

# LIFE BETWEEN BUILDINGS

Using Public Space

Jan Gehl







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## Three Types of Outdoor Activities

a street scene

An ordinary day on an ordinary street. Pedestrians pass on the sidewalks, children play near front doors, people sit on benches and steps, the postman makes his rounds with the mail, two passersby greet on the sidewalk, two mechanics repair a car, groups engage in conversation. This mix of outdoor activities is influenced by a number of conditions. Physical environment is one of the factors: a factor that influences the activities to a varying degree and in many different ways. Outdoor activities, and a number of the physical conditions that influence them, are the subject of this book.

three types of outdoor activities

Greatly simplified, outdoor activities in public spaces can be divided into three categories, each of which places very different demands on the physical environment: *necessary activities*, *optional activities*, and *social activities*.

necessary activities  
– under all conditions

*Necessary activities* include those that are more or less compulsory – going to school or to work, shopping, waiting for a bus or a person, running errands, distributing mail – in other words, all activities in which those involved are to a greater or lesser degree required to participate.

In general, everyday tasks and pastimes belong to this group. Among other activities, this group includes the great majority of those related to walking.

Because the activities in this group are necessary, their incidence is influenced only slightly by the physical framework. These activities will take place throughout the year, under nearly all conditions, and are more or less independent of the exterior environment. The participants have no choice.

optional activities  
– only under favorable exterior conditions

*Optional activities* – that is, those pursuits that are participated in if there is a wish to do so and if time and place make it possible – are quite another matter.



three types of outdoor activities



*Necessary activities*



*Optional activities*



*Social activities*

outdoor activities and  
quality of outdoor  
space

*Graphic representation of the  
relationship between the quality  
of outdoor spaces  
and the rate of occurrence of  
outdoor activities.*

*When the quality of outdoor  
areas is good, optional activities  
occur with increasing frequency.  
Furthermore, as levels of op-  
tional activity rise, the number  
of social activities usually  
increases substantially.*

This category includes such activities as taking a walk to get a breath of fresh air, standing around enjoying life, or sitting and sunbathing.







These activities take place only when exterior conditions are favourable, when weather and place invite them. This relationship is particularly important in connection with physical planning because most of the recreational activities that are especially pleasant to pursue outdoors are found precisely in this category of activities. These activities are especially dependent on exterior physical conditions.

When outdoor areas are of poor quality, only strictly necessary activities occur.

When outdoor areas are of high quality, necessary activities take place with approximately the same frequency – though they clearly tend to take a longer time, because the physical conditions are better. In addition, however, a wide range of optional activities will also occur because place and situation now invite people to stop, sit, eat, play, and so on.

In streets and city spaces of poor quality, only the bare minimum of activity takes place. People hurry home.

In a good environment, a completely different, broad spectrum of human activities is possible.

	Quality of the physical environment	
	Poor	Good
Necessary activities		
Optional activities		
“Resultant” activities (Social activities)		



*Social activities* are all activities that depend on the presence of others in public spaces. Social activities include children at play, greetings and conversations, communal activities of various kinds, and finally – as the most widespread social activity – passive contacts, that is, simply seeing and hearing other people.

Different kinds of social activities occur in many places: in dwellings; in private outdoor spaces, gardens, and balconies; in public buildings; at places of work; and so on; but in this context only those activities that occur in publicly accessible spaces are examined.

