

# **Everywhere from Copenhagen: Method, storytelling, and comparison in the globalization of public space design<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Sydney, Hamburg, New York, Chongqing, Sao Paulo, Amman, Moscow, Mexico City, Toronto, Kilmarnock. The ‘Our Approach’ section of the Copenhagen-based architecture firm Gehl Architects’ website, includes an introductory video displaying forty cities and towns, which, it soon becomes clear, are some of the places the company has worked since its founding in 2000 (Gehl Architects, nd a). The video’s narrative explains,

we approach our work both as social scientists and architects, spending days, weeks, months, and years investigating the interconnected loop between life and form in cities throughout the world. As social scientists we observe how people use their environments and how they contribute to people's quality of life and lifestyle. As architects we are concerned with the form of the built environment in response to people’s uses and needs.

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As might be expected of a firm whose focus is the design of streets, plazas, and “life between buildings” (Gehl, 2011), the firm’s observational method tends to address relatively small urban spaces. Yet, at the same time, as the video makes clear, the firm’s scope is global, with offices in Copenhagen, New York, and San Francisco offering cities insights into “improving quality of life for people ... [by] pairing people’s needs, values, and principles with beautiful, useable, intelligent spaces” (Gehl Architects, nd a).

Gehl Architects is a global design consultancy closely associated with Jan Gehl, a Danish architect, academic, and urban designer who co-founded the firm with fellow architect, Helle Søholt, in 2000. Gehl is a prominent global figure in a planning movement called ‘placemaking,’ an approach that emphasizes collaborative community planning to redesign public spaces (Project for Public Spaces, 2007). His time as an academic architect, early in his career, as well as his work in practice has afforded him substantial credibility as a purveyor of his brand, or model, of public space design.

In this chapter, we follow the work of Vogelpohl (2019, 98) and others, who point to the way in which global professional service firms act to shape cities and urban policy “through methodical standards, to solidify competitive thinking through comparisons and networked knowledge as well as data sets, and to expect solutions through their prestigious name and external perspective” (see also Bok and Coe, 2017). We consider Gehl and his firm as a particular case of a professional service firm that acts as a transnational policy actor, what the policy mobilities literature calls a global “transfer agent,” to create and mobilize models of ‘best practice’ in urban policy (McCann, 2011; Ward, 2018; Temenos et al. 2019). Understanding Gehl helps us understand the ideas and practices of a wider set of ‘placemakers’ who increasingly hold the center of debates about the future of urban design and planning. Our discussion also deepens an underdeveloped element of the policy mobilities literature: the study of private corporate

actors in the circulation of policy models. Gehl Architects trades in a certain type of urban expertise as product, represented by the firm's credo, "first life, then space and finally buildings" (Gehl Article nd b). By circulating its version of placemaking among cities, the firm has created and benefits from a market for its ideas and the Gehl brand.

We argue that Gehl generates credibility from a carefully curated image as a committed devotee of straightforward observational methods, like notetaking and counting people in public spaces, and the firm's centring of what they call "architectural ethnography" (Gehl Architects, 2019) in their approach. These methodological attributes are selling points that drive the travels of the Gehl approach among cities. The methodological orientation gives the firm a distinctiveness and gravitas. It positions Gehl as an experienced and meticulous expert; a serious force of change.

This discussion of urban design ideas in motion is part of our larger research project on how urban public space is globalized through the circulation of design models. In this paper we provide a preliminary account, drawing on our critical analysis of Gehl Architects' website, supplemented by Jan Gehl's books and other related media, to identify the key elements of the practice's approach to public space.

In the following sections, we will first elaborate on the geographies of policy mobilities, as evident in Gehl's approach: the way consultants establish credibility, construct a story of a better urban future, and create markets for their intellectual products; and the role of methods, and persuasive storytelling in consultants' work. We will detail Gehl's approach to public space and unpack his firm's methodology and methods, with an eye to the assumptions that underlie the approach and questions they raise about the way design-oriented 'placemaking' tends to address only a superficial level of urban life and space. We will also contrast Gehl's tendency to invoke a

singular, undifferentiated ‘public’ for whom space should be designed to how critical social scientists theorize public space, not simply as a matter of design and planning, but as constituted by multiple publics, conflicts, and tensions.

