

URBAN MENTOR INVITES CITIES TO LIFE

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Danish architect and “urban quality consultant” Jan Gehl has advised on ways to invigorate the urban life of, among other cities, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Amman, Sydney, Adelaide, Perth, Hobart, San Francisco, Seattle, London, New York City ... and Melbourne. In fact, Melbourne was one of the first cities to engage his services, in 1994. Long before London (2004) or NYC (2007-08).

It was in the 1970s that Professor Gehl began to undertake systematic studies of urban life and public spaces, investigating the relationship between buildings, spaces and human behaviour in an effort to re-create cities for people. He has always credited his wife, psychologist Ingrid Gehl, with bringing to his attention the fact that the interaction between form and life is a precondition for a good, liveable city.

The foundation of all Professor Gehl’s recommendations to cities is that it is essential to re-orient cities towards the pedestrian and the cyclist. He considers the bicycle simply a rapid form of foot traffic.

Speaking in London at a conference organised by *The Economist* in January (“Creating tomorrow’s liveable cities”), Professor Gehl said he had never met a mayor who did not declare that the goal of his or her city was for it to be lively, safe, sustainable and healthy.

The simple and direct route to this end, he said, is being “sweet to homosapiens” – something city planning since the car-oriented 1960s has virtually sidelined. “If we are sweet to pedestrians and make sure they can move about in dignity, and sweet to the cyclists – to all people who want to use their own muscles to get around – we are actually addressing all 4 of these issues,” Professor Gehl said.

“If we are focused more on the people in the city we will have a better scale of city. We’ll also have less stress because we’ll move slower and we’ll have less noise and less pollution, and the city will be dominated by the most fascinating thing in our lives: other people.”

Focusing on inviting people to walk and bike through a city achieves safety and sustainability goals, he said, because a city good for bicycling and walking has a good public realm and is geared towards servicing public transport – as well as improving the health of the population.

The key word for Professor Gehl in this strategy is ‘inviting’: deliberately building an inviting environment for pedestrians and cyclists. “Whenever we make good conditions for public life, for people to come together to meet their fellow citizens, they will come if we provide the quality.”

He said a simple city-improvement policy would be something like: “In this city we will do whatever we can to shift the emphasis from car driving to a policy where we *invite* people to walk and bicycle as much as possible as part of their day-to-day activities. And to do that we will make the systems of good quality, so that for once the people in the city will not feel like they are third priority and that the car is king.”

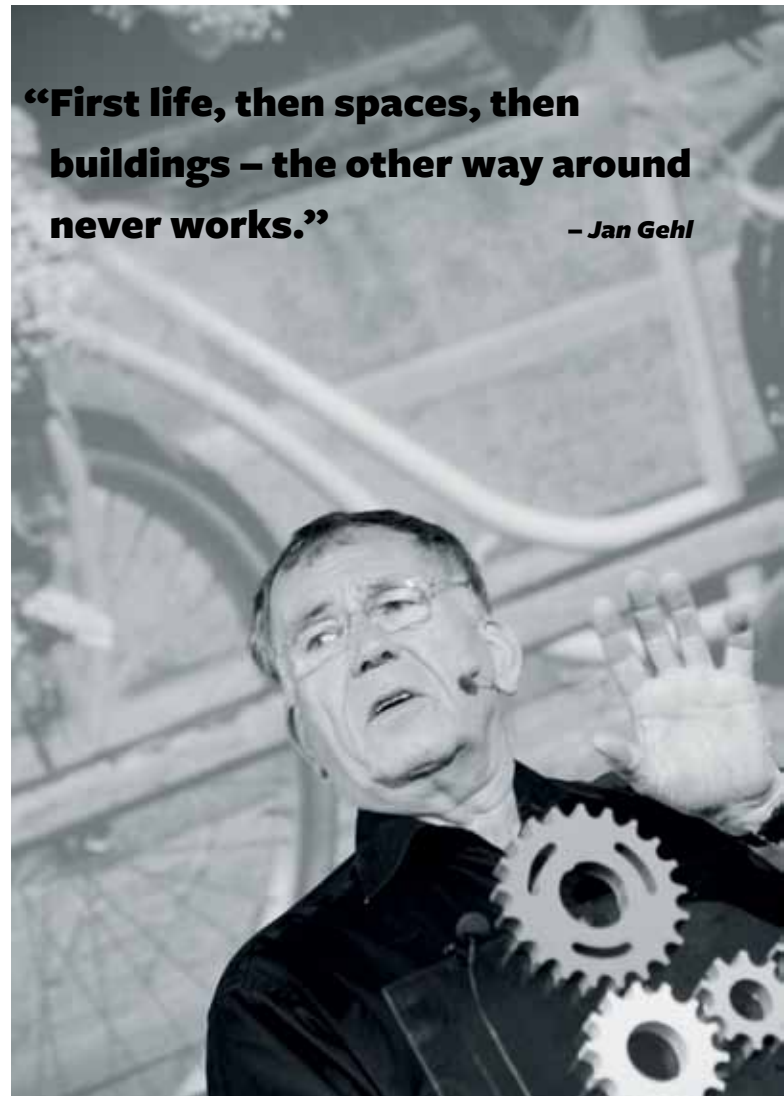
In the mid-1980s, Melbourne was nicknamed “the doughnut”, he said, its city centre empty and lifeless. In 1994 the problems were analysed, the volume of city life documented and an ambitious program of urban improvements drawn up. Subsequently, housing in the city increased,

