability to navigate the streets on their own. Many are losing their social skills as well. They may be taught only distrust of strangers, but not the valuable lessons of whom and how to trust. They may be taught that people different from them are bad, unworthy of their time or attention. What children learn when they roam the streets on their own may be of even greater importance than their ability to enjoy the benefits of physical play and activity, essential as those are for their health and even academic performance.

Children learn about the nature of cities through their experiences in the streets; this includes the simple if often forgotten fact that people must look after each other. As Jacobs writes, “In real life, only from the ordinary adults of the city sidewalks do children learn — if they learn it at all — the first fundamental of successful city life: People must take a modicum of public responsibility for each other even if they have no ties to each other. This is a lesson nobody learns by being told. It is learned from the experience of having other people without ties of kinship or close friendship or formal responsibility to you take a modicum of public responsibility for you” (Jacobs 1989).

That is, only when children observe adults looking out for each other — helping someone to cross the street, giving directions, offering help with a heavy item — do they learn that people can and should do so, that it is quite normal and expected for people to look after each other.

That the streets of the city are the connective tissue in a society in which people live in inter-dependence.

That one person’s selfish acts have negative repercussions on others, and that we should be aware of others, think about how our actions affect them, as we move through our city and our lives.

“[Unification Park] reminds people about a period of struggle and victory in the history of the capital because the park was built by the efforts of thousands of workers at a time when people lived for the common benefit rather than that of individuals.”

(Nguyen Hai in Hellberg and Johansson 2008)

Since streets play such an important role in the life of the city, it is a great mistake to feel that wide sidewalks are wasted space, or that space in the streets should be given over entirely for the movement of (usually motorized) vehicles.
"Sidewalks thirty or thirty-five feet wide can accommodate virtually any demand of incidental play put upon them — along with trees to shade the activities, and sufficient space for pedestrian circulation and adult public sidewalk life and loitering. Few sidewalks of this luxurious width can be found. Sidewalk width is invariably sacrificed for vehicular width, partly because city sidewalks are conventionally considered to be purely space for pedestrian travel and access to buildings, and go unrecognized and unrespected as the uniquely vital and irreplaceable organs of city safety, public life and child rearing that they are." (Jacobs 1989)

If we can learn to respect the value that sidewalks give to our daily lives, and the need of children to grow up partly outdoors under the eyes and in interaction with many people, we will go a long way towards creating a better city.

5 And in the wrong places, such wide sidewalks do no good. Children will not travel far to use wide sidewalks; if there is nothing to attract people to them, they will go unused, or for little more than wastefully free car parking.

UNSCRIPTED PLACES:
PARKS, PUBLIC GARDENS, AND PLAZAS

Brookline, Massachusetts

"Intricacy is related to the variety of reasons for which people come to neighborhood parks. Even the same person comes for different reasons at different times; sometimes to sit tiredly, sometimes to play or to watch a game, sometimes to read or work, sometimes to show off, sometimes to fall in love, sometimes to keep an appointment, sometimes to savor the hustle of the city from a retreat, sometimes in the hope of finding acquaintances, sometimes to get closer to a bit of nature, sometimes to keep a child occupied, sometimes simply to see what offers, and almost always to be entertained by the sight of other people." (Jacobs 1989)

"One of the most important initiatives in urban places worldwide is the integration of more parks and green spaces with trees and plants that can dampen noise levels, filter pollution, absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen, absorb rainwater and reduce run-off, and provide shade. These spaces also encourage physical activity, and may help address worrisome health issues such as the rising level of child obesity." (Ryan 2006)
In a small plaza, a toddler practices walking followed by his anxious mother. A man rides his new bike in circles around the central fountain. A grey-haired lady moves her foot in circles to work her ankle as she sits on a bench watching the others. The man pauses to lean against the fountain, and a child starts cycling in his place, in quiet rhythmic circles around the fountain. A woman leans against her motorcycle eating an ice cream. Couples play badminton. Two white-haired men, one apparently a foreigner, intently engage in some game or transaction on a bench. People photograph the fountain.

* * *

Some cities are blessed by having a number of high quality public spaces: squares, lakes, parks, plazas and public gardens. Some are vast green spaces with paths, smaller paved areas for exercise or events, lakes, restaurants, cafés, and informal shops and eateries. Others are simply small areas, paved or not, where people can sit, walk, skate, cycle, play badminton, and watch others. Some are too small to offer space for much more than to sit on a bench and relax for a few minutes on one’s way elsewhere. Some are nearly empty part of the time and packed in early mornings and throughout the evening; others are always lively, due in part to their central location and easy access.

Feeling lonely? Just go outside. Need something to do? Watch people, participate actively or passively in the daily drama of life in the streets, in the parks and plazas and public gardens of the city.

One thing is clear: such spaces are much loved and do much to enhance the quality of life of those who have the opportunity to use them.

A rainy morning in a park. A few cafés are open, the diners under the protection of big umbrellas or a bright blue sheet of plastic.

A ballroom dance club braves the rain. A woman in a black skirt that ends below the knee in a lacy fringe demonstrates a new move ending with a coquettish swivel. The other dancers watch from under their red, blue, and green umbrellas.

A young woman walks slowly in a park, gently assisting an elderly man who is partly paralysed to stumble along in his blue cotton pyjamas. A serious-looking girl with glasses skips along the path.

A group of skinny naked boys lie on their backs and slide along the thin layer of mud on a plaza.
Late on a cool damp Saturday morning in April, a park is full of children playing on the playground equipment, riding the toy train with their parents, watching an elderly man making colourful wax birds and soldiers, riding bikes in a quiet corner. Those who come mostly for exercise come and leave early, though the park will again be full in the evening of people walking, strolling, jogging, sitting, eating, and playing.

Business happens, at all hours and in all seasons. Roaming vendors, small cafés, and informal shops sell a range of food and drink. Others sell clothes or children’s toys or fans, some offer massage, a man sketches people. A wedding photographer, old women with scales and blood pressure monitors, all find employment in the park. In the early mornings a man in his 70s teaches ballroom dance mostly to seniors, and a woman with the voice of a military officer leads aerobics.

People are employed in countless other ways: collecting trash, repairing paths, tending plants, sweeping, operating rides, selling tickets... Mostly these are independent jobs, so different from a strict schedule, working for someone else, always indoors.

Amidst the blaring music of the ballroom dancers, a group meditates with full concentration. Youth practice their dance moves, some twirling on their shoulders, others leaping and kicking, forgetting for the moment the shyness and awkwardness of adolescence.

* * *

Among the many basic needs of people is that for recreation, including relaxation and socializing. People are not meant to work constantly; nor are they meant to live alone. Ideally these different needs — to escape from the pressures of work, to feel part of a community, to be around and possibly interact with others — can all be met in the same place. When people are drawn to public spaces they can perform multiple roles for others as well as for themselves: a group of people engaged in aerobics for their own health and fitness are a visual spectacle for others. The woman with a scale and blood pressure kit offers not only medical advice but a chance for gossip.

Those different uses are vital, both to satisfy people’s various needs and to ensure that public spaces are well-used, as “...it takes a wide functional mixture of uses to populate and enliven a neighborhood park through the day” (Jacobs 1989).

One could spend the entire day in one of Hanoi’s big parks or Kathmandu’s Durbar Squares. With their multitude of activities, parks and large squares serve as a microcosm of life, offering a glimpse of many aspects of the urban existence but in a quieter, safer, more peaceful setting (blaring music aside). Since the uses change with the time of day and the seasons, and since there is no script and the unexpected is always happening, public spaces do not grow stale.

Parks are not just places to visit, but places where people lead their lives, spilling out from often dark and cramped homes. How much better to be outdoors in the light and air with the chance to interact or at least be among other people. In the words of two Swedish landscape architects, “The way that people live their lives within and in this park, spending each and every morning and afternoon in this extended living room, is the essential thing here” (Hellberg and Johansson 2008).
Taipei

Two foreign men walk side by side, talking intensely, pushing babies in strollers, no woman in sight. A tiny dog plays with a kitten, charging at it and nibbling its legs.

A large tattooed man squats on the sidewalk, deep in conversation with a white-haired vendor. A boy strolls with his grandmother, the two exactly the same height. A bride poses by a wall near a busy ice cream shop, two photographers crouched on the ground and a third watching from a motorbike, as her grey-haired mother instructs her in coquettishness.

A family pauses to admire the sun setting in a lake. Tourists seated on a bench apply mosquito repellent to their legs. A local man explains to a blonde the sights described in her tourism book. A woman does callisthenics.

Why is it so important to meet and mix with people different from ourselves? To break the monotony of the workaday world? To challenge our expectations about people, life, ourselves? To take a cautious step or two outside the safe, secure, comfortable boxes in which we often lead our lives? And without doing so, can we call ourselves fully human?

Unscripted places are open and inviting. They offer perhaps a suggestion of possible activities, but no more. They encourage creativity and allow people to shape their environment, rather than always having to follow the assigned script of one’s daily life: work in the office, shop in stores, move (and sit in traffic) in the streets. The liberty and freedom people seek is possible in public spaces, and often impossible elsewhere.

Unscripted places are also efficient places in terms of use of space, as the same space can be used in different ways at different times by different people. A tree is shade, shelter from rain, a place to tie a dog, something to climb on, a source of fruit. Playground equipment can be used by joggers to stretch. A plaza offers itself for concerts, events, tai chi, ballroom dance, football, a festival.

Surprise, spontaneity, independence, creativity...life lived outdoors among others.
THERE’S MORE TO COMMERCIAL TRANSACTIONS THAN BUYING AND SELLING: MARKETS

In some cities a belief that traditional markets are unsanitary, unhygienic, or not modern is leading to a drive to tear them down, to be replaced by supermarkets and shopping malls. Never mind that the markets are extremely popular, that the goods are far cheaper in them (though bargaining skills may be required), that markets offer socializing along with the purchase. The false belief in the need to push the modernization drive — or the desire to lend a helping hand to new businesses that otherwise have difficulties finding customers — can lead to the decision to tear down the markets.

For those living in cities where such markets are not threatened, appreciate what you have. And for those who don’t, here are a few thoughts about them. Since both customers and sellers have such strong opinions about markets, in this section we prefer mainly to let them speak for themselves.

“Using the street as a place of commerce provided room for new enterprises to start up. One did not have to rent a high-priced shop in a large regional shopping mall or business park. Some businesses could start rent-free right in the street... The hubbub of economic activity already happening in the street increased the chances of these new businesses growing... This provided a greater diversity of businesses — and by extension a greater diversity of goods and services — than do economies that are centralized. The bottom line was that as a result of the concentration of exchange opportunities (which reduced transport costs) the price of goods and services became cheaper.”

(Engwicht 1999)

Local markets, informal shops: Good for local businesses. Good for small businesses. Good for variety and diversity. Good for reducing congestion and keeping prices down. Good for employment and independence. Good for reducing otherwise socially destructive enormous gaps in income.

“[This] market is a big market where people can satisfy their needs for different products. They have everything you need. The road into the market is big and airy, so one can shop quickly; we don’t have to waste time. It would be more inconvenient if they built up the market. Now I can enter by motorbike, whereas otherwise I would have to park my motorbike and go upstairs, which would take a lot of time. When I am in a hurry, I would just have to do without my purchases. It’s the same with supermarkets. And since when are their products fresher or more delicious? They get their products from elsewhere too, then they store them for days. The products are more expensive because of the other expenses of a shop.

6 E.F. Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful remains a classic text on the problems of reliance on economic growth fuelled by high energy use and the need instead to encourage small businesses.
Whenever you go into a supermarket you have to spend a lot, normally several hundred thousand VND\(^7\), it's not like you can go everyday. Then you have to spend time waiting in line at the check-out counter, it's very tiring.”

A wide array of goods, easily accessible. Quick access, quick departure. Low prices. No pressure to make large purchases. And along with the buying and selling, the chance to stop and talk: the human dimension.

“There are a lot of advantages to shopping in the market. I mainly just buy vegetables, pickles, meat and fish for daily meals, and the market is only a few steps away. The food is fresh and good, and there is abundance aplenty. The prices are reasonable. If I go to a supermarket I have to travel a long way, and since I'm old it's hard for me to climb the steps. And often my purchases are so trifling, I can't even find such things in a supermarket.” (83-year-old woman)

A place that welcomes the poor, the old, the slow; that has time to help people, to offer services no matter how small the purchase.

“Whether it's an old or new market or a supermarket, the purpose is to serve the needs of the public. But all those who live around here are labourers, they don't earn much, so they look for places that sell goods at reasonable prices. Markets are the most suitable of all. I always just come to this market. The prices are so high in supermarkets and there's no guarantee that the products are any higher quality, because the process of checking the quality of goods is poor.”

---

\(^7\) At the time of writing, one US dollar was equivalent to about 18,000 Vietnamese dong (VND).

A place that does not discriminate against the low-income, that doesn’t push the capitalist model of consumption, that doesn’t scorn at differences.

“This market is a very good place, they have fixed it and built it higher. I've been selling here a long time. My customers are also known to me. If they build a new multi-story market then the basic goods will probably be on the 3\(^{rd}\) floor, so it won't be convenient for the customers. They won't come in. They would have to park their motorbike and climb the stairs, so why would anyone bother when they just need a couple things?

If there are no customers, to whom am I supposed to sell? As it is, selling dried goods means a very low profit margin. In a new market, the rent will also be a lot more expensive. At the moment I have to pay about 2 million VND per month for my place to sit, and for electricity, water, taxes... In a new market I would have to pay at least 3 million, who knows precisely, it could be even higher. Where am I supposed to find all that money?”

Bangkok
A known seller, known customers. A stall at a reasonable rent. And in the hearts of those who for decades have earned their living this way, the fear of the future.

Local markets and street vendors enhance the local economy, not destroy it. It is super-chains like WalMart and 7-Eleven that destroy local businesses. Open markets, vendors and small shops provide jobs, ensure the availability of a wide variety of goods and services at a low cost, and are the true foundation of a sustainable economy.

“T’ve been selling vegetables here for thirty years, and I’m very attached to this market. If they tear this down and build a new market it will cause a lot of confusion for the vendors, and for the customers to find what they need. And people don’t like shopping in new markets, so I’m afraid I won’t be able to sell like before. The new markets aren’t doing any business. Nobody wants to sell or buy in them. It’s such a waste, how much better to keep these bustling markets where the customers can shop comfortably and the sellers can make a decent living.”

Why destroy what is so popular? Why force the expensive and “modern” choice on the reluctant? If some people wish to shop in existing supermarkets, so be it, but why not allow the many that prefer shopping in markets to continue to do so? And if many new malls truly are empty, why build more of them?

A market. A wide array of products within a relatively small space. Individual, independent vendors. Clothes, kitchen supplies, fresh produce, meals and snacks, dry foodstuffs, meat and fish, sandals and shoes. Lively with the chatter of sellers and buyers. A little improvement could make them cleaner; instead some will be bulldozed to make room for more shopping malls, again pushing aside the poor and middle class to make way for the rich.

