I. PUBLIC SPACE: THE BASICS

Public spaces are places intended to be open and accessible to the community at large – usually at no or little cost. These can include everything from streets and roads, parks, public squares and plazas, to civic institutions such as libraries, community centres or City Hall. These are all places that are paid for by public taxes and are intended to improve life for everyone in an open and accessible way. Public space (or 'the public realm') is usually seen as the opposite of 'private space' – the homes, office buildings and stores that are owned by individuals and corporations, rather than by all citizens or residents. Let's take a closer look at some different types and uses of public spaces that so interested Jane Jacobs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SIDEWALKS AS PUBLIC SPACES

Sidewalks seem to be everywhere in an urban setting. They are part of our daily encounter with the city right from the moment we step out of our front door. Of course, the obvious role of sidewalks is to help people get from point A to point B, but they have many other important functions. As Jane Jacobs wrote in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961):

"Streets in cities serve many purposes besides carrying vehicles, and city sidewalks—the pedestrian parts of the streets—serve many purposes beside carrying pedestrians…. A city sidewalk by itself is nothing. It is an abstraction. It means something only in conjunction with the buildings and other uses that border it, or border other sidewalks very near it." (1961: 29)[1]

Among the reasons that Jane Jacobs argued that sidewalks are so important is that, when used well, they improve safety and security.

"To keep the city safe is a fundamental task of the city's streets and its sidewalks" (1961: 30)

The safety of a street is improved by its very use. Peace, in such an environment, is not kept by police so much as by a sufficient number of people – often strangers to one another – whose presence helps us feel a "comfort in numbers." In other words, a street, when it's well used, *becomes* safe. In turn, this feeling of safety allows the street to be well-used.

There are a number of factors argued by Jane Jacobs to encourage this feeling of safety, including: a clear separation between public and private space – so that the actual boundaries of the street are clear; the presence of "eyes on the street" – that is the eyes of community members, shopkeepers and others who help to indirectly monitor what goes on outside their windows; and, a critical mass of people to use sidewalks and streets. Take these elements away, and the perception of safety often dwindles.

Another reason that sidewalks were argued by Jane Jacobs to be such important public spaces is that they provide opportunities for us to come into contact with one another.

"The point of ... the social life of city sidewalks is precisely that they are public. They bring together people who do not know each other in an intimate, private social fashion and in most cases do not care to know each other in that fashion." (1961: 55)

Sidewalks, as an intricate web of criss-crossing paths between stores and public places, allow people to encounter one another. In fact, they provide a never-ending tapestry of interesting personas, expressions, attire and activity. Walk the same streets in your neighbourhood long

enough and you'll "get on familiar terms" with people – often, perhaps, without ever necessarily speaking to them. What results is a sense of mutual but unstated trust between the citizenry. What this means, in informal terms, is that daily encounters on the street create a sense of people looking out for one another.

"The sum of such casual, public contact… is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect." (1961: 56)

A third benefit identified by Jane Jacobs is that sidewalks can function as places where children can learn about the world under the watchful eye of community members. In these environments, children are allowed an element of freedom, without necessarily being isolated.

"Children in cities need ... an unspecialized outdoor home base from which to play, to hang around in, and to help form their notions of the world…It is this form of unspecialized play that the sidewalks serve…" (1961: 80 – 81)

But it's not all about play. Indeed, one of the results is that children learn about the essence of neighbourliness. Jane Jacobs call this the "first fundamental of city life" – that is, the idea of shared, or public, responsibility for each other and for the community.

PARKS AND OTHER OPEN SPACES

Parks and other open spaces are additional examples of public spaces that were identified as important by Jane Jacobs. As you might imagine, the very notions of encounter, critical mass, play and safety also factor into the success (or lack thereof) of a city's **open spaces**.

