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# The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces

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*William H. Whyte*



The Conservation Foundation

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# Preface

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This is a pre-book. When I started the Street Life Project in 1971, it was with the expectation that our research would last about two years and that I would then pull the findings into a book. At the very latest, I told Doubleday & Co., 1974. As is often the way with projects, however, the research grew and grew. Our initial studies of playgrounds led to a project on teen-age territories; our studies of New York's most crowded street led to a request to do a similar study in Tokyo; a study of indoor spaces led to comparison studies of suburban shopping malls. So it went. A year ago, I swore off more research and started writing.

Most of our research has been fundamental—that is, I can't now think of any especial applicability for it. What has fascinated us most is the behavior of ordinary people on city streets—their rituals in street encounters, for example, the regularity of chance meetings, the tendency to reciprocal gestures in street conferences, the rhythms of the three-phase good-bye. By the time the full book is finished, I am sure I will have figured out much more significance to all this. But not quite yet.

There is one part of our work, however, which does have immediate applicability: our study of spaces that work, don't work, and the reasons why. Rather than wait for completion of the book, I thought it would be helpful to get out our findings and recommendations, and thus this manual. I am indebted to The Conservation



Foundation and its president, William K. Reilly, for publishing it, and to Robert McCoy for his editorial help.

As a companion to the manual I have completed a 55-minute film—with the same title and the same general structure. It is being distributed under the auspices of the Municipal Art Society of New York. I want to express my thanks to Executive Director Margot Wellington, and to President Doris Freedman, one of the reasons many New York spaces so delight the eye and spirit.

The main work of the Street Life Project was done by a small band of young observers, and I want to thank them for their curiosity, their diligence, and their tendency to dispute my hypotheses. The principal researchers the first years were Marilyn Russell and Nancy Linday. They were joined by Fred Kent, Ellen Ascher, Margaret Bemiss, Ann Herendeen, and Elizabeth Dietel. Working with us on special studies were: Beverly Peyser, Ellen Iseman, Cecilia Rubin, and Ann R. Roberts.

For their help on many things, I want to thank Raquel Ramati and Michael Parley of the Urban Design Group of the New York City Planning Department, and Kenneth Halpern and Loren Otis of the Mayor's Office of Midtown Planning and Development.

I have many organizations to thank. The basic research was a project of the National Recreation and Park Association and was supported by grants from the Vincent Astor Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Rockefeller Family Fund, and the Fund for the City of New York. A grant for the preparation of this publication was provided by the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. The film project was made possible by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, and by grants from

the American Conservation Association, the J. M. Kaplan Fund, Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, Inc., the New York Telephone Company, and the Arthur Ross Foundation.

I thank these good people for their support and their interest, and their patience. Finally, I want to thank Laurance S. Rockefeller—for his support of our work, and for helping bring about some of the most felicitous of small urban spaces.

William H. Whyte  
New York, New York  
January 1980

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# Introduction

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This book is about city spaces, why some work for people, and some do not, and what the practical lessons may be. It is a by-product of first-hand observation.

In 1970, I formed a small research group, The Street Life Project, and began looking at city spaces. At that time, direct observation had long been used for the study of people in far-off lands. It had not been used to any great extent in the U.S. city. There was much concern over urban crowding, but most of the research on the issue was done somewhere other than where it supposedly occurred. The most notable studies were of crowded animals, or of students and members of institutions responding to experimental situations—often valuable research, to be sure, but somewhat vicarious.

The Street Life Project began its study by looking at New York City parks and playgrounds and such informal recreation areas as city blocks. One of the first things that struck us was the *lack* of crowding in many of these areas. A few were jammed, but more were nearer empty than full, often in neighborhoods that ranked very high in density of people. Sheer space, obviously, was not of itself attracting children. Many streets were.

It is often assumed that children play in the street because they lack playground space. But many children play in the streets because they like to. One of the best play areas we came across was a block on 101st Street in East Harlem. It had its



101st Street, East Harlem.



