ACTIVITIES IN THE PUBLIC SPACES

On this page three different categories of activities carried out in public spaces are described.
Among the three distinct categories of people activities - NECESSARY ACTIVITIES, OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES - the optional and the social activities are the important keys to city quality.

In poor quality city areas one will only find necessary activities ie. people doing things they have to do.

In good quality city areas one will find not only necessary activities (carried out under decent conditions) but also a multitude of recreational and social activities people love to do while in cities. However these activities will only happen if the circumstances are right; ie. if the city offers tempting, good quality spaces. This is why a good city can be compared to a good party - people stay for much longer than really necessary, because they are enjoying themselves.

THREE TYPES OF PEDESTRIAN ACTIVITIES

Necessary activities
The things that have to be done:
Going to school, waiting for the bus and going to work. In the short term these types of activities occur regardless of the quality of the physical environment because people are compelled to carry them out.

A Good City provides good conditions for the many necessary activities and will retain and strengthen these activities over time.

Optional activities (urban recreation)
Activities people are tempted to do when climatic conditions, surroundings and the place are generally inviting and attractive. These activities are especially sensitive to quality. They only occur when quality is high.

A Good City is characterized by a multitude of optional activities. People come to town, find the places attractive and stay for a long time. A great, attractive city can always be recognized by the fact that many people choose to spend time in the public spaces.

Social activities
These activities occur whenever people move about in the same spaces. Watching, listening, experiencing other people, passive and active participation.

A Good City offers a wide range of attractive optional activities, and because so many people are present in the city, there are many people to experience, watch and speak to. The city becomes a lively and wonderful city. A people city.

LIFE IN THE PUBLIC SPACES

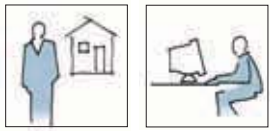
The good public space

The key to establishing lively and safe public spaces is pedestrian traffic and pedestrian activities.
The arrival to the public space will - in different combinations - happen via six forms of traffic - people will arrive on foot, by car, by train or tram, by bus or on bicycles. Eventually everybody will be pedestrians leaving their mode of transport behind and entering the public spaces experiencing the surroundings at eye level.
The traffic in good public spaces will primarily be dominated by walking, cycling and limited vehicular traffic. How the traffic will be distributed depends on the quality of the public spaces. If the vehicular traffic is too dominant the public spaces will neither be exciting for people nor lively. Worldwide examples show how public spaces with unfortunate compromises for pedestrians result in unattractive and deserted public spaces.
If on the other hand good conditions are provided for pedestrians more people will walk and many recreative and attractive activities will follow.
A public space of high quality will always be recognized by people interrupting their walk or daily business so they can rest, enjoy the city, the public spaces and be together with other people.

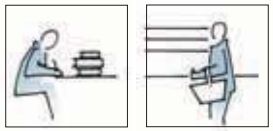
Good conditions for walking and for life on foot, along with a possibility for staying, for pauses and experiences are the key to attractive and lively public spaces.

Placa del Sol, Barcelona, Spain.

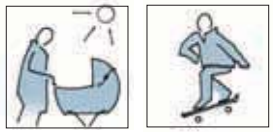
Which types of user groups can be expected to use the public spaces ?



1. **The every day users:** People that live and work in the area or walk through.



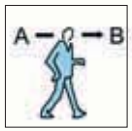
2. **The visitors/customers:** People that visit the functions in the area.



3. **The recreational visitors:** People that visit the area because the public space is delightful or use the public space in relation to recreation, pleasure, exercise, play etc.

4. **The visitors to events:** People that visit the public space because of special events.

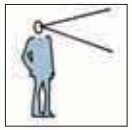
What kind of activities can be expected in the public spaces ?



