

# MINI-KEYNOTE: PEOPLE POWER — CITY PLANNING AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR



## Abstract

Winston Churchill famously stated: “We shape our buildings and they shape us.” I will apply this to the urban environment, taking this to mean that we should create public spaces that attract people and promote a feeling of well-being.

Important early research on human behavior in the urban environment was made back in the 1960s and 70s by such famous names as Jane Jacobs, Edward Hall, Kevin Lynch, William Whyte, Amos Rapoport, and Richard Alexander in the U.S., and Jan Gehl in Europe. Their core findings are still valid today. These early pioneers identified such things as people’s different sensory and emotional experiences, the characteristics of a “good place,” and the cues for behavior that the environment sends us. These assessments take place against a changing background of other people whose presence is often taken for granted. But here we may actually have the key “attractor” in the urban environment! People like to be around other people, and they like watching people. This can now be reverse-engineered: Create a place for people watching, add some props—like an improvised cafe—and see the use of space grow through the “people power” mechanism!

Indeed, early experiments in New York City and Copenhagen employed just this people power mechanism to transform “unfriendly” city spaces and streets into interesting and welcoming environments, at the same time as they changed people’s behavior. More recent experiments with street closings in New York, Paris, and elsewhere have shown the great transformative potentials of attractive city environments. And in some places people themselves have taken power and created attractive public places out of undefined (or badly defined) urban spaces.

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