



Jan Gehl is a
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INTERVIEW

Jan Gehl

Singapore as the World's First Car-Free City

World-renowned urban designer and CLC Visiting Fellow **Jan Gehl** has studied public spaces for 50 years, and advised cities globally for the last 20. He tells Dinesh Naidu about threats facing public spaces, how cities can create people-centric places, and his dream of Singapore as the world's first car-free city.

Why should today's city leaders care about public space?

It is very important for social inclusion and democracy that people in neighbourhoods and townships meet face to face regularly. So that you realise that you are a part of this society, and that these people are your fellow citizens. I think that is very important.

With the enormous growth in digital communications, one can get the idea that all this cyberspace can make public space redundant. But there is no evidence at all. On the contrary, I think indirect contact, like social media, inspires people to see other people in real life.

We can do a thought experiment. If everybody were given an iPhone, spread out in the Sahara and asked to make a living, they would go crazy right away because man is a social animal. We need contact with other people. Throughout history, contact with other people in public spaces has been a very important part of the way we live as human beings, and it still is. If anything, with longer life spans, smaller families, and more leisure time, there is a strong tendency that we will use good quality public spaces more intensively.

“... after the year 2000, we can see a change in attitude. Now, more and more cities are working on securing good conditions for public life.”

Has interest from cities in public spaces grown over time, and if so, why?

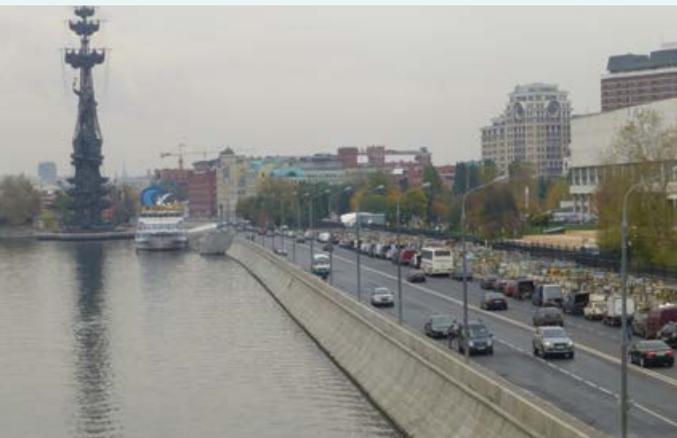
Definitely. I see 1960 as a turning point, when cities all over the world started to expand. It was also when motorcars started to invade cities and became very plentiful. And for a period of time, most cities didn't think of this as a challenge.

Then there came a counter movement, of which my career is a good example. I saw, worldwide, the realisation that public life was becoming endangered. From the 70s to 90s, more and more city governments realised that motorcars were pushing out the life of the city. But especially after the year 2000, we can see a change in attitude. Now, more and more cities are working on securing good conditions for public life.

A very good example is Moscow, which was completely invaded by motorcars. Cars were all over the place and it was so awful with fumes and pollution. As a result, there was less and less life in the city. But since 2012, they have made great efforts to make better conditions for people to walk, and to enjoy the parks and the squares to uphold the city as a meeting place.

I've been consulting for Perth for 25 years and I think that they have one of the most remarkable changes I've ever seen in the world. One of the things they did was that they turned all their one-way streets into two-way streets with wider sidewalks and trees. They've completely changed the character of the whole city in just the last 10 years. I am so impressed with how they turned that completely silly city into a rather lovely city.

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01 & 02 The Krymskaya embankment in Moscow before and after interventions.

03 The new Elizabeth Quay in Perth, Australia.

04 Researchers from Gehl Architects making observations in the field.



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What advice would you give to cities trying to reclaim space from cars?

My advice would be that these changes should be made based on documentation and information. That means that the first thing that you should do is record how people are using the city today. Based on this, you could make an overview of where improvements could be made, where it would be most efficient or give the best results. So my advice really is to have the data. Do not just start blindly doing projects here and there.

Are gated communities and privately-owned public spaces obstacles to the democratic role of public spaces?

We can talk about two models. One is the open society, where you have access to the various parts of society. To me, “open” and “democratic” go together. In this open society, rich and poor, and various cultural or religious groups have access to the same spaces, can meet and realise that this society is

made up of all these different types of people; and together, we are a nation.

At the other extreme is a totally gated society, where everybody lives in fortresses, and all communication is made by television, emails or whatever. This is totally different from the open society. I’m strongly against the gated community because I think that it is so much more valuable if we can make a wonderful city where everybody can enjoy.

Public spaces which are privately-owned, like airports and shopping malls, can perform some functions of being a meeting place for people. But generally, there are much stricter rules for what you can do, and they also keep out people who are seen as strange or too poor. Publicly-owned spaces have a much wider range of activities because they are governed by the police and the government who put down rules on what is and is not allowed in this society. They are not governed by what is good or not good for business.



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Besides cars or gated communities, are there other threats to public spaces?

Terrorism is influencing a number of cities in Germany, France and around the world—the fear is that terrorists would attack the places where many people love to go. I see that as a very serious threat—if we start to be afraid of going into the city, instead of enjoying to go into the city.

I don't know what we can do to tackle this. But I think it's very important to stick to the open society idea so that we don't gradually lock ourselves in privatised worlds with guards and gates surrounding us, living in little fortresses in fear of the world. We have to fight these threats and insist on our public and our humane traditions—that it is a human right to be able to meet your fellow citizens.