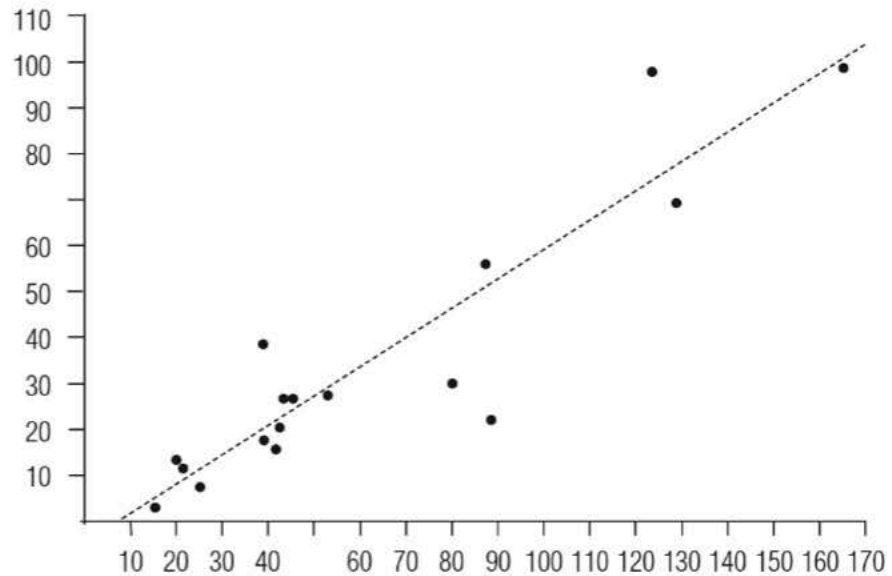
These activities could also be termed “resultant” activities, because in nearly all instances they evolve from activities linked to the other two activity categories. They develop in connection with the other activities because people are in the same space, meet, pass by one another, or are merely within view.

Social activities occur spontaneously, as a direct consequence of people moving about and being in the same spaces. This implies that social activities are indirectly supported whenever necessary and optional activities are given better conditions in public spaces.

*Greeting old friends, Bilbao*



*The more time people spend outdoors, the more frequently they meet and the more they talk. Chart plotting the relationship between the number of outdoor activities and frequency of interactions. (Street life studies in Melbourne [20]. See also page 191.)*



The character of social activities varies, depending on the context in which they occur. In the residential streets, near schools, near places of work, where there are a limited number of people with common interests or backgrounds, social activities in public spaces can be quite comprehensive: greetings, conversations, discussions, and play arising from common interests and because people “know” each other, if for no other reason than that they often see one another.

In city streets and city centers, social activities will generally be more superficial, with the majority being passive contacts – seeing and hearing a great number of unknown people. But even this modest type of activity can be very appealing.

Very freely interpreted, a social activity takes place every time two people are together in the same space. To see and hear each other, to meet, is in itself a form of contact, a social activity. The actual meeting, merely being present, is furthermore the seed for other, more comprehensive forms of social activity.

This connection is important in relation to physical planning. Although the physical framework does not have a direct influence on the quality, content, and intensity of social contacts, architects and planners can affect the possibilities for meeting, seeing, and hearing people – possibilities that both take on a quality of their own and become important as background and starting point for other forms of contact.

This is the background for the investigation in this book of meeting possibilities and opportunities to see and hear other people. Another reason for a comprehensive review of these activities is that precisely the presence of other people, activities, events, inspiration, and stimulation comprise one of the most important qualities of public spaces altogether.

life between buildings  
– defined

If we look back at the street scene that was the starting point for defining the three categories of outdoor activities, we can see how necessary, optional, and social activities occur in a finely interwoven pattern. People walk, sit, and talk. Functional, recreational, and social activities intertwine in all conceivable combinations. Therefore, this examination of the subject of outdoor activities does not begin with a single, limited category of activities. Life between buildings is not merely pedestrian traffic or recreational or social activities. Life between buildings comprises the entire spectrum of activities, which combine to make communal spaces in cities and residential areas meaningful and attractive.

Both necessary, functional activities and optional, recreational activities have been examined quite thoroughly over the years in different contexts. Social activities and their interweaving to form a communal fabric have received considerably less attention.

This is the background for the following, more detailed examination of social activities in public spaces.