A **Daily necessary activity:** To walk to and from or walk through

B **Daily recreational activity:** Breaks and pauses

C **Recreational activity:** Recreation and play

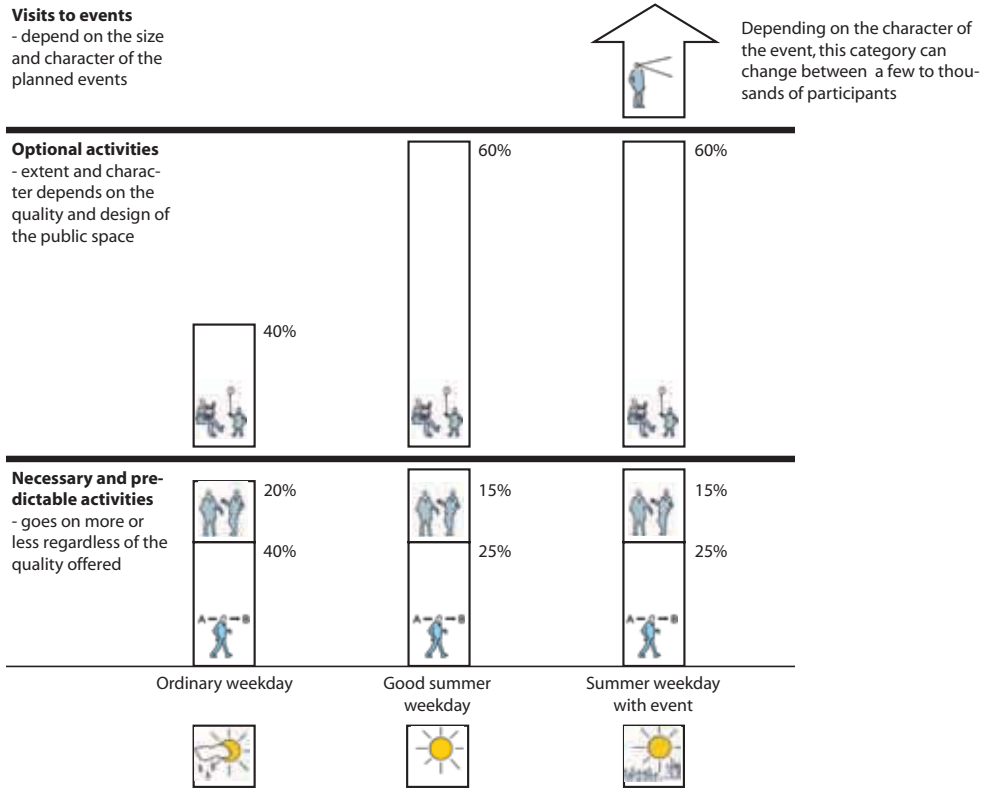


D **Planned activity:** To be a spectator /participant

Focus

When planning public spaces the most important group are those people who visit the area because the public spaces are delightful and who use the public space for recreation, pleasure, exercise, play etc.
To ensure that public spaces are lively and popular one must make sure that this group of people are given good conditions. This means that the public spaces must be highly attractive. Within this user group the focus can be on children, teenagers, adults or the elderly, and the public spaces can be designed to meet the different needs of different groups. If the public spaces are very attractive one can, on a day with nice weather, expect the group of public space visitors to make up the majority of people in the public space.

To the right is a list of criterias to be used as a guide in the design of public spaces. To create a "100% place" - meaning a place that combines all or nearly all the essential qualities to obtain comfort and pleasure for people - the majority of the listed criteria should be met.



DESIGNING / DETAILING THE PUBLIC SPACES
A KEY WORD LIST

PROTECTION

1. Protection against Traffic & Accidents

- traffic accidents
- fear of traffic
- other accidents

2. Protection against crime & violence (safety)

- lived in / used
- streetlife
- streetwatchers
- overlapping functions - in space & time

3. Protection against unpleasant climatic extremes

- wind / draft
- rain / snow
- cold / heat
- sun / glare

COMFORT

4. Possibilities for WALKING

- room for walking comfortably
- un-tedious layout of streets
- interesting facades
- good surfaces
- no obstacles
- good accessibility to key points

5. Possibilities for STANDING / STAYING

- staying zones
- 'Edge effect'
- defined spots for staying
- supports for staying

6. Possibilities for SITTING

- zones for sitting
- maximized advantages primary sitting possitions secondary sitting poss.
- benches for resting

7. Possibilities to SEE

- seeing-distances
- unhindered views
- interesting views
- lighting (when dark)

8. Possibilities for HEARING / TALKING

- low noise level
- bench arrangements »talkscapes«

9. Possibilities for PLAY / UNFOLDING / ACTIVITIES

- invitation to physical activities, play & entertainment - day & night and summer & winter

ENJOYMENT

10. Scale

- dimensioning of buildings & spaces in observance of the important human dimensions related to senses, movements, size & behaviour

11. Possibilities for enjoying positive aspects of climate

- sun / shade
- warmth / coolness
- breeze / ventilation

12. Aesthetic quality / positive sense- experiences

- good design & good detailing
- views / vistas
- trees, plants, water

THE INVADED AND THE ABANDONED CITY

THE INVADED CITY - Westport, Ireland

THE ABANDONED CITY - Spokane, WA, USA

Different cities have applied very different policies concerning people activities in the city centres and the design concepts for their public spaces.

- the invaded city
Cities being inundated with car traffic to such an extent that the pedestrians and the public life have almost been squeezed out. This has happened in many cities worldwide.

- the abandoned city
Cities where walking and public life has become completeley phased out. Many cities in North America are now in a situation where public life is non existent.

- the reconquered city
Cities which have striven to regain a reasonable balance between traffic, market and meeting places. This is the case in Barcelona (Spain), Strasbourg and Lyon (France), Freiburg (Germany) and Copenhagen (Denmark) - all European cities. From other continents cities such as Portland (USA), Curitiba (Brazil) and Melbourne (Australia) have gone through a similar development. In many of these cities can be found an impressive increase in the volumes of walking and other people activities in the public spaces. In Copenhagen a four-fold increase in public space activities over the past 25 years has been documented - closely corresponding to the improvements carried out in the pedestrian environments in the same period.

- from Gehl & Gemzøe »New City Spaces«, 2001