

# Life Takes Place on Foot

Danish architect Jan Gehl's campaign to make cities safe and attractive for walking — and for cycling

*By Jonathan Barnett, FAICP*

Jan Gehl has devoted his professional life to reclaiming space for pedestrians from traffic lanes and parking spaces. New York is one of the most recent in a long line of cities that have hired Gehl, for many years a professor at the school of architecture of The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, to analyze what can make places friendlier for people who travel on foot. Beginning in the 1960s Gehl and his students completed extensive reports, first about Copenhagen and other Scandinavian cities, then for Edinburgh, and then Perth and Melbourne in Australia.

In 2000, a former student, Helle Soeholt, persuaded Gehl to open an office where they could make urban design proposals as well as do analytical studies. The two started the firm in Gehl's house, and commissions soon followed for London, Mexico City, Muscat, and the U.S., including San Francisco and Los Angeles as well as New York. Today the firm occupies half a floor in a central Copenhagen office building, employs more than 30 designers, and has six other partners in addition to the founding principals.



## **Broadway Boulevard**

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's PlaNYC 2030, released in 2007, made transportation and streetscape improvements a priority. Implementation has been led by New York City's highly effective transportation commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan. Jan Gehl first met Sadik-Khan before she became commissioner, when she was a senior vice president at the consulting firm Parsons Brinkerhoff. Gehl says that they had several conversations about how they would redesign streets and public spaces in New York if they ever had the opportunity.

Sadik-Khan was appointed New York City's transportation commissioner in April 2007. Within a few weeks a team from New York visited Gehl in Copenhagen. Private funds were raised and Gehl Architects was retained to prepare an extensive study of public spaces in New York, *World Class Streets: Remaking NYC's Public Realm*, released in 2008. Turning Broadway, the diagonal street that cuts across midtown Manhattan, into Broadway Boulevard has been one of the most important results. The design uses the triangular spaces formed where Broadway intersects with the regular street grid to create a series of enhanced plazas and walkways. The project also reorganizes the traffic on Broadway, adds bicycle lanes, and rationalizes the intersections from Union Square to Columbus Circle.

Sadik-Khan made it clear that proposed changes had to come from the city government; they would have no credibility for cynical New Yorkers if they were seen as coming from a consultant based in Copenhagen. So Gehl's most important contribution has been his methodology, which looks at movement and place simultaneously, rather than consigning movement to transportation engineers and placemaking to urban designers.

That means his research needs to be as objective as the work of transportation engineers. In New York, his team measured activity in Times Square, demonstrating that 90 percent of the space was used by vehicles and 10 percent by pedestrians, while 90 percent of the people there were pedestrians and only 10 percent were in vehicles. The contrast between the space occupied by cars and the numbers of people crowded onto the sidewalks was telling.

This work also revealed that 30 percent of sidewalks along Broadway between Houston Street and Columbus Circle were covered by scaffolding. Building owners who had identified falling masonry as a potential hazard put up scaffolding to prevent injuries, but they were not fixing the actual problem. Gehl Architects prepared photos and diagrams to show how the scaffolding created dark and grimy sidewalks, obscured the buildings, and generally created an unpleasant and unsafe environment.

Other findings showed that most of the pedestrians in Times Square were moving through the space, not stopping at destinations within it, and there were few children or people over 65. Exposing these deficiencies clearly creates the demand for change.

The design proposals for Broadway Boulevard, dedicated bicycle lanes on Ninth and Second Avenues, and other Manhattan improvements were developed in Janette Sadik-Khan's office. The *World Class Streets* report credits the working relationship between the city and Gehl Associates this way: "Gehl Architects conducted its trademark Public Space/Public Life Survey, developed the report's analysis of the city's existing streetscape and public realm, created initial drafts of this report, and has provided a wealth of experience and ideas to NYCDOT."

The New York City Department of Transportation also made sure that it included other parts of the city, implementing 21 additional public plazas between 2008 and 2012, and publishing design standards for complete streets — that is, streets that accommodate transit, pedestrians, and bicycles as well as cars, taxis, and trucks — plus programs for safe streets for seniors, public art, coordinated street furniture, and weekend pedestrian and cycling streets.

According to the NYCDOT, as of June 2013 New York City had 31 miles of protected bicycle ways, and another 211 miles of exclusive bicycle lanes and 124 miles of shared bicycle lanes. Sadik-Khan insisted that the Broadway Boulevard include bicycle lanes in order to make complete street principles part of the demonstration.