### **Policy-making and public space in urban-global context**

How might we think about private consultants circulating their vision of public space among cities across the globe? What are the implications of their involvement in urban policy-making? The policy mobilities literature provides a number of insights (McCann, 2011; Temenos and McCann, 2014; Ward, 2018), as does the critical literature on publics and public spaces (Bodnar, 2015; Mitchell, 1995, 2017; Nowicka, 2020; Valentine, 2008).

#### ***Policy mobilities***

For our purposes, three themes are particularly relevant. First, the policy mobilities literature discusses “transfer agents” (Stone, 2004) as a “specialist elite” (Larner, 2002, 663) who work through various networks to circulate ‘best practice’ models for urban governance and design among cities. The global consultancy industry, from global firms (Chang, 2017; Rapoport and Hult, 2017; Vogelpohl, 2019, see Purandare in this volume) to ‘middling technocrats’ (Larner and Laurie, 2010), to lone gurus (Peck, 2005; McCann, 2008, see Volkova in this volume), is one iteration of this type of transfer agent. Consultants promote their models as ideal ‘solutions,’ ready for adoption by a wider variety of clients. In this process, credibility must be established: the transfer agent must show that they have done the work and often personally developed a model approach to a specific problem. They must also shape a narrative about their approach, drawing on successful case studies in various locations. Crucially, they must tell these place-

specific stories with enough generality that they are seen by policy actors elsewhere as being applicable to their own particular circumstances and the consultants must make it clear that the lessons from the distant case studies can be adapted to different and changing circumstances. Consultants work not only to solve policy problems, then, but also to create markets for their solutions (Baker et al., 2016).

In turn, a second insight – the role of metrics and measures – has been developed by policy mobilities scholars. They argue that these calculative and comparative technologies are a necessary factor in the mobilization of policy models. “Labour such as the generation of indicators or benchmarks ... becomes necessary for the translation process as it creates consensus over differences” (Adscheid and Schmitt, 2019, 5). As Larner and Le Heron (2002, 761) argue, technologies such as calculations make the “incommensurable commensurable.” Metric-making thus facilitates market-making and circulation by creating equivalencies and comparable cases among otherwise distinct cities.

A third theme in the literature addresses the role private consultants play in narrating and legitimating specific visions or agendas in debates over the future of cities (McCann, 2011; Jokinen et al, 2018; Montero, 2019; Franco and Ortiz, 2020). There are at least two elements to this storytelling that are relevant to the work of placemaking consultants like Gehl. First, when a policy receives global awards and recognition as a ‘best practice,’ its entry into a new city comes wrapped in that story of success and plaudits. As a result, it can be difficult for groups who are skeptical of a new policy to challenge it since it is narrated as a globally-accepted ‘best practice.’ Second, as consultants narrate their strategy for overcoming complex policy and political problems in a city, their storytelling tends to involve a form of ‘post-political’ simplification and technicalization (Swyngedouw, 2009). They need to ‘boil down’ complex issues within cities and profound differences among cities in order to create a ready market for their policy products.

In this way, planning and design consultants like Gehl fit neatly in a long tradition of persuasive storytelling in urban planning. Indeed, this tradition is so central to the discipline that Throgmorton (2003, 126) defines planning as “persuasive and constitutive storytelling about the future” (Throgmorton, 2003, 126). As Söderström et al (2014), drawing on Sandercock (2003) and Throgmorton (2003), argue, storytelling is crucial to a future-oriented discipline like planning, while we would add that the architecture and design professions find it similarly crucial. As Throgmorton (2003, 128, our emphasis) continues, “*stories cannot tell themselves*. Rather, they must be transformed into narratives and then be told. That act of construction is necessarily selective and purposeful.”

Through emplotment, characterizations, descriptions of settings, and rhythm and imagery of language, such ‘planning stories’ unavoidably shape the readers’ attention, turning it this way instead of that (Ibid. 127).

