

Book Review

City: Rediscovering the Center

by William Whyte, Doubleday, 1989

Reviewed by Robert E. Ansley

Many chroniclers of city life make dogmatic statements and predictions based on intuition and what they hope will happen. A skeptical few go look, draw conclusions and make forecasts from simple and prolonged observation. In *City: Rediscovering the Center*, William H. Whyte looks and looks and looks. And he quite capably tells us what he sees.

Whyte, best known for his 1956 study of suburbanization, *The Organization Man*, has become something of a patron saint to urban planners, architects and urban designers. For the past 20 years, he has relentlessly examined what people do in cities, and his reports have had great influence on the design and management of many of the more exciting public places in cities. This book, the culmination of his work, should be a standard reference for many years.

Whyte's message is that the design, development and management of cities has shunted people--mainly pedestrians--to secondary roles, if not altogether removed them. He reminds us that urban public spaces such as plazas, parks and sidewalks are merely stages for the show that is human activity. This activity is manifest in animated conversations, chance encounters, deal-making, reading, watching, resting, entertaining and walking.

Far too many designs have made the appearance and arrangement of the physical elements of public areas the objects of the development. They are not inviting or comfortable, and thus they are avoided. Or if a space is active, management often kills it by removing the features that attract people. People are considered too much trouble.

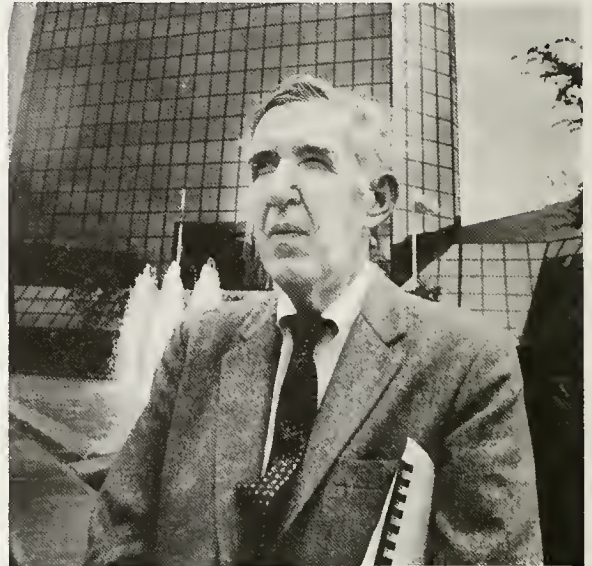
For example, in an attempt to make itself more livable, New York City in the 1960s offered the right to build larger buildings to developers who would provide public plazas. But the city made precious few stipulations as to design and management of these spaces. Owners and developers, not used to managing public areas and not yet having discovered the market value of well-planned ones, viewed them as minor irritations on the way to more leasable floor space. They gave these spaces minimal attention and expenditure. Worse, they felt that an empty, orderly plaza meant a smarter, more marketable building. Thanks to Whyte and his disciples, New York has had some success in reversing these trends.

City is replete with simple, convincing and often inexpensive techniques to give public spaces back to people. These include tables, chairs, sitting ledges, trees, benches at right angles for face-to-face conversations, food vendors, sunlight, comfortable steps and so on. No great discoveries here, but it is surprising the extent they have been forgotten.

Anathema to Whyte are those elements that "dullify" a city: skyways, underground concourses, enclosed atriums, immovable furniture and vast empty areas of concrete, all of which remove people from public areas or steer them away.

Whyte, who was once hired to translate the plan of New York into readable prose, spares us virtually all jargon while also making this an excellent reference book. Where he criticizes, he makes good usable suggestions. More pictures would have better illustrated some of his arguments, but the reader is never lost.

The chief audience for this book will be planners, architects, designers, developers, property managers and the like. But anyone who has an interest in urban life will find it delightful and reassuring. Whyte is a confirmed believer in people, and he eloquently shows that more often than not in spontaneity there is order.



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