

Book Review

May 2016

The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces

William H. Whyte, The Conservation Foundation, Washington D.C., 1980.

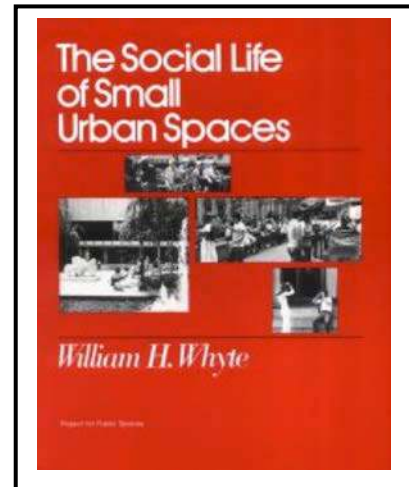
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Summary

As Mr. Whyte describes, his book is a “pre-book”. His intent was to conduct his research fronted by his Street Life Project and then publish his findings. Thankfully, a funny thing happened on his way to his initial goal. He came upon a rich lode of insights and data produced by his cameras, his interviews and his curiosity. He found that some small public spaces were teeming with life while other dead spaces producing no social or economic value.

His persistent research uncovered many factors that make spaces active, or not. This little book of 125 well-photographed pages presents his findings; all instructive to those dedicated to creating active urban spaces. His findings show:

1. People attract people.
2. Seating is necessary with ledges, benches and chairs all at a height conducive to sitting for lunch, a conversation or a quiet moment with a book.
3. Ledges with two backsides worked well; steps were often employed as seating areas; fixed and moveable chairs and benches worked.
4. “Sun, Wind, Trees and Water” are the subject of Chapter 3; each of which deals with climate; each of which change people’s enjoyment of plazas and parks with the changing of the seasons.
5. Food, Chapter 4, is always a draw. The current proliferation of food trucks are an extension of Mr. Whyte’s 1980 thought.
6. Sidewalks and streets are great gathering places; wide sidewalks enable standing conversations with only modest inconvenience to those passing by.
7. His discussion and statistical analysis of the “density of use” is a prime example of the depth of his thoughts and the persuasiveness of his hard work that produced “facts and figures” for the skeptical. Paley Park and Greenacre Park seem to be his best examples of smaller spaces that are extensively used.



His statistics demonstrated that the total amount of open space devoted to plazas was not well correlated with the number of people using the plaza; smaller spaces were well used while larger spaces went empty. The amount of “sittable” space turned out to be a better predictor of use.

Since one of his products was a revision to the New York City design codes, he produced photos, movies and statistical data that supported his ideas about what designs worked and what designs did not work. The code in existence during his study required open space and plazas with building construction projects, but the codes missed the mark; revisions that effectively deployed the plazas were required

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and a rigorous argument for the changes was essential. His work demonstrates that facts matter.

YouTube: In addition to the reviews cited below, check out:

The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces William H Whyte



Andres Felipe, Published on Nov 7, 2015

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjxXTsHgc8g>

Published Reviews

[William H. Whyte - Project for Public Spaces](#)

Project for Public Spaces

Apr 7, 2015 - **William H. (Holly) Whyte** (1917-1999) is the mentor of Project for Public ... The Last Landscape (1968); **The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces** ...

<http://www.pps.org/reference/wwhyte/>

goodreads

The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces

by [William H. Whyte](#) (Contributor)

4.26 · [Rating Details](#) · 406 Ratings · 23 Reviews

“In 1980, William H. Whyte published the findings from his revolutionary Street Life Project in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Both the book and the accompanying film were instantly labeled classics, and launched a mini-revolution in the planning and study of public spaces. They have since become standard texts, and appear on syllabi and reading lists in urban plann...” [more](#)

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/552476.The_Social_Life_of_Small_Urban_Spaces



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“The way people use a place mirrors expectations.”

“In 1970, legendary urbanist and professional people-watcher **William “Holly” Whyte** formed a small, revolutionary research group called The Street Life project and...”

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/08/22/the-social-life-of-small-urban-spaces-whyte/>

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