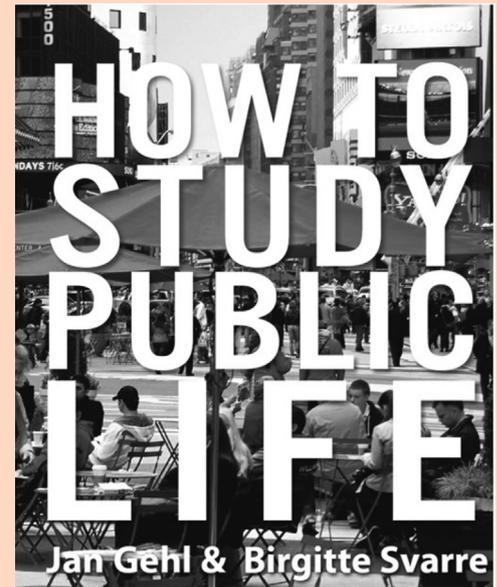


Book Review: How to Study Public Life

Gehl, J. & Svarre, B. (2013)
Washington, DC: Island Press.
179 pp.

This book is written by one of the pioneers in the field of public life studies. Jan Gehl, one of the authors of this book, is a well-known Danish architect and urbanist. He is a co-founding partner of Gehl Architects. He has taught at many universities in Denmark, Canada, US, New Zealand, Mexico, Australia, Belgium, Germany, Poland, and Norway. For more than 50 years, he has participated in and advised many urban design and public projects around the world. Birgitte Bundesen Svarre, the co-author of this book, is a member of Gehl Architects. Her work focuses on research and communication of public space and public life studies.

The motto of this book is “Look and Learn” as mentioned by George Ferguson, the Mayor of Bristol. The book provides simple tools and systematic procedures to study the interaction between public life and public space. The authors of this book aim to inspire people to consider public life studies in all urban design and planning phases and to provide good examples of how the tools could be simply used to study city space and city life. They suggest that readers should explore the city, observe how it works, analyze it carefully, especially by using common senses, and then question what the city should be in the future. The simple tools or methods are recommended to be developed further and adjusted to local conditions.



Before industrialization, cities grew slowly in accordance with the needs of people which were based on human senses and scale. The rapid growth of many cities after the process of industrialization and modernization sometimes ignore the roles of public life in the city, especially cities life on foot. Many policy makers, architects, and planners focused more on automobile-oriented, large-scale, and overly-rationalized developments. In the 60s, some critics and urban designers, such as Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl, started to study the interactions between public life, public space, and

buildings. In addition, since the mid-80s, many cities have had to be more competitive in order to attract more residents, tourists, and investments. The key feature to make the city more attractive is to make a better city to live. The more understanding of people's needs and behaviors are required.

In order to understand the city life and city space, it is necessary to know how to ask right questions. The book provides systematic guideline for observing the interaction between people and physical surroundings with basic questions such as how many, who, where, what, and how long. Understanding these key basic questions can help us acquiring knowledge about complex behaviors of people in public spaces. The book also provides a list of different simple tools of studies that can be adapted to a city: (1) counting, (2) mapping, (3) tracking, (4) looking for traces, (5) photographing, (6) keeping a diary, and (7) test walks. These tools can be adapted for a specific task, time, and place. The authors highlights that the key for public studies are observation and the use of common sense. The tools are just for "collecting and systemizing" information.

The authors provide the historical overview of public life studies via series of selected publications starting from the seminal works published in 1889 of Camillo Sitte on *The Art of Building Cities* to the classic work of Jane Jacobs's *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) to mainstream publications such as Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau's book *S,M,L,XL* (1995) and Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), and to the recent work of Jan Gehl's *Cities for People* (2010). The field of public life studies stems from the ideas of urbanists and planners such as Le Corbusier, William H. Whyte, Kevin Lynch, Jane Jacobs, and Jan Gehl. The field had been promoted to wider audience by the works of renowned architects such as Aldo Rossi and Rem Koolhaas. The field of public life studies has been emphasized with the mainstream topic of creative class pioneered by Richard Florida. Besides the work of these scholars, the issues on economic, social aspects, health, sustainability, security, and technology play important roles in the development of the field.

The book includes selected studies by the authors and others at Gehl Architects as examples of how to study public life by using simple tools and systematic techniques. The brief research stories are retrospectively described with references such as notes, drawings, and photographs. For example, the authors present how to use mapping method to study where people prefer to stand at a Piazza del Popolo in Italy, how to use tracking method to study

walking speed of people in different seasons in Copenhagen, and how to use GPS (Global Positioning System) tracking and questionnaires to study pedestrians' routes in the city centers of Norwich in UK, Rouen in France, and Koblenz in Germany. In addition, the examples of Jan Gehl and Gehl Architects' research for major cities are shown in the book. These studies have provided decision-making input to policy makers for urban planning and design strategies. The examples are from many cities, socioeconomic status, and cultural contexts, such as Copenhagen, London, Sydney, Melbourne, New York, and Cape Town. The authors also highlight the development of public life studies in Copenhagen and show how local government, businesses, and community see the public studies as "a valuable tool for user-friendly urban development".

In conclusion, this book provides simple but effective methods of studying the interaction of public life and public space. In addition, data and information in the book are illustrated in well-communicated and beautiful infographics. In addition to the details of observation tools and methods, the book provides the introduction to urban design concepts and theories as well as some useful literatures in the field of public life studies. However, all examples of the studies are only in the contexts of cities in developed countries. Thus, adjustment and modification of tools are needed for a study in a context of developing countries. Nevertheless, this book could be used as a manual for professional urban planners/designers, students, and general public on how to study their city.

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