

**Fieldwork in public space assessment: William Holly Whyte and the *Street Life Project* 1970 to 1975**

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This chapter outlines the twin roles of analysis and intuition in the assessment of public space through an example of urban fieldwork. The territory for this ‘creative legwork’ is the public spaces of Modernist Midtown Manhattan, much of which was built as a result of 1961 zoning regulations. This fieldwork creatively adopted methods usually used by other fields, and through ‘legwork’, changed legislation and encouraged better designs, ‘When architects and planners designed by intuition, Holly gave them facts (Whyte 1969, Goldberger 1999:55)’<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the fieldwork was to understand why some spaces ‘work for people, and some do not, and what the practical lessons might be.’ This is from the opening lines of *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, written by William Hollingsworth Whyte Jr. or Holly Whyte as he was known. This pre-book and film (Whyte 1980) recorded the findings of a special fieldwork group which Whyte established, called *the Street Life Project*. He regarded both book and film as stop-gaps to change planning legislation. With the publication of *City-Rediscovering the Centre* in 1988, he completed a trilogy of urban design guides which remain core texts in many Urban Design courses today.

Whyte's (1917 to 1999) own field was journalism, a role he shares with many noted reformers in urban design, Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs and Ian Nairn. What distinguishes him and makes his work critical to a discourse on fieldwork, is not only his connections to and from other fields, but his life-long dedication to seeking the universal from the particularities of place.

Whyte was an ex US-Marine Corps Captain and Intelligence Officer who joined Fortune Magazine in 1946. As its assistant managing editor from 1952 to 1958, he turned a few magazine series into successful books. His most popular was on corporate America which grew from observations in Forest Park, Illinois and was based on some 'good old-fashioned shoe leather' (Whyte 2002: xiv) which led to his best selling book *The Organization Man* first published in 1956. Another work turned attention from the suburbs to the design of the city, and resulted in *The Exploding Metropolis* (Whyte 1958). The latter text brought Whyte to the attention of the conservation philanthropist, Laurance Spellman Rockefeller, whose patronage, together with consultancy work for a number of state bodies, freed Whyte from Fortune's publishing house, Time Inc.. A period of work influencing legislation relating to the effects of sprawl, a term coined by Whyte was followed by a move to urban fieldwork from 1969.

What predisposed Whyte, a successful editor and best selling author to spend the rest of his career walking the streets of Manhattan recording how vendors, buskers

and undesirables use its steps and street corners? The shift from piecework to fieldwork, 1969 to 1979, from *Organization Man* to *Observation Man* (Birch 1986) was marked by the establishment of his *Street Life Project*. This chapter is organised around three phases: before the field, to set the context; in the field, for methodology; and after the field, for post-production analysis.

Despite the vast quantities of fieldnotes assembled by the Street Life Project, an archive does not exist for it or for William Holly Whyte. This is partly due to his peripatetic and episodic professional life and in part to a couple of fires at his home. The *Street Life Project* and its influence are relatively undocumented as a result. In researching this project, un-catalogued archives of the American Conservation Association Archives and the Rockefeller Brother's Fund held by the Rockefeller Archive Center and files in storage by Project for Public Spaces, 1970 to 1975 were used. The details are pieced together using his vast writings, interviews with colleagues, his Alma Maters, (St. Andrew's School, Delaware & Princeton University) and Whyte's family and by walking the spaces he documented.<sup>2</sup>

### **Before the field - context**

Andreas Feininger's 1948 image of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, 'all tense and unsmiling' (Whyte 1988:iv) sums up a congested and miserable, *Anti-City* image that was gaining sway in the 1950s and 1960s. Funnelled between street face and queuing traffic, the telephoto lens foreshortens the pedestrians, suggesting overcapacity and

congestion, while the hazy light recalls images of contagion; either way it played to a popular worry about the ‘spectre of overcrowding’ (Whyte 1988:4) and a default dystopia driving decentralist planning policy. Whyte’s intuition was that density and concentration made cities prosper. His field-work deliberately set out to capture an antidote to a gritty and pejorative image of the city.