Seagram's



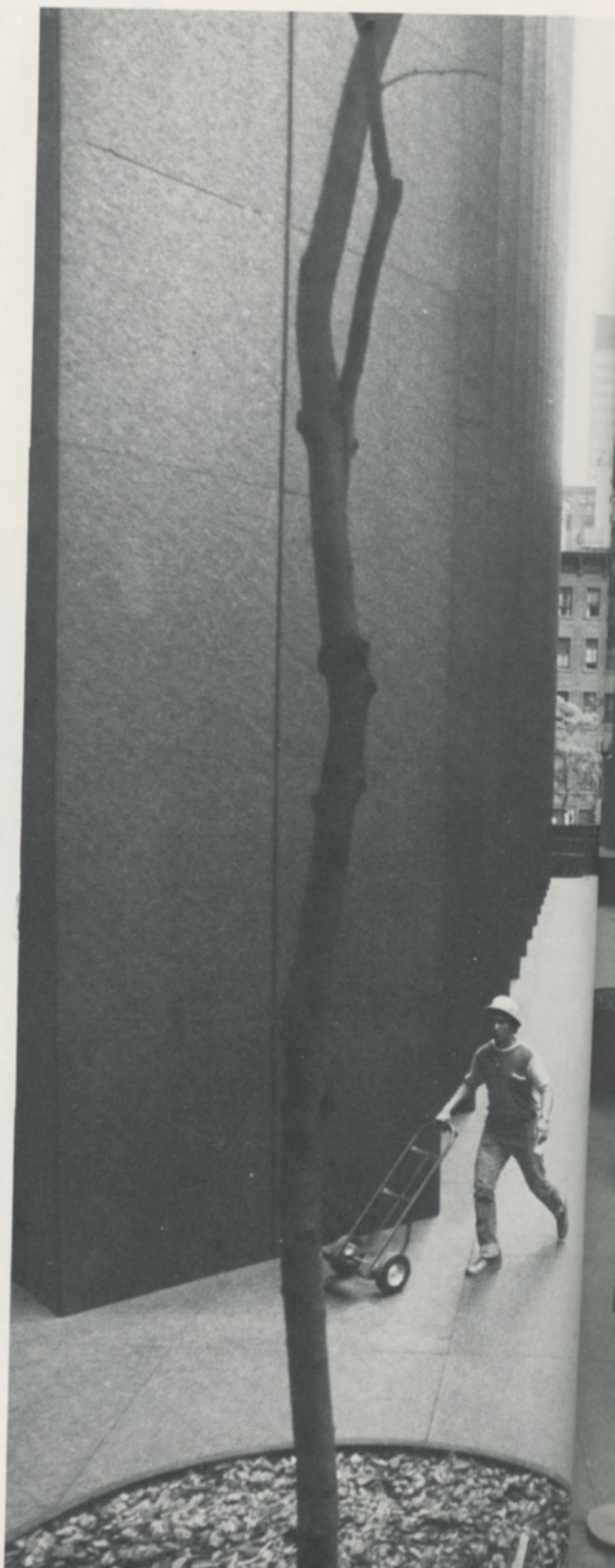
problems, but it worked. The street itself was the play area. Adjoining stoops and fire escapes provided prime viewing across the street and were highly functional for mothers and older people. There were other factors at work, too, and, had we been more prescient, we could have saved ourselves a lot of time spent later looking at plazas. Though we did not know it then, this block had within it all the basic elements of a successful urban place.

As our studies took us nearer the center of New York, the imbalance in space use was even more apparent. Most of the



crowding could be traced to a series of choke points—subway stations, in particular. In total, these spaces are only a fraction of downtown, but the number of people using them is so high, the experience so abysmal, that it colors our perception of the city around, out of all proportion to the space involved. The fact that there may be lots of empty space somewhere else little mitigates the discomfort. And there is a strong carry-over effect.

This affects researchers, too. We see what we expect to see, and have been so conditioned to see crowded spaces in center city that it is often difficult to see empty ones. But when we looked, there they were.









The amount of space, furthermore, was increasing. Since 1961, New York City has been giving incentive bonuses to builders who provided plazas. For each square foot of plaza, builders could add 10 square feet of commercial floor space over and above the amount normally permitted by zoning. So they did—without exception. Every new office building provided a plaza or comparable space: in total, by 1972, some 20 acres of the world's most expensive open space.

We discovered that some plazas, especially at lunchtime, attracted a lot of peo-

ple. One, the plaza of the Seagram Building, was the place that helped give the city the idea for the plaza bonus. Built in 1958, this austere elegant area had not been planned as a people's plaza, but that is what it became. On a good day, there would be a hundred and fifty people sitting, sunbathing, picnicking, and shmoozing—idly gossiping, talking “nothing talk.” People also liked 77 Water Street, known as “swingers' plaza” because of the young crowd that populated it.

But on most plazas, we didn't see many people. The plazas weren't used for much

except walking across. In the middle of the lunch hour on a beautiful, sunny day the number of people sitting on plazas averaged four per 1,000 square feet of space—an extraordinarily low figure for so dense a center. The tightest-knit CBD (central business district) anywhere contained a surprising amount of open space that was relatively empty and unused.

If places like Seagram's and 77 Water Street could work so well, why not the others? The city was being had. For the millions of dollars of extra space it was handing out to builders, it had every right to demand much better plazas in return.