*Contact at a modest level  
– but definitely contact.*



## Life Between Buildings

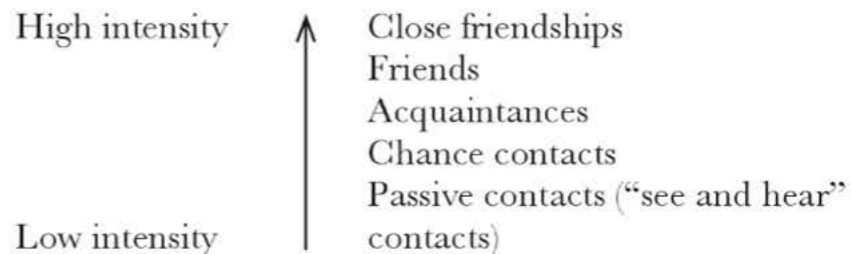
life between buildings  
– and the need for  
contact

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely what life between buildings means in relation to the *need for contact* [14].

Opportunities for meetings and daily activities in the public spaces of a city or residential area enable one to be among, to see, and to hear others, to experience other people functioning in various situations.

These modest “see and hear contacts” must be considered in relation to other forms of contact and as part of the whole range of social activities, from very simple and noncommittal contacts to complex and emotionally involved connections.

The concept of varying degrees of contact intensity is the basis of the following simplified outline of various contact forms.



In terms of this outline life between buildings represents primarily the low-intensity contacts located at the bottom of the scale. Compared with the other contact forms, these contacts appear insignificant, yet they are valuable both as independent contact forms and as prerequisites for other, more complex interactions.

Opportunities related to merely being able to meet, see, and hear others include:

- contact at a modest level
- a possible starting point for contact at other levels
- a possibility for maintaining already established contacts
- a source of information about the social world outside
- a source of inspiration, an offer of stimulating experience

a possible beginning for contacts at other levels







– a form of contact

The possibilities related to the low-intensity contact forms offered in public spaces perhaps can best be described by the situation that exists if they are lacking.

If activity between buildings is missing, the lower end of the contact scale also disappears. The varied transitional forms between being alone and being together have disappeared. The boundaries between isolation and contact become sharper – people are either alone or else with others on a relatively demanding and exacting level.

Life between buildings offers an opportunity to be with others in a relaxed and undemanding way. One can take occasional walks, perhaps make a detour along a main street on the way home or pause at an inviting bench near a front door to be among people for a short while. Or one can do daily shopping, even though it would be more practical to do it once a week. Even looking out of the window now and then, if one is fortunate enough to have something to look at, can be rewarding. Being among others, seeing and hearing others, receiving impulses from others, imply positive experiences, alternatives to being alone. One is not necessarily with a specific person, but one is, nevertheless, with others.

As opposed to being a passive observer of other people's experiences on television or video or film, in public spaces the individual himself is present, participating in a modest way, but most definitely participating.

an opportunity for maintaining established contacts





– a possible access to contact at other levels

Low-intensity contact is also a situation from which other forms of contact can grow. It is a medium for the unpredictable, the spontaneous, the unplanned.

These opportunities can be illustrated by examining how play activities among children get started.

Such situations can be arranged. Formalized play occurs at birthday parties and arranged play groups in schools. Generally, however, play is not arranged. It evolves when children are together, when they see others at play, when they feel like playing and “go out to play” without actually being certain that play will get started. The first prerequisite is being in the same space. Meeting.

Contacts that develop spontaneously in connection with merely being where there are others are usually very fleeting – a short exchange of words, a brief discussion with the next man on the bench, chatting with a child in a bus, watching somebody working and asking a few questions, and so forth. From this simple level, contacts can grow to other levels, as the participants wish. Meeting, being present in the same space, is in each of these circumstances the prime prerequisite.

– an uncomplicated opportunity to maintain already established contacts

The possibility of meeting neighbors and co-workers often in connection with daily comings and goings implies a valuable opportunity to establish and later maintain acquaintances in a relaxed and undemanding way.