## **Temporary changes**

The city began by closing Broadway completely from 42nd Street to 47th Street in 2009 and, later, from 33rd Street to 35th. At first this new public space was an experiment, but, with just a painted street surface, potted plants, and inexpensive lawn furniture, it was an immediate hit with the public. There was a small improvement in traffic flow on the cross streets and on nearby sections of Seventh Avenue

and the Avenue of the Americas (Sixth Avenue). There was also a big reduction in accidents at the dangerous corners where the closed sections of Broadway used to intersect other streets and avenues.

The next year then Mayor Bloomberg made the closings permanent, citing the gains in public safety, without having to justify the change as an aesthetic improvement. The Oslo and New York architectural firm Snohetta has been chosen to design the permanent streetscape and newly pedestrianized plaza space for Times Square. Completion is expected in 2015.

Starting with temporary street closures and portable amenities meant that the administration did not need city council approval for a major public expenditure until the changes had been tested and the project had won public acceptance. Before even temporary changes were made, the city held many information meetings with constituent groups, including business improvement districts and community planning boards.

### **Cities for people**

Some of the increasing demand for the Gehl firm's studies comes from its ability to draw on Copenhagen's experience with designing and operating bicycle ways. While he is pleased that his office is kept busy, he is somewhat conflicted about bicycles.

Gehl called his recent book, a summary of his city design philosophy and methods, *Cities for People*. "Cars are definitely not people, but bicycles are not people, either," he told me when I stopped by his Copenhagen office last June: "Maybe half people."

Of course, Gehl believes that reducing traffic by replacing cars with bicycles for short trips is important, and making cities safe for cyclists is a critical part of street design. But his central interest is in encouraging walking. "Life Takes Place on Foot" is his axiom, which he first put forward in a 1980 book, *Life Between Buildings*. When you walk from one place to another through a boring or hostile environment — what Gehl calls a necessary activity — you try to get to your destination as fast as you can. If you walk through an interesting, well-designed environment, you may also engage in "optional activities": looking in a store window, sitting on a bench for a few moments, perhaps stopping for a coffee.

These optional activities in turn generate "social activities": You plan your walk around meeting someone for lunch; you run into someone you know and stop to chat; you exchange a few words with a stranger. According to Gehl, these experiences are what city life is all about, and they can happen only when walking.

I asked Gehl what effect innovations in communication technology have had on his theories about how people should experience urban space. He responded by saying that his studies have shown that along with greater use of cyberspace there has been a parallel upsurge in the use of public space, particularly where Wi-Fi is available. He also says visiting public places is an antidote to the trend towards smaller families and the single life, pointing out that "Every other flat in Copenhagen has just one person."

### **A look at London**

Gehl Architects' analysis of pedestrian movement in central London, published in 2004, gave that city a bad report card for livability. The sponsors of the study, Transport for London and the Central London Partnership, required a disclaimer noting that the views expressed in the report were those of the consultants, not necessarily the clients'.

The study found that London had increasingly been giving primacy to vehicular traffic, forcing pedestrians into underground crossings at big intersections and putting railings along sidewalks to prevent jaywalking. Photos documented how pedestrians evaded these restrictions, slipping past the railings to make dangerous sprints across busy intersections, and then walking in the streets, outside the railings, looking for an opening to get back to the sidewalk.

While London's flat topography and moderate climate make it suitable for bicycles, the study found that little provision had been made for them. The report gave examples of better public space management in other cities, but offered no specific designs for London, opting for principles that could guide local decision makers.

Gehl told me that he has been disappointed to see that only a few of the conflicts between pedestrians and vehicles identified in his London report have been remedied. One reason may be that London has

approached the conflict problem by reducing traffic, instituting a congestion charge in 2003, which levied a fee of £10 per day on vehicles entering the central London zone from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on weekdays.

Recently, however, London has begun creating bicycle lanes and pedestrian spaces, although mostly not in Central London. An exception is Oxford Circus, one of the critical central locations where Gehl had documented problems with underground crossings and restrictive railings. The redesign, by Atkins, the international engineering firm, removes the railings, repaves the intersection in a circular pattern, symbolizing its importance as public space, and permits diagonal crossings at grade, regulated by traffic signals.

### **Work in Melbourne**

Gehl considers his studies for Rob Adams, director of city design in Melbourne, Australia, to be an ideal professional relationship. "I've been working with him for 20 years," Gehl says. "He uses us to prove scientifically the value of things he wants to happen, and his local knowledge helps us focus on things that he knows can be changed."

Gehl conducted his first study for Adams in 1994 and was invited back in 2004 to document the effect of the changes that Melbourne had implemented. According to Gehl Architects, among the findings of the 2004 study: a 40 percent increase in pedestrian traffic, a 300 percent increase in "stationary activities" (sitting on benches, sitting at cafe tables) and a 100 percent increase in pedestrian activity at night.