---

8 In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein describes American businessmen’s excitement about how “One well-stocked 7-Eleven could knock out 30 Iraqi stores; a Wal-Mart could take over the country.”
Where else to find the abundance and variety of affordable goods and fresh healthy produce? To have the opportunity to converse as part of the transaction? Little things do matter; little things like recreation and socializing and observing others constitute the soul of the city. And its lifeblood as well, as the informal economy, by providing jobs and affordable goods, is critical to the functioning of the city.

“It’s very important for sellers to have a fixed place to sit, have quality goods that are fresh and delicious to serve their customers, especially their familiar customers. I think they just need to renovate the market to make it more spacious and clean, not to completely tear it down and build a new one. Customers also prefer to shop in old markets because it’s more convenient and cheaper.”

When our home is a mess, do we clean it up or tear it down?
“The opportunity to see and hear other people in a city...also implies an offer of valuable information, about the surrounding social environment in general and about the people one lives or works with in particular. This is especially true in connection with the social development of children...” (Gehl 2001)

“We can create a city for children’s happiness rather than for cars’ mobility.” (Peñalosa 2004)

Boys and girls climb on playground equipment, run along a tilted wheel, and dig in the sand in a park. A little girl tries out her new blue bike, riding in circles in a small plaza. A wisp of a girl with long hair demonstrates her stunning agility on skates, weaving gracefully through the crowds at a popular plaza on a Sunday evening. A toddler in a khaki jacket and white pants stumbles eagerly along a path in a tiny park, eluding his mother, while nearby a tiny boy stops to watch in fascination as a young man, reclining on his back, juggles a ball with his feet.

At a popular public garden, a little girl with cheeks as pink as her pants stands in the midst of chaos, completely absorbed as she hugs an equally pink ball to her chest. A tiny child with a multicoloured bandana pushes a little wooden cart decorated with three brightly painted wooden chickens.

Children are our future, our most valuable assets, our most precious citizens. Such phrases are easy to repeat, but what does life in our cities say about our genuine feelings about children? How well do today’s cities allow parents to meet the needs of their children?

Putting aside critical issues of access to quality education and health care — issues of great importance but beyond the scope of this book — let us consider another basic need and human right of children: quality recreation. Children, like the young of all species, need to play. Play builds the body, teaches social skills and confidence, allows experimentation and encourages creativity, and thereby prepares children for their role in the adult world. And of course, unlike watching television, a passive activity associated with obesity
as well as unhappiness (Kabir et. al. 2007), play allows children to be fully children — loud, active, exuberant, and carefree.

For those of us who walked to school as children, who played ball in the streets of our neighbourhoods, who knew our neighbours and walked or cycled alone to shops and parks, how differently do we see children growing up today? Between excessive loads of homework, extensive extra-curricular schedules of coaching and organized sports, and often the impossibility of navigating city streets on one's own, how many chances do today’s children have to learn and explore independently in the streets of their city, or even to play freely and safely in parks? Yet all such experiences are vital for children's psychological and physical health as well as social development.

There also arises the question of happiness, elusive but by no means entirely unpredictable. What makes children happy: toys and electronic games or the freedom to roam and play in their streets and feel the support of an engaged community? International research on the needs of low-income children in urban areas identified key qualities in determining their happiness, especially “...children's perception of the place as on the whole friendly and secure, where as a consequence they could move about and do things with friends. This unifying characteristic may be described as a fund of social capital from a children's perspective. ... additional assets [include] ... an interesting street life... These social advantages, enacted in the streets, shops and public places of the community, appeared to outweigh standard economic indicators” (UNESCO 2002).

An odd dual impoverishment occurs in many cities today. The poor have insufficient access to schools, decent food, health care, and adequate shelter. Yet the children of the poor run freely through the streets, interacting confidently with their surroundings and able to share extensive information about their environment with others. They know who to trust and who to avoid; they have detailed maps of their neighbourhood in their heads; they have many friends and acquaintances, and can turn to a range of people for help. The children of the rich, with so many material advantages, suffer from a deep experiential impoverishment. They often have little knowledge of the city beyond the very limited bounds of the home, with no ability to move about independently, no knowledge of their neighbours or of what the streets have to offer.

Children, like adults, fail to thrive in isolated environments: "When there were no safe places for socialising and participating in community life, young people expressed high levels of alienation” (UNESCO 2002). The international study on children's needs found that children were happiest not in the wealthiest places, but in those with the richest street life and strongest communities. There is no question that children's need for such places can be more significant, and the lack of such places more dire, than for other age groups. The elderly are similarly strongly affected. Young people and adults, especially those with money, may find alternate spots for recreation, but for children and the elderly, no other options may be available — and their independent movement is greatly curtailed by heavy traffic.

Urban planner Kevin Lynch observed that “much of children's play and socialising takes place in public places close to home...the regulation of local streets and small open spaces is a crucial issue” so “he made several recommendations to diminish or divert traffic from areas where children live. ... Observing that ‘the hunger for trees is outspoken and seemingly universal’, he emphasised that landscaping ‘is not window dressing’ and needs to be
recognised ‘as essential a part of the basic infrastructure of a settlement as electricity, water, sewers, and paving’... At the same time, he recommended that: ‘The city should open out to these children’” (UNESCO 2002).

Children are not simply adults in miniature. They have special needs that must be addressed; when they lose certain opportunities, the damage cannot necessarily ever be undone. How much concern do the needs of children generate among policymakers and planners? As former mayor of Bogotá (Colombia) Enrique Peñalosa and others point out, are we more concerned about the mobility of cars than about the happiness and wellbeing of our children?

Returning to the research on low-income children in various countries, it was seen that children “expressed satisfaction with their community when it had a positive self-image, friendly adults, available playmates, accessible and engaging public spaces where interesting activities could be found and places that children could claim as their own for socialising and play. When these elements were lacking, they expressed high degrees of alienation. The communities where the children expressed the most happiness with their place were...one of the poorest districts of Buenos Aires... Children expressed high degrees of alienation in the United States, England, Australia and South Africa” (UNESCO 2002).

While it is vital to meet children’s physical needs, neglecting their needs for independence and unstructured play will hamper their health, development and happiness. In attempting to modernize and improve urban areas, the risk is great of creating just such alienating environments as are so harmful to children throughout “modern” cities of the world today.

* * *

“The best part of going to the park is that you don’t have to worry about your child. When my son and I walk we have to step down from the sidewalk repeatedly to avoid obstacles, then my son cries, “car! motorbike!” and we step up again for a few steps. The whole time I am worried and he complains about being tired. But when we get to the park he runs and jumps and dances, he never says he’s tired. Later he begs me to take him to the park again. Recently when he was sick, he lay in front of the TV and groaned, but when I asked if he wanted to go to the park he leapt up immediately. Before marriage it was pleasant to go to the park to talk with a lover, but once we have children, parks are essential.”

Where else can children explore, run free, and ride bikes without their parents in constant terror of bodily harm? Places removed from the danger of traffic allow children to be children: active, carefree, frisky, sometimes wild. Such parks are so important that some parents travel eight kilometres or more to take their children to one because there is nothing suitable in their neighbourhood.
Parents do not need to be lectured about the importance of their children being active, getting exercise, and having a chance to play. What they need is the opportunity to give their children the chance that they so covet for such activities, to join in such fun.

Parents use the TV as a babysitter not necessarily because they are not aware that it can be harmful, but because they lack other alternatives.

One mother complained that when she leaves her children in front of the TV, they are soon drooping from exhaustion and limp with weariness. They become “stupid”, lethargic, losing their spontaneity and creativity. Yet without an alternative, what are parents to do?

Kids need parks and other open spaces to run around. Is it more important to provide parking and other amenities for vehicles or to provide parks, open spaces, and other amenities for children? As Enrique Peñalosa (2004) observes, “During the last 80 years we have been building cities more for motor vehicle mobility than for the happiness of children.” What if we were to reverse the trend? What if, as Peñalosa did in his own city of Bogotá9, we were to create small parks and playgrounds within walking distance of most people’s homes and to tame the traffic in the streets so that children could call the city their own?

9 A city famous for its corruption and crime, yet able, under the direction of a determined mayor, to make stunning changes to improve the lives of its residents by prioritizing pedestrians, cyclists, mass transit and children rather than cars. Among many other things, he built over a thousand new parks in the city.
I participate in an exercise class here in the afternoons. It’s too depressing to exercise at home alone. In the park there is music and lots of other people who exercise together, it’s much more fun. It’s because of coming here regularly that I can maintain my figure and my health.”

“I’m a student, I rent a house near this park. There are so many different expenses each month, so there’s no money to go to a gym to work out. The most economical and healthy way is to run or walk a few laps in the park everyday. It’s fresh and cool, the path is clean, and after I finish running I feel good and cheerful. So without having to go anywhere else, I can still be healthy.”

“It’s cool and pleasant in the summer, so different from the environment of the streets. The environment here makes me feel at ease and helps to melt away the fatigue and tensions of my workday.”


In a park in Dhaka, women in saris and running shoes stride rapidly along. Men in tunics, pants or long shorts loudly discuss politics as they walk. The t-shirts men wear offer amusing slogans (“Life is short, make fun of it”), good advice (“Avoid diabetes, walk daily”) or questionable propositions (“I taste as good as I look”).

Adults come to parks and other open spaces for a number of reasons. Parks in particular offer freedom from vehicle traffic: fresh air relatively free from vehicle exhaust, the chance to walk without worrying about being hit by a motorbike or car. People may come simply to escape from tension and breathe the fresh air.
Exercise in parks is sociable even when people engage in it alone. There is a world of difference between using exercise equipment and getting exercise outdoors, in terms of boredom, fatigue, variety, and stimulation. It is almost impossible to use a treadmill without listening to music or watching TV, and one may still find oneself counting the minutes in painful anxiety to be finished. Walking, jogging, or running in a park, or exercising in a class outdoors, by contrast, offers enough amusement and diversion that one hardly notices the time go by.

Some people come to parks to make money, and others to avail themselves of the goods and services that the former provide. Parks and other open spaces are enjoyable places to eat, drink, and shop; to stretch one’s legs while sitting on a low stool overlooking a lake or watching aerobics, talking to friends, gently fanning oneself with the fans provided by the café owners; to watch others, to be part of the social life of the city.

If you wish to observe a happy urban resident, walk through the city’s attractive outdoor public spaces or sit and watch. It is hard not to smile, not to forget one’s worries and be pulled into the joy of the moment.

ENSURING HEALTHY AND SOCIAL SPACES FOR THE ELDERLY

“I regularly walk and exercise in this park. My home is nearby, I just have to walk for a few minutes to get here, so I come everyday. I have a hereditary problem with my legs, painful inflamed joints, but since I started exercising I feel much better, and I eat better too. Then too I can meet a lot of other elderly women, and we really enjoy talking to each other. Any day I don’t come I really miss it.”

(72-year-old woman)

As the darkness of night fades and the city slowly emerges from sleep, some of the first people on the streets are the elderly. They gather at lakes, in parks and plazas. In small groups or as part of larger gatherings, they engage in various forms of exercise, sometimes silent, sometimes chattering. Afterwards they may gather at a long low table to drink green tea and share stories.
Old men, some sporting long wispy white beards, gather to play Chinese chess. Women in wide-legged black trousers and loose blouses, a scarf partly covering their white hair, sit on park benches and comment on those walking past. A husky woman in an Indian tunic with loose trousers and flowing scarf walks slowly, meditatively, in circles around a fountain.

Outside a rundown shop is a row of broken-down chairs, at the end of which an elderly woman slumps in a wheelchair.

A teenager helps her grandfather shuffle along the sidewalk. A grandmother holds the hand of her grandson, laughing at his childish stories. A man in a wheelchair, a few wisps of white hair decorating his scalp, sits quietly as the traffic roars past him.

But what about the elderly? Their time has passed and so we can now just brush them aside? Is a city civilized that fails to respect and care for the elderly?

In some cities one sees very few old people on the streets. In many cities pedestrian crossings at street lights are set such that most elderly people do not have time to cross; they must either risk their lives or stay within a limited range of their residence.

In many other cities there are small sunny parks and plazas where the elderly congregate during the day. Like children arriving at a playground to seek play companions, so the elderly arrive alone to find people with whom to play board games, to drink tea, to gossip and commiserate and comment on the vagaries of life.

Such parks and plazas are of vital importance to the elderly. The daily vital socializing of the elderly occurs not in shopping malls and fancy shops and restaurants, but mainly in the public spaces of cities: the sidewalks, plazas and parks.

"... the more civilized city is not the one with highways, but the one where a child in a tricycle can move about everywhere safely." (Peñalosa 2004)

What Enrique Peñalosa says about children is equally true for the elderly. Can they move about independently or must they, like small children, be chauffeured by others? It is no small matter to lose one’s independence. In much of North America, children dream of the day when they will gain their driver’s license; the elderly live in terror of losing theirs. Independent movement means dignity, flexibility, not being a burden, not worrying that one’s desires and needs are too petty and trivial to bother others. It means

63

Hanoi

It is easy to justify an action, to raise attention to a campaign, or to fundraise by explaining that it is for children. Children are our hope, our joy; the future belongs to them.
spontaneity, freedom, the chance to be a little selfish and likewise to avoid the selfishness of demanding transport from others.

One of the greatest reasons to tame traffic and reclaim its sidewalks is to help restore mobility and independent movement to the elderly.10

Whatever the situation on the streets themselves — and it is a fairly rare and terrifying sight in many cities these days to see an elderly person on a bicycle or crossing a street — there are many elderly on those rich treasures of public life, the sidewalks. Old men and women selling tea, snacks, clothes, tourist items...or simply sitting at a tiny sidewalk shop on a low stool, eating pumpkin seeds and gossiping.

“\textit{It is unbearable at home, depressing and hot. This environment is really good for elderly people, especially those like me who are ill. I’m lucky that my home is near this park, so it’s not much trouble for the person pushing me and I can come often.”} (78-year-old man in a wheelchair)

Homes can indeed be stifling and claustrophobic. They can also be lonely. Like everyone else but more so — because the opportunities are more limited and health is more precarious — the elderly need to socialize, need stimulation. Research (New York Times 2009) suggests that if the elderly regularly engage in social and intellectual activities such as playing games with others that require concentration, they will be less likely to become senile, even in the face of physical decay of the brain.

The elderly can also act as a civilizing influence on others, but only where contact occurs. Not everyone is lucky enough to have elderly relatives in their home.

\textit{“The elderly, having undertaken the journey, sit in the streets to give guidance and direction to those travellers standing at the crossroads deciding which way to go.”} (Engwicht 1999)

The elderly remind others that not everyone can move quickly or see and hear easily. Yet physical limitations can be accompanied by wisdom, insight and grace. How many young people can perform the intricate and synchronized movements with fans that are readily and daily performed by female tai chi practitioners in their 70s and 80s? How much accumulated experience and observation, what storehouses of knowledge, are some of our elderly?

---

10 Likewise, those with other reasons for moving a bit more slowly such as the blind, the deaf, those on crutches or those in wheelchairs would benefit from a slowing and humanizing of the city streets.
Youth is not an unmixed blessing any more than age is simply a curse. It is easier to accept the course of one's life, easier to remember the need to think of others, when living amongst and interacting with those much older, sometimes frailer, and often wiser than ourselves.