I put the question to the chairman of the City Planning Commission, Donald Elliott. As a matter of fact, I entrapped him into spending a weekend looking at time-lapse films of plaza use and nonuse. He felt that tougher zoning was in order. If we could find out why the good plazas worked and the bad ones didn't, and come up with hard guidelines, we could have the basis of a new code. Since we could expect the proposals to be strongly contested, it would be important to document the case to a fare-thee-well.

We set to work. We began studying a cross-section of spaces—in all, 16 plazas, 3 small parks, and a number of odds and ends. I will pass over the false starts, the dead ends, and the floundering arounds, save to note that there were a lot and that the research was nowhere as tidy and sequential as it can seem in the telling. Let me also note that the findings should have been staggeringly obvious to us had we thought of them in the first place. But we didn't. Opposite propositions were often what seemed obvious. We arrived at our eventual findings by a succession of busted hypotheses.

The research continued for some three years. I like to cite the figure because it sounds impressive. But it is calendar time. For all practical purposes, at the end of six months we had completed our basic

research and arrived at our recommendations. The City, alas, had other concerns on its mind, and we found that communicating the findings was to take more time than arriving at them. We logged many hours in church basements and meeting rooms giving film and slide presentations to community groups, architects, planners, businessmen, developers, and real-estate people. We continued our research; we had to keep our findings up-to-date, for



now we were disciplined by adversaries. But at length the City Planning Commission incorporated our recommendations in a proposed new open-space zoning code, and in May 1975 it was adopted by the city's Board of Estimate. As a consequence, there has been a salutary improvement in the design of new spaces and the rejuvenation of old ones. (Since the zoning may have useful guidelines for other cities, an abridged text is provided as appendix B.)

But zoning is certainly not the ideal way to achieve the better design of spaces. It ought to be done for its own sake. For economics alone, it makes sense. An enormous expenditure of design expertise, and of travertine and steel, went into the creation of the many really bum office-building plazas around the country. To what end? As this manual will detail, it is far easier, simpler to create spaces that work for people than those that do not—and a tremendous difference it can make to the life of a city.

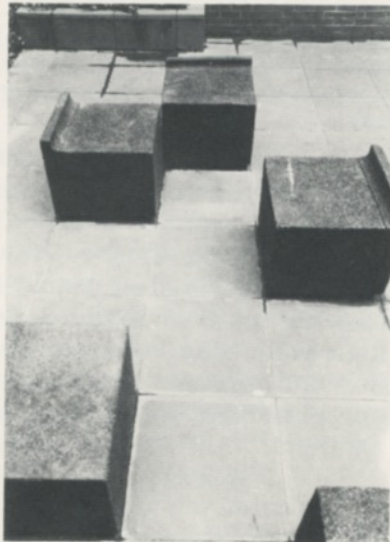


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# Sitting Space

## 2

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In their use of plazas, New Yorkers were very consistent. Day in, day out, many of them would sit at certain plazas, few at others. On the face of it, there should not have been this variance. Most of the plazas we were studying were fairly comparable. With few exceptions, they were on major avenues and usually occupied a block front. They were close to bus stops and subway stations and had strong pedestrian flows on the sidewalks beside them. Yet when we rated plazas according to the number of people sitting on them at peak time, there was a very wide range—from 160 people at 77 Water Street to 17 at 280 Park Avenue (see chart 1).

How come? The first factor we studied was the sun. We thought it might well be the critical one, and our initial time-lapse studies seemed to bear this out. Subsequent studies did not. As I will note later, they showed that the sun was important, but did not explain the difference in the popularity of plazas.

Nor did aesthetics. We never thought ourselves capable of measuring such factors, but did expect our research to show the most successful plazas would tend to be the most pleasing visually. Seagram's seemed very much a case in point. Here again, the evidence proved conflicting. Not only was clean, elegant Seagram's successful; so was the fun plaza at 77 Water Street, which some architects look on as kitsch. We also noticed that the elegance and purity of a building's design seems to