Federation Square and the Yarra promenades were laid out and arcades and laneways opened up. To invite people to walk, footpaths were expanded, bluestone pavements laid, high-quality city furniture added, trees planted, a world-leading art-in-the-city program initiated and night lighting installed.

Professor Gehl returned to study Melbourne in 2004. Importantly, his regular city life surveys of Melbourne, and his hometown of Copenhagen, have documented that improving conditions for pedestrian traffic leads to new patterns of use and more life in city space.

His methods and results are described in detail in his fifth book, *Cities for People*, published last year. The book is the culmination of more than 40 years of his work transforming urban environments and

“First life, then spaces, then buildings – the other way around never works.”
– Jan Gehl



recreating cityscapes on a human scale.

In Melbourne he found marked improvements since 1994. Both pedestrian traffic and 'staying activities' had increased, in step with the many urban improvements, and pedestrian traffic had increased by 39% during the day and doubled at night.

"They have done a fabulous upgrading of the city [of Melbourne]," he said, "There are more people there and it really has changed from a dull and uninteresting to a fascinating, invigorated place and, in this process all the economic factors have gone up – there are more jobs, higher turnover, higher real estate values ... you name it."

Interestingly, Professor Gehl says much city improvement work is undertaken in a cold economic climate. Barcelona, Lyon, Melbourne and Copenhagen all worked to improve the quality of their urban life in economic downturns. In the 1970s and 1980s, Copenhagen went through dire economic times, but "the city's politicians openly declared: 'We are not so poor that we cannot make another park or square to lift the spirits of our citizens'," Professor Gehl said.

Jan Gehl was instrumental in the pedestrianisation of Copenhagen's main street, Strøget, which began in 1962, with further closures in 1973, 1980 and 1992. This precinct is in many ways his 'laboratory', and he coined the term 'Copenhagenize' to describe the transfer of ideas refined here to the rest of the world.

Melbourne and Copenhagen both feature regularly on 'most liveable cities' lists, and these cities are always the ones that are great for biking and walking, Professor Gehl said. 'Most liveable' is also a label guaranteed to increase people's desire to live in the city as well as increase property prices, showing that 'Copenhagenizing' makes excellent economic sense. "If you are sweet to people on the surface in the public realm that may also be a very good recipe for being sweet to your economy."

In New York City, Professor Gehl's influence can be seen in the closure of Broadway to car traffic and the street furniture that now fills Times Square. Done as an experiment in 2009, 75% of New Yorkers thought it was the best thing that had happened in the city in the 21st century and the pedestrian and biking zone is now permanent.

In 2007 NYC began rolling out a program to make Manhattan and the other 4 boroughs bicycle-friendly – with lightning speed; in just 3 years more bike lanes have been made in the city than there are in Copenhagen. "They're doing it very cheaply – just putting out coloured asphalt," Professor Gehl said. "But like in Sydney and Melbourne, we have seen people pick up the invitation to bicycle.

"When they can make it there, you can make it anywhere." *

KEEN?

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"Until about 1960, cities throughout the world were primarily developed on the basis of centuries of experience. Life in city space was a vital part of this wealth of experience and it was taken for granted that cities were built for people ... [but] in step with burgeoning urban growth, city development was turned over to professional planners. Theories and ideologies began replacing tradition as the basis for development. Modernism, with its vision of the city as a machine ... became highly influential. ... [and] a new group, traffic planners, came gradually on the scene with their ideas and theories on how to ensure the best conditions – for car traffic."

– *Cities for People*, 2010