Conventionally, neighbourhood parks or parklike open spaces are considered boons conferred on the deprived population of cities. Let us turn this thought around, and consider city parks deprived places that need the boon of life and appreciation conferred on them. This is more nearly in accord with reality, for people do confer use on parks and make them successes—or else withhold use and doom parks to rejection and failure." (1961: 89)

In order for **parks**, **plazas** and **other open spaces** to work well they require a diverse "reservoir" of users – people with reasons to be in the park at different times of the day and for different reasons. And this means that there has to be a sufficient degree of diversity in the neighbourhoods that surround the park.

A park that has nothing but office towers on all sides is likely to find that its users are restricted to those that work in the towers – a "functional monotony" of people whose use of the park is limited to lunch hours, coffee breaks and brief after-work interludes. On the other hand, a park that is surrounded by a mixture of uses – schools, galleries, homes, shops, etc. – will likely result in a variety of users that reflect the diversity of its surroundings. As with sidewalks, this diversity of users helps create a feeling of safety and well-being, factors that make the park become a 'draw.' There are other features that contribute to the use of parks – such as good design, gathering places, recreation opportunities, the availability of sun and a sense of enclosure. But these features alone do not guarantee the well-being of a park; that comes from the social ingredients – the diversity of users.

II. PUBLIC SPACE TODAY

In many ways, our concerns about a city's public spaces – its sidewalks and parks – are more pressing than ever before. An increasing and diverse population, trends towards the privatization (or corporatization) of public places, environmental concerns and an increased focus on public health are among the trends that have influenced our ideas about public space in the last few decades.

CHANGING POPULATION, CHANGING PUBLIC

Not only is the population of Canada increasing, but it is also become more heterogeneous. A declining birth-rate among people who were born in this country means that much of our nation's population growth comes in the form of immigration from elsewhere. And by and large, most immigrants to Canada end up living in cities. In combination with the fact Canada is already highly urbanized, this means that our cities are growing, with more and more people using sidewalks, parks, community centres and other aspects of the public realm. As our cities densify, they will need to respond to an increasing need for public space, and an increasing diversity of needs. Consider the following quote from Setha Low, Dana Taplin and Suzanne Scheld, who wrote a book called *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity*:

In this new century, we are facing a different kind of threat to public space—not one of disuse, but of patterns of design and management that exclude some people and reduce social and cultural diversity. (2005: 1)

There a need to ensure that our public spaces are capable of managing the increased usage that they will be subject to; just as importantly, there are a greater array of needs and interests that need to be reflected in the design and use of public space – be these interests cultural, linguistic, economic, age or ability related. Whether or not this happens is a matter that will define how "public" our public spaces will be.

PRIVATIZATION OF PUBLIC SPACE

The increased privatization of public space is a notable trend of the last few decades. It involves the transfer – sometimes intentional, sometimes not – of control over public space from public authorities to private, usually corporate interests. This happens through a variety of ways:

- Through the hiring of private security firms to undertake patrol work traditionally handled by the police, or by neighbourhoods that would allow for 'eyes on the street.'
- Through the proliferation of new forms of advertising that have crept into public space – bigger billboards, advertising in public transit facilities, the sale of 'naming rights' on public buildings.
- Through the development of 'gated-communities' and enclosed shopping centres as a replacement for more traditional neighbourhoods – as these spaces often come with restrictions on behaviour, private security, and limitations on free speech, and free association that we associate with public space.
- The blurring of lines between public and private space that takes place in many new downtown developments – where public space that is created by the developer (as negotiated by the city government) is often constructed in such a way as to appear private.

PUBLIC HEALTH, ENVIRONMENT AND WALKABILITY

Another important emerging theme in creating vibrant public spaces is an increased emphasis on public health, the environment and what planners call "walkability" – that is, the overall conditions (good or bad) for pedestrian activity in a given neighbourhood or area.

Current goals for creating walkable communities include: the importance of pedestrian activity as a way to create vibrant streetscapes for a range of users; the importance of locating goods (such as housing, offices and retail) and services (such as transportation, schools, libraries) within an easy and safe walk for community residents and visitors.

Together, these goals are thought to improve the overall health of cities, both for individual walkers and for the environment in general. This happens by making walkability (or cycling!) an easy and enjoyable option that has many physical and mental health benefits. It also gets us out of our cars, thereby reducing harmful emissions that harm the environment.

