



ARTICLE FROM THE BOOK:

**Cyclists & Cycling Around the World – Creating Liveable and Bikeable Cities**

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## Cities for People – Copenhagen studies in urban life

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### People make cities “softer” and friendlier

Copenhagen has changed dramatically over the last 40 years, from a city dominated by cars to a city where the majority of the citizens move around on bicycles or on foot. This is a very different type of environment than can be seen in many cities, where the cars still dominate the streets and open spaces. It is hard to see people when they are moving through the city inside cars. The reflections in the windscreens and the speed blur the impression. A city dominated by cars is a city of moving objects.

People on bicycles and on foot are a very different experience. They are fully visible as they move slowly through the streets and squares. They have time to see what goes on and others can see them at the same time. Pedestrians and cyclists can enjoy all their senses, as they are not cocooned in a car. They can easily get in contact with other people, simply stop and talk on the spot. They do not have to worry about finding a parking lot or a place to meet. People walking and cycling on the streets of Copenhagen make the city “softer” and more human. Cycling is just a simple way of getting around in daily life and not something people wear special clothing to do. Cycling is like walking – just city life: “Faces on the street”. Cycling has for too long been seen only as a mode of transportation from A to B. There is much more to cycling and walking than transport and Copenhagen is a fine example of how the urban culture has changed.



**Picture 1.** A city full of cars is a city of moving objects and very different to a city with people on foot and bicycles.

**Picture 2.** All ages and all walks of life cycle daily in Copenhagen

**Picture 3.** Copenhagen is city full of people meeting, talking and enjoying city life.

## Data about people is one of the key elements in the transformation

Data has always been important in urban planning; it is a powerful tool because it often defines what both the problems and solutions are. The most dominant set of data applied in the planning of public spaces has normally been data about vehicular traffic with a strong focus on car traffic. Data about people on foot was normally not available and there was very little knowledge about what people do in public spaces. This often remains the case in many cities all over the world. People are invisible in the planning process due to lack of data – and subsequently ignored. When traffic data is the dominant data set, then the design solutions of public space will tend to reflect how the problems of car driving are solved and how the spaces cater to traffic flow and not to people.

Data about what people actually do, where they are and where they are not, can shift the perspective in planning. When a set of people data is established a new debate is possible. - a debate about what makes the city attractive, lively and inviting for people and not just good for driving cars.

The city of Copenhagen has published biannual studies of the development in cycling and the satisfaction among the users on the development of its cycle facilities since 1995. A similar study about people on foot was published for the first time in 2011 (*“Bylivsregnskab – Tendenser i det københavnske byliv 2010”. Literally: “City Life Account – Trends in the city life of Copenhagen”*).

But there is a much longer history of collecting data on pedestrian behaviour in Copenhagen and it has had an interesting impact on the planning over decades.

## Copenhagen as a case study

Copenhagen is a very interesting case of how data about people has had a significant impact on the process of transforming the city from a place full of cars to a much friendlier place full of people.

The old main street in Copenhagen, Strøget, was changed in 1962 to a street for pedestrians only. This change took place after a heated debate about all the possible impacts this might have. No one had closed a main street to traffic before anywhere, so all sorts of arguments were voiced: shopkeepers were certain that the shops would die if the cars were prohibited. Others were certain that the damp Danish climate would make it disastrous to close the street to traffic. What would it look like on a rainy Monday when the street was totally empty? Ultimately the argument was that it did not fit with Danish culture: “We are not Italians!” was the slogan. The obvious lack in Copenhagen of the kind of urban culture that can be found in the Mediterranean, where people meet, stand talking, and sit outside restaurants, was evident. None of it existed in Copenhagen





**Picture 4.** Gammeltorv-Nytorv before 1962.  
Photo: The City Engineers Office of Copenhagen



**Picture 5.** Gammeltorv-Nytorv today.

at the time. So it was true, we did not have that kind of culture, time showed though that the main obstacle to this was that we had filled every open public space with parked cars.

The pedestrian street became both a success for the people as well as for the shopkeepers. The two adjacent shopping streets in the downtown area requested to become pedestrian streets as well. After the street had been transformed into a car free space a process began, which over time changed the urban culture of outdoor life in the city totally.



**Picture 6.** Strøget on any nice summer day



**Picture 7.** Strøget on a rainy day

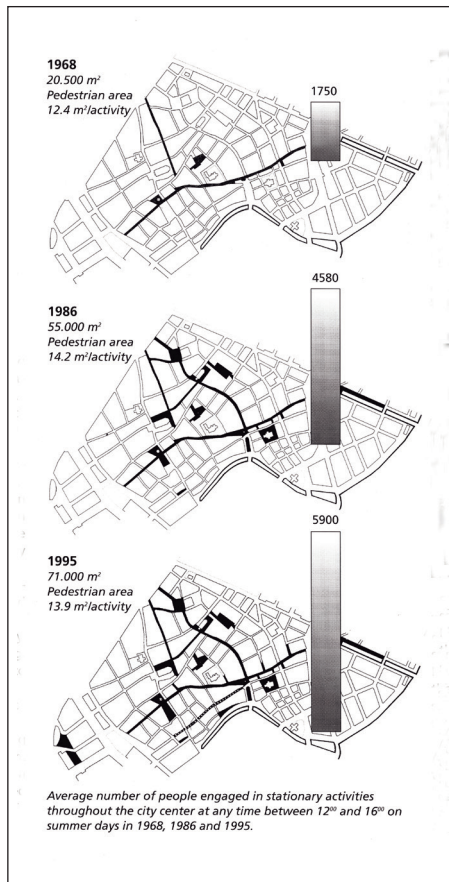
## Copenhagen has data about public life over a 40-year period

In 1968, Professor Jan Gehl with a team of students and researchers, mostly from the School of Architecture in Copenhagen, studied what people were actually doing in the street after the cars had disappeared. They looked carefully at what was going on, where it happened, how much was happening and for how long it took place. The study became the first in a series of repeated studies on how the delivery of car-free spaces of good quality for people walking led to a total change in the character and quantity of public life.