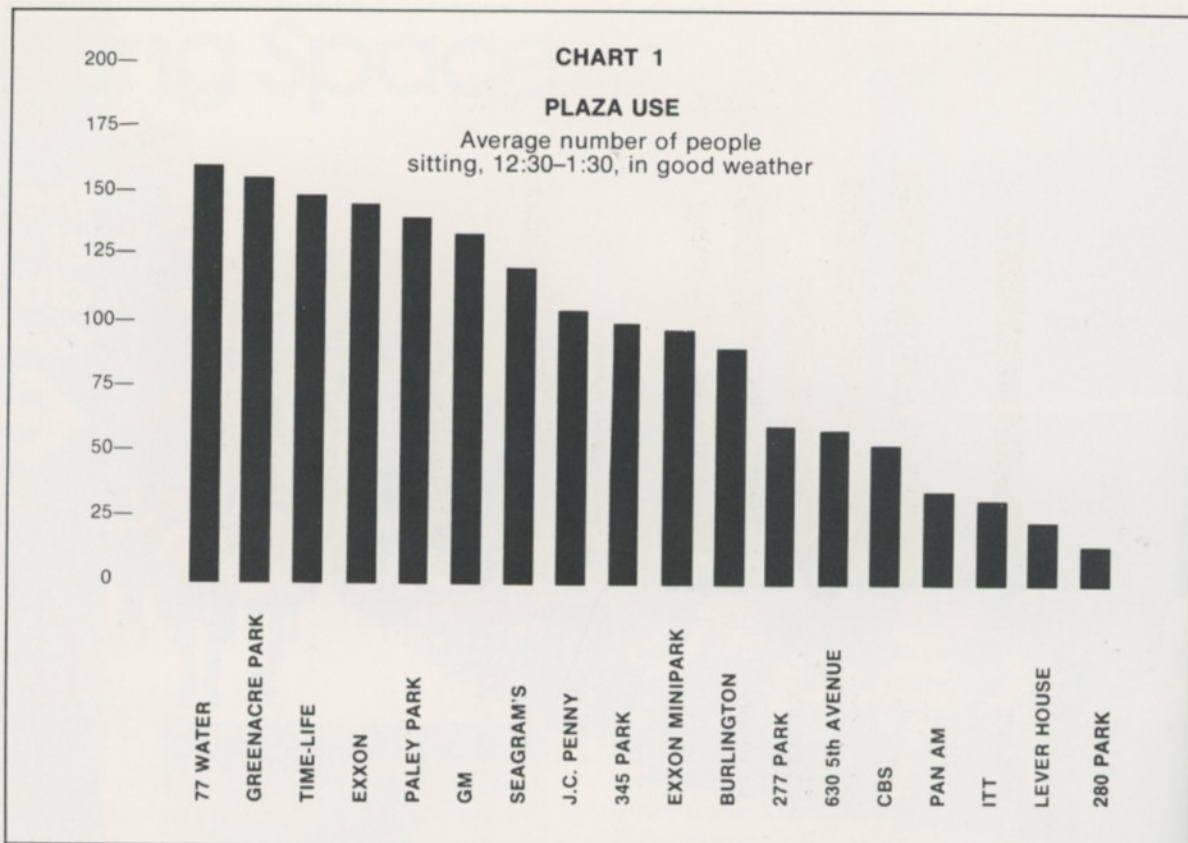
the ark  
at  
citicorp  
center



*Above:* The ledge at St. Peter's Church, part of the Citicorp complex, has become one of the most-used sitting places on Lexington Avenue.

*Left:* Another popular place to tarry is a simple round bench at Rockefeller Center, just across the street from St. Patrick's Cathedral.





have little relationship to the use of the spaces around it.

The designer sees the whole building—the clean verticals, the horizontals, the way Mies turned his corners, and so on. The person sitting on the plaza may be quite unaware of such matters. He is more apt to be looking in the other direction: not up at other buildings, but at what is going on at eye level. To say this is not to slight the designer's eye or his handling of space. The area around Seagram's is a great urban place and its relationship to McKim, Mead & White's Racquet Club across the street is integral to it. My personal feeling is that a sense of enclosure contributes to the enjoyment of using the Seagram plaza. But I certainly can't prove this with figures.