Social events can evolve spontaneously. Situations are allowed to develop. Visits and gatherings can be arranged on short notice, when the mood dictates. It is equally easy to “drop by” or “look in” or to agree on what is to take place tomorrow if the participants pass by one another’s front doors often and, especially, meet often on the street or in connection with daily activities around the home, place of work, and so on.

Frequent meetings in connection with daily activities increase chances of developing contacts with neighbors, a fact noted in many surveys. With frequent meetings friendships and the contact network are maintained in a far simpler and less demanding way than if friendship must be kept up by telephone and invitation. If this is the case, it is often rather difficult to maintain contact, because more is always demanded of the participants when meetings must be arranged in advance.

This is the underlying reason why nearly all children and a considerable proportion of other age groups maintain closer and more frequent contact with friends and acquaintances who live or work near them – it is the simplest way to stay “in touch.”





– information about  
the social  
environment

The opportunity to see and hear other people in a city or residential area also implies an offer of valuable information, about the surrounding social environment in general and about the people one lives or works with in particular.

This is especially true in connection with the social development of children, which is largely based on observations of the surrounding social environment, but all of us need to be kept up to date about the surrounding world in order to function in a social context.

Through the mass media we are informed about the larger, more sensational world events, but by being with others we learn about the more common but equally important details. We discover how others work, behave, and dress, and we obtain knowledge about the people we work with, live with, and so forth. By means of all this information we establish a confident relationship with the world around us. A person we have often met on the street becomes a person we “know.”

– a source of  
inspiration

In addition to imparting information about the social world outside, the opportunity to see and hear other people can also provide ideas and inspiration for action.

We are inspired by seeing others in action. Children, for example, see other children at play and get the urge to join in, or they get ideas for new games by watching other children or adults.

– a uniquely  
stimulating  
experience

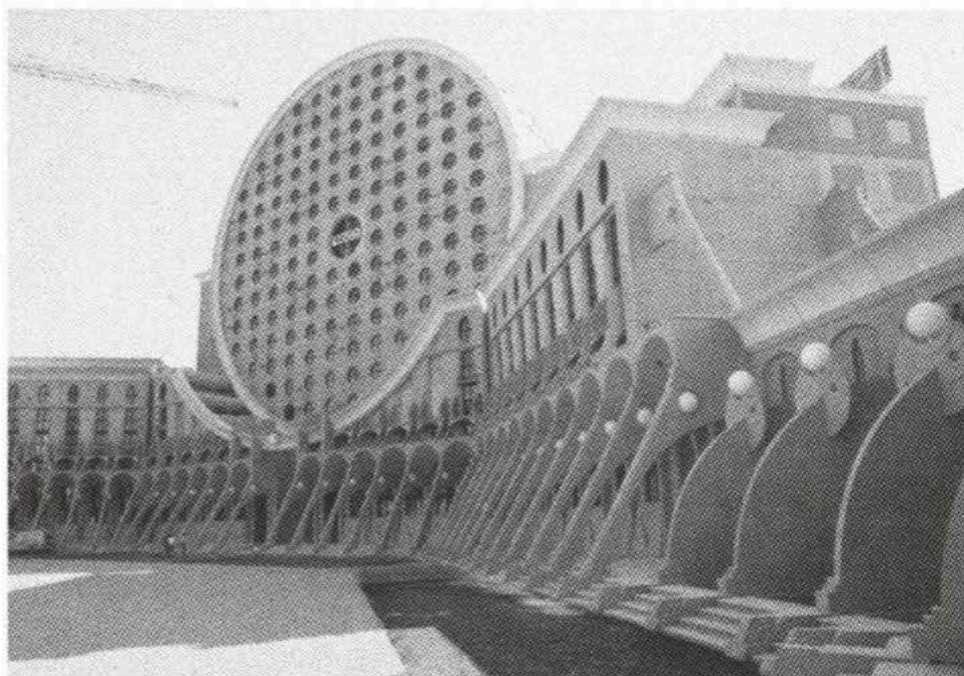
The trend from living to lifeless cities and residential areas that has accompanied industrialization, segregation of various city functions, and reliance on the automobile also has caused cities to become duller and more monotonous. This points up another important need, namely *the need for stimulation* [14].