Several simple methods, all based on observations at eyelevel in the public spaces, were developed. The focus was on ways of recording the patterns of public life. How many were walking, what were they doing and where were they spending time?

What was new was the way these methods were used to give a picture of the simultaneous activities in a whole city district over a whole day and evening.





**Picture 8.** The city delivered almost four times more car-free spaces from 1968 to 1996 and the result was almost four times more activity. (Graph from Public Spaces – Public Life, Copenhagen 1996, Jan Gehl & Lars Gemzøe, Danish Architectural Press)

## What were the results?

The changes in urban outdoor life were striking. When the data is put together over almost 40 years it shows great changes in public life from a city that was dead in the evenings to a city that was alive day and night, from a city centre almost totally absent of outdoor seating to a city full of outdoor cafes. Most of all it shows how the city centre was transformed from a place dominated by shopping and window shopping to a place with a multitude of cultural activities and opportunities. The most striking results of the data showed that while the city had increased the number of car-free square metres by almost four times from 1968 to 1995, the number of people spending time on the same squares and streets had also almost quadrupled. This was not because a lot more people came downtown, but because people spent more time doing a much wider range of activities than before. The city centre had become the most important meeting place.



**Picture 9.** Regardless of the worry about the rainy Danish weather outdoor cafés flourished and grew constantly in numbers.

**Picture 10.** Café-life extended from summer into all seasons. Blankets are now a Copenhagen standard.

**Picture 11.** A great number of festivals have emerged as the car-free spaces offered new opportunities.

## How data supported political and planning actions

The four Copenhagen studies, 1968, 1986, 1995 and 2005, were made as independent research studies, solely initiated by the researchers, who had to raise funds to pay for the students working on recording the activities and also to publish the results once complete. The publications and books were aimed at informing the people in Copenhagen, the planners and architects as well as the politicians. The books were later translated into many languages and more and more cities are applying the methods today.

Over the years, there were many indications of how useful the data was for the mayors in charge of the public spaces and for the city engineers and architects responsible for the planning. It was clear that people “voted with their feet” and used the spaces more and more the more they got! It was also clear that with more space more new activities were flourishing developed by organisations, NGOs and individuals like the Jazz Festival, the Summer Carnival, the Night of Culture, the Gay Parade and much more. With more good quality public spaces, more people found new ways of using the nice, car free spaces for new outdoor activities.

The data supported further action being taken and more and more car-spaces were changed to people-spaces. The mayors in charge of public spaces have changed quite a lot over time from the far left to centre right and back to centre left - but the interesting point is that the core of the policy has remained the same: make better conditions for people on foot and you are rewarded. People enjoyed good car free spaces in the city and they wanted more.

## Copenhagen City of Cyclists

The development of daily cycling has maybe been the most striking change in the city: a great increase in cycling has taken place over the last 40 years. Copenhagen planners have used data over many years as a useful tool in the planning of the cycle infrastructure. Since the mid-nineties, the city has also used data and intensive communication with the users as part of the strategy to make more people use the facilities. It was important to communicate that it has become safer and safer to cycle. Information about the quality of the infrastructure and the feedback from the cyclists in the form of biannual Bicycle Accounts have been important parts of the development.

The latest Bicycle Account shows, that 50% of the residents in the City of Copenhagen go to work or education on bicycles in the city (*Copenhagen City of Cyclists – Bicycle Account 2010*).

Another way to count and measure is the fairly new bicycle counters. They are visible to all users and count every cyclist that cycles down the cycle track, and show how many have passed that day and for the year so far. The signal is: it matters that you cycle and you are counted.

The city simply became much better for Copenhageners of all ages as a result of the policies. It also became much more appealing for visitors and tourists. City life is now a

**Picture 12.** With better and better conditions for cyclists, we got more and more people using bicycles as part of daily life.







**Picture 13.** Bicycle counters. Telling you how many you are and that cycling matters.

brand of the city and it is proud of its monuments, which are not imposing buildings but “people in motion” as it is described in the bicycle account.

The first four studies about pedestrians were not commissioned by the City of Copenhagen but the city supported them financially. All the data has been given to the city and the researchers have advised the city about how to conduct the research. The 5<sup>th</sup> Copenhagen study was made in 2010 by the city itself and all base data is accessible on the city’s website. “Bylivsregnskab – Tendenser i det københavnske byliv 2010” (literally: “City Life Account – Trends in the city life of Copenhagen”). An English version is on the way.

This marks the fact that the city has now taken on the obligation of collecting the necessary data to study how public spaces are used, how their use relates to design and how well the spaces are perceived by the actual users. “People first,” is firmly embedded in the city’s policies.

The striking results from Copenhagen have inspired other cities like Melbourne, Sydney, London, New York and many others to have similar studies done in order to make their cities more livable. Melbourne has also been inspired to make “Copenhagen style” cycle lanes and bicycle accounts.

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