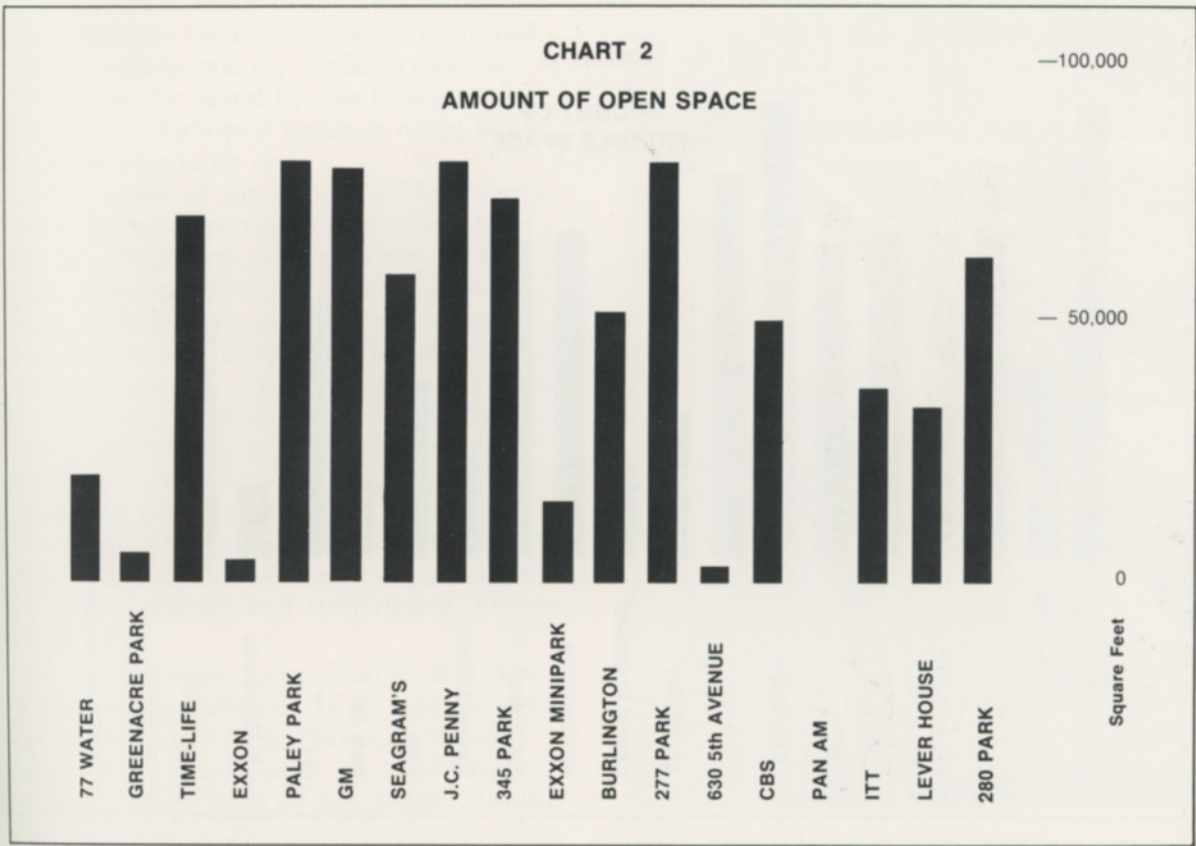
Another factor we considered was

shape. Urban designers believed this was extremely important and hoped our findings might support tight criteria for proportions and placement. They were particularly anxious to rule out "strip plazas"—long narrow spaces that were little more than enlarged sidewalks, and empty more often than not. Designers felt a developer shouldn't get bonuses for these strips, and to this end they wanted to rule out spaces the length of which was more than three times the width.

Our data did not support such criteria. We found that most strip plazas were, indeed, empty of people most of the time. But was the shape the cause? Some square plazas were empty, too, and several of the most heavily used places were, in fact, long narrow strips. One of the five most popular sitting places in New York is es-







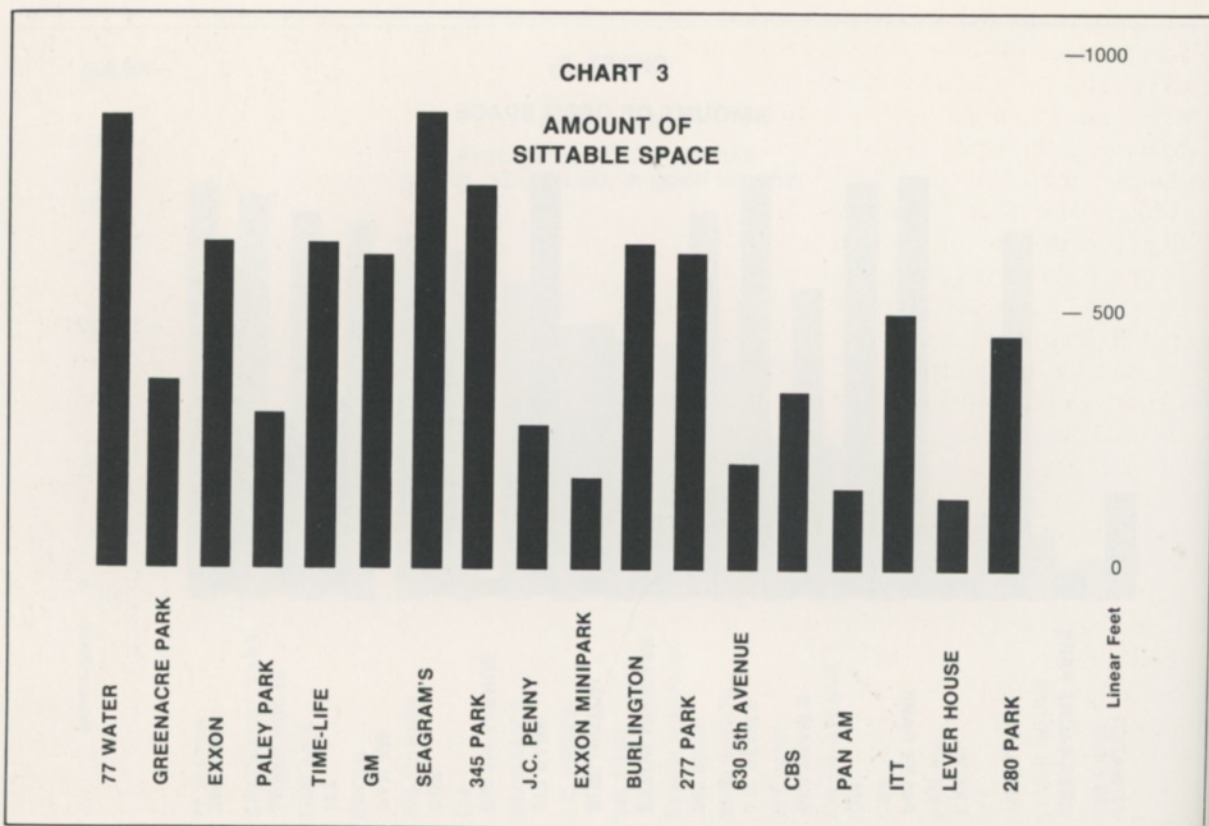
entially an indentation in a building—and long and narrow. Our research did not prove shape unimportant or designers' instincts misguided; as with the sun, however, it did prove that other factors were more critical.

