William Whyte’s study on the social effects of Open Spaces and its effect on my spatial study of Seward Park

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Abstract:
William H. Whyte’s film The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces introduces a new, more esthetically pleasing, way to present quantitative data. His work with the “Street Life Project” succeeded in uncovering a methodology behind what makes up successful urban plazas. This essay addresses a brief history of post war urban sprawl, William Whyte’s view on the importance of open space, an analysis of his revolutionary film, and the effects it has had on my own visual study of the Seward Park housing project in New York City’s Lower East Side.

Keywords: William H. Whyte, urbanist, open space, plaza, Seward Park, film, Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, quantitative method, Street Life Project, New York City

There is one reoccurring phrase in any academic article, book, website, or film about (or by) William H. Whyte; that phrase is “open space”.

*The notable writer, journalist, and researcher began his career at an unprecedented time in America’s history of housing. Before the close of the 1950’s, post war suburban sprawl was responsible for the erection of fifteen-million new suburban single family residences constructed mainly either on converted farm land or on the outskirts of urban epicenters.¹ This newly evolved view that everyone could, and should, be a home owner resulted in a massive (and highly successful, depending on which way you look at it) flock to affordable suburban developments. “The open space issue was

¹ William Whyte, Open Space, and Environmental Activism. Adam W. Rome. (p. 260)
rooted in the profound transformation of the building industry during and after WW-II. For the first time, the industry was dominated by large builders using mass-production techniques to transform tracts of hundreds of thousands of acres into new neighborhoods.”

While Whyte was vocal about his beliefs in combating wasteful and consumptive building practices, at the core of his philosophy there lay a very human element. According to the organization PPS (The Project for Public Space) Whyte is considered a monumental figure due to his, “seminal work in the study of human behavior in urban settings.” Whyte believe, "The social life in public spaces contributes fundamentally to the quality of life of individuals and society… (and) that we have a moral responsibility to create physical places that facilitate civic engagement and community interaction.”

William Whyte was an avid writer, producing nine books over a forty-five year career as a researcher. He is widely known for his belief in the power of observation, there is no way to effectively plan space and place for people without directly observing them in it. When Whyte began the “Street Life Project”, “a pioneering study of pedestrian behavior and city dynamics” in 1969, he had little idea how he wanted to express his findings. Luckily for us, this sixteen year project resulted in the 1980 book The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, a film with the same name, and the culminating product, the 1988 book City: Rediscovering the Center – While William Whyte was primarily a writer I will address his philosophy, research, and ideology through the lens of his video camera, and more specifically his 1980 film The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces.

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2 Ibid.
3 William H. Whyte. Project for Public Spaces - Placemaking for Communities.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces must be seen as the most visual element of the “Street Life Project”. Whyte, through candid observation, attempted to quantifiably isolate what elements of open spaces made them effective or, conversely, ineffective. His choice to explore this visually must have stemmed from the observational nature of his work. Film not only gives him an increased ability to document more information at a faster rate but also the ability to express his findings in a way that is accessible to a greater number of people. In other words, his product The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces is very watchable. He speaks in simple terms that anyone could understand and employs striking visuals to empower his quantitative conclusion. The opening shot of the documentary is a six hour time lapse taken of the plaza at the Seagram building from a rooftop across Park avenue. His initial anecdotal hypothesis, one that introduces his entire observational method, is “the sun is the chief factor in determining where people (will) sit or not sit”⁶. As the hours passed and shadows from neighboring buildings were cast on the plaza there was a large lit area that slowly moved across the space (see fig. 1), and just as Whyte had predicted that large lit area was by far the most heavily populated area. Whyte’s ability to utilize new technology (a time lapse camera) gives a definite strength to his conclusion. We the viewers can see first hand people sitting, standing, and moving to be in direct sunlight. If this were documented with field notes the evidence would not be as undeniable; even a still camera couldn’t have capture the dynamic with which people moved through the space – I am hearkened back to the article, Interdisciplinary agendas in visual research: re-situating visual anthropology by Sarah Pink. There is no doubt that Whyte’s film has two agendas; first, and most importantly, to

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methodically explore qualities of successful urban plazas. However, as previously stated, his second goal is to make an accessible and well received movie that conveys the ideas he wishes to espouse. In the introduction, when we see the shadow cast on the plaza of the Seagram building I can’t help but think Whyte turned the aperture on his camera way down to make the shady areas look much shadier than they really were (see fig. 1). In my opinion this isn’t much of an offense but it does raise questions about conflicting interdisciplinary agendas and how film can be, and often are, manipulated to selectively enhance certain elements of a researchers study.

Whyte’s goal (in his film) is to isolate those elements that make the Seagram plaza effective, which I shall here summarize: [Sittable space, proximity to the street, sunlight, proximity to food (restaurants and street vendors), presence of water, presence of trees, and one more nebulous factor called triangulation]. The fascinating thing about these conclusions are that they are one-hundred percent quantifiably deduced. In addition to filming, Whyte constructs meticulous maps and charts measuring human interactions in the Seagram plaza (see fig. 2). In this map the red squares represent places where people stopped to converse. Given this data Whyte concludes that, “people don’t often stop to talk in the middle of a large space. They like to find places: steps, edges, flagpoles.” Whyte pairs his findings with rather esthetically striking visuals (see fig 3). Here he captures two men talking on a stair, even though they have limitless room to converse they seem to prefer a non centralized location. Collier’s article, Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method, poses questions about the reliability of observations; and, while Collier’s article addresses the ability to convey culture

7 Ibid. (23:30).
accurately and clearly it still makes me question Whyte’s ability to accurately and clearly address physical actions in the Seagram plaza from a roof top across park avenue.

Allow me to briefly discuss this concept of triangulation, as I believe it to be the most important. According to Whyte sittable space, sunlight, trees, water, proximity to the street, and food vendors are crucial to maintaining a successful open space, however they don’t guarantee that one will necessarily be successful. It is this idea of the plaza being triangulated between other things that make people want to enter, and participate in what is going on, that makes it successful. While anything can be a point of triangulation he mentions, public art works, esthetic appeal of the architecture itself, and spectacles (like live music or performers) as being seminal to the Seagram plaza’s success as a place.

The work of William Whyte, more specifically his film The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, has definitely informed my own project on the visual portrayal of an urban space. For my project I am studying Seward Park in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Initially I wanted to look at the public/ co-op houses that made up Seward Park and compare them to Le Corbusier’s idea of the Radiant City, however after seeing Whyte’s film I feel that there is a more poignant direction I can go in. While I still want to focus my attention around the apartment complexes that make up Seward Park, I think it would be more interesting to look at the use of public space directly around the co-ops. Each building has some sort of open space either directly in front of it or inscribing it. Furthermore, it could be interesting to compare and contrast the use of public space at the different complexes. I know there is a socio-economic rift between the homes located north or south of Grand street. The northern ones being section 8 housing and the
southern ones being co-ops sold at or near market price. I would like to research how people interact in those public spaces and see if there is any difference between how people interact in the section 8 open spaces versus the market priced open spaces. I am not sure what the difference would be but I think there would definitely be some quantifiable difference in so far as the way people interact in those spaces. *(Possibly I could attempt to research which open spaces are more effective: the section 8 ones or the market value ones.)*

Another element I would like to work into my project is visually interesting portrayal of quantitative data. Whyte has a way of conveying information in a *painless*, for lack of better words, and visually pleasing way. If I could reach a strong visual *conclusion* about the way in which people, in the two types of open space in Seward Park, act; I would have a much more interesting project.
Bibliography


Images

(fig. 1)

(fig. 2)

(fig. 3)