The presence of the elderly in public spaces — walking, playing badminton, practicing meditation and tai chi, ballroom dancing, or selling snacks — enriches the surroundings. Even if they had nothing to offer we would have a moral responsibility to care for them. How much greater the justification, the need, to act in the interests of the elderly by preserving their cherished meeting spaces, when they give so much back to society?

"Playgrounds in cities are essential meeting places for people of different ages and backgrounds...play is a necessary component of the urban environment."
(Ryan 2006)

"Streets were not just play space for children—they were also play space for adults." (Engwicht 1999)

"Street play provided invaluable lessons in citizenship: the sharing of a space with other people and cooperatively turning it into a place of shared meanings. In play, children take the blank canvas of some space and, through innovation and negotiation with each other, transform this space into 'a place'. An hour later they renegotiate and give the same space some other meaning. Informal or spontaneous play is therefore the training ground for good citizenship: it teaches cooperation with others who

---

11 This section draws heavily on UNESCO 2002.
are different from them to create a place of shared meanings. ... These children will one day be in control of shaping our cities. Their ability to transform barren spaces into places which are rich in meaning will depend on the skills they learnt as children of transforming a piece of sidewalk or asphalt into an exciting place.

The alternative to spontaneous street play is being driven to an organized sporting event. Here children interact with their peers in an event where the rules are made by someone else and enforced by an authority figure. The game emphasizes competition and individual performance rather than cooperation. While there are other values associated with this kind of planned event, the valuable citizenship and place-making lessons are missing. It is also poor training in the democratic processes of shared responsibility for society's collective life.” (Engwicht 1999)

It is often believed that play is the sole domain of children and is perhaps a rather trivial activity, enjoyable but hardly essential. Meanwhile adults (grown-ups) are serious people engaged in serious pursuits with no time for anything so trivial as play. Women are busy at work and in the home, cooking, cleaning, and caring for others. Men’s free time is occupied with a range of culturally-determined adult pursuits.

Youth are viewed as a concern in this regard, as they tend to idle away the hours in anti-social pursuits: making out in parks and at lakes, racing their motorbikes or cars, taking over parts of the city that were meant for others. The elderly, meanwhile, have time on their hands — though many still must work for a living or care for a disabled spouse or maintain a home or some combination of all three — but of course are too old and wise to need play. There are suitable leisurely pursuits for the elderly, including group tai chi or meditation, and strolls in the park with grandchildren...but not of course play.

Yet play in different forms is an essential part of being human. Putting aside for the moment some of the established rules of human conduct, temporarily shirking one’s responsibilities, and simply enjoying oneself are surely necessary for human survival, and certainly for maintaining one’s sanity.

Play is also a valuable form of human contact, of connecting. One reason to have children is the sheer pleasure of playing with them. Whether one plays with one’s own children or grandchildren or someone else’s, or simply watches children at play, it is nearly impossible while doing so not to feel connected, part of the fabric of human society. Troubles and worries fade away. The imaginative world of children takes over and all else, at least for that happy moment, is forgotten.
“What we are drawn to in cities is the potential of human contact, the multiplicity of opportunities, the socio-cultural diversity. These elements stimulate human creativity, provide the pluralistic basis for a community, and make the public environment our open house.”
(Ray Bradbury in Engwicht 1999)

Two women playing a game in front of their cane goods shop slap down their cards in rapid succession, then both burst into long joyous laughter. A passer-by kicks a ball back to youth playing in an empty lot. A small child, new to the world of talk, tells a long and meaningless story, half in babble, to her delighted and proud grandfather. Several kids try to swing from the low branches of a tree. Each in their way re-creates the world, changes its boundaries, redefines roles and spaces. As Engwicht emphasizes above, spontaneous street play also teaches children a number of skills that they cannot easily acquire elsewhere. The street as living room and playground enriches our lives, teaches us about others, and gives us the opportunity to learn the skills necessary for sharing cramped space in our crowded cities.

Meanwhile, people watching is “a form of adult play in which we make up stories about others” which also allows us to consider and weigh our own life choices and thus to arrive at wiser decisions (Engwicht 1999).

Gossip itself can also be a form of play, of inventing and sharing stories about others. While it can be malicious and destructive, it can also manifest a healthy interest in the lives of others. It allows people to voice their concerns in a safe way: when talking about the cheating husband, the delinquent youth, the disobedient child, one seeks to order and arrange one’s own life, to gain perspective on one’s own problems and concerns. It functions best outdoors, with the stimulus of other people in the vicinity, with the liquid nature of the group as people come and go. Sit on a wooden bench by the river eating noodles or sipping coffee, talking about others. Gesture with chopsticks. Pass the chilli sauce to a neighbouring diner. Shout for more tea. Maintain and affirm one’s role in the community, in the public realm, through stories, questions, and actions.

As for adolescents, they desperately need places to socialize, to play. At the same time current complaints about public spaces in many cities are related to their occupation by young couples engaging in behaviour generally considered too intimate for the public realm. Youth can find themselves in an awkward position, no longer children but not yet adults, being pushed into responsibilities they are reluctant to accept. The more excluded they feel, the more likely they are to become involved in anti-social activities.

Children have playgrounds. Adults have bars, sidewalk cafés, some shops and other venues. Yet few cities offer designated, acceptable and free places for youth to just relax and socialize. For those with money there are more options, but such places are less satisfying than public venues, and
all too often in cities the choices for youth may seem limited to drinking, smoking, riding a motorbike and making out.

In many cities the sight of young people — say, age 14 to 25 — just hanging out in a group strikes fear in adults and children. The youth are labelled delinquents, accused of vandalising property, of littering, of terrorizing others, or at the least of being where they shouldn’t. But if one has nowhere to go, what choices are there?

The needs of youth are not that different from those of others. Like children, they still need to run around, to shout, to practice their social skills. They need to interact with the opposite sex (an activity which can occur far more safely in groups). Too old for playgrounds and too young for badminton, what are they to do, where are they to go? If more opportunities existed, if they had other ways of expressing themselves in public places, if a group of youth could lay claim to parts of public places in cities, perhaps fewer would resort to the one de facto, ironically publicly acceptable, youth activity: necking. After all, if we label all other activities as age inappropriate and do nothing to encourage alternatives, youth will engage in the activity reserved specifically for them.

What alternatives are there? In some cities fitness equipment in parks and at lakes gives youth a place to gather, bulk up and have fun. Being outdoors, they are free to make noise, which may simply consist of loud joyous greetings to friends. Depending on the sport(s) of choice, they are allocated — albeit usually in insufficient quantities — cricket or football fields or basketball courts. Rather than being chased away from the steps of shopping malls they could be encouraged to contribute to the liveliness of public spaces, allowing them room for their hip-hop, breakdancing, and story telling.

In Dhaka, the crowded and polluted capital of Bangladesh, with about 12 million residents, it is difficult to walk or cycle in the city. Children suffer from the lack of outdoor recreational opportunities. Not just obesity but social problems are on the rise due to the lack of a chance to grow up in a healthy, active social environment.

To address this, one NGO in the city takes over just one lane of a dead-end residential street two afternoons a week and turns it into a cycling playground: a place for children and others to learn to ride a bike and to enjoy cycling in relative safety. Where public spaces are lacking, streets and sidewalks can be used to ensure that the recreational needs of children and youth are met. The slight slowing of traffic for a few hours a week is surely not too high a price to pay to meet the needs of our youth.
Public play, for people of all ages, means amusement, relaxation, relief; socializing, interacting, entertaining others and being entertained; and finding one’s place in the social order.

Well-designed urban public spaces should aim to address the needs of city dwellers to rebalance their lives, offering a refuge from the hustle and bustle or a place in which they can develop through learning and new experiences. People need to connect with their environment and feel a sense of belonging, to feel good being there — therein lies the good life.” (Ryan 2006)

“The lack of appropriate outdoor play spaces for children and youth means that they are often forced to spend their free time at home watching TV or playing computer games. As a result, their physical, mental, and social development are all hampered...

Similarly, adults need pleasant outdoor recreational opportunities; wandering through shopping malls or eating in restaurants is not the same as enjoying a pleasant park or neighbourhood hangout, meeting neighbours, observing strangers, and learning about — and learning to love — one’s city.” (Efroymson 2008)
EXPERIENCING THE CITY

“Cities concentrate exchange opportunities in one convenient place. They are an invention to maximize exchange opportunities while minimizing travel.” (Engwicht 1999)

“Wherever there are people — in buildings, in neighborhoods, in city centers, in recreational areas, and so on — it is generally true that people and human activities attract other people. People are attracted to other people.” (Gehl 2001)

The essential nature of cities includes not merely the opportunity to earn a living, to gain and display and enjoy one’s wealth, but places where the concentration of people in a relatively small space gives rise to numerous possibilities: for learning, working, earning money, and playing.

While anti-social people do come to and reside in cities, the true character of cities is sociable, people-oriented, and public rather than private. Urban life is played out in public spaces, on the streets and sidewalks, in plazas and squares and parks and open markets.

Interaction, exchange, or just observation: being among and around people is quintessentially to be urban.

Yet this essential nature of cities is threatened by recent developments. Urban life has become more privatized, and as a result public life is more important than ever.

“With daily life increasingly privatized and indirect communication growing by leaps and bounds, the need for public life in public space is growing. Here people can experience direct contact with other people and the society of which we are a part. Here they can see things for themselves, experience, participate and feel a sense of community.” (Gehl and Gemzoe 2003)

Images in old paintings or photographs, long before the existence of the car or motorbike, show streets full of people, busy with transactions and exchange. Vendors pushing carts, messengers traveling on foot, children playing ball, adults discussing events, newspaper boys shouting headlines...life was lived predominantly in the streets.

The car and motorbike, by taking over the streets, have had a major impact on the way people live life in the cities. Air conditioning has also led to a major change. Without it — as is still evident in many low-income cities — people escape the heat by spilling outdoors. With air conditioning comes the great retreat inside, to movie theatres, shopping malls, homes and restaurants. Life withdraws from the streets.

That change has caused tremendous damage to some neighbourhoods in the US. Where people used to sit on their stoop or porch or the front steps of their buildings, they now disappear indoors. Gone the eyes on the street, the observation of public life, the thousands of seemingly trivial interactions — a nod, a simple greeting — that wove together the social fabric and gave people a shared stake in
the vibrancy of their community. Simultaneous with a new vision of housing — not as an entry into a desirable community or a place to plant one's roots but rather as an investment to be exchanged or upgraded as the situation permitted and sensible economics demanded — people's approach to community changed, or rather diminished or vanished (Cohen 2004). The results include crime, alienation, loneliness, fear of strangers, and the tendency to distance oneself ever more from the very community one needs to live happily.

It is not enough to look at what one gains from changes and modernization; one must also consider what, if anything, one loses. Not that the losses always outweigh the gains — but neither is the reverse true. Yet the very term “development”, as with modernization and progress, assumes a steady progressive improvement which fails to recognize or acknowledge real and significant loss. A former empty lot had value to the children who played ball there; the installation of air conditioning not only adds to the burden of electricity demands but also weakens public life.

Public spaces cannot return all that rising incomes, industrialization, and the “modern” trend towards individualism and isolation take away, but they can do much to lessen the damage.

“One way to judge quality in a city is not to look at how many people are walking, but to observe whether they are spending time in the city, standing about, looking at something, or sitting just enjoying the city, the scenery and the other people.” (Gehl and Gemzøe 2004)

The quality of life in the city is visible by the life in the streets: those living streets, the multiplicity of experiences and stimuli, of opportunities for human contact, available as soon as one steps outside. Or not...as privatized parts of the city deliberately exclude street life. And it is, alas, very difficult to go back, to realize what one misses and to reclaim it after banning or destroying it.

Street life can be created in a highly artificial form, such as Disneyland, the main attraction of which is the freedom from cars and the attempt to recreate, albeit at low cost, the image of former pedestrian-oriented cities rich in detailed design. As American writer James Howard Kunstler (1996) points out, this is also why Disneyland flopped in France,
where the existing genuine architecture is so much lovelier than the false creation of Disney designers and where freedom from cars is far more easily obtained. So much of what was beautiful in US cities has been destroyed, and cars are generally so prevalent, that Disneyland seems an attractive alternative to unaesthetic daily life. Just as there is something wrong with turning to shopping malls for recreation, so the state of a city is clear by people's need to escape it for the cheapened idealized Disney alternative.

Remedies for saving or rescuing community in cities also exist and are not extraordinarily difficult to implement. One simply must remember to make provisions for people — not just for exclusive shops and high-rises, and other prestigious places that benefit the rich but do nothing for others — and by not banning life on the streets.

"To keep public places in residential areas lively, people need to spend time — and that is much easier if there are things to do. This emphasizes how important it is that in public spaces in residential areas there are not only opportunities for walking and sitting, but also opportunities to act, things to do, activities to be involved in. This should be supplemented preferably with possibilities for taking small, daily domestic activities, such as potato peeling, sewing, repair jobs, hobbies, and meals, out into the public spaces." (Gehl 2001)

In dense Asian cities, how much easier than in Copenhagen, the colder, less densely-populated home of Jan Gehl. Rather than provide seating, rather than create opportunities for public life, one must simply allow the existing public life to flourish and, where public life has been eliminated — whether intentionally or no — work to remedy the problem. Recognizing what is right about vibrant streets and cities, one can work to preserve and further enrich them.
“I moved to Paris to be with my husband. We have two daughters. Though we live in a cramped one-room apartment, we have been happy there, especially my kids, because there are playgrounds nearby where my children can play with others. The highlight of their day is the trip to the playground. When they were smaller I would push them in a stroller; now they can walk or ride a small bike. When I moved back to Asia, I moved into my in-laws’ large fancy home on the outskirts of the city. We have far more space than before but there is no playground nearby. My kids get bored playing at home despite all the space and abundance of toys, because they want to play with other children.”

On a stretch of sidewalk in Bangkok a man stitches at his sewing machine, others sell clothes and others a variety of spicy freshly-cooked local foods. Stands offer fragrant
garlands of jasmine and bright marigolds; a woman pounds out ingredients for green papaya salad in a wooden mortar and a man mixes ice and sweet toppings. In tourist areas vendors sell cloth paintings, colourful bandanas, plastic geckoes, beaded sandals, music and movies, bracelets, hair clips, key chains, blue jeans, handbags... Others sell t-shirts with humorous slogans and images: “iPood”; a line of apes evolving into people ending with a man bent over a computer and the slogan, “Something, somewhere went terribly wrong”; a bride and groom at their wedding day with the words, “Game over”.

* * *

Given the important role of cities in generating wealth, some people — particularly but not exclusively businessmen — conceive the use of urban space for non-commercial use as an expensive waste of precious land. With so much pressure on existing land, how can one justify setting aside large (or even small) tracts for so insignificant a use as sitting and socializing? Prosperous cities cannot afford the idle, so the belief goes, be it idle people or idle land.

But is it true that public spaces contribute nothing to the economy? In the case of open markets this is clearly not the case. While some shopping malls are virtually empty and many shops lack customers, markets are generally crowded and thriving. Any individual may spend relatively little, but many customers come and go quickly, shopping daily, and the sum of many small transactions can be greater than far fewer larger ones. Not simply in the volume of transactions but in the number of jobs they generate, markets are clearly significant players in the city’s economy.