Experiencing other people represents a particularly colorful and attractive opportunity for stimulation. Compared with experiencing buildings and other inanimate objects, experiencing people, who speak and move about, offers a wealth of sensual variation. No moment is like the previous or the following when people circulate among people. The number of new situations and new stimuli is limitless. Furthermore, it concerns the most important subject in life: people.

Living cities, therefore, ones in which people can interact with one another, are always stimulating because they are rich in experiences, in contrast to lifeless cities, which can scarcely avoid being poor in experiences and thus dull, no matter how many colors and variations of shape in buildings are introduced.

If life between buildings is given favorable conditions through sensible planning of cities and housing areas alike, many costly and often stilted and strained attempts to make buildings “interesting” and rich by using dramatic architectural effects can be spared.

Life between buildings is both more relevant and more interesting to look at in the long run than are any combination of colored concrete and staggered building forms.



*Inevitably, life between buildings is richer, more stimulating, and more rewarding than any combination of architectural ideas.*

*Above: New housing complex, Paris.*

*Below: Everyday scene.*

*Facing page: Children, workmen, and contemporary architecture (Les Arcades du Lac, Paris, 1981; architect, Ricardo Bofill).*







#### activity as attraction

The value of the many large and small possibilities that are attached to the opportunity of being in the same space as and seeing and hearing other people is underlined by a series of observations investigating people's reaction to the presence of other people in public spaces [15, 18, 24, 51].

Wherever there are people – in buildings, in neighborhoods, in city centers, in recreational areas, and so on – it is generally true that people and human activities attract other people. People are attracted to other people. They gather with and move about with others and seek to place themselves near others. New activities begin in the vicinity of events that are already in progress.

In the home we can see that children prefer to be where there are adults or where there are other children, instead of, for example, where there are only toys. In residential areas and in city spaces, comparable behavior among adults can be observed.





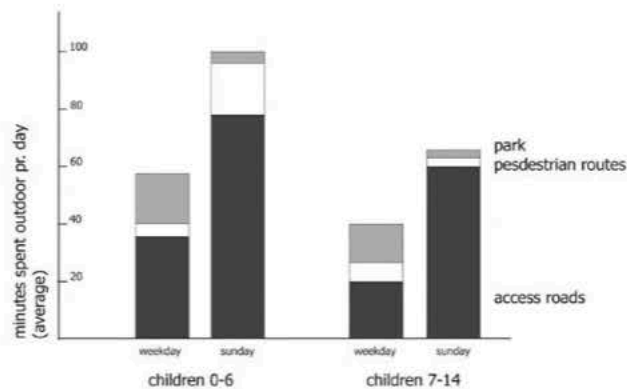
## activities and play habits

If given a choice between walking on a deserted or a lively street, most people in most situations will choose the lively street. If the choice is between sitting in a private backyard or in a semiprivate front yard with a view of the street, people will often choose the front of the house where there is more to see (see page 38).

In Scandinavia an old proverb tells it all "people come where people are."

A series of investigations illustrates in more detail the interest in being in contact with others. Investigations of children's play habits in residential areas [28, 39] show that children stay and play primarily where the most activity is occurring or in places where there is the greatest chance of something happening.

Both in areas with single-family houses and in apartment house surroundings, children tend to play more on the streets, in parking areas, and near the entrances of dwellings than in the play areas designed for that purpose but located in backyards of single-family houses or on the sunny side of multi-story buildings, where there are neither traffic nor people to look at.