Future plans in Melbourne include protected bicycle lanes, like those in Copenhagen. The Melbourne public space improvements have been part of a larger plan to add more residents and more nighttime activities, and to encourage expansion of educational institutions in the central area. The Economist magazine's Intelligence Unit Livability Survey rated Melbourne the world's most livable city in 2011 and 2012.

### **More U.S. projects**

In San Francisco, Gehl Architects are the urban designers for a six-firm team working on the Better Market Street project, which is using the need to repave the street to consider modifying the distinctive streetscape originally designed by Lawrence Halprin and constructed in the 1970s and 1980s. Today the goal is to make Market Street more responsive to the different neighborhoods it passes through. The study, still in progress, has found that 75 percent of the pedestrians on Market Street are only there because they are waiting for transit. The proposed remedy is to create more optional and social activities by tying the streetscape to improvements in adjacent areas.

Another repaving, Figueroa Street between Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in south Los Angeles and 7th Street downtown, is also an opportunity to reconsider the design of the street itself, plus extensions into some of the nearby neighborhoods. Gehl Architects was retained to work with local landscape architecture firms Melendrez and Troller Mayer in the conceptual phases of the project. Gehl Architects led a Public Space/Public Life Survey to audit pedestrian activity on and close to the corridor and worked with the local firms to develop the vision for the project, based on a first round of public outreach meetings. Then the three firms together developed three design alternatives: good, better, and best. These initial design drawings were done in the Gehl office.

The "best" alternative included a 36-foot-wide multipurpose median within the existing street at important locations along the corridor. The median was designed to accommodate activities that would draw pedestrians, like restaurant kiosks. This design also included a busway and dedicated bicycle lanes, and proposed pedestrian improvements for nearby neighborhoods. The median plus the bicycle lanes and the busway would leave space for only one lane of traffic in each direction on Figueroa Street, a common condition in Copenhagen, but rare for major streets in the U.S.

The "good" alternative, the one selected, has bicycle lanes throughout, protected by a separate curb or a row of parked cars. Landscape and street furniture improvements are also planned, including special traffic signals for bicycles, along with a busway with boarding platforms outboard of the bicycle paths in some locations, as shown in the rendering on the previous page.

The proposal also includes a one-way westbound buffered bicycle lane along six blocks of 11th Street, from Broadway to South Figueroa Street, and new buffered bicycle lanes along Bill Robertson Lane between Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Exposition Boulevard. Construction was intended to begin in January. There has been a last-minute objection to the bicycle lanes on Figueroa Street from the

owner of some car dealerships, but the original construction deadline has been extended to 2016, to allow time for objections to be resolved and construction to go forward.

Asked whether he is disappointed that what has proved feasible in Los Angeles does not do as much for pedestrians as the optimal alternative, Gehl says that the Copenhagen you see today, with its extensive network of pedestrian spaces and its connected system of dedicated bicycle lanes separated from other traffic, is the product of incremental change over more than 40 years. You start with what you can achieve, he says, and hope it creates a constituency for more.

### **On to Moscow**

When I saw Jan Gehl in June he was about to go to Moscow for presentations on his firm's studies there. Gehl Architects had just completed an analysis of public life and public spaces in central Moscow, looking at conditions in both the summer and winter.

Reclaiming public space in Moscow from traffic and parking will be difficult, he says, but he is optimistic: "Freedom from Communism doesn't mean freedom to park on the sidewalk."

According to the online news site moscownews.com, Gehl said at a presentation in Moscow in July that he was delighted to see many of his recommendations starting to be implemented, even before his report was completed. Parking has been banned on the fashionable Tverskaya Street, more street trees are being planted, and there are fewer billboards.

In the same news report, Marat Khusnullin, acting deputy mayor for urban development and construction, was reported to agree that the city of Moscow was willing to forgo some of the revenue from outdoor advertising, and deal with public objections when parking spaces are eliminated, but he was also quoted as saying "The number of roads per inhabitant in Moscow is three to five times lower than in any major city in the world, so we can't just close all the remaining roads and all walk everywhere happily, because this will paralyze the city and lead to a collapse in transportation."

Jan Gehl, firm, but tactful, responded that he hoped to come back to Moscow in five years' time and see a new city, a city for the people.

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## **Resources**

**Image:** A redesigned stretch of Figueroa Street in Los Angeles will include protected bike lanes, landscape and street furniture improvements, and busway boarding platforms. Rendering courtesy Gehl Architects.