If not shape, could the *amount* of space be the key factor? Some conservationists were sure this would be it. In their view, people seek open spaces as a relief from the overcrowding they are normally subjected to, and it would follow that places affording the greatest feeling of light and space would draw the most. If we ranked plazas by the amount of space, there surely would be a positive correlation between the size of the plazas and the number of persons using them.

Once again, we found no clear relationship. As can be seen in chart 2, several of

the smaller spaces had lots of people, several of the larger had lots of people, and several of the larger had very few people. Sheer space, it appears, does not draw people. In some circumstances, it can have the opposite effect.

What about the amount of *sittable* space? Here we begin to get close. As chart 3 shows, the most popular plazas tend to have considerably more sitting space than the less well-used ones. The relationship is rough. For one reason, the amount of sitting space does not include any qualitative factors: a foot of concrete ledge counts for as much as a foot of comfortable bench space. We considered weighting the figures on a point basis—so many points for a foot of bench with backrest, with armrests, and so on. This would have produced a nicer conformance on the chart.



We gave up the idea, however, as too manipulative. Once you start working backwards this way, there's no end to it.

There was no necessity. No matter how many variables we checked, one point kept coming through. We at last saw that it was the major one:

*People tend to sit most where there are places to sit.*

This may not strike you as an intellectual bombshell, and, now that I look back on our study, I wonder why it was not more apparent to us from the beginning. Sitting space, to be sure, is only one of the many variables, and, without a control situation as a measure, one cannot be sure of cause and effect. But sitting space is most certainly prerequisite. The most attractive fountains, the most striking designs, cannot induce people to come and sit if there is no place to sit.

### Integral Sitting

Ideally, sitting should be physically comfortable—benches with backrests, well-contoured chairs. It's more important, however, that it be *socially* comfortable. This means choice: sitting up front, in back, to the side, in the sun, in the shade, in groups, off alone.

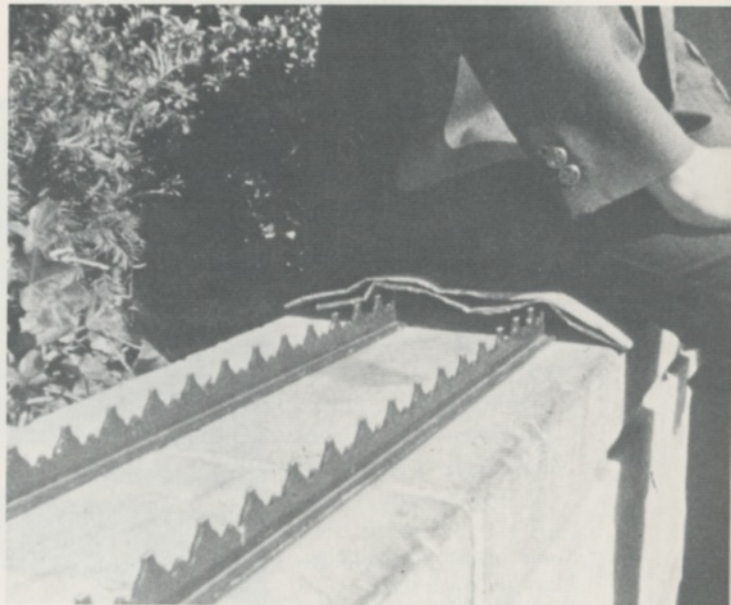
Choice should be built into the basic design. Even though benches and chairs can be added, the best course is to maximize the sittability of inherent features. This means making ledges so they are sittable, or making other flat surfaces do double duty as table tops or seats. There are almost always such opportunities. Because the elevation changes somewhat on most building sites, there are bound to be several levels of flat space. It's no more trouble to make them sittable than not to.