Likewise, parks, plazas and sidewalks are venues for innumerable informal businesses, selling an infinite array of products and services and generating countless jobs. Far from inefficient, such businesses represent some of the most economically efficient uses of space imaginable and are far more productive than, for example, the parking of cars or motorbikes.

But why measure wealth only by money? What about the wealth in diversity: the variety of foods sold and of sidewalk businesses, the different forms of exercise in a park, the many ways children and youth play?

There are also more and less equitable ways of dividing wealth. Widely accepted economic measures such as GDP per capita fail to capture distinctions which are, nevertheless, of vital concern to those involved. On the macro scale, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few while the majority struggle to earn a pittance is no less desirable than a more equitable distribution of wealth. But however invisible to economists, such differences are critical to the lives of individuals and to the quality of life in cities.
An abundance of small independent businesses and a thriving informal economy help to balance out growing inequities and thus to lessen misery, desperation, drug use and crime.*

One might wish to ban the poor from cities, but such a wish is neither wise nor realistic, not to mention its uncharitable nature. The well-off rely on the lower classes for any number of services they are understandably reluctant to perform themselves, from butchering animals to cleaning homes and streets to selling food. Nor is it an easy matter to ban the poor; they will trickle in through the cracks, and during times of economic crisis those cracks can become fissures. Besides, how does life become richer by trying to eliminate diversity? And how fair is it to expect the poor to fend for themselves, offering them few if any opportunities to improve their situation or even survive?

Given that the poor do contribute in so many ways, how much more wise and just to welcome, encourage, and appreciate their contributions?

---

* This is by no means to suggest that only the lower classes indulge in these afflictions. Having no purpose in life can be as destructive to one’s soul as having no hope for the future.
A woman sits in a park by her sign announcing her services, a café umbrella resting with one side on the ground sheltering her from the light rain. A man sheltered by his own umbrella sits on a stool in front of her as she takes his blood pressure and offers a few words of advice on his health. Throughout the park, those who stop to check their weight or blood pressure seem in no hurry to move on, as if the chance for a little small talk and for someone to pay them a bit of attention were of at least equal importance with the information they pay to receive.

* * *

To ban or not to ban?

In the admirable attempt to improve conditions for pedestrians in cities, vendors are often targeted as a key obstacle that prevents people from walking. After all, they occupy the sidewalk illegally, taking away space from pedestrians. By banning them, people can walk more easily...or so the theory goes.

But what actually happens?

Two types of obstacles exist on sidewalks: those that unilaterally make walking impossible or unpleasant, such as dumping of construction waste and parking of cars or motorbikes; and those that, while perhaps making it necessary to step into the street, enhance rather than destroy the experience of the pedestrian on the city streets. These include an “oversized” tree that blocks the entire sidewalk, and vendors selling attractive objects such as flowers or pottery.
An equally important deterrent to walking occurs in many urban areas: the lack of any attraction. In otherwise busy parts of the city some wide sidewalks go unused, despite the abundance of space for movement and play, because there is nothing to attract people. At their worst, such sidewalks become dark and dangerous places that positively deter people from walking or staying, attracting anti-social behaviour. And there are of course many other deterrents to walking, such as noisy smelly dangerous streets packed with motorbikes and cars, all emitting fumes as well as noise; and the lack of safe street-level crossings, making getting about difficult and dangerous.

Before making decisions about how to improve walking, it is thus important to make careful observations within the city itself, to study why some sidewalks that are in terrible shape or offer little in the way of amenities are full of pedestrians, while others are abandoned. If one were to conduct such observations, one fact could hardly escape notice: that people for the most part enjoy the presence of vendors on the sidewalks and are more rather than less likely to walk where vendors are present. This should come as no surprise: vendors provide “eyes on the street”, increasing safety; their wares create an attraction, a reason to walk and equally important, to stop. Because they offer goods at affordable prices people actively seek them out, thereby increasing liveliness and safety on the streets.

“Roaming vendors are really important in everyday life. We often don’t have to expend time or effort going to the market but can still buy our necessities by relying on vendors. The prices are sometimes cheaper than in the market but the quality is no lower. Especially for flowers, in this season if you get up early the flower carts are all over the streets. The fresh flowers are splendid, colourful, and there are varieties to meet everyone’s need. And of course they are much cheaper than the flowers in shops because they don’t have to add the price of rent to that of the flowers. So consumers have even more opportunity to buy to their satisfaction but at reasonable prices.”

Because of the existence of vendors, a wide variety of goods is available at low cost. A multiple impoverishment would occur if vendors were to disappear — of the sellers, the buyers, and the rich colours of lively streets.
There are some products that I can only buy from vendors, not in the market or in a supermarket. For instance there are local fruits and vegetables like boiled sweet potatoes or peanuts. Of course I could buy sweet potatoes in the market and boil them at home, but I don’t know why, they are never as delicious as when I buy them already boiled from a street vendor. Everyone in my family enjoys eating them. Sometimes when we sit at home we see a vendor go buy and call to her, it’s really convenient. It’s the same with vegetables. And the vendors compete with each other and thus sell the produce at low prices which is so important in these difficult economic times.

Vendors provide a range of essential goods and services. Clothing, household goods, a range of fresh and cooked foods, toys; barbers, repairers of motorbikes and bicycles, shoe shiners, key copiers; any number of amenities offered close to where people live and work, at affordable prices and all hours. Sometimes these services and products are the only ones their lower and middle class consumers can afford; but more than that, they offer a more personalized style of business than is found in fixed shops.

People come to this park to stroll, run, walk, or exercise in groups. When they need a drink, I can sell to them. I have a lot of regular customers among those people; after they exercise they come and sit at my stand to have a drink and rest. The older people are really cheerful, they tell interesting stories and teach me a lot of life experience. I don’t have any other way to make a living and can’t imagine what I would do if I couldn’t work here.”

A job is sometimes more than a job, a transaction more than a transaction. Pity the people who go to work only to earn a living, who find little or no enjoyment in the tasks that allow them to survive. But pity also those whose daily transactions occur without small talk, sincere smiles, the chance to lean against a counter or sit on a stool and exchange more than a few rapid and artificial words of greeting (“Thank you, have a nice day”). People need jobs; selling on the streets provides them with one. But those people selling on the streets also enrich the lives of their customers with their smiles, their willingness to listen, the time they can offer in an informal setting to turn a transaction into a ritual, a friendly exchange, a relationship.
Social security

“I have two small children, three years and five months. My husband died last year in an accident. I’ve been selling for five years now. On a lucky day, if the police don’t catch me, I can earn 30,000 or 40,000 VND. These days the police often catch us, so I lose my goods, my money, my customers. It’s really difficult. We just live day to day. I had to drop my studies, I don’t know any other way to make a living.”

“I live in a somewhat wealthy neighbourhood where the street life consists entirely of the guards, vendors, and beggars. They are the ones who occupy the street, who know everyone, who greet me when I walk. The residents just drive to and from their buildings; they are almost never out on the street. The only kids who play on the street are the students at a school; otherwise it is as if no children lived in the apartment buildings. Yet it is a fairly safe street, with few vehicles and little crime. If it weren’t for the vegetable and fruit sellers, guards, and street kids, the whole neighbourhood would feel deserted, as if the only occupants were vehicles, the only speech the honking of horns.”

Vendors are vitally important for another reason as well. In an important sense they are the lifeblood of the city, serving as they do not only as attraction and safety on the street, but as a vital informal economy and safety net that keeps crime rates low and prevents untold human suffering. Little as the informal economy may be understood or valued, it is absolutely vital to the formal economy and to the livelihood not only of vendors and their families, but to the wider network of people partly or fully dependent on them.

The importance of the informal economy as a safety net cannot be overstated. One reason why there are so few beggars in downtown Hanoi, as opposed to most Asian and international cities, is that there are so many options to earn an income even for those with virtually no money to invest, little education and no marketable skills.

In some countries safety nets exist to provide free health care, education, and care for children, as well as unemployment benefits and pensions...preferably not just to those who hold formal jobs, but to all those who work including housewives and those in the informal sector. But even in the best of cases, safety nets for the unemployed may do little to prevent the loss of self-esteem when a formerly independent person is no longer able to earn enough to support her or his family.

Safety nets are absolutely vital, as are basic government services to ensure that people need never worry about accessing health and education for themselves and their
family members. But while government services for all serve to maintain dignity and equality, it is difficult to run an unemployment program that offers people the same rewards and stimulation that paid work can provide. And in much of the world, no safety nets exist at all; for those who have no formal job, life is a daily struggle for survival and drink may provide the only escape from constant worry.

"I’ve been selling goods on the street since I was 19. My husband isn’t employed these days, he stays at home, so the money for our three children to eat and study all depends on my cart. I live 20 kilometres from here. Every day I leave at 2 or 3 a.m., compete with others to get my goods, then pedal this cart in the streets to sell. I only get home at 9 or 10 p.m. If the day goes well, I earn about 40,000 or 50,000 VND. If the police catch me, I lose everything. I only take very light and quick meals so that I can save all my money for my children’s food and studies.

If I couldn’t do this job, I don’t know how I would manage. My children wouldn’t have food or money for school. I have no other source of income.

The village official has a plan for raising trees and crops, but he has no interest in the people. If we can work we can survive, if not, too bad. If your tree bears fruit you can enjoy it, if not, you’re out of luck. I’ve been growing pomelo but for the last 5 or 6 years the trees haven’t borne fruit; my vegetables have also failed.

All the ponds have been filled in to sell the land, the ditches have been drained. There are only the small ditches left, so when it rains it floods; when it’s sunny, the land is parched, so how can we grow anything? Saving money is only a dream when I can’t grow anything myself.

If they don’t let us sell on the streets anymore, will the government create new income opportunities for us so that our families don’t die of hunger and so that we have money to send our children to school?"
What then does the informal economy offer? An enormous, essentially infinite range of earning opportunities for people; a chance to survive and possibly even prosper; the possibility to earn money to increase the chances that one’s children will lead a better life. The informal economy also offers more interaction than is possible within fixed shops, especially those of the “modern” high-rise style.

“I’ve been selling in this public garden since last year. Most of my customers are people who come here to play or for a stroll. I can’t sell much, I just make enough to get by, but I can’t imagine what I would do if I couldn’t sell here. I don’t have any skills so it would be very difficult to find a job.”

But of course the informal economy extends beyond those working for mere survival. Some people with informal businesses do quite well. In any case, could they not all be accommodated with increased jobs in factories or shopping malls? Unfortunately modernization and industrialization destroy rather than create jobs; as economies continue to modernize, more and more people will be thrown out of work. Intensive labour is replaced with machines. Industrialists prosper not by hiring more people but by hiring fewer. Those who prosper do not worry about the unemployed, considering it the responsibility of the government, if anyone, to provide for those who are unnecessary in the “modern” economy. Few options are open to those who lose work, the most feasible generally being within the informal economy.

Further, among the attractions of the informal economy are the opportunity to work independently, to spend the day outdoors; to answer to oneself and one's customers only; not to an anonymous owner; to set one's working hours; not to worry about being fired if one arrives late or cannot come in due to the illness of oneself or a child or elderly parent.

Certainly one could raise taxes on business and offer more handouts to people; such handouts would do much to alleviate suffering, and a universal government pension scheme for the elderly and benefit scheme for young parents would be most welcome. But in the absence of such programs, and considering the greater self-esteem of self-employment versus working in big business or receiving a check from government, it is important to remember that whatever the difficulties involved, many people are best off within the informal economy.

“I’ve been working as a vendor for ten years. I leave my home at 5 a.m. and pedal my cart to Hanoi, then pedal home in the evening. I have to do this work because my son is crippled and his wife is not healthy. Their children are small. They have no other source of income, they have to rely on me. We’ve already sold all our fields. I go up and down the streets and try to make about 30,000 VND a day. I have to be very careful in my expenses to compensate for the days when I’m sick or when due to bad weather I stay home and rest. If I couldn’t do this work anymore we would all just die of hunger.” (70-year-old woman)

Removing poverty from public sight doesn’t make it go away...but may make people forget that it needs to be addressed and that the poor and struggling, too, are human, just like everyone else.
SOMETIMES PEOPLE ARE EQUAL: EQUITY

“A better city is a more humane one, one friendly to children, the handicapped and old people, to society's most vulnerable members. ... Contrary to stereotypes, it is not its skyline that lends character to a city. Rather it is its human spaces, its pedestrian promenades, parks, plazas, libraries, and public transport. ... Magnificent networks of tree lined roads exclusively for pedestrians and cyclists could change the nature of cities and city living, making them much friendlier to people. ...”

For the cost of an airport, a developing country city could build a formidable pedestrian road network hundreds of miles long lined with giant trees that would not only radically improve quality of life and demonstrate respect for its citizens, but give it a unique character and impress foreign visitors even more than a sophisticated airport. It only requires different thinking, different values and priorities.” (Peñalosa 2004)

People drive Porsche SUVs that in the US cost $250,000 while others push handcarts through the streets. Luxury shops offer expensive clothing, soaps, perfumes, shoes, and other items to the wealthy, while roaming fruit sellers struggling to earn a pittance run from the police. Some work and live in spacious climate-controlled surroundings while others are crowded into tiny spaces, exposed to the elements, and always with the insecurity of whether they will be able to feed their children today.

* * *

The glitter of the modern city is hard to resist. High rises, glass towers, sparkling shopping malls with exclusive shops, wide roads, and luxury homes. Yet usually such glitter represents only one aspect of cities, accompanied by deeply-entrenched poverty. Whether one attempts to shift the poor out of sight altogether (for example, by banning various activities that constitute their livelihood), or simply out of mind, poverty continues, and continues to pose difficult issues. How much inequity can we accept? Is it right that some have so much and others nearly nothing, and that children's lives are considered of great value or essentially worthless depending on who their parents are?

No city is free of inequity, but there can be limits, controls, to keep it within check. Governments which impose such limits, such as in Scandinavia, do much to resolve inhuman living conditions, to limit anger and resentment, and to ensure a decent living for all. Just as there can be too little, so also there can be too much: too much wealth, too much luxury, too much waste, too much tragedy in the enormous inequities of the division of a nation’s limited wealth. Those inequities are also seen in the extent of private prosperity and public poverty, as described by famous economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1973), speaking of the United States but equally applicable to many cities throughout the world: fancy cars, luxurious homes, and degraded public spaces.
Property that is private and exclusive is of a high standard; spaces shared by all are dirty, unsafe, and poorly maintained. The conditions of public spaces in a city tell much about that city’s level of equity — or its absence.

“How did architect Jorge Mario Jáuregui explain his design for a park in a troubled part of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)? The city has been ‘strongly marked by the inequalities generated by development processes that are abased on quantity and private benefits rather than quality and social benefits’, and ‘his plan is that the park will create a democratic space for use by all and be a gesture of confidence in the city’.”

(Ryan 2006)

While it is important that the rich and poor not be segregated in the city — whether in housing, schools, or access to a range of civic services — in recreation, such mixing is easiest of all. Public spaces are too enjoyable for the rich to abandon them altogether, despite their alternatives: working out in a gym, playing on a golf course or at a private club, dining in restaurants.