Impetus came in the late 1960s, with an opportunity to challenge recent policy that was prompting the proliferation of new urban spaces. With its set-back from Park Avenue as well as its popularity, the Seagram Plaza of 1958 had given the city the idea for a plaza bonus or a new planning tool, namely Incentive Zoning, which was implemented by the New York Planning Commission in 1961 to extract planning gains: for every square foot of new plaza space provided, the developer could add ten square feet of office space. The bonus, or Open-Space zoning provision, proved almost embarrassingly successful. Floor space grew by twenty percent but did benefits accrue to the city to balance the net gain of developers? Hundreds of new spaces were created but many of these were poorly considered and were empty. Whyte’s intuition led him to ask how they were working in reality. Nobody knew and it seemed that nobody wished to know. This affront to civic justice incensed Whyte. Were people attracted to quiet spaces or did they prefer more congested places? Whyte set out to record where people chose to be and whether their behavior suggested a preference for either. Informed by the adage of cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead that ‘What people say,

what people do, and what they say they do are entirely different things'<sup>3</sup>, Whyte was curious to separate perception from fact.

Whyte was able to pursue his enquiry as an outsider within the planning department. Under the pro-city bias of John Lindsay, New York Mayor 1966-1973, he had been invited to edit the draft City Plan. He agitated for an evaluative unit and contested that the City should evaluate the effectiveness of these expensive public spaces. The Plan itself was criticised for its lack of substantive analysis which held resonance with Whyte, so he offered to substantiate his long held anti-city scepticism with an immediate challenge. If he could prove what makes the good spaces good and the bad ones bad, he could amend the code. He was driven to convert his suspicion to facts and arm himself with evidence aimed at officials, planners and legislators.

It is unclear how the eighteen spaces<sup>4</sup> finally documented in the *Street Life Project* were selected but they included a range of sizes and a spectrum of popularity, mostly concentrated in Manhattan's midtown, a short walk from Whyte's own office. They were nearly all associated with office developments due to the incentive zoning bonus. Whyte credits a serendipitous street encounter for becoming the first ever recipient of a grant-aided National Geographic Domestic Expedition. The grant formally established *the Street Life Project* as an expedition unit and it received funding for two consecutive years. Marilyn Russell was the first member to join Whyte in 1970 and early in 1971, she was joined by

Nancy Linday. Their initial findings fortified Whyte's belief in the viability of a small evaluative group. Their observations were supplemented by social commentaries undertaken by sociology students during Whyte's year-long Professorship at Hunter College. Later members rotated between Fred Kent, Ellen Asher, Marge Bemiss, Ann Herendeen and Elizabeth Dietel representing a range of disciplines, plus interns.

### **In the field- methods of the Street Life Project**

‘A word about methodology. Direct observation was the core of our work.’

(Whyte 1988:4)

The group's method focused on behavioural mapping, social commentaries and time-lapse photography. Their expedition began when Whyte mounted time-lapse cameras on the McKim, Mead & White's Racquet Club building directly opposite one of the archetypal icons of high-modernism, Mies Van der Rohe's Seagram Tower and the Seagram Plaza on Park Avenue, Manhattan to record “dawn to dusk patterns”.(Whyte 1988:105) This was by far the most popular of recently completed public plazas. ‘Many thought it should not be but it was and we were curious to know why’ (Whyte 1979)

Reflecting on the team's work, Jan Gehl confirmed that they established the primary tool for understanding how people use public space; ‘eye-ball

observation', which is to observe at eye-level and jot down on paper what you observe on the ground.<sup>5</sup> They backed up fieldnotes with a record of physical characteristics in order to explore correlation of levels of activity with actual location. They noted what people did, where they met, how and where they shook hands or took leave. They recorded the time of day, logged the weather, and tallied the total on each chart. They jotted down a head count at regular intervals. They circled the social groupings; the proportion of people in groups, the size and gender composition of each. Countless charts are testimony to their diligence. When viewed today, their method seems accessible and possible to be repeated by relatively untrained fieldworkers. Each chart fitted on a clip-board and was notated by hand on gridded maps or on characteristic blue-graph paper.

'There is primitive power in the tools Holly used to craft his thesis: simple observation, time-lapse Super 8 movie cameras, hand-drawn maps and charts made with press type' (Whyte 1988: xii)

To test where people stopped to talk, whether people moved to the side or out of the way of the main pedestrian stream, they tracked movements. Well edited video footage captures the silhouettes of bodies, and their long shadows, moving across the pale gridded granite of the Seagram Plaza which is timeless footage amidst the otherwise colourful 1970s setting while the honking, sounds of the city are temporarily muffled by its water fountains.