WHAT CITIES ARE DOING TO HELP ENCOURAGE WALKABILITY:

- A growing number of major cities worldwide are developing pedestrian plans of some form. These include pedestrian charters, neighbourhood plans or sidewalk strategies.
- Many cities have created promotional / educational campaigns and programs.
- New models or designs that are trying to bring back pedestrians include New Urbanism, Transit Oriented Development, Pedestrian Pockets, Transit Villages and Urban Villages.

FURTHER LINKS

The City Repair Project
http://www.cityrepair.org/wiki.php/about
The City Repair Project is group of citizen activists creating public gathering places and helping others to creatively transform the places where they live.

Project for Public Spaces
http://www.pps.org/
Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public places that build communities.

GET INVOLVED

Your local government
Check with your local municipality to see if they have a pedestrian plan, or are working on sustainable transportation in any way. Ask them to refer you to their key planning documents… and if they don't have any ask them why!

Walk and Bike for Life
http://www.walkandbikeforlife.org
A Canadian based non- profit organization, with an international outlook. We are dedicated to improve awareness of the benefits of walking and cycling as activities and of urban parks and trails as great places, and their impact on creating healthier communities where its residents live happier.

walkON
http://www.walkon.ca
A partnership of Central West Heart Health Networks including: Choices 4 Health in walkON

Halton Region, Brant Healthy Living in Brant County, Health Action in Haldimand and Norfolk Counties, Together 4 Health in the Region of Waterloo, Healthy Living Niagara in the Niagara Region, the Community Heart Health Network in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph. We work together to support the development of walkable communities.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Centre
http://www.walkinginfo.org
The PBIC is a national clearing house for information about health and safety, engineering, advocacy, education, enforcement, access, and mobility for pedestrians, transit users and bicyclists.

Toronto Public Space Committee
http://www.publicspace.ca
Vancouver Public Space Network
http://www.vancouverpublicspace.ca
Both the TPSC and VPSN act as advocates for the public realm, working on campaigns related to urban design, public transportation, greenspaces, privatization and more. If there isn't a public space group in your city why not consider starting one!

III. EXERCISES: THINGS TO DO IN PUBLIC SPACES

As we have seen, public spaces including sidewalks, parks and other open spaces continue to be crucial to our daily lives. Public spaces are places where a sense of trust, safety and mutual support must be felt among strangers if we are to go about our lives together.

This brings us back to the question: ***how do public spaces work today?***

As a walk leader, it will be your challenge to bring different aspects of public spaces to the attention of your walkers. What's exciting is that in many cases sidewalks will be right under your feet or at your fingertips at least part of the time so you have a great opportunity to weave the ideas we've outlined into the theme of your own walk.

For these exercises we will focus on sidewalks but keep in mind that you can easily substitute parks, plazas or other open spaces for any of the exercises.

Here are three exercises that you can consider:

- **EXERCISE 1: WHAT'S ON YOUR SIDEWALK?**
- **EXERCISE 2: WHO'S ON YOUR SIDEWALK AND HOW ARE THEY USING IT?**
- **EXERCISE 3: HOW DOES YOUR SIDEWALK FEEL?**

Keep in mind that a great way to get people thinking is to ask good questions without necessarily providing the answers! Your job is to help people "see" and experience their city differently. A good way to do this is to engage your walkers directly in the exercises by asking them to share their own perspectives on public spaces, healthy sidewalks and walkable neighbourhoods.

EXERCISE 1: WHAT'S ON YOUR SIDEWALK?

