

Social impact

Why do public space and quality of life go hand in hand?

By Kathleen M. O'Donnell, June 20, 2018



ATTENDEES OF THE A'18 "SHARING THE CITY" WORKSHOP LEAF THROUGH PHOTOS OF PUBLIC SPACES IN AN ATTEMPT TO FIND THE ONES THAT SPEAK TO THEM.

Human-centered design isn't a new idea, but architects at A'18 explore its relevance today.

Public spaces—leafy parks, quaint squares, grand plazas—often define our memories of cities that we visit. They are not only welcomed amenities but also places where life plays out, in all its messy vitality.

At “Sharing the City: Connecting Urban Design with Public Life,” a four-hour workshop at AIA Conference on Architecture 2018, architects, designers, and public officials gathered to discuss public space and gain practical knowledge to make communities more functional and enjoyable. “As people come to visit New York, they get a chance in this workshop to get a global perspective, but also a local perspective on where the origins of the public space movement are,” said speaker Claire Weisz, FAIA, of [WXY](#) in New York.

The workshop was facilitated by Jennifer Gardner, program manager at the [Gehl Institute](#), a leading organization in human-centered design research and programming. Gardner asserted that elements of public space are usually designed and analyzed for efficiency. Bus stops, crosswalks, and parking lots are disparate features that don’t always come together to create an enjoyable experience. “When we focus on these details, we tend to miss focusing on human needs,” said Gardner. “We’re hoping that together we can realign our priorities as designers, planners, and people involved in policy.”

Gehl’s work centers on public life, which they define as the collective experience taking place in public space—those areas outside of homes, workplaces, and cars. According to Gehl, public life is a driver of physical and mental health, sustainable mobility, social benefits, identity and sense of place, safety, and economic development.

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Conducting a wholistic analysis of the public realm starts with looking at these drivers from the human dimension. Architects can compile data by simply observing public spaces, counting and mapping social interactions and physical objects. “Part of our work as an organization is to figure out how to quantify and qualify these elements, learn something about them, and interrelate them,” said Gardner.

Gehl has developed [tool kits and guidelines](#) to help cities design for enhanced public life and social cohesion, which Gardner shared with attendees after the workshop at Hudson Park & Boulevard, a portion of NYC’s massive Hudson Yards development. “These are tools for collecting data, but also for engaging experts who are working on design in communities,” she said.

Weisz, who co-founded the [Design Trust for Public Space](#), sees public space as a movement that requires dedicated involvement from architects. She shared lessons from [Sharing the City](#), a historical account and analysis of public space in New York City. “Many architects and planners have seen

cycles over the years—of the idea that architecture, design, and ambition of shared space that has a public planning process,” she said.

Weisz credits the current wave of the public space movement in New York to a shift that occurred around the turn of the century. At that time, resilience and sustainability had entered design vernacular in full force and the public showed a dedicated interest in Ground Zero’s redevelopment after 9/11. Now, she thinks there’s an opportunity for architects to latch on to public space for good. “It really is dependent on all of us to keep it alive,” she said.



GUIDES LEAD WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS THROUGH HUDSON PARK & BOULEVARD, A PORTION OF NYC'S MASSIVE HUDSON YARDS DEVELOPMENT.

The New York City Design Commission, though established in 1898 as the quality control arm for public works, has worked hard in recent years to reinvigorate the public space movement. “We are trying to rethink and understand a different approach for making public space through the entity of government,” said executive director Justin Garrett Moore in his presentation.

Moore cited two New York projects changing the game for public-private partnerships and public space as a whole: the [Domino Sugar Refinery master plan](#), led by SHoP and Field Operations, and Hunters Point South in Long Island City Queens. The Hunters Point master plan will bring 5,000 affordable housing units and connect residents with the local ecosystem. “The idea is to relate these very human spaces, but also provide for a connection to the waterfront and the recognition that this is a constructed relationship between ecology and human ecology,” he said.

Jeri Muoio, mayor of West Palm Beach, Florida, discussed the change she has worked to bring to her city as well. After working closely with the Gehl Institute, she established an Office of Public Life, which she believes is the first and only one in the US. “We include public life planning in all of our major projects,” she said.

Workshop participants were encouraged to think differently about public life in their own cities, and share experiences with one another. Common issues arose such as lack of funding and long-term maintenance, especially when dealing with partners who are less understanding of public space ideology. “The idea that you create really nice spaces, but you have to put a fence around them and your biggest problems are maintaining them and raising money for them—that’s still a reality for most people who are trying to explain the benefits for a public market, open streets, and collective spaces,” said Weisz.

Speakers and participants agreed that, in their cities across the US, key tenants of high functioning public spaces include connectivity and longevity. When neighborhoods are connected to one another via bike lanes and walkable streets, residents can move easily between them and share in social life easier. And if public spaces are designed in permanent, sustainable ways, they’re more likely to last for future generations.

But perhaps the most important element of a thriving public realm is equity. Designing public space that is reflective of the entire community’s needs and desires, and incorporating their voices in planning is crucial. It starts when designers and public officials share in the process, along with members of their communities. “These are conversations about how we have more inclusive processes as part of design,” said Moore. “We have to look at how we can democratize the planning.”

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