Planning as storytelling is about power – the power to name, to make and affix meaning, and to shape urban politics (Söderström et al, 2014). In planning, “it is not merely the individual stories that count, but *storytelling* and the complex social networks, physical settings, and institutional processes in which those stories are told” (Throgmorton, 2007, 250, quoted in van Hulst, 2012, 301; italics in the original). Moreover, this narrative power is not simply localized: “[C]ities and their planning-related organizations can be thought of as nodes in a global-scale web, a web that consists of a highly fluid and constantly (albeit subtly) changing set of relationships” (Throgmorton, 2003, 130). We suggest that these relationships are built, maintained, and extended by private planning, architecture, and design consultants like Gehl and other placemakers. Yet, whether operating in local contexts or in wider networks, placemakers’ narratives are what van Hulst (2012, 302, following Forester 1993) calls storytelling as

“organizing attention.” They direct focus to certain aspects of public space and, deliberately or not, away from others. We unpack this issue in the following section.

### *Critical approaches to public space*

Gehl’s ideal of urban public space is a liberal consensual one – a singular convivial place for a singular public. This can, if not approached carefully, divert attention from a critical understanding of public space as rife with exclusions and injustices that cannot be simply remedied through design, even while design exacerbates them. The liberal consensual ideal also draws attention away from a more progressive ideal of public space as multiple, complex, and open to dissensus. The longstanding critical urban public space literature (see Bodnar, 2015 for a review) contrasts with and highlights the elisions in placemakers’ vision.

This literature shows that public space reflects and reproduces the social inequalities of contemporary society, while also providing a setting in which people express their political positions (Terzi and Tonnelat, 2017). It is simultaneously a space of inclusion and exclusion, conformity and subversion, characterized by various and often incompatible uses (Parkinson, 2013; Bodnar, 2015). This is why “public spaces are absolutely essential to the functioning of democratic politics” (Mitchell, 1995, 115).

Not only is public space essential to political expression, but it is also where political identities can be formed with or against the strangers one encounters (Young, 1986; Bodnar, 2015). For Young (1986), the “being together of strangers” generally encourages openness to unassimilated others, ideally leading to a less oppressive city and a progressive politics of difference. In this sense, public space is not only a site of protest and other explicitly political

expressions. It is also a site of and stake in the quotidian negotiation of living together (Massey, 2005).

Yet, public space should not be romanticized as an entirely positive space, even when well-designed. First, it is not equally welcoming or accessible to all. It is frequently the site and object of securitization and surveillance practices that differentially target racialized, classed, and stigmatized people, while it is also frequently less accessible to people who are disabled and the elderly than to more physically able people. Second, not everyone has the choice of whether or how to participate in public space. While being in public is a choice for many, it is a necessity for people who are homeless or whose housing is so cramped or inadequate that they must spend large portions of their days in public, often performing private acts, like bathing. Third, proximity does not always lead to “meaningful contact” (Valentine, 2008, 334) and, indeed, frequently involves violence (Catungal and McCann, 2010). Groups who exist together in public space frequently do not mix together in any meaningful way. Fourth, proximity can breed defensiveness. Convivial interactions in public can be superficial displays of urban etiquette – which do not always equate to lessening of prejudice or overcoming social distance (Valentine, 2008; Nowicka, 2020).

Superficial forms of encounter in public space may maintain the social order by creating the expectation that people will suppress differences in their interactions. Nowicka (2020) warns against mistakenly adhering to a “fantasy of equality” (Nowicka, 2020, 32). She calls for greater attention to how the prevalent belief in equality obscures, rather than corrects, injustices. The critical question applies: who is public space for? It cannot be conceptualized as an apolitical place of peaceful and convivial interactions, but as a “battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted” (Mouffe, 2007, 3). Indeed, as Mouffe (2005) argues, conflicts are ineradicable in politics and social life. Therefore, aiming for consensual definitions of publicness



and public space can obscure injustices and tensions instead of giving them a place to be addressed, which leads to the emergence of antagonisms (Fraser, 1990).

Clearly, then, public space is complex and political. Yet, it is the very simplicity and unitary ideal espoused by placemakers like Gehl – an ideal of a singular public whose relationships to space can be grasped through observational measurements and enhanced through design interventions – that attracts local governments intent on adopting relatively anodyne and uncontroversial solutions. The model circulates among cities as a result of its elision of unequal power-relations among publics.