Public spaces are the great equalizer shared by all income groups, perhaps the one place where people can meet nearly as equals, all with equal rights to use and enjoy the space.

In such moments of relaxation, one also has the opportunity to observe, however passively, and thus learn about others. To challenge one’s prejudices. To broaden one’s views.

To see that life is richer when it is more diverse. That community benefits all. That people, however different from ourselves, however shabby or old or disabled, are people.

Like us.

That to be fully human we must accept and appreciate the humanity of others. Words with no meaning until we rub shoulders in public spaces, as equals, with those ever so different from ourselves.12

A healthy, functional society is not one which always acts to benefit those who need it least. There must be limits on inequity in order to control public anger and resentment and to avoid inflicting too high a price on the most vulnerable. Demonstrations of equity in public spaces can do much towards promoting good will among the populace and towards addressing the problem of private prosperity and public poverty. That is, rather than simply allowing wealth to accumulate in the hands of the few, one can ensure better conditions for all by investing in public spaces. This is particularly important in densely-crowded cities, where efficient use of public space is an urgent necessity.

13 This is also why the accessibility of public spaces is so important: not only that they not charge an entrance fee but that they be easily reached on foot or by bicycle, and that road crossings be facilitated. The greater the variety of people who can reach them, including the disabled, the better such places will serve their purpose.
MAKING THE MOST OUT OF THE LEAST:
EFFICIENCY

Dhaka

"...the city's streets are about more than just the movement of vehicles and people." (Ryan 2006)

"Urban planner Ruben Gazoli warned that the streets of Buenos Aires had become mere traffic corridors. He was concerned that they were rapidly losing their social function especially for children, the primary users of streets in urban residential neighbourhoods. As the global economy extends its reach, children living in the world’s major cities...are suffering an unfair share of negative impacts to their primary outdoor space, urban streets." (UNESCO 2002)

"It is a tremendous waste of open space to use it for car [or motorbike] parking. The recreational needs of children and youth, and fitness needs of adults, should take precedence over a few individual's desire to store their private vehicle for free in public space. ... One playing field can be used over the course of several hours by hundreds of people, or serve a handful of people as car parking. In a city that gives priority to children and that supports public health through active travel and recreation, parks will never be used as parking lots." (Efroymson 2008)

Stockholm

A teenage girl runs along a path in a park, blowing soap bubbles. Men fish the still waters. A couple with their young daughter float by in a swan boat. Another couple sits quietly under a tree that dips gracefully into the water.

People sit on benches, low walls, and cement light fixtures. Others stroll leisurely along: young couples with and without small children, a man with his pregnant wife, toddlers pushed on toy bikes by their grandmothers, groups of friends.

Teenage boys wrestle, jokingly threatening to throw each other in the water.
The most expensive and valuable commodity in cities is space. Yet planners often treat space as worthless, allowing individuals to use vast quantities of it for long periods each day, literally or virtually for free. This arises or is inseparable from a tremendous concern for vehicle parking which would be laughable if it were not so destructive. What are we to do with the vast quantity of cars and motorbikes that need a parking spot? Few other demands or desires call out such a strong and concerted response. What of the demand for affordable housing, quality schools and health care, food for the hungry, jobs for all those in need including educated youth, recreational opportunities for all groups, and so on?

As Donald Shoup (2005), the man who wrote “the” book on parking explains, no baker would first attempt to assess the demand for free cake and then bake accordingly. Yet planners readily accept the demand for free parking as a minimum requirement for cities. And why not? The parking of cars and motorbikes throughout the city causes any number of problems for traffic circulation, both vehicular and pedestrian, and impedes people from entering shops and accessing services.

But...why respond to the demand for free parking? Vendors are harassed by police presumably in part because they do not pay for a fixed spot from which to sell, and thus are seen as having no right to that space. Yet selling on the sidewalk is far more economically productive than parking a vehicle. Selling creates jobs, allowing people to care for themselves and their families. It generates other jobs; someone else is growing and harvesting the fruits and vegetables, or manufacturing the other goods and products that they sell. Affordable goods are a boon to many. Parking, meanwhile, is mostly just a cost. Without it, people would simply use businesses closer to home; there would be no net loss to the economy.

To acknowledge that space is valuable is not to say that we should charge everyone who wishes to use it. Trying to monetize every aspect of life leads to a vulgarization, a cheapening of life. Rather, it means making decisions based on the social value of different activities.
For any individual, parking his or her vehicle on the sidewalk represents a benefit, but it hampers the movement and tarnishes the dignity of all those who would walk by. Driving on sidewalks is dangerous to others. An informal sidewalk shop — a noodle stand, a vendor and a few stools — provides employment, cheap and convenient dining, and while possibly hampering movement does not carry the same message as the parking of a vehicle: that things are more valuable than people and that the rich always deserve priority over the poor. People enjoy and benefit from the presence of people; parked vehicles are simply a hindrance.

Given the quantity of traffic and air pollution at present in many cities, the fact that so many people continue to choose to eat or simply sit on sidewalks indicates a great fascination not just with the outdoors (however dirty and smelly) but with public spaces, with public life. It is not conducive to happiness (nor to economic productivity) to ban people’s favourite activities, especially given the empty and melancholy quality of sidewalks on which all selling, and hence seemingly all life, is banned.

What is efficient, rational and sensible is to encourage activities that are popular, harmless, and contribute to the public good while limiting or banning those that benefit the few at the expense of the many. In the case of parking this is easily done. As Shoup (2005) explains in great detail in his masterpiece, *The High Cost of Free Parking*, the problem is not that there is too little parking, but that parking is free (or charged at so low a rate and with no increments for time as to be essentially free). By charging a fair market rate by space and time occupied (bigger vehicles would pay more, and the money would be collected by intervals of an hour or less depending on the busy-ness of the area), fewer spaces could accommodate more vehicles, as people would be reluctant to spend the money to park for hours.

One car (or a few motorbikes) may park for several hours in a parking space. If people had to pay for parking by time rather than one flat rate, they would likely spend far less time parked there, and that same space could thus serve ten or twenty cars or dozens of motorbikes over the course of the day. The parking capacity would be expanded by several times, but space devoted to parking would not have to increase. Thus the parking problem could decrease not only at no expense to the government and without having to create more parking provisions, or sacrifice more street-side space, but while generating significant revenue.

Again, this is NOT to say that all space should generate revenue, that people should pay to sit on benches or chat or shop. Socially beneficial and equity-enhancing activities (those that either fail to differentiate by income or that promote the welfare of the needy) should be allowed, even encouraged. One individual who has plenty of money to pay for parking can benefit from parking his car on a sidewalk. Another individual, who cannot afford to rent a space in the market, could set up a noodle shop in that same space, giving her needed income and providing a low-cost convenient meal for others.

These should not be difficult choices to make, especially since in this case helping the poor (passively, by allowing them to earn a living) also means enhancing the quality of life in urban areas.
"[Outdoor cafés] provide seating and refreshments, as well as a comfortable excuse to spend more time in a nice place. Sipping [a drink] is an uncomplicated way to combine several attractions: being outdoors, taking in the sunshine and fresh air, enjoying pleasant space, and the ever-present amusement of watching people passing by."

(Gehl and Gemzøe 2004)

FEE OR FREE

"I don’t have to pay to exercise in this park, but I know that other parks charge an entrance fee, which means that they aren’t in fact for everyone."

“Every time I enter the park I have to pay 2,000 VND, plus the money to park my motorbike. I live rather far from here so I have to drive. So every time I come with my family here we have to spend 12,000 VND altogether, on tickets and parking. Who can come to a park alone? That would be too depressing. If we came everyday that would be way too expensive, you can’t call that a place for everyone. You should call it a business instead.”
“I regularly come to the park to exercise. If I come early I don’t have to buy a ticket. If I am tired and get up late then I have to pay. It would be better not to have this payment system so everyone could enjoy the park. Not everyone can come at the times when it’s free, especially those who have a paying job.”

Although parks are highly valued spaces in cities, when admission fees are charged to enter them they no longer are truly public spaces. Unfortunately some cities engage in the highly unfortunate practice of charging such fees, thereby limiting who can enjoy a place that should be available for all. This section is aimed at places that charge admission fees.

Charging people to enter a park is wrong for a number of reasons. It sends a message about who is welcome and who is not. Such a message utterly violates the essential nature of public spaces, which is to be freely accessible to all: places that help counter the inequity present in virtually every other aspect of life, from housing to clothing to transport to food to education to health care. Recreation is one area in which people of different incomes have the chance to meet essentially as equals. Doing so humanizes everyone, rich and poor.

Charging to enter a park also sends the wrong message about values. People’s behaviour is to a large extent determined by the physical environment and the various rules concerning it. People walk in cities that encourage and facilitate walking. People don’t litter when there are trash baskets present and when littering is obviously not acceptable. The same for spitting and public urinating and a variety of other socially harmful or beneficial activities. When it costs at most 1,000 VND to park a motorbike and 4,000 to enter a park, the message is clear: please ride and park your motorbike everywhere but don’t enter the parks. Discouraging people from walking, from enjoying fresh air and a pleasant green space, from exercising or socializing or otherwise recovering from stress while encouraging people to pollute the air, makes no sense. It is wrong and unwise.

Admission fees reduce the use of parks. They act as a disincentive. But parks only function well when people use them. A large green space with few people is potentially a dangerous place, or at least one that facilitates anti-social behaviour. There is safety in numbers. No effort need be made to encourage people to use a park; simply, the existing disincentive needs to be removed.

“I don’t think there should be a charge for entering a park. In that way everyone could enjoy the fresh air and would have the chance to exercise in a cool and spacious place.”

Finally, properly speaking parks belong not to the State but to the people. This is particularly true of Unification Park in Hanoi, which was built by local residents and whose users have refused to allow it to be destroyed to make way for an amusement park or to be further infringed on to build a hotel. But all parks properly belong to their users, to the local residents. This does not mean that local users would then have the right to sell the land to developers.

No, because they have the responsibility to pass on the park, in at least as good a condition as they received it, to the next generation. We are stewards of the city’s few precious green spaces. As stewards we have many responsibilities to keep parks green, attractive, safe and usable. What no one owns cannot be sold. Nor does anyone have the right to charge an entrance fee to a space that belongs to all.
“I regularly come to the park to exercise. If I come early I don’t have to buy a ticket. If I am tired and get up late then I have to pay. It would be better not to have this payment system so everyone could enjoy the park. Not everyone can come at the times when it’s free, especially those who have a paying job.”

Although parks are highly valued spaces in cities, when admission fees are charged to enter them they no longer are truly public spaces. Unfortunately some cities engage in the highly unfortunate practice of charging such fees, thereby limiting who can enjoy a place that should be available for all. This section is aimed at places that charge admission fees.

Charging people to enter a park is wrong for a number of reasons. It sends a message about who is welcome and who is not. Such a message utterly violates the essential nature of public spaces, which is to be freely accessible to all: places that help counter the inequity present in virtually every other aspect of life, from housing to clothing to transport to food to education to health care. Recreation is one area in which people of different incomes have the chance to meet essentially as equals. Doing so humanizes everyone, rich and poor.

Charging to enter a park also sends the wrong message about values. People’s behaviour is to a large extent determined by the physical environment and the various rules concerning it. People walk in cities that encourage and facilitate walking. People don’t litter when there are trash baskets present and when littering is obviously not acceptable. The same for spitting and public urinating and a variety of other socially harmful or beneficial activities. When it costs at most 1,000 VND to park a motorbike and 4,000 to enter a park, the message is clear: please ride and park your motorbike everywhere but don’t enter the parks. Discouraging people from walking, from enjoying fresh air and a pleasant green space, from exercising or socializing or otherwise recovering from stress while encouraging people to pollute the air, makes no sense. It is wrong and unwise.

Admission fees reduce the use of parks. They act as a disincentive. But parks only function well when people use them. A large green space with few people is potentially a dangerous place, or at least one that facilitates anti-social behaviour. There is safety in numbers. No effort need be made to encourage people to use a park; simply, the existing disincentive needs to be removed.

“I don’t think there should be a charge for entering a park. In that way everyone could enjoy the fresh air and would have the chance to exercise in a cool and spacious place.”

Finally, properly speaking parks belong not to the State but to the people. This is particularly true of Unification Park in Hanoi, which was built by local residents and whose users have refused to allow it to be destroyed to make way for an amusement park or to be further infringed on to build a hotel. But all parks properly belong to their users, to the local residents. This does not mean that local users would then have the right to sell the land to developers.

No, because they have the responsibility to pass on the park, in at least as good a condition as they received it, to the next generation. We are stewards of the city’s few precious green spaces. As stewards we have many responsibilities to keep parks green, attractive, safe and usable. What no one owns cannot be sold. Nor does anyone have the right to charge an entrance fee to a space that belongs to all.
THE WORSE IT IS THE WORSE IT GETS...
AND VICE VERSA

Left: Bangalore; Right: Dhaka

“My home is right on the street, it’s very crowded, so many people pass by. So if I want to exercise, there is no place to do so. Sometimes I try to stroll along this street, but there is a lot of traffic and dust and pollution, so I have to wear a face mask. Whenever I want my children to enjoy playing in a pleasant place I have to take them by motorbike to [a] park. Even if there were just a small public garden somewhat close to my home, that would be so good.”

For any individual, the shift from travel by foot, bicycle or bus to motorbike or car can represent an improvement in comfort and convenience. But in cities such actions do not happen in a vacuum. As more people make the transition, the streets become less hospitable to those walking or cycling; others then have further incentive to switch. Soon the pollution and traffic danger are such that only the young, the poor, and the crazy (for example, foreigners) continue to cycle.

Similarly, when one parent starts taking her children to school by car or motorbike, it becomes less safe for other kids to walk or cycle. It is often the perception of danger that starts the process, but once in place, peer pressure also plays a role, as can guilt: are you a bad mother if you subject your child to the danger inherent on the streets? By reacting to an imaginary (or real but often overblown) danger, people create a real one.

Such self-perpetuating events are called positive cycles — positive in the sense that one action sets off other similar ones. When causing an ever-increasing spiral of negative results, they are called vicious cycles. But positive cycles can be virtuous as well as vicious. Say one parent, concerned about his children’s obesity and fear of the streets, decides to start walking with his children to school. Other parents observe this. The father tells his friends how his son and daughter are becoming stronger and more fit, but also more interested in their surroundings, more alert and aware, less lethargic — and able to pay more attention in school. Their grades are improving. Other parents take the example to heart and also encourage their children to walk or cycle to school. If a ripple effect can be generated then a virtuous cycle will kick in: as more kids walk and cycle it becomes safer and more acceptable for them to do so, thereby encouraging even more people to follow the example.

* Research shows that children’s school performance improves when they get more exercise. Think of it as better blood circulation, to the brain as well as the limbs. See, for example, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, “Physically fit children appear to do better in classroom, researchers say”. 18 Oct. 2004, http://www.news.uiuc.edu/news/04/1018fitness.html
And so with parks. One can quietly observe the deterioration of a neighbourhood playground, a park, a public space. People toss trash there. Youth go there for romance. At night anti-social activity occurs. As a result, more and more people shun the place, and its condition grows worse and worse.