It takes real work to create a lousy place. Ledges have to be made high and bulky; railings put in; surfaces canted. Money can be saved by not doing such things, and the open space is more likely to be an amenable one.

This is one of the lessons of Seagram's. Philip Johnson recounts that when Mies van der Rohe saw people sitting on the ledges, he was quite surprised. He had never dreamt they would. But the architects had valued simplicity. So there were no fussy railings, no shrubbery, no gratuitous changes in elevation, no ornamentation to clutter spaces. The steps were made easy and inviting. The place was eminently sittable, without a bench on it. The periphery includes some 600 feet of ledge and step space, which is just right for sitting, eating, and sunbathing. People use all of it.

So ledges ought to be sittable. But how should this be defined? If we wanted sittable ledges in the New York City zoning amendments we thought we would have to indicate how high or low ledges should



Most ledges are inherently sittable, but with a little ingenuity and additional expense they can be made unsittable.



*Left:* This office-building plaza in Denver is a simple grassy park with a few trees. It is well liked and makes a nice complement to the plaza of the First of Denver across the street.

*Below:* A canopy of a few trees can make a high-traffic area feel very comfortable.



overlapping foliage provides a combination of shade and sunlight that is very pleasing. Arbors can do the same.

## **Water**

Water is another fine element, and designers are doing rather well with it. New plazas and parks provide water in all sorts of forms: waterfalls, waterwalls, rapids, sluiceways, tranquil pools, water tunnels, meandering brooks, fountains of all kinds. In only one major respect is something lacking: access.

One of the best things about water is the look and feel of it. I have always thought that the water at Seagram's



looked unusually liquid, and I think it's because you know you can splash your hand in it if you are of a mind to. People do it all the time: they stick their hands in it, their toes, and feet, and, if they splash about, some security guard does not come rushing up to say them nay.

But in many places water is only for looking at. Let a foot touch it and a guard will be there in an instant. Not allowed. Chemicals in the water. Danger of contamination. If you let people start touching water, you are told, the next thing they'll start swimming in it. Sometimes they do. The new reflecting pool at the Christian Science Headquarters in Boston is only a few feet deep, but when it first opened many people started using it for wading and even swimming. It was with some difficulty that the pool was put off limits to such activity and reclaimed for its ornamental function.

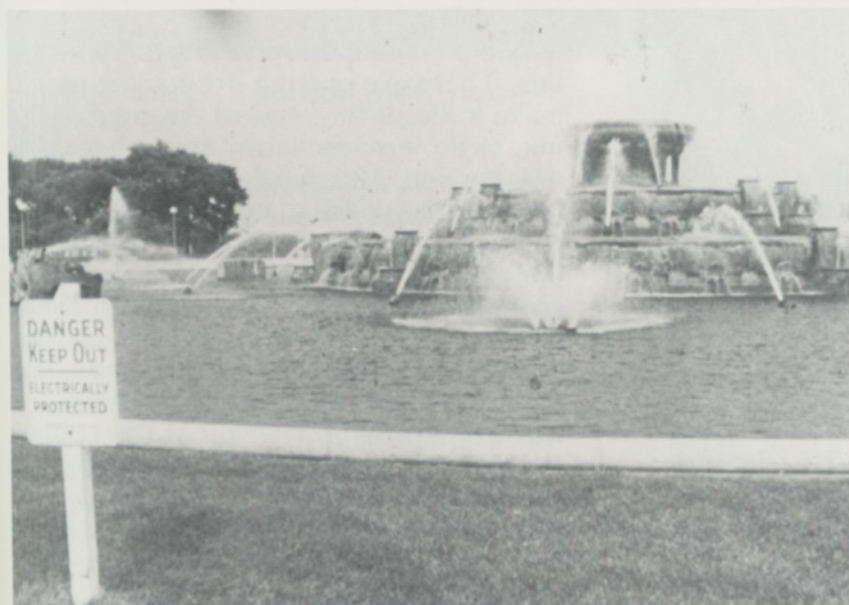
It's not right to put water before people and then keep them away from it. But this is what has been happening across the country. Pools and fountains are installed, then immediately posted with signs admonishing people not to touch. Equally egregious is the excessive zeal with which many pools are continually emptied, refilled, vacuumed, and cleaned, as though the primary function of them was their maintenance. Grand Old Buckingham Fountain in Chicago's Grant Park has been put off limits with an electrified fence.