### **‘Cities for people’: Gehl’s diagnosis, prescriptions, and influence**

Combining his academic pursuits with the work his firm has done since its founding in 2000 decades, Gehl has become a *bona fide* global policy guru – a transfer agent of urban design and public space planning. His firm has expanded internationally, creating markets as it grows. Gehl and his firm are skilled in packaging and presenting their ideas in a way that is persuasive to their intended audiences, including city governments and others who buy, literally and figuratively, into their model. This vision of a walkable, ‘human-scale’ city “for people” (Gehl, 2010), as represented in his academic background and his prolific output of books, lectures, workshops, and masterclasses that describe the successes and lessons of his consulting contracts with 250 cities, is a particular form of persuasive storytelling. Using carefully crafted stories that “[set] out a view of what is wrong and what needs fixing” (van Hulst, 2012, 300, quoting Schön, 1979, 144), private consultants create the conditions for their ideas to be persuasive and mobile: they combine diagnoses of problems and prescriptions of solutions into an influential story. In Gehl’s case, as we will explore below, appeals to unitary conceptions of ‘people’ and ‘public’ and to

comparison and competition conditions audiences and markets to accept his vision of better urban spaces.

### ***Diagnoses and prescriptions framing discussion and action***

For Gehl, the problem with cities is the legacy of post-war modernist, automobile-oriented planning, leading to the “gradual breakdown of the opportunities of city space to function as a meeting place” (Gehl, 2010, 25). Having defined the problem, consultants must identify a solution and provide the data and principles necessary to achieve it. Drawing on a long lineage of architects and planners, and critics, including Jane Jacobs, William H. Whyte, Donald Appleyard, and Allan Jacobs, who he and Svarre profile in a chapter of *How to Study Public Life* (2013), Gehl’s cure to the ills of the contemporary city is to study, then plan, “the city at eye level ... the human landscape” in order to design spaces that will attract pedestrians and diverse social activity (Gehl, 2010, 195). Thus, Gehl’s first book, *Life between buildings: Using public space*, originally published in Danish in 1971 and updated in new editions in various languages in the subsequent years (Gehl, 2011) emphasizes the necessity for planners and designers to focus primarily on creating cities where people want to congregate and encounter each other. These encounters are always envisioned as convivial, not conflictual.

### ***Local testimonials highlighting influence***

Gehl’s ideas have led to numerous commissions and are the subject of many laudatory comments from journalists and from planners in cities where his firm has worked. For example, recent media comments relating to his work in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada encapsulate the balance that consultants must find between personal approachability and a clear narrative of

credible analysis. “Gehl is the demigod of urban planning,” one senior planner exclaims, “We all have his books on our shelves” (quoted in Warren, 2009), while another publication continues the messianic theme while also emphasizing the alluring simplicity of Gehl’s methods: “The Gospel of Jan Gehl, spread around the globe by a staff of 35, is so commonsensical it seems obvious” (Hume, 2012).

*How to Study Public Life* (Gehl and Svarre, 2013) catalogues many of the more significant commissions Gehl and his firm have had from cities. Copenhagen, Melbourne, and New York feature prominently as exemplars of this influence. On their website, the firm quotes Tina Saaby, Copenhagen’s former Chief City Architect: “From Politicians to Department Heads, Project Managers and citizens – [Gehl’s] notion of People First and Life, Space, Buildings has infiltrated all aspects of making Copenhagen what it is today” (quoted in Gehl Architects nd j) and they argue that, by 2014, “the new National Architecture Policy for Denmark emphasizes the need for a ‘putting people first’ approach to architecture, thereby making it a national political goal” (Gehl Architects, nd k).

In Melbourne, where the firm has worked since the early 1990s to revitalize the urban core in the face of suburban flight (City of Melbourne, 2015), Gehl’s methods of surveying and measuring the liveliness of urban public spaces have been internalized by the city’s planning department. The City now conducts Gehl-style research, building on the consultant’s earlier iterations. The firm, in turn, uses their work in Melbourne as a selling point when engaging with other cities, dubbing it the ‘Melbourne Miracle’ (Gehl Architects, nd i). A more recent engagement with New York City, beginning in the mid-2000s as part of its *PlaNYC* and Sustainable Streets programs, produced the *World Class Streets* report (Gehl Architects and NYCDOT, 2008) and pilot projects, including a temporary pedestrianization of Times Square, Broadway, and Herald Square (Gehl Architects, nd l). Indeed, the firm argues that its influence

goes further: they “trained the city” (Gehl Architects, nd m) to follow their methods of surveying, data collection, an ongoing communication among stakeholders. Gehl’s influence on planners and local politicians is not only built on his diagnosis of contemporary problems and his vision of a ‘