Or the opposite. As people begin to clean up their surroundings, to make it clear that they will not tolerate anti-social behaviour, more people come; the presence of more people greatly reduces or even eliminates the possibility of anti-social behaviour occurring.

An ironic twist occurs in urban planning. Central neighbourhoods with good access to quality public spaces and a range of goods and services command high rent for small apartments. People move farther out of the city to save money and gain space. New areas fail to provide amenities. Though people desire such public amenities, they learn to live without them and young people may never experience their benefits and thus never demand them.

Planners announce that such amenities are no longer desired; people simply want shopping malls, vehicle parking and wide roads. Something tremendously valuable is lost and people do not even know what to blame for their unhappiness. The suburban model seems to work and thus is replicated; after all, urban space is too valuable to be wasted for such frivolous purposes as providing plazas and parks, and a civilized area cannot allow vendors or playing on sidewalks.

Just because the pattern is repeated and people live where they have no choice does not mean that all is right.

“I like to exercise but I can only exercise every day in our alley. There is no park or public garden near my home. I don’t want to exercise on the street because traffic is so dangerous these days, many people even walking on the sidewalk have been hit by motorbikes. I really wish there were a park or public garden near my home, it would have trees and water and be cool and pleasant, there would be plenty of open space so I could go there to enjoy the fresh air, to meet acquaintances and friends...how nice that would be.” (72-year-old man)

Vicious cycles can be stopped. Virtuous cycles can be promoted. But someone has to look around, observe, speak up, react.
And so with parks. One can quietly observe the deterioration of a neighbourhood playground, a park, a public space. People toss trash there. Youth go there for romance. At night anti-social activity occurs. As a result, more and more people shun the place, and its condition grows worse and worse.

Or the opposite. As people begin to clean up their surroundings, to make it clear that they will not tolerate anti-social behaviour, more people come; the presence of more people greatly reduces or even eliminates the possibility of anti-social behaviour occurring.

An ironic twist occurs in urban planning. Central neighbourhoods with good access to quality public spaces and a range of goods and services command high rent for small apartments. People move farther out of the city to save money and gain space. New areas fail to provide amenities. Though people desire such public amenities, they learn to live without them and young people may never experience their benefits and thus never demand them.

Planners announce that such amenities are no longer desired; people simply want shopping malls, vehicle parking and wide roads. Something tremendously valuable is lost and people do not even know what to blame for their unhappiness. The suburban model seems to work and thus is replicated; after all, urban space is too valuable to be wasted for such frivolous purposes as providing plazas and parks, and a civilized area cannot allow vendors or playing on sidewalks.

Just because the pattern is repeated and people live where they have no choice does not mean that all is right.

“I like to exercise but I can only exercise every day in our alley. There is no park or public garden near my home. I don’t want to exercise on the street because traffic is so dangerous these days, many people even walking on the sidewalk have been hit by motorbikes. I really wish there were a park or public garden near my home, it would have trees and water and be cool and pleasant, there would be plenty of open space so I could go there to enjoy the fresh air, to meet acquaintances and friends...how nice that would be.” (72-year-old man)

Vicious cycles can be stopped. Virtuous cycles can be promoted. But someone has to look around, observe, speak up, react.
And so with parks. One can quietly observe the deterioration of a neighbourhood playground, a park, a public space. People toss trash there. Youth go there for romance. At night anti-social activity occurs. As a result, more and more people shun the place, and its condition grows worse and worse.

Or the opposite. As people begin to clean up their surroundings, to make it clear that they will not tolerate anti-social behaviour, more people come; the presence of more people greatly reduces or even eliminates the possibility of anti-social behaviour occurring.

An ironic twist occurs in urban planning. Central neighbourhoods with good access to quality public spaces and a range of goods and services command high rent for small apartments. People move farther out of the city to save money and gain space. New areas fail to provide amenities. Though people desire such public amenities, they learn to live without them and young people may never experience their benefits and thus never demand them.

Planners announce that such amenities are no longer desired; people simply want shopping malls, vehicle parking and wide roads. Something tremendously valuable is lost and people do not even know what to blame for their unhappiness. The suburban model seems to work and thus is replicated; after all, urban space is too valuable to be wasted for such frivolous purposes as providing plazas and parks, and a civilized area cannot allow vendors or playing on sidewalks.

Just because the pattern is repeated and people live where they have no choice does not mean that all is right.

“I like to exercise but I can only exercise every day in our alley. There is no park or public garden near my home. I don’t want to exercise on the street because traffic is so dangerous these days, many people even walking on the sidewalk have been hit by motorbikes. I really wish there were a park or public garden near my home, it would have trees and water and be cool and pleasant, there would be plenty of open space so I could go there to enjoy the fresh air, to meet acquaintances and friends...how nice that would be.” (72-year-old man)

Vicious cycles can be stopped. Virtuous cycles can be promoted. But someone has to look around, observe, speak up, react.
IS THERE LIFE AFTER TRAFFIC?

"Hanoi’s Red river could become one of the most charming waterfronts in the world [if it gets rid of the motor vehicles...]. One truth about urban transport: It does not matter what is done, traffic jams will become worse; unless a radically new model is adopted. Transport is different from other development challenges such as health or education, because it does not improve with economic development. On the contrary, traffic and transport problems tend to worsen as income per capita increases. The solution to the challenge is public transport and restrictions to private automobile use." (Peñalosa 2004)

"...walking is more than a form of transport. It means exercise, fresh air and the chance to promenade. Walking can be fun. Walking allows time to look around at the surroundings, people, shop windows, and events. Walking also lets people stop, change direction, and experience things. It is a flexible way to move about the city, and it appeals to all the senses. Walking combines all these qualities and options: Transport, exercise, experience and pleasure." (Gehl and Gemzæe 2004)

Traffic becomes worse, not better, as economies grow. This is evident in many cities as people have made the transition from bicycles to motorbikes and cars. The air has grown more polluted, noise has worsened, the streets have become more dangerous to cross and to move about in.

What has traffic to do with public spaces? People, and particularly young children and the elderly, cannot access such spaces if the streets are too dangerous, and the streets themselves are the most common public spaces. The viability of sidewalk cafés, of benches, of commerce and socializing on sidewalks is threatened by traffic, as sidewalks are taken over for parking and the unpleasantness of the streets destroys the ambiance of their surroundings. There are only two possibilities: allow traffic to dominate urban life or rein in traffic to allow urban life to prosper.

Without going into detail, a few questions may suffice. Is the problem of cities too few streets or too many vehicles? Can a densely-populated city flourish without a functional public transit system (not just buses that have to compete with other vehicles for road space) accompanied by measures to restrain the use of cars and motorbikes? Is convenient access by car and motorbike to all parts of the city more important than the independent mobility of children and the elderly? Do cities in the world that rank high in liveability, wealthy cities whose citizens could easily afford the use of motorized vehicles but instead act to limit their use and encourage walking and cycling — cities such as Paris, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Freiburg — have anything to teach us?

One can pour a lot of money into addressing urban transport problems without making the situation any better and often making it worse. One can treat the streets as a place for movement only, abandoning their traditional role and allowing the city to be overrun by traffic. One can set
off vicious cycles in which ever-worsening traffic makes public transport, walking and cycling ever less viable and thus the problems ever worse: more pollution, more danger, more motorized traffic...

Or one can act to preserve or restore the streets as the central organs of the city, as the city's living room, as places where far more than movement occurs. Ironically, by de-emphasizing movement, one can actually improve traffic conditions, or at least make it possible to move about fairly easy on foot, by bicycle and by public transit. The sacrifice of personal motorized transport is a small price to pay when replaced by safer, quieter, less polluted, friendlier and livelier streets and healthier, more vibrant communities.

"...the realities of most urban areas are that traffic dominates the streets; waste places and public open spaces are often barren or dangerous; children's hunger for trees does not appear to be shared by most developers and city officials; communities still have to fight to maintain their heritage and identity in the face of development pressures; most children have narrowly limited ranges of movement; and research with children and attention to their needs are emphatically not part of most urban policy, planning, design and management practices." (UNESCO 2002)

Of course overcrowding in parks and other public spaces would also be greatly eased if the sidewalks were returned to pedestrians and cyclists again had safe access to the roads. Then people would not have to swarm the parks, lakes, and public gardens for the chance to work out in company; they could meet their socializing needs through walks along sidewalks and through cycling on lively streets. If people could walk or cycle to work and to shops, they would not have to put aside time for exercise, traffic would be lighter, pollution would diminish, and people would be healthier.

But it helps to remember that one truly can't have it all. Some sacrifices must be made to enjoy other benefits. Just as the person at risk of diabetes must learn to say no to sweets and soft drinks, so those eager to walk and cycle must realize that when they make all trips, including very short ones, by motorbike they not only miss the chance themselves but reduce the ability of anyone else to enjoy such opportunities.

"The urban environment should again become a place favorable to human encounter; for looking around, listening and talking to people, walking about and sitting down. Streets and squares should once again be treated as outside rooms within the city, as places where the opportunity of contact between people is the primary consideration."

(Jan Tanghe et al. in Engwicht 1999)

Liveable cities includes the concept of living streets, a concept that may sound strange to those familiar with lively streets. What on earth is a dead street? Unfortunately for the residents thereof, there are in fact many of them even in low-income cities: streets void of people if not of motorized
traffic; barren sidewalks empty of pedestrians or vendors or kids playing or people talking. Just...streets. Streets reduced, stripped, to one basic function: the circulation of vehicles. A necessary but hardly sufficient function.

How much more enjoyable to be in a part of the city full of people, vitality, life. Groups of people seated on low stools eating at informal sidewalk restaurants. A prosperous café that spills over onto the sidewalk. A toddler pedaling a toy vehicle. An elderly couple playing badminton.

Shopkeepers and manicurists, leaning in the doorway of their shops watching the drama of the streets. People arranging floral wreaths. Men painting signs, fixing bicycles, cutting hair. Incense and prayer beads and paper money sold by elderly women at stands in front of a pagoda.

Fresh fruits sold from bicycle carts and sidewalk displays. Fresh cut flowers. Pottery. Peanuts.

Never far to go to eat, drink, shop, observe, be entertained.

Those who are used to living streets may long for “dead” ones, where cars and motorbikes move freely (or so the theory goes), where traffic laws operate, where vendors are banned.

Of course to be consistent, such a city would also keep its sidewalks free of parked vehicles. No loitering, please. No more shopping without having to get off your motorbike. No more familiar vendors reserving the last glass of juice, selecting the tastiest fruits, making the best tofu, for you. Efficiency. Speed. The impersonal.

What begins as cleanliness and order becomes soulless; empty streets become dangerous; those whose jobs are banned may become desperate. Then people begin to clamour for living streets. Hard to create them when you don’t have them. Sometimes hard to appreciate them when you do.

And may we add a note on civilization, which can be used as an excuse for banning vendors and for “cleaning up” the sidewalks: a city is not civilized that fails to take into account the needs of the poor to earn money. Banishing the poor from sight does not remove the poverty. Since sidewalk commerce can actually enhance quality of life, it should never be banned, and doing so under the name of civilization is a cruel twist on an otherwise attractive word.

Bangkok
CAN’T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG: ENCOURAGING CIVILITY

Hanoi

“[Cities] quickly produced magnificent architecture and sculpture, ... the sweet smells and moist airs of gardens, shady luxury with occasional fine things to eat and drink, pungent marketplaces, and hot dusty streets filled with strangers and acquaintances in a pact to accept one another.” (Register 2006)

“Historically Americans have a low regard for the public realm, and this is very unfortunate because the public realm is the physical manifestation of the common good. When you degrade the public realm, as we [Americans] have, you degrade the common good.” (Kunstler 1996)

Cities, by their very nature, involve a tricky problem: how to make it possible for absurdly large numbers of very different types of people, most unrelated, most strangers, to share a relatively small space without constantly cursing or frequently killing each other? If extended families find it difficult to share living quarters, how to enforce a social contract among people with no obvious connections to each other?

We tend to assume that civility should exist and regret its absence, but isn’t it more surprising that it exists at all? That most food sold to strangers is untainted, that most transactions do not involve any significant cheating, that most people are kind and considerate or at least benign? Shouldn’t crowding, noise and pollution result instead in anger, aggression and other ugly behaviours?
Just as economic transactions require a social contract — most people must trust and be trustworthy or no commercial exchanges would be possible — so civility in cities relies on a general feeling that other people are more or less decent human beings.

Little as we may wish to think about it, every day of our urban existence is filled with instances of trust, of dependence on strangers not to run us over in the street, not to steal our possessions, not to abuse our children and elderly...

Trust may involve multiple foundations and people may offer and defend different theories. But it is clear that it is easier to trust those with whom one interacts than others; that civility in cities is self-reinforcing, a positive cycle of goodwill whereby people appreciate and imitate the friendliness of others; that civility is far easier, is perhaps only truly possible, when different kinds of people interact or at least observe each other on the streets and in other public places.

How else is one to learn that beggars are not thieves, that vendors can smile when you refuse their products, that strangers will sometimes look out for you?

Endless daily encounters, most unnoticed at the time at any conscious level, add up to the sensation that one’s city is a safe and friendly, if also often noisy and smelly, place to live.

A true story serves as an example: a young woman parks her bicycle on a busy market street and goes inside a house to meet a friend. The two women go out to dinner. Upon returning, the one is upset to realize that her bicycle is missing and naturally assumes that it has been stolen. Just then a vendor crosses the street to approach them, a vendor who has never said a word to the woman living in the house, and says, “I saw that you parked your bike unsafely, so I rang the bell and moved it inside the gate for you.” Without waiting to be thanked, the vendor again crosses the street to return to her post.

This all falls apart when the rich segregate themselves into gated communities and assign the poor to substandard housing often on the urban fringe. Daily interactions decrease. Fear, tension, and resentment increase. Without civility, one must find one’s safety elsewhere: behind fences, inside cars, with security guards. And the situation continues to deteriorate.

Or not. Public spaces and the interactions they facilitate can and do save our cities.

"A city in which all citizens use public transport and all green space and waterfronts are for public use can construct significant equality. ... The equality that matters is that which matters to children. Children don't care about luxury cars or jewels. They do care about access to sports facilities, quality schools, music lessons, parks, waterfronts. While income equality may escape us, we can strive for equality of quality of life, particularly in the case of children.” (Peñalosa 2004)

Being around, observing, sharing space with others is a great equalizer and humanizer. We can’t live together and live without it.
A WORD ABOUT THE FOUNDATION OF LIFE: THE ENVIRONMENT

 Bangalore

“I have been paralyzed for six years. I can’t walk; someone has to push me in a wheelchair. Going for a stroll like this in the park is peaceful, cool, and allows me to breathe good fresh air.” (78-year-old man)

In a sprawling urban park, brilliant turquoise kingfishers dive into a lake in search of fish. Insects hop along the surface of the water. A woodpecker clings to a trunk, rhythmically working away with its bill. Shade, breezes, gently falling leaves, the fragrant smell of wet earth.