[IMAGE 6.1 AROUND HERE]

Dimensions mattered and records of the physical characteristics of public spaces studied indicate the hours of measurements that the team invested. The overall square footage was noted. So was the length and breadth of spaces as they wished to monitor the prevalence of long-narrow plazas. Steps and level changes were of interest due to the prevalence of partially sunken or raised plazas. The rise and going (tread) of every step was measured with Eadweard Muybridge precision, picking up on rhythm and mood. Notwithstanding the time invested assessing the level change of steps and plazas, it should be noted that because Whyte was not a designer, there are some spatial shortfalls regarding plan analysis. For instance, the Seagram Plaza has a fall of nearly five feet from end to end which changes the granite edge on one side from bench level to a seven foot high fairly blank wall at the opposite end. Also, all the field-maps of the plazas end at the kerb-edge of the plaza and do not include the surrounding buildings so the connection to street activity is less apparent from the visual charts, giving the time-laps a distinctive edge. They followed up with interviews to find out why people were there, where they had come from, how frequently they used the space and what they thought of it. This is where activities and a cast of characters were recorded. A fieldnote on Washington Square from Mon, April 12th 1971, (Noon, weather sunny, temp 65 to 70) noted 'Chess was underway at the corner of Washington Place and McDougal; there were half a dozen games underway'.<sup>6</sup>



While working on the New York City Plan, Whyte had significantly influenced the inclusion and use of images in relation to text, so it was a small step for him to narrate and co-create a film commissioned by the City to promote the plan, 'What is the City But the People,' (Whyte, 1969). As a journalist, Whyte embraced this media as a means of public communication, accurately capturing the dynamic field they were interrogating. Whyte's interest in the visual documentary of time-lapse photography offered the advantage of gathering a large amount of information relatively quickly *in the field* and of speeding up analysis of patterns *after the field*. 'Time-lapse does not save time, it stores it. What you have to do is ...hypothesize: ask questions of the film' (Whyte 1980:109) The analysis of 1,000s of feet of film footage was time consuming and required skilled editing for visual frames to be appealing to a wider audience.

Encouraged by evidence that overall numbers using the open space of the city were increasing by twenty five percent year on year [from 1972 to 1973 and 1973 to 1974], the Street Life Project concentrated on specific characteristics that differentiated popular spaces from empty ones. Whyte focused on choice. Why were people choosing to be in some spaces and what hindered the inhabitation of others? In their after-the-field analysis, findings were distilled into legible charts tabulated by popularity. A pattern began to appear. What was found was that the busiest, densest places are where people are most likely to congregate. Despite protestations to the contrary, the team observed that most people cannot resist a tendency toward self-congestion, that they are propelled into the thick of things, to

what he termed the '100% location'. Far from moving out of the way, most people, not just the gregarious, have an innate urge to move further into the flow. The longer the conversation, the more likely they were to stand 'smack in the middle'. Spaces that attracted groups, generally in twos or threes, signalled the most popular spaces and registered the highest use overall, confirming that people, when alone, also gravitated towards these spaces.

[IMAGE 6.2 AROUND HERE]

After sixteen years walking the streets and plazas of Manhattan, Whyte was apologetic about the deceptively simple findings. 'No matter how many other variable we checked, one basic point kept coming through; people sit where there are places for them to sit'. (Whyte 1988: 110) In the film, he explains the merits of movable seats by showing a choreography of chairs at Paley Park, a space that had registered the highest occupancy numbers but which was also perceived as the least crowded of spaces. He attributed this overlap of a sense of control and comfort within density, to 'that fine old invention, the movable chair' as people enjoy 'being around strangers more when there is a little something they can control; like a chair they can move.' (Whyte 1980:35) An anti-thesis was unfolding between perception and facts, between what people said and what people did. Whyte wound down the Street Life Project in 1975 once he had sufficient data to amend the 1961 plaza bonus but supported his researcher, Fred Kent, to set up Project for Public Spaces to continue their methodology

### **After-the-field analysis.**

‘Communicating the findings was to take more time than arriving at them.’