For this exercise you can pause on a particular part of a city block, laneway or busy thoroughfare. Ask your walkers what they observe. What is present on the sidewalks (if there are any)? What is

missing? In some cases this might be the sidewalks themselves! Some of the things you might find on a sidewalk include:

- Bus stops
- Signs
- Benches, shelters
- Newspaper boxes, mail boxes
- Garbage bins
- Trees and other greenery
- Public art
- Food carts
- Animals
- Pedestrian crossings (marked or unmarked)
- Curb ramps, stairs, overpasses or underpasses
- Places to stop and rest
- Places to get out of the rain
- Construction barriers and broken sidewalks

Attached to sidewalks can be:

- Shops and other local businesses
- Schools
- Food markets
- Parks and other green spaces
- Homes
- Playgrounds
- Public squares
- Laneways and alleys
- Paths (marked and unmarked)

1. Ask your walkers how they think the "things" and places that they observe add to a vibrant sidewalk life (however they define it).

2. Ask how the things they observe (or the things that aren't there) take away from a vibrant sidewalk life.

3. Depending on who is on your walk and what the theme is, you can ask your walkers if their observations touch on any of the same themes that Jane Jacobs identified as important uses of sidewalks: safety; social contact; places for children; play and learning; criss-crossing paths.

4. Walkable neighbourhoods with good sidewalk life depend in many ways on maintaining small distances and good connections between buildings, schools, workplaces and social spaces. This gives people reasons to crisscross paths! Identify two or more important parts of sidewalk life on your chosen block or blocks. This might be a school, grocery store and park, for example. Walk from place to place then ask your walkers what they observed. Were there good connections between the places? Were the distances walkable for most people? What issues might pose barriers? What could improve walkability between your chosen sites?

EXERCISE 2: WHO'S ON YOUR SIDEWALK AND HOW ARE THEY USING IT?

A natural extension of observing **what** is on a sidewalk is to ask **who** is using the sidewalk and **how** it is being used. Be sure to remind your walkers that it's not just a matter of observing who is using a sidewalk, but just as importantly, who is **not**. Absences can tell us just as much about the vitality of sidewalk life.

Sidewalk users can include:

- Children
- Youth
- Adults
- Seniors
- People with mobility, hearing or vision impairments
- Homeless people

Sidewalk uses can include:

- Walking
- Jogging
- Cycling
- Skateboarding
- Parades and protests
- Sitting
- Resting
- Playing
- Dog walking
- Selling food or crafts
- Panhandling

Once again you should pause on a particular part of a city block, laneway or busy thoroughfare that is part of your walk. Ask your walkers what they observe. Who is present on the sidewalks (if there are any)? Who is missing?

1. Ask your walkers to reflect on how they think the people and activities that they observe add to a vibrant sidewalk life (however they define it).

2. If your walkers are able to identify people who aren't present on your sidewalk, ask them why they think this is the case? Is it a matter of accessibility (e.g. no sidewalk ramps or marked crosswalks), ambiance (too close to a busy road or no places to stop for a chat), time of day (night time versus day time) or safety (perceived danger because of poor lighting, few people around, certain types of people seen to be 'undesirable').

3. Ask your walkers to observe the mix of people on the sidewalk. Are there different types and ages of people? Do certain people seem more welcome than others? How are people interacting (or not) when they pass each other on the street? Do they greet each other? Stare straight ahead? Walk purposefully or linger to window shop and chat?

EXERCISE 3: HOW DOES YOUR SIDEWALK FEEL? A MINI AUDIT OF THE SENSES

Public spaces have an important role to play in fostering feelings of belonging, safety and integration to produce vibrant sidewalk life. This includes not only the physical dimensions of sidewalk life but also our sensory experiences. This last exercise picks up on these themes. You can incorporate this quick exercise into your walk by pausing at a few different planned spots on your walk and asking your walkers for their individual feedback on some of the following.

1. Ask your walkers to close their eyes and focus on what they hear at different points of the walk. Does traffic noise dominate? Can you hear birds and other animals? What about children playing? People socializing with each other? The sound of dishes clanking from a sidewalk café? All of these sounds tell us different things about the kind of sidewalk life that exists on the walk.

2. Try the same exercise with the sense of smell.

3. Try it yet again by paying attention to the feeling of weather. Are there places to get out of the rain or bright sunshine? Is there shelter from the wind?

---

[1] Quotes in this primer are drawn from Jane Jacobs. The Death and Life of Great American Cities. New York, Vintage Books. [1961] 1992.