* * *

With so much to say about the environment, where is one to start and, equally, where or how is one to end? This will by necessity be brief.

Some believe that economic concerns must be addressed before one can worry about the environment. With people still hungry, how can we worry about trees or the quality of the air and water? Economic growth first; environmental concerns later, the belief goes. But such a belief contains a few obvious fallacies.

First, economic growth often fails to remedy poverty and often enriches the few at the expense of the many (Stiglitz 2003), while also destroying the environment. Second, by the time one is ready to deal with the environment, there may be little left worth saving. And finally, how much sense does it make to create wealth while impoverishing one’s surroundings? How much dirty air and water can people take?
China is widely praised for its rapid and sustained economic growth. Certainly the achievements are admirable, but they come at an exceedingly heavy price which does not fail to take its toll. Filthy water and unbreathable air can only sustain human life for so long and at less than optimal levels of well-being.

Are more shopping malls and high-rises truly more valuable than trees? Is it worth increasing flooding in the city to destroy more water bodies to enrich a few developers? Many of the changes in today’s rapidly growing and urbanizing cities have no doubt been positive, but while continuing to grow and expand and “modernize” it helps to pause occasionally to ask, at what price? How much more private wealth do we need at the expense of the public good?

The wealthy cities of the world place great value on their green spaces, their parks, lakes, rivers and waterfronts. Such places are considered too valuable to destroy. Parks and lakes are often called the gems of a city. Nobody except the most brand-addicted teenager speaks with such love about a shopping mall.

Even progress must have its limits, and some places truly are too valuable to be destroyed. Blessed are those who learn such lessons before there is nothing precious left to save.

SEEKING SAFETY IN OUR STREETS

“Would it not be better if children grew up without the terror of cars? Today children in cities around the world jump in fright when told: Watch out, a car! They have good reasons to fear cars. Thousands of children the world over are killed by cars every year. Why not conceive a city where children would walk out of their houses into pedestrian streets?” (Peñalosa 2004)

“A well-used city street is apt to be a safe street. A deserted city street is apt to be unsafe. ... there must be eyes upon the street.... the sidewalk must have users on it fairly continuously.” (Jacobs 1989)
Danger in cities comes in two main forms: traffic and crime. People fear both; both result in people limiting their and their children’s movements. There are streets which are literally impossible to cross on foot; others which are only possible for those between certain ages, in excellent health and with sufficient courage. The elderly, children and those with disabilities either must rely on others to help them across or simply not cross at all.

Generally speaking, cities where income gaps between the rich and poor are fairly small have little crime, and those with greater gaps have more. Ostentatious wealth amid seas of poverty causes jealousy among those who cannot purchase the goods they see advertised and flouted. Such jealousy and resentment, and certainly misunderstanding between the classes, tends to increase as the rich attempt to segregate themselves from the poor. Mixed cities are safer cities.

So much for the city overall. In terms of public streets, there are no great secrets to ensuring safety. Traffic, as discussed elsewhere, should not be allowed to dominate the streets, and certainly not to overtake the sidewalks.

People of all ages should feel safe walking on the sidewalks and crossing the streets. Nor should the traffic fumes be so intense that the health benefits of exercise may be outweighed by the dangers of all the chemicals one inhales.

Further, crime can be reduced or nearly eliminated by ensuring lively streets; that is, by allowing street life to flourish rather than seeking to constrain or ban it.

“Good ground floor façades are an important city feature. They make the city interesting to walk through, interesting to look at, to touch and to stand next to. Activities inside buildings and those on the street can enrich each other. In the evenings, friendly light shines out through the windows of shops and other ground floor activities, contributing to a feeling of security as well as to genuine safety. Interesting ground floor façades also provide good reasons for walking around in the city in the evenings and on Sunday, engaging in the age-old pastime of window-shopping. In contrast, blank walls underline the futility of visiting the city outside working hours.” (Gehl and Gemzæ 2004)

The many shops lining central streets, and the presence of the many vendors, contribute to interest and safety. In other parts of the city the streets carry a more deserted look, discouraging pedestrians and inviting crime. Small shops and vendors should be encouraged throughout the city, and sidewalks returned to people of all ages. Cars and motorbikes must be controlled, and cycling and public transport encouraged. As life returns to the streets, so will safety to the city.
"Regular, moderately intense physical activity helps to maintain the functional independence of older adults and enhances the quality of life for people of all ages. Physical activity helps maintain normal muscle strength and joint structure and function, lower high blood pressure, relieve depression and anxiety, lower obesity levels, and is necessary for normal skeletal development during childhood. Physically inactive people are almost twice as likely to develop coronary heart disease as people who engage in regular physical activity." (Frank et. al. 2003)

There is no question about it: there is simply no substitute for physical activity in maintaining health. And that physical activity makes demands not just on individuals but on cities. People simply cannot be expected to get all their exercise in gyms or at home. People need to be able to walk and cycle in their city, and to have parks and other public spaces to go to for a combination of exercise and socializing.

"I used to be very heavy, with a big belly, and suffered from various diseases. My doctor advised me to exercise. I had high blood pressure and diabetes. I’ve been walking for a year now. From the day when they fixed up this park I’ve been coming here, and so I don’t have to walk on the streets anymore. I’m always worried when I walk on the street that I could be hit by a vehicle, and there’s so much traffic exhaust, so I had to choose narrow streets. It wasn’t at all pleasant.

"It is quite true that exercise helps people overcome disease. And it is no small matter as to where one exercises. My stomach is much smaller now, I feel healthier, and my blood pressure is stable. This is also my chance to meet many people, to talk and to make close friends. That socializing makes us much happier." (85-year-old man)

Consider how painfully boring it can be to try to pass time on a treadmill or other exercise machine, as opposed to going for a walk or jog or bike ride. Exercising in the presence of others is far more satisfying and enjoyable than doing so alone.

It is extremely difficult for most people to maintain an exercise regimen if it is not part of their daily routine — walking or cycling to school or work and to shops — or is not pleasurable.

Cities need healthy populations; governments expend far too much treating lifestyle-related diseases, and workplaces lose some of their most productive workers from such illnesses. It simply does not work to rely on individuals to find the time and motivation to exercise; cities must offer and enable healthy physical activity.
Incorporation of physical activity into one’s daily regime is critical, but so is the socialization aspect of exercise. It can be difficult to motivate oneself to maintain an exercise regime without some positive feedback beyond better health and a slimmer figure. Many people will find it nearly impossible to use a treadmill or exercise bike, or to work out alone, but will easily maintain a regime that involves the company of others.

And the socialization is itself an essential part of health. People are sociable creatures: we cannot live without the company of others, and the more social our exercise regimes, the more mentally healthy and happy we will be.

Health is also improved by reducing pollution: traffic fumes cause and aggravate lung disease, and noise can kill by worsening heart conditions. Slower and lighter vehicles would mean fewer traffic deaths and injuries. When cities provide good conditions for walking and cycling, and attractive parks and other open spaces for exercise, as well as reducing traffic to decrease pollution and road crashes, the population is healthier and happier; surely those are worthwhile goals?
GREEN SPACE: HOW MUCH, WHAT KIND?

“The more successfully a city mingles everyday diversity of uses and users in its everyday streets, the more successfully, casually (and economically) its people thereby enliven and support well-located parks that can thus give back grace and delight to their neighborhoods instead of vacuity.”
(Jacobs 1989)

“This park is rather crowded because people who live in the surrounding area and even farther away like to come here to exercise. Supposing that every part of the city had a good-sized public space for the people who live nearby to come to for relaxation, then this place wouldn’t be so crowded.”

It may or may not be helpful to quantify the amount of green space needed per resident in a city. While such indicators may tell something, they can be misleading. A small city may contain a large park or even a small forest that seems to suggest a high ratio of green space to residents, though most residents cannot access it because it is far away, or one needs a car to get there, or one must pay to enter. Figures on green space per capita may or may not be up to date, and may include “green” spaces with no trees, long since paved over to build factories or shopping malls.

A more helpful measure may be the percent of the population with access to a green or decent quality open space (not just an abandoned lot!) within a certain distance of their home: say 400 or 800 metres. Such a measure, if open/green space is carefully defined, could say far more about the actual benefits to the residents.

However defined, it is clear that green space in many cities is grossly inadequate. For instance, in Hanoi, green space shrunk by about 3% a year from 1996 to 2003, with only 0.9 m² per person, as against a target in the Masterplan 2020 of 5.2-5.5 m² per person. Yet people desire more green
space: 90% of residents in Hanoi feel that good access to a park is important or very important, though only 31% of Hanoi residents live within walking distance of a park (Hellberg and Johansson 2008).

Yet trends need not always mean reductions in green space. Curitiba, a city in a low-income part of Brazil, in the 1950s had only 0.5 square meters of green space per inhabitant. By the end of the 1990s city authorities had created so many new parks that the figure rose to an astounding 55 square meters per person, or over three times the amount (16 square meters/person) prescribed by the WHO (Del Bello 2006).

If public spaces existed throughout the city within a short distance of most people’s homes, then most people could access them on foot, thereby greatly reducing the need for parking. Less parking would in turn mean more space for all other activities. If children and the elderly could easily walk to the local public space, the burden on other family members (usually women) would decrease. And if people walk more, they will be healthier.

If people learned that walking can be pleasurable — that is, if walking truly became pleasant, with the opportunity to enjoy many sights as one walks and without stumbling into motorbikes and cars parked on the sidewalk — people would walk more and thus congestion, pollution and traffic injuries would all decline.

As to the design of public spaces, there is no one right answer. The most one can offer is basic principles or guidelines; different types of spaces will meet different needs, and different communities have different needs and preferences. Prize-winning Danish architect Jan Gehl, who advises mayors in cities throughout the world, has helpfully broken down the issue of designing and detailing quality public spaces into three main categories: protection, comfort, and enjoyment.13

Under protection, Gehl addresses three key issues:

1. Protection against traffic and accidents (including the fear of accidents as well as the actual incidence, and the possibility of accidents other than traffic-related ones);

13 These points are discussed in more detail in Jan Gehl’s book Life Between Buildings (2001), which has been translated into many languages.
2. Protection against crime and violence, or the feeling of safety (whether a place feels lived in and used; the presence of street life and street watchers, and overlapping functions in the same space and over time — that is, a park or plaza used at different times by different people for different activities; the less varied the use, the less safe it will be);

3. Protection against unpleasant sensory experiences such as wind, rain, cold, intense heat, pollution, dust, glare and noise.

Under comfort, Gehl addresses six issues:

4. Possibilities for walking (room, street layout, interesting façades, freedom from major obstacles, and good surfaces);

5. Possibilities for standing/staying (attractive edges or the “edge effect”, where there are niches or small shelters within the façade), defined spots, and supports for staying, which include but are by no means limited to benches or posts against which to lean;

6. Possibilities for sitting (including benches, low walls, statues, and so on);

7. Possibilities to see (the ability to see into the distance and views unhindered by buildings or other obstructions, interesting views, and lighting as appropriate);

8. Possibilities for hearing/talking (low noise level, and benches or seating arranged such that people can easily sit in different arrangements that facilitate conversation);

9. Possibilities for play and other activities (possibilities for various physical activities including exercise and play; space for entertainment, both day and night, and in different seasons).
Finally, Gehl places three items under the category of enjoyment:

10. Scale (buildings and spaces so dimensioned as to be appropriate to the human dimensions — not overwhelmingly large — and related to our senses, movements, size and behaviour); 

11. Possibilities for enjoying positive aspects of the climate (sun, shade, warmth, coolness, breeze, ventilation; as appropriate, provide access to these aspects as pleasures and not just protection from them as nuisances); 

12. Aesthetic quality and positive sense experiences (good design and detailing, views and vistas; and inclusion of trees, plants and water).

According to Gehl, when analyzing a public space, if there is “a resounding YES to the above 12 questions”, then “a 100% place has been achieved”.

All of the above dimensions are important to varying degrees; one can sacrifice a few and still have a decent public space, but one cannot sacrifice them all. Some are also more urgent than others. For instance, while attractive paving of sidewalks helps, it is far more important not to allow vehicle parking. Similarly, as discussed throughout, sights, shopping and safety are of great importance in attracting people to public spaces: these qualities are enhanced through the presence of vendors and of interesting and open façades, such as shops with clear glass windows and colourful displays, preferably lit up at night.

“While it is true that buildings and urban units have become increasingly larger, people continue to be small, slow, and on the lookout for good sensory experiences. ... The ground floor is where building and town meet, where we urbanites have our close encounters with buildings, where we can touch and be touched by them.”
(Gehl, Kaefer, and Reigstad 2004)
For parks and public gardens it is important not to over-landscape, nor to over-plan the space. Flower gardens may be pleasant to look at, but they reduce the useable space. And anyone observing the use of seating in parks will quickly discover that pleasant as trees, flowers, and water are, people are the main attractions. It is far better, rather than planting many flowers or trying to maintain smooth grassy lawns, to leave more room for a variety of activities. Overly-manicured parks tend to be empty or under-utilized, too formal to be inviting, meant for the eye only.

Different people have different needs, and different people will use the space depending on the season and time of day. The less structured the space, the more likely it will adapt itself to the needs of the users at any particular moment. Paved plazas are an example, alternately serving children for skating and cycling, ballroom dancers, vendors, small events and so on. Similarly, children’s play equipment can be used at times when no children are present as auxiliary exercise equipment for youth and adults.

Benches should face activity areas rather than lakes or flower beds. People are attracted to movement and like to watch other people; if there is nobody to watch, benches tend to go unused.

Just as play equipment can attract children and youth, so young men may particularly enjoy sporting equipment: bars for chin-ups and the like. Planning for different age groups, and not simply sedentary activities for older people and active ones for kids, helps keep places lively and people healthy.

The best way to understand what people want is to observe how people use existing public spaces: which ones are most popular? What groups do they attract? Location is also important: livelier, busier locations generally attract more users.

Each individual may have multiple needs and different people’s needs vary; thus one space cannot satisfy all needs and all users. It is difficult to match a large park for the exercise opportunities, but smaller plazas may be more popular during the daytime: places people pass through anyway as opposed to ones they go out of their way to enter. The city should offer different types of public places throughout.

And since sidewalks will almost always be the most bounteous public space, it is important to reconsider management issues. While some sidewalks are too narrow to allow for various uses, many are wide enough to offer multiple advantages: as badminton courts, bicycle paths for children, sidewalk cafés, and local shops, while still accommodating walking.

Finally, why not ask the locals what they want? They may not all be able to draw or design a space, but they can certainly tell someone what they would like for themselves and their families; a safe place for children to run and play, a wide path for walking and jogging, open spaces for dance or aerobics or tai chi, and informal cafés to sit and relax and socialize.
For parks and public gardens it is important not to over-landscape, nor to over-plan the space. Flower gardens may be pleasant to look at, but they reduce the useable space. And anyone observing the use of seating in parks will quickly discover that pleasant as trees, flowers, and water are, people are the main attractions. It is far better, rather than planting many flowers or trying to maintain smooth grassy lawns, to leave more room for a variety of activities. Overly-manicured parks tend to be empty or under-utilized, too formal to be inviting, meant for the eye only.