(Whyte 1980:15)

The fieldwork on the plazas took five years and the analysis continued for another thirteen years until the publication of *City* in 1988. Complex charts on pedestrian flows, seating patterns and other data were converted to simple graphics showing comparative analysis. The film represents this analysis of bar charts like the relief score of a wind-up music box with a clear narration as to patterns of use. Margot Wellington, ex Director of the Municipal Art Society of New York, which sponsored Whyte’s film and provided a space to show early screenings as a silent film, recalls how Holly would perform live and hone his narration through reaction from live audiences.<sup>7</sup> At one screening, at the Urban Land Institute, a number of significant developers of the Midtown area were in attendance. Whyte led them into his research, in a matter of fact manner, only to disarm them by revealing which spaces did not work. He used artistic effects to hide blank walls or empty plaza behind.

Whyte’s aim was to work within the system to cause change, to establish an influence on the planning process, a link between good design and the evaluation of good places. The most immediate practical application of the findings was that

Whyte wrote detailed amendments to the Open-Space zoning provisions which were adopted by New York City in May 1975. The new zoning revisions imposed higher design standards, mandated amenities and open space standards, restricted height above natural grade and differentiated between sidewalk widening and useable plazas. In all it impacted two-thirds of the total 503 spaces created by the code (Kayden 2000). The ubiquitous presence of street vendors and movable chairs in New York today is evidence of the influence of their findings. Dan Biederman of Bryant Park Corporation credits Whyte for reforming Bryant Park in the 1980s to securing its status as one the most popular spaces in Midtown Manhattan today.

## **Conclusion**

William Holly Whyte's work with the Street Life Project is seminal for what it did, for when it did it, for the immediacy of its effect and for the enduring lessons of its method. This chapter has outlined the contribution of this 'outsider's' urban fieldwork. Perhaps the prime legacy of this particular fieldwork is its drawing from both particularities of the place, and observations of social use. Whyte's intuition that people are attracted to other people and to the city centre was proved using methods that range from dimensional measurement, to empirical, post-occupancy, observations.

Their methods and findings appear to benefit from a non designers' viewpoint. Their study began with the Seagram Plaza because it was popular; much of its deliberate clean lines and grand dimensions made it attractive for the public to use to sit. And although the fact that people congregated there came as a shock to its architect, Mies van der Rohe and his assistant, Philip Johnson, it demonstrated that good urbanism is based on principles that can coexist with high Modernist architecture. Because the Street Life Project was based on fieldwork and hard evidence of what worked well, it remained relatively independent of aesthetic judgement about the modernist spaces it examined. This study represents an intimate study of the public spaces of high-modernism which ran counter to received assumptions of the time. Its lack of bias regarding aesthetics is of special value to any urbanist researching modernist space today. Holly Whyte's tenacity in pursuing empirical facts of the inhabited urban realm characterized his fieldwork. Many colleagues commented on his intuition for the spaces he studied because he could predict people behavioural patterns in any part of these spaces. 'He taught all of us, more than anything, to look hard, with a clean, clear mind, and then to look again-and to believe in what you see'. (La Farge, 2000: ix) By his legwork, designers could become more creative.

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<sup>1</sup> 1961 New York City Planning Department established a developer incentive to create more open space in Manhattan by set-backs and plazas in exchange for increased floor areas. This is known variously as incentive zoning, plaza bonus and Open-Space zoning provisions. The code created over 500 spaces, at least

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two-thirds of which were improved by Whyte's zoning prescriptive amendments in 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Ex-colleagues of Whyte were generous in their recollections and include Kathy Madden, Fred Kent, Don Elliott, Margot Wellington, Jan Gehl, Albert La Farge, Alexandra Whyte, Marge Bemiss, Nancy Linday. Clayton West Frye, Peter Laurence, Ricky Burdette, Rutherford Platt and Dr. Prof. Hugh Campbell also assisted in understanding the context.

<sup>3</sup> attributed to Margaret Mead.

<sup>4</sup> The spaces included in the final documentation were: 77 Water Street, Greenacre Park, Time-Life, Exxon, Paley Park, GM Headquarters, Seagram Plaza, JC Penney, 345 Park Ave, Exxon Minipark, Burlington, 277 Park Avenue, 630 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, CBS, Pan Am, ITT, Lever House and 280 Park Avenue. The Street Life Project did a number of other studies on parking, street width, concourse exits but these did not form core to their zoning amendment work.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Gehl, telephone conversation with author, 15 July 2009.

<sup>6</sup> From files of the Street Life Project held by Project for Public Space, 700 Broadway, New York 10003.

<sup>7</sup> Margot Wellington interview with author, 8 July 2009.