*Even when well-developed systems of parks and pedestrian routes are available, children of all ages spend most of their time outdoors in or alongside the access roads. (Survey of children's play habits in single-family house areas in Denmark [29]).*





*Below: All over the world sidewalk  
cafe chairs face the street life.  
(Photos from Karl Johan, main  
street, Oslo Norway)*





activities and seating preferences

Corresponding trends can be found regarding where people choose to sit in public spaces. Benches that provide a good view of surrounding activities are used more than benches with less or no view of others.

An investigation of Tivoli Garden in Copenhagen [36], carried out by the architect John Lyle, shows that the most used benches are along the garden's main path, where there is a good view of the particularly active areas, while the least used benches are found in the quiet areas of the park. In various places, benches are arranged back to back, so that one of the benches faces a path while the other "turns its back." In these instances it is always the benches facing the path that are used.

Comparable results have been found in investigations of seating in a number of squares in central Copenhagen. Benches with a view of the most trafficked pedestrian routes are used most, while benches oriented toward the planted areas of the squares are used less frequently [15, 18, 27].

At sidewalk cafes, as well, the life on the sidewalk in front of the cafe is the prime attraction. Almost without exception cafe chairs throughout the world are oriented toward the most active area nearby. Sidewalks are, not unexpectedly, the very reason for creating sidewalk cafes.



*When benches do not face activities, either they will not be used – or they will be used in nontraditional ways*



attractions on a  
pedestrian street

The opportunity to see, hear, and meet others can also be shown to be one of the most important attractions in city centers and on pedestrian streets. This is illustrated by an attraction analysis carried out on Strøget, the main pedestrian street in central Copenhagen, by a study group from the School of Architecture at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts [15, 18]. The analysis was based on an investigation of where pedestrians stopped on the walking street and what they stopped to look at.

Fewest stops were noted in front of banks, offices, showrooms, and dull exhibits of, for example, cash registers, office furniture, porcelain, or hair curlers. Conversely, a great number of stops were noted in front of shops and exhibits that had a direct relationship to other people and to the surrounding social environment, such as newspaper kiosks, photography exhibits, film stills outside movie theaters, clothing stores, and toy stores.

Even greater interest was shown in the various human activities that went on in the street space itself. All forms of human activity appeared to be of major interest in this connection.

*No one stops in front of banks and prestigious showrooms. Quite a few people stop to look at children's toys, photos, and other items related more directly to life and other people. By far the greatest number of people stop to watch other people and events.*





*Left: Registration of all people, standing and sitting, on the central part of the main pedestrian street in Copenhagen on a Tuesday in July at noon.  
Plan: 1:3000 [18].*

Considerable interest was observed in both the ordinary, everyday events that take place on a street – children at play, newlyweds on their way from the photographers, or merely people walking by – and in the more unusual instance – the artist with his easel, the street musician with his guitar, street painters in action, and other large and small events.

It was obvious that human activities, being able to see other people in action, constituted the area's main attraction.

The street painters collected a large crowd as long as their work was in progress, but when they left the area, pedestrians walked over the paintings without hesitation. The same was true of music. Music blaring out on the street from loudspeakers in front of record shops elicited no reaction, but the moment live musicians began to play or sing, there was an instantaneous show of lively interest.

The attention paid to people and human activities was also illustrated by observations made in connection with the expansion of a department store in the area. While excavation and pouring of foundations were in progress, it was possible to see into the building site through two gates facing the pedestrian street. Throughout this period more people stopped to watch the work in progress on the building site than was the case for stops in front of all the department store's fifteen display windows together.

In this case, too, it was the workers and their work, not the building site itself, that was the object of interest. This was demonstrated further during lunch breaks and after quitting time – when no workers were on the site, practically nobody stopped to look.

life between buildings  
– one of the most  
important city  
attractions

A summary of observations and investigations shows that people and human activity are the greatest object of attention and interest. Even the modest form of contact of merely seeing and hearing or being near to others is apparently more rewarding and more in demand than the majority of other attractions offered in the public spaces of cities and residential areas.

Life in buildings and between buildings seems in nearly all situations to rank as more essential and more relevant than the spaces and buildings themselves.