Different people have different needs, and different people will use the space depending on the season and time of day. The less structured the space, the more likely it will adapt itself to the needs of the users at any particular moment. Paved plazas are an example, alternately serving children for skating and cycling, ballroom dancers, vendors, small events and so on. Similarly, children’s play equipment can be used at times when no children are present as auxiliary exercise equipment for youth and adults.

Benches should face activity areas rather than lakes or flower beds. People are attracted to movement and like to watch other people; if there is nobody to watch, benches tend to go unused.

Just as play equipment can attract children and youth, so young men may particularly enjoy sporting equipment: bars for chin-ups and the like. Planning for different age groups, and not simply sedentary activities for older people and active ones for kids, helps keep places lively and people healthy.

The best way to understand what people want is to observe how people use existing public spaces: which ones are most popular? What groups do they attract? Location is also important: livelier, busier locations generally attract more users.

Each individual may have multiple needs and different people’s needs vary; thus one space cannot satisfy all needs and all users. It is difficult to match a large park for the exercise opportunities, but smaller plazas may be more popular during the daytime: places people pass through anyway as opposed to ones they go out of their way to enter. The city should offer different types of public places throughout.

And since sidewalks will almost always be the most bounteous public space, it is important to reconsider management issues. While some sidewalks are too narrow to allow for various uses, many are wide enough to offer multiple advantages: as badminton courts, bicycle paths for children, sidewalk cafés, and local shops, while still accommodating walking.

Finally, why not ask the locals what they want? They may not all be able to draw or design a space, but they can certainly tell someone what they would like for themselves and their families: a safe place for children to run and play, a wide path for walking and jogging, open spaces for dance or aerobics or tai chi, and informal cafés to sit and relax and socialize.
There is a conflict between a city for cars and a city for people. As a city becomes friendlier to motor-vehicles, it inevitably becomes less humane. Generally the slower traffic is and the wider a sidewalk is the better for the human quality of a given urban sector. And better than a wide sidewalk and slow motor-vehicle traffic is an exclusively pedestrian street. Cars parked on sidewalks or parking bays where there should be sidewalks symbolize a lack of respect for human dignity. And in developing cities this also tends to reflect an unequal society that respects more those with power or wealth." (Peñalosa 2004)

Expand existing public space: Open space in many cities is already grossly insufficient. No further encroachment on existing public space or green space should be tolerated, and efforts should be made to increase the quantity. Existing encroachment or detracting commercial space in existing public spaces could be removed to expand the green space.

If it is possible to knock down buildings to widen roads — which will likely simply get clogged with new traffic — there is no reason why buildings cannot be knocked down to provide extremely valuable open space for the use of residents. Where possible, linkages should also be created among existing green and open spaces, for instance by ensuring safe pedestrian street crossings. If all else fails, then some sidewalks and even streets can be remade into more generous, welcoming and multi-purpose public spaces.

Don’t destroy what works: Where public places are extremely popular, they should be preserved and any plans to update or improve them should be carefully considered and only adopted after full discussion with a wide range of existing users. This applies equally to parks, plazas, markets, and the presence of vendors on sidewalks.

Preserving the informal economy: Given its importance to the poor and middle class, the informal economy should be preserved and protected rather than chipped away at through bans and police harassment. India, for example, has enacted a National Policy on Urban Street Vendors which emphasizes the importance of allocating vendors sufficient space and protecting their rights to do business.

Safety: Public spaces can become dangerous when they are not used, or used mainly by the “wrong” people. Solutions to this problem are fairly simple. Many public spaces are
small enough to be fully visible from the street. If they are located in busy areas where plenty of people pass and where access is easy (signals for road crossings, no fences to block access), they should stay safe. Vendors attract people and should be allowed as long as they leave space for other activities. At night, lighting is critical. Parks must be free to enter.

If these principles are followed then safety is generally not an issue. The usual approaches to addressing safety often make the problem worse rather than better: by fencing the space to limit access one keeps out everyone except the vandals; by charging admission or otherwise trying to keep people out, one makes the park more dangerous rather than safer.

**Parking:** Public spaces are for people. Vehicles should not be allowed to dominate or destroy them. If shopkeepers and other owners were fined for allowing improper parking in front of their stores and other businesses, they would contribute to the solution rather than the problem. Cars should of course NEVER be allowed to park on sidewalks. Managing motorbike parking in small public spaces like plazas should be considered carefully. Providing one location for parking and charging for it by the time it is used would help resolve the problem by lessening demand for parking without having to provide extra space for it.

If there were proper public places throughout the city — smaller places to socialize, play, eat, and relax and bigger ones for exercise and for more active play — then parking would be unnecessary at public places. People could simply walk from their homes, reducing traffic and pollution, enjoying the health benefits of physical activity, and allowing precious public space to be used in better ways.

Motorized vehicles should not be allowed in parks, period. No car parking. No riding of motorbikes. One motorbike passing through a park leaves a trail of exhaust in an otherwise fresh environment. Few activities are more offensive than honking while riding a motorbike through a crowded park. Where else do people have space in the city free from the noise, smell and danger of motorized vehicles? That space should be sacred. Bicycles, as long as remaining few in number and moving slowly, are unobtrusive, safe and non-polluting.

**Entrance fees**, as discussed elsewhere, are wrong-minded and should be stopped altogether.

**Popularity:** Of course not all public spaces work equally well, nor are all public spaces always in use. Some parks attract vagrants, whereas others are vital spaces much beloved by all. What is the difference? A few recipes for success include being located where the space is easily reached by people at all hours, design factors such as unprogrammed space; and variety and interest in the layout.

Variety in layout allows for different people to come and a multiplicity of activities to occur at different times of day and in varying seasons and weather. Exercise may be the predominant activity in morning and evening, while daytime use is more for children and families; there may be differences between weekdays and the weekend. Variety means more use, more popularity, more safety.

"Only when opportunities for sitting exist can there be stays of any duration. If these opportunities are few or bad, people just walk on by. ... The existence of good opportunities for sitting paves the way for the numerous activities that are the prime attractions in public spaces: eating, reading, sleeping, knitting, playing chess, sunbathing, watching people, talking and so on." (Gehl 2001)
As Jan Gehl (2001) describes in *Life Between Buildings*, there is an essential difference between places where people merely come and go and those where they stop and stay; it is those who stay who make public spaces lively. Where there are good opportunities for staying, cities are livelier. If people love their city and care for others they will be less likely to act in negative ways. Environments can fail to inhibit or can even encourage anti-social behaviour, or they can encourage people to care for their surroundings and for other people.

Describing a successful park in a city which has many unsuccessful ones of the same design, Jane Jacobs writes that the good park is situated in an area with a “mixture of uses of buildings [which] directly produces for the park a mixture of users who enter and leave the park at different times. They use the park at different times from one another because their daily schedules differ. The park thus possesses an intricate sequence of uses and users.” The park “is busy fairly continuously for the same basic reasons that a lively sidewalk is used continuously: because of functional physical diversity among adjacent uses, and hence diversity among users and their schedules” (Jacobs 1989). This is in marked contrast to parks in downtown areas which are basically only used at lunchtime and become deserted and unsafe, as the single-use downtown area is, in the evening. Mixed use means different people and different schedules, and thus the sort of continuous use that keeps public spaces lively and safe.

When poorly maintained, dark, or difficult to access, such spaces can indeed give rise to — or more accurately provide a home for — antisocial activities. It is often true that small public spaces, placed in areas that due to a mix of housing and commercial or office space are lively at all hours, work the best, as the constant flow of people prevents them from being taken over by “undesireables”. But big parks, as discussed elsewhere, are important too, for exercise, socializing, and income-earning possibilities.

Rare is the problem that can’t be solved, and some solutions are absurdly simple, for example, to make parks livelier in the day, stop charging entrance fees!
The needs expressed by people in this book are universal. Everywhere people need secure sources of income, opportunities for their children to gain strength and wisdom through playing and interacting with others, and the chance for people of all incomes, ages and abilities to feel part of a larger community of people who live for others as well as for themselves.

Throughout the world the traditional form of cities has crumbled under market pressures. Neighbourhoods have been torn down to make space for high-rise offices and apartment buildings. Markets and street vendors are disappearing, replaced by supermarkets. People who used to know their neighbours now rarely see and never interact with them. Those who walked to school and played in the streets now drive their children everywhere.

Yet such changes are by no means universal or unilateral. In city after city people are fighting to preserve or rebuild what is being lost, to maintain the personal in the city. In other cities little seems to have changed. Evenings in Paris, the streets are still full of people strolling home with a baguette under one arm. Cycling has experienced a resurgence in many cities including Paris, and street vendors, once banned, are now encouraged. For those cities which have sunk under the dominance of the car and survived the experience, reversed the trend, and taken back the streets for people, quality of life has surged. Such cities provide examples and hope for cities elsewhere.

“...the long-standing dominance of the automobile in American street design may be eroding. There is growing pressure for acceptance of the basic premise that streets should serve a number of purposes, only one of which is the movement of vehicles. Streets contribute to the built environment through their design and are not just pipelines through which traffic is run.” (Frank et. al. 2003)
Copenhagen is now one of the most liveable cities in the world, but only a few decades ago its streets and squares were overrun with cars, people squeezed to the side. People only came out in the streets for necessary errands; there was no street life. All that has changed, gradually yet dramatically. Those who claimed that Danes were private people who would never learn to enjoy public recreation were proved wrong; people have taken back the streets and squares, and public life flourishes. As a result, residents of Copenhagen rate their city as a great place to live.

“Rather than discourage people from walking in cities, European city policy has been to invite people to walk there instead. Walking is a cheap, low-noise, environmentally-friendly form of transportation, which allows streets to hold larger volumes of traffic. Strøget is only 11 meters wide, and yet is one of Denmark’s most heavily travelled streets, carrying more than 80,000 people per day in the summer. Instead of wide, noisy streets in and out of the city and six-story underground parking all over the city center, Copenhagen has opted for fewer cars and an extremely attractive city center. Copenhagen is living proof that the policy works.”
(Gehl and Gemzøe 2004)

Copenhagen successfully dealt with its parking problem not by expanding parking, but by dramatically decreasing it—by about 40% in 20 years. This included converting public squares from parking into people places. As a result, more people come to, and especially stay in and enjoy (and spend money in) the city center.

“Amazingly enough, Copenhagen city center goes on working well despite the gradual reduction in parking places. The Copenhagen policy seriously puts in to question the widely held belief that many parking places are needed to ensure that a city center functions well”
(Gehl and Gemzøe 2004)

Other European cities such as Paris, London, and Freiburg have taken similar steps, or worked hard to ensure that existing positive conditions are maintained. Pedestrians are encouraged through a number of means, while vehicles are discouraged or prevented from entering many streets in the city centre. As a result, not only do businesses prosper, but people are able to enjoy their city safe from the dangers and fumes of traffic, to live healthier and more social lives...in short, to experience more of the joys and fewer of the problems of cities.

“[Copenhagen] is just one of many cities in which urban policy initiatives have raised urban quality. Traffic, noise and pollution have been reduced, foot traffic and bicycle traffic have been reinforced. Public life has blossomed on the streets and squares of the city...”
(Gehl and Gemzøe 2003)

While many cities still have a long way to go, there are a few small signs of positive change: In Hanoi, the popular Unification Park was recently rescued by public outcry from a plan to turn it into a sort of Disneyland and again from plans to allow an international hotel to swallow up a piece of the park. In the popular Thu Le Park in the same city, a number of illegal structures that were gradually eating up the park space were torn down (Hellberg and Johansson 2008). Such trends indicate the possibility of working to ensure that cities are indeed for people.
SUMMING UP

“Living cities...ones in which people can interact with one another, are always stimulating because they are rich in experiences, in contrast to lifeless cities, which can scarcely avoid being poor in experiences and thus dull, no matter how many colors and variations of shape in buildings are introduced.” (Gehl 2001)

“For the past few decades, our society has emphasized the values of competition and the rights of the individual. But if we are to build compassionate and civilized cities, these values need to be balanced with a vision of cooperation and the duties of citizenship. This requires the return of the street as the central stage for the democratic process.” (Engwicht 1999)

People should be able to walk the streets; not just young and able-bodied people, but children, the elderly, and those with disabilities. The sidewalks should be shared by vendors and pedestrians, by those stopping for a chat or a meal, and those trying to get somewhere. There should be space on some sidewalks for young children to learn to ride a bike and for people to play badminton. People should not be terrified of being hit by a motorbike, or have to gasp from the traffic fumes, when trying to walk.

Until that happens, parks, plazas and public gardens are the only places where people can exercise and children can run free.

Parks, plazas and public gardens may always be the gems in the crown, but the city will be a more thriving, vibrant, liveable place when people also re-conquer the sidewalks.

* * *

“Very freely interpreted, a social activity takes place every time two people are together in the same space. To see and hear each other, to meet, is in itself a form of contact, a social activity.” (Gehl 2001)

6:15 a.m. on a rainy Saturday in July. A big popular downtown park is empty. No aerobics, no tai chi, no meditation, no football, no badminton, no cafés or noodle shops or toys or clothes sellers. A few people jog. Several people walk under umbrellas. A vendor with baskets of sweet potatoes and boiled peanuts slung on a shoulder pole slips through the entrance. One lone ballroom dance group, taking refuge under a shelter, attempts a Viennese waltz on a narrow strip of cement; after a few dizzying turns they stop and chat. An elderly woman selling hard-boiled eggs, doubly sheltered under her conical hat and an awning, smiles at those walking past.
The rain falls slowly, gently, on the nearly empty brick paths. It makes rippling patterns in the still lake. It collects in puddles. It slides off of benches and play equipment, saturates the ground to form mud. It falls quietly in a park mostly void of music, of the laughter of children, of the exclamations of seniors playing badminton, of people arguing and joking over coffee and noodles.

Yet the park, seemingly empty and soothingly quiet, is safe — because it is not truly empty. People still walk, stretch, jog, dance.

The park, even quiet, is full of life and hope and promise. It has not been destroyed. It is there, waiting for future users. To be played in, enjoyed, loved, appreciated.


Places for people. The heart of the city, beating with life and vitality.

The people’s city. Use it. Enjoy it. Preserve it. Live in it.

Some things once lost are irretrievable. It is nearly impossible to go back, no matter how much one misses it: to replace supermarkets with open markets, to tear down a shopping mall and restore a park, to return to low-rise friendly neighbourhoods after moving into high-rise luxury apartments in gated communities. Once the regret and sense of loss emerge, it is far too late to save what has been destroyed.

How then to create a balance between the forces that work to preserve public spaces and those that seek to destroy them? Read, learn, observe, and participate. There are many ways we can speak out for our public spaces, and experience in cities throughout the world has shown that when people speak out, they can save their most beloved places. Urban environments can nurture their residents and offer a truly liveable environment for people of all ages and incomes, with a generous abundance of public spaces to humanize the city.

It is not enough to love a city; we must also work to save it.
REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


Kabir, N, HI Hillol, and D Efroymson, The Negative Effects of TV and Our Children. WBB Trust, Dhaka, November 2007 (in Bengali only).


Kunstler, JH, Home from Nowhere, Remaking our everyday