Safety is the usual reason given for keeping people away. But there are better ways than electrocution to handle this problem. At the Auditorium Forecourt Fountain in Portland, Oregon, people have been climbing up and down a complex of sluiceways and falls for some six years. It looks dangerous—designer Lawrence Halprin designed it to look dangerous—and, since the day it opened, there have been no serious mishaps. This splendid fountain is an affirmation of trust in



people, and it says much about the good city of Portland.

Another great thing about water is the sound of it. When people explain why they find Paley Park so quiet and restful, one thing they always mention is the waterwall. In fact, the waterwall is quite loud: the noise level is about 75 decibels close by, measurably higher than the level out on the street. Taken by itself, furthermore, the sound is not especially pleasant. I have played tapes to people and asked them what they thought it was. Usually they grimace and say a subway train, trucks on a freeway, or something just as bad. In the park, however, the sound is perceived as quite pleasant. It is white sound and masks the intermittent honks and bangs that are the most annoying aspects of street noise. It also masks conversations. Even though there are many others nearby, you can talk quite loudly to a companion—sometimes you almost have to—and enjoy a feeling of privacy. On the occasions when the waterwall is turned off, a spell is broken, and the place seems nowhere as congenial. Or as quiet.



Water should be accessible, touchable, splashable. It is no longer so at Chicago's Buckingham Fountain (left), now protected from people by an electric fence. Shame.



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# Food

## 4

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One of the big contributors to Seagram plaza's success is Gus, the vendor who can be found day after day, year after year at the corner of Park Avenue and 52nd Street.

If you want to seed a place with activity, put out food. In New York, at every plaza or set of steps with a lively social life, you will almost invariably find a food vendor at the corner and a knot of people around him—eating, shmoozing, or just standing.

Vendors have a good nose for spaces that work. They have to. They are constantly testing the market, and if business picks up in one spot, there will soon be a cluster of vendors there. This will draw more people, and yet more vendors, and sometimes so many converge that pedestrian traffic slows to a crawl. In front of Rockefeller Plaza during the Christmas holidays, we've counted some 15 vendors in a 40-foot stretch (most of them selling hot pretzels).

The civic establishment deplores all this. There are enough ordinances to make it illegal for vendors, licensed or not, to do business at any spot where business is good. Merchants always get on the backs of the police to enforce the ordinances. In midtown and downtown the most frequently observed police activity is giving summonses to food vendors. Sometimes there are sweeps, the police arriving with trucks to haul the vendors away. The confrontations usually draw big crowds who are clearly on the side of the vendors.

And well they should be. By default, the vendors have become the caterers of the city's outdoor life. They flourish because they're servicing a demand not being met by the regular commercial establishment.



Basic food facilities—a snack bar, tables, chairs—seed a place with activity.

Plazas are particularly parasitic in this respect. Hardly a one has been constructed that did not involve the demolition of luncheonettes and restaurants. The vendor thus fills a void, and this can become quite clear when he is shooed away. A lot of the life of the space goes with him.

New York City is less puritanical than some other places. Many cities have ordinances that not only prevent purveying food outdoors, but eating there as well. If you ask officials about this, they tell you of the dreadful things that would happen were the restrictions lifted—the dangers





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# The Street

## 5

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Now we come to the key space for a plaza. It is not on the plaza. It is the street. The other amenities we have been discussing are indeed important: sitting space, sun, trees, water, food. But they can be added. The relationship to the street is integral, and it is far and away the critical design factor.

A good plaza starts at the street corner. If it's a busy corner, it has a brisk social life of its own. People will not just be waiting there for the light to change. Some will be fixed in conversation; others, in some phase of a prolonged goodbye. If there's a vendor at the corner, people will cluster around him, and there will be considerable two-way traffic back and forth between plaza and corner.



A corner of Wall Street is a great place for business conversations.



One of New York's best corners is 49th Street and the Avenue of the Americas, alongside the McGraw-Hill Building. This corner has all of the basics: sitting space, a food vendor, and a heavy pedestrian flow, the middle of which is a favorite place for conversations.







Margaret Bemiss

William H. Whyte is Director of the Street Life Project in New York City. This manual is based on research conducted by that group since 1971. Mr. Whyte has published a number of articles on urban issues, including "The End of the Corporate Flight to the Suburbs" (*New York Magazine*), and edited *The Exploding Metropolis*. Among his other books are *The Organization Man*, *Open Space Action*, *Cluster Development*, and *The Last Landscape*. Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees of The Conservation Foundation, he has also served on the Hudson River Valley Commission, the New York State Environmental Board, and the President's Task Force on Natural Beauty.