What makes a successful public space?

From my research, I have put down 12 criteria for a good public space. Piazza del Campo in Siena, Italy, is one of the best examples. All 12 criteria are very convincingly addressed there. That's why it's so well-functioning after 700 years, and is world-famous. On the other hand, I know a number of places that are



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deserted, and if people do visit, they run out as quickly as they can. You'll realise in some of these places they have overlooked all 12 criteria.

So there is a very close correlation between the quality offered and the popularity and the well-functioning of a public space. You have to be very careful with these criteria to create a wonderful space. You can spot a successful space if people spend more time there, or seek out this place from far away.

How do you find Singapore's public spaces, and what more would you like to see here?

Boat Quay, Chinatown and Little India are some very interesting areas in Singapore. What I feel is that they are not linked in any convincing way. You can easily go to Singapore and overlook quite a few of these. So I suggest that an active policy be made to link these places in a better way—maybe a light rail going through the city.

The idea of having more pedestrian traffic underground is not very good. You are protected from heat and rain, but after 10, 20 or 30 years, these passages tend to be very uninteresting. There's so much more

01 Mourners remembering victims at a site of the 2015 Paris terror attack.

02 Pedestrians need to use overhead bridges to traverse multi-lane roads in Singapore.



fun and enjoyment moving at the surface of the earth. If you go to Orchard Road in Singapore, you see that you have much better temperature at the sidewalks when you have ample tree coverage. You can easily walk in the daytime in Singapore if you are careful with the vegetation. So don't push people underground, like moles, or even to the second level. They have done quite a bit of this in Canada and northern USA, which they regret bitterly now. Because it's very difficult to get the surface working again as a public space.

Do you think sky gardens work as public spaces?

I think we need research on this, so that it's not speculation and we can base it on real facts. Gardens in the sky provide fresh air and relief for those living or working in high-rise buildings. I suspect that they function as public spaces to a certain degree, but also that a good park at the ground level—easily accessible for all in the community, not just those who live in this high-rise—would be in most cases a much better solution.

Are cycling and walking viable mobility options in a tropical city like Singapore?

In my dream, I see Singapore as the first city in the world to be car-free.

It's really stupid to drive cars on an island that is 50 by 25 kilometres, and where people live so densely. If you are to expand from five million to seven or eight million people, you cannot rely on technology from Detroit in the United States in 1905, which has given everybody four rubber wheels to secure individual mobility. That was a good strategy a hundred years ago, but it's certainly not a good one for 21st century cities, and especially not for Singapore, which is so confined and so condensed.

Singapore could be served by fantastic neighbourhoods where you walk and cycle short distances without getting too sweaty, with a very efficient public transportation system that links these neighbourhoods. You don't need cars at all in Singapore, in my opinion.

It would be really lovely if you start to analyse what would be a smart mobility strategy for an island city like Singapore. You could have much better neighbourhoods than the ones you have today, where school children have to climb up and down silly bridges to get to their schools. People would walk, bicycle, and use public transportation, and cars are only used for emergency services, people with disabilities and deliveries.

The promotion of walking and bicycling is more obvious in certain countries than others.



The Piazza del Campo from Siena, Italy is Gehl's model public space.



Gehl's 12 Criteria for Good Public Spaces

Protection – against

- traffic / accidents
- crime / violence
- unpleasant sensory experiences

Comfort – opportunities to

- walk
- stand / stay
- sit
- see
- talk / listen
- play / exercise

Delight – through

- human-scale urban design
- chances to enjoy good climate
- positive sensory experiences

“In my dream, I see Singapore as the first city in the world to be car-free.”





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In Copenhagen, we do a lot of bicycle commuting because that keeps us warm, but that's not your problem. In Singapore, I see bicycling as something for small trips, to the train station or supermarket, and not to commute for half an hour in the heat. Bicycling can be used very differently in different climates.

What do you think of placemaking events to enliven public spaces?

Promoting activities and festivals for communities is a very valuable activity. But you cannot use placemaking as a sort of acupuncture, where you go in and do a little bit here and a little bit there. What is needed are strategies for the whole city, as part of a people-oriented policy. Cities like Perth, Copenhagen, New York and Moscow have city-wide strategies to improve the situation.

Then you can go into individual places, streets, squares or parks and have some further programmes to promote that place and organise events. But I think there is a tendency for some cities to do a number of little placemaking things and they skip the overall question of a general strategy for mobility, health and sustainability. Smaller placemaking interventions are great, but they are not the answer.

How can citizen inputs be usefully incorporated into creating public spaces? Are there limits to this?

No, I would not say there are limits. It's very interesting that there is such an enormous interest among the general population about public spaces. Whenever you have a public meeting with public spaces on the agenda, people come in great numbers and they have lots of ideas and suggestions. That shows that these things are close to people's hearts.

We should value and use this public interest as a resource. But we must also be professional and study the subjects very carefully before we go to the public meetings, so that we have something to offer to the people. We should tell them, "This is what the problems are, and this is what has been done in other places and cities" so people can get an overview of possible solutions, and then discuss on a more informed level. We have an enormous obligation to inform the people as part of a public process, because you can never ask for something you've never heard about. We have to tell them about other successful neighbourhoods and say, "Are there some of these things you like to see happening in your community?" 

01 Shade trees at Orchard Road in Singapore show how tropical cities can be walkable.

02 Singapore is developing walking- and cycling-friendly towns, beginning with Ang Mo Kio.