

BASED ON THE STUDY OF URBAN THEORIST: WILLIAM H. WHYTE

BOOK REVIEW: STUDY OF THE LIFE OF SOCIAL SPACES PEOPLE, PUBLIC LIFE & PLAZAS

Ar. Barkha Soni

Assistant Professor

Department of Architecture and Planning
Madhav Institute of Technology and Science,
Gwalior (M.P.)

Ar. Rajeev Parashar

Assistant Professor

Amity School of Architecture Planning
Amity University Madhya Pradesh

“Cities are fundamentally about people, and where people go and where people meet are at the core of what makes a city work. So even more important than buildings in a city are the public spaces in between them. Enjoyable public spaces are the key to planning a great city. They are what make it come alive.” WILLIAM H. WHYTE.

Abstract:

Much of our experience of a city depends on its public spaces. Cities are fundamentally about people, and where people go and where people meet are at the core of what makes a city work.

So even more important than buildings in a city are the public spaces in between them. What people feel about a city depends on their experience of its public spaces. Public space can change how you live in a city, how you feel about a city, whether you choose one city over another, and public space is one of the most important reasons why you stay in a city.

This research paper is to investigate what are the problems and major issues in Indian public places which discourage people from using it and why previous attempts of making a place failed. The research has been done to study what are the barrier against a good public place.

Also an attempt has been made to find simple solutions for Indian public places can be considered as liveable, hospitable and socializing places and how can we transform a space to a place. Also a study of elements and principles which makes a normal public place to a great public place.

Case studies have been done on Bhopal's public spaces to study the negative and positive points of public places and the various factors that are responsible for it. Further design proposals will be provided that can be used as design guidelines for public places making them a pedestrianized zone and encourage social interaction.

Keywords—Open space, plaza, Street Life Project, Sitting space, Comfort, Streets & Plazas, Light, Food, Water, Trees and Triangulation etc.

Introduction:

Public spaces consist of outdoors environments, which generally give relief from urban hectic life. These places are sidewalks, streets, parks, city halls, squares, plazas, and other forms of gathering spaces. They are generally vegetated, and place where civic, cultural and social activities occur. These spaces are livable settings that play important role for community identity. Public spaces are a stage for public life, which promotes sense of

community, sense of place, people connection, and therefore create a sense of belonging. Public spaces provide the opportunity for people to gather and enjoy experiences with others. Public spaces benefit cities economically, contributing significantly to the land use values of a city. Often, public spaces provide retreat from the automobile orientated life and locate in natural settings. The presence of green spaces in the city increases people's appreciation and awareness of the natural environments and provide habitat for the urban fauna.

William H. Whyte:

The notable writer, journalist, and researcher began his career at an unprecedented time in America's history of housing. William Whyte and his associates systematically studied various parks, plazas and sidewalks in New York City in the 1970s in order to understand how people used them. They found, for example, that people gather in various ways on plazas, and during specific times, such as the lunch hour, many people cluster in small groups, chatting and conversing with one another. They also discovered how people sometimes gather in unconventional sites such as at the edges of sidewalks. Based on the results of this work, Whyte consulted with officials in New York City to improve the placement and design of its parks and plazas.

Expected outcome:

Methods to make vibrant public spaces. Simple solutions for the public spaces so that it could be applied on existing public spaces and plazas.

LITRATURE REVIEW:

"People movements are one of great spectacles of urban plazas."(Whyte, 1980)

In 1970, the notable writer, journalist, researcher and legendary urbanist William "Holly" Whyte formed a small, revolutionary research group called 'The Street Life project' and began investigating the curious dynamics of urban spaces. At the time, such anthropological observation had been applied to the study of indigenous cultures in far-off exotic locales, but not to our most immediate, most immersive environment: the city, which hides extraordinary miracles of ordinary life, if only we know how to look for them. So Whyte and his team began by looking at New York City's parks, plazas, and various informal recreational areas like city blocks — a total of 16 plazas, 3 small parks, and "a number of odds and ends" — trying to figure out why some city spaces work for people while others don't, and what the practical implications might be about living better, more joyful lives in our urban environment. Their findings were eventually collected in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (public library) in 1980 and synthesized in a 55-minute companion film, which you can watch for some remarkably counterintuitive insights on the living fabric of the city.



Far more intriguing than the static characteristics of the architectural landscape, however, are the dynamic human interactions that inhabit them, and the often surprising ways in which they unfold. Whyte writes in the preface:

“What has fascinated us most is the behavior of ordinary people on city streets — their rituals in street encounters, for example, the regularity of chance meetings, the tendency to reciprocal gestures in street conferences, the rhythms of the three-phase goodbye.”

Source: http://www.brainpickings.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/sociallifeofsmallurbanplaces_plaza.jpg

Methods:

The methods of study included time-lapse filming, interviews, and direct observation.

Whyte’s team went on to investigate everything from the ideal percentage of sitting space on a plaza (between 6% and 10% of the total open space, or one linear foot of sitting space for every thirty square feet of plaza) to the intricate interplay of sun, wind, trees, and water.

(it’s advantageous to “hoard” the sun and amplify its light in some cases, and to obscure it in others) These factors and many more go into what makes a perfect plaza:

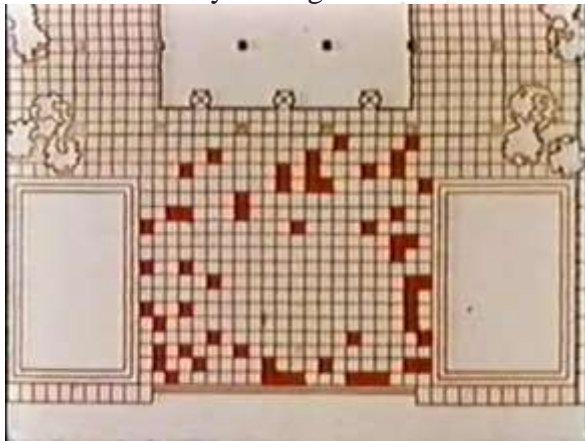


Image: Mapping of highly used space in a plaza

“A good plaza starts at the street corner. If it’s a busy corner, it has a brisk social life of its own. People will not just be waiting there for the light to change. Some will be fixed in conversation; others in some phase of a prolonged goodbye. If there’s a vendor at the corner, people will cluster around him, and there will be considerable two-way traffic back and forth between plaza and corner.” [...]

Demography of plaza users: Whyte suggested that the effective market radius for a plaza is about three blocks (p.16), the proportion of people in groups is associated with the plaza’s success: the best-used plazas have about 45% of people in groups while the least-used plazas have about 32% in groups (p.17).

Gender differences.

The most-used places tend to have a higher than average proportion of women. Men show a tendency to take the front-row seats. Women tend to favor places slightly secluded (p.18).

Rhythms of plaza life.

In the mornings hours – hotdog vendors, elderly pedestrians, a delivery messenger, a shoeshine man, some tourists and a scavenger woman. After 11am – hard hats with beer cans and sandwiches. Noon to 2pm (peak time)- some 80 Percent of the total hours of use will be concentrated. In mid/late afternoon- use is again sporadic, if a special event, people stays as late as 6-6:30pm. 6pm – ordinarily, plazas go dead. (p.18)

User behavior.

Self-Congestion- What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people (p.19). People didn’t move out of the main pedestrian flow. They stayed in it or moved into it, and the great bulk of the conversations were smack in the center of the flow (p.21).



Image: showing user behavior of people in plaza

Sitting space.

Whyte discovered that one of the major elements in plaza use is sittable space. Integral sitting: Sitting should be socially comfortable that provides flexible choices: sitting up front, in back, to the side, in the sun, in the shade, in groups, off alone (p.28).



Image: showing settable spaces in plaza

Even though benches and chairs can be added, the best course is to maximize the suitability of inherent features (p.28)

Sitting dimension: Height- people will sit almost anywhere between a height of one foot and three (p.31), Deep- ledges and spaces two human backsides deep (30 inches) seat more people comfortably than those that are not as deep (p.31), Movable chairs: Fixed seats are awkward in open spaces because there's so much space around them (p.35), Amount of sitting space: one linear foot of sitting space for every thirty square feet of plaza (p.39)

Comfort (sun, wind, trees, and water).

Whyte found that people tend to sit in the sun if the temperature is comfortable. Sun light, reflected light, warmth, and cool weather are important for the comfort as well having choice of sun, or shade, or in-between (p.40-44). The absence of winds and drafts are critical for these as sun (p.44).

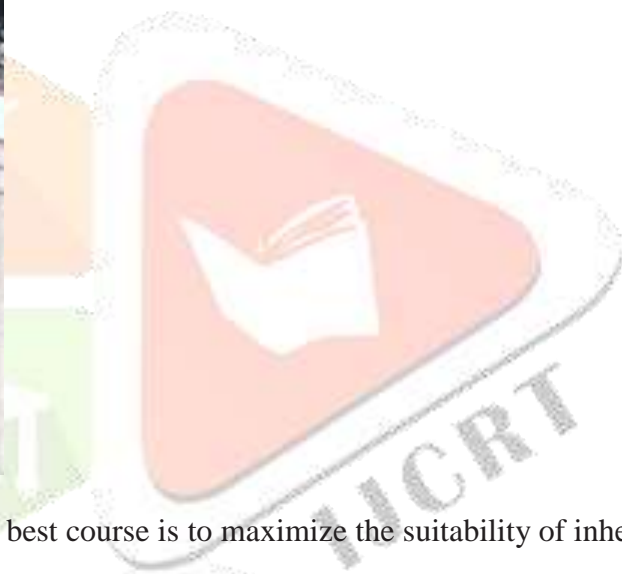




Image: showing people enjoying sunlight



Image: people sit in shade beside the street

Source: <http://www.google.co.in/imgres?imgurl=http://betterwaterfront.org/>

Affording a good look at the passing scene and the pleasure of being comfortably under a tree provide a satisfying enclosure; people feel cuddled, protected. Developers should be encouraged to combine trees and sitting spaces. They should also encourage planting trees in groves (p.46).

One of the best things about water is the look, feel and sound of it(p.48).

Water should be accessible, touchable, splashable (p.49).

Food.

Whyte presented a correlation between the lively social activities in a plaza and the presence of food cart. Food attracts people who attract more people (p.52).

Street.

Whyte argues that the key space for a plaza is not on the plaza. It is the street.

Street corner: A good plaza starts at the street corner. If it's a busy corner, it has a brisk social life of its own (p.54).

Retailing (stores, windows with displays, signs, doorways): Developers should be required to devote at least 50 percent of the ground-floor frontage to retail and food uses (p.57).

Relationship of the space to the main pedestrian flow: The area where the street and plaza or open space meets is a key to success or failure. The transition should be such that it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins (p.57). Steps, a slight elevation, sightlines are important. If people do not see a space, they will not use it (p.58.)

Effective capacity.

- Plazas tend to be self-leveling – The places that carry the most people are the most efficient in the use of place as well as the most pleasant. It is people who determine the level of crowding, and they do it very well(p.73).
- Indoor spaces(atriums, galleries, courtyards, through-block arcades, indoor parks, covered pedestrian areas)
- The principal needs for successful indoor space are much the same as with outdoor spaces(p.76~78)

Sitting: Movable chairs are best for indoor parks.

Food: The basic combination is snack bars and chairs and tables.

Retailing: Shops are important for liveliness and the additional pedestrian flows they attract.

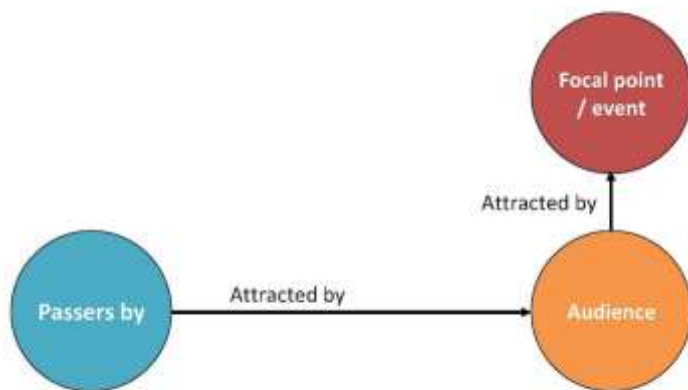
Toilets: The existence of toilets could have a considerable effect on the shopping patterns of many people, older ones especially.

One benefit of an indoor space is the through-block circulation it can provide for pedestrians (p.78). A good internal space should be visible from the street; the street and its surroundings should be highly visible from it; and between the two, physically and psychologically, the connections should be easy and inviting (p.79). One way to provide a good entrance is to have big enough crowds. (p.81).

The problem of all public plazas is only “undesirables”, Whyte considers the problem of urban “undesirables” — drunks, drug dealers, and other uncomfortable reminders of how our own lives might turn out “but for the grace of events.” Here, too, Whyte’s findings debunk conventional wisdom with an invaluable, counterintuitive insight: rather than fencing places off and flooding them with surveillance cameras (which he finds are of little use in outdoor spaces — something that would delight artist and provocateur Aiweiwei), we should aim to make them as welcoming as possible.

Triangulation.

Whyte describes a phenomenon he calls “triangulation” in which some external stimulus provides a social bond between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other as though they were not(p.94).



The stimulus: a physical object or sight such as sculpture, musicians and entertainers

Odds and ends of space: bus stops with overhead shelter, the furniture of the street (p.100).

Key qualities/Attributes of a good place:**Access and linkage:**

Access concerns how well a place is connected to its surroundings both visually and physically. A successful public space is visible, easy to get to and around. Physical elements can affect access (a continuous row of

shops along a street is more interesting and generally safer to walk by than a blank wall or empty lot), as can perceptions (the ability to see a public space from a distance). Accessible public places have a high turnover in parking and, ideally, convenient public transit.

Activities and usage:

Activities that occur in a place-friendly social interactions, free public concerts, community art shows, and more-are its basic building blocks: they are the reasons why people come in the first place and why they return. Activities also make a place special or unique, which, in turn, may help generate community pride.

Comfort and image:

Comfort and image are key to whether a place will be used. Perceptions about safety and cleanliness, the context of adjacent buildings, and a place’s character or charm are often foremost in people's minds-as are more tangible issues such as having a comfortable place to sit. The importance of people having the choice to sit where they want is generally underestimated.

Sociability

This is a difficult but unmistakable quality for a place to achieve. When people see friends, meet and greet their neighbors, and feel comfortable interacting with strangers, they tend to feel a stronger sense of place or attachment to their community-and to the place that fosters these types of social activities.



Image:
Attributes
of a good

place.(image from www.pps.org)

Bibliography:

- Whyte, H. William. “*Project for Public Spaces – Place making for Communities.*” *Project for Public Spaces – Place making for Communities.* N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.pps.org/articles/ww>
- Dir. Whyte, H. William *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces.* The Municipal Art Society of New York, 1980.
- Images from video documentary of Whyte, H. William “*The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*”.

