

CITIES FOR PEOPLE PEOPLE FOR CITIES

30 May at the World Cities Summit in Singapore, Gehl and Borreskov do a back-to-back presentation of their visions for cities for people and people for cities, respectively. In this correspondence we gave them the opportunity to exercise their arguments before the conference.

You both describe a good city as one that is lively, safe, sustainable and healthy. Jan Gehl has been doing so for more than 40 years, Jane Jacobs from 10 years before and William Whyte and others even earlier. It would probably be hard to find anyone advocating the opposite. Even so, why is it necessary to state the seemingly obvious again and again?

Jan Gehl By 1960 all previous experiences concerning people-friendly public spaces, handed down for many generations, were thrown out. If at any time a group of professional planners had been paid to make lifeless cities it could never have been done more efficiently than in the site plans of modernistic planners from Brasilia and onwards to Ørestad. Jane Jacobs described these problems in her 1961 book. Following this, *Life Between Buildings* was primarily a book debating the issues. It has taken many years to gather, through research, the evidence and knowledge needed to understand how built form influences human activities. In *Cities for People* this knowl-

edge is now available and is rapidly being distributed and used across the world.

Flemming Borreskov Even though it is hard to find anyone nowadays who would advocate against the wisdom of Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl, we see many cities that are practicing the exact opposite. It is not sufficient to have the right mindset nor to have the right recipe on how to design and build sustainable, liveable and resilient cities or neighbourhoods; we also need good leadership and governance systems to turn the right mindset into reality. Urban design and city planning are paved with good intentions that evolved into disasters when they met the real world. Designing and building good cities is much easier said than done. Therefore, we need people like Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl, but we also need people to buy in on their ideas and findings, and who are willing and able to implement this mindset into a complicated world.





Since *Life Between Buildings* was first published in 1971, the Danish architect Jan Gehl has been internationally renowned as an advocate for a people-centered approach to urban planning and design. Through an elaborate effort in research, teaching, talking and consulting, Jan Gehl has spread his ideas to cities all around the world and summed up the *raison d'être* of his life's work in the title of the 2010 publication *Cities for People*. Photo © Ashley Bristowe



In 2013, after more than 12 years as CEO of the Danish member-based philanthropic organisation Realdania, president of the International Federation for Housing and Planning (IFHP) and of the Danish Architecture Center (DAC), Flemming Borreskov founded Catalytic Society promoting the importance of leadership and governance in urban planning and development under the headline *People for Cities*. Photo © Bjarke Ørsted

New York City and the former Bloomberg administration with Amanda Burden as director of the Department of City Planning play a central role to both of you. Jan Gehl has worked with them on PlaNYC and Flemming Borreskov highlights them flat out as heroes. To others the Bloomberg/Burden axis represents the culmination of neoliberal urban governance using planning as a tool for economic growth and class reinforcement. Why are they good examples of people for cities in your eyes?

Jan Gehl In 2007 Michael Bloomberg as Mayor in New York City played a major role in organising the C40 initiative, creating a network of mayors from the world's biggest cities addressing climate change. In this context Bloomberg announced that New York City would aim to be the most sustainable metropolis of the world. A major link in this policy was to reduce automobile commuting and improve conditions for using public transport and bicycling. New York City has flat terrain, high den-

sity and wide streets. All in all perfect conditions for creating a bicycle city. Improvements to the walking environment and introducing car-free public spaces can be seen as elements of this general policy to shift emphasis from an automobile environment to a people-oriented environment.

Flemming Borreskov Bloomberg and Burden are excellent examples of leaders with the ability to bring one of the world's largest cities a huge leap forward towards more sustainability and livability. To me a hero is a role model, and in that sense, Bloomberg is one of my heroes. The Bloomberg mayorship represents to me a period in which New York City prospered in the good way. He and his administration understood both the complicated set of forces that are driving society and the need of people – the human perspective. If you think you can design and build good cities for people without understanding the forces driving a modern city, you are doomed to fail. You need much more than good intentions. Obviously, you have to buy in on the thinking of the human scale,



but you also need to show good leadership and practice good governance in a democratic society. This is not an easy task, but I think Bloomberg and Burden are good examples in this perspective. The days are long gone when urban leaders, designers and planners only had to deal with the physical fabric of the city. Today we need people who understand how a contemporary city has turned into a very complicated organism. Urban design is far too important to be dealt with by the technical departments on their own. We need the involvement of the strategic leadership level of a city to deal with the challenges that cities are facing today.

Most of what Gehl Architects propose to create cities for people is piece-by-piece urban transformation with an outset in the human condition on street level. Talking about people for cities strikes a chord which seems to be focused on very powerful top-down governance and leadership. How do these two positions play together?

Jan Gehl In the process of planning the rebuilding of Christchurch, New Zealand, after the 2011 earthquake a remarkable public consultation was carried out. 106,000 ideas and proposals were collected concerning qualities needed for a good city for the 21st century. It was remarkable how close the answers were to anything we had written or stated about cities for people. In my opinion the demand for more people-oriented city planning comes very much from the citizens. This certainly explains why many existing city districts have become more people-friendly (e.g. Copenhagen, Melbourne, New York City), while new towns and new districts are still heavily influenced by modernism and technocratic ideas. Developers, planners and architects primarily influence these plans, while ordinary people/voters as a general rule are not involved.

Flemming Borreskov The concept or slogan “Cities for People” cannot stand alone. That concept is one perspective. You have to add the notion of “People for Cities” to fulfil the circle. People for Cities is not just about good leadership, it is also very much about a strong civil society and about good and adaptive leaders with insight, that have the ability to listen to civil society and to organize processes that involve the people affected by the projects or just simply show an interest. However, these projects are a necessary part to develop or redevelop a good city whether the city is growing or shrinking. It is somewhat easier in a growing

city since the funding in most cases is more plentiful, but it is equal important in a stable or shrinking city. In other words, “top-down” is one side of the coin with “bottom-up” as the other side. It is not a coin unless it has both sides.

In the film “The Human Scale” portraying the work of Gehl Architects, Janette Sadik-Khan, former commissioner for New York City’s Department of Transportation tells how PlaNYC was spawned from an understanding of how a city’s livability enhanced its international competitiveness. Do we only create good cities because it is good for business? And if so, does it matter as long as we do it?

Jan Gehl Some cities have opted for a single spectacular building as a key element for *branding* the city (eg. Bilbao and Sydney). Other cities have opted for a general improvement of the people landscape (e.g. Copenhagen and Melbourne). The latter strategy has the impact that everyone in the city can enjoy the benefits every day of the year. Visitors to these cities can equally enjoy these qualities. As a bi-product, liveable cities will also have a fine reputation enhancing their competitiveness, but first and foremost they will be better cities for the everyday life of their citizens.

Flemming Borreskov Whether we like it or not, cities compete with each other. I like it because it helps keeping cities on their toes. We have to create good cities for the better good of business too. The market economy and private businesses are by far the biggest wealth creating engines in our economies today. They are the most efficient wealth creators the world has seen to date. However, many things indicate that a market economy is not that good when we are talking distribution of wealth. The same could be said when we are talking designing and building cities for people. Therefore, I would argue that we need a strong business community but we also need a strong city government. Moreover, we need an active and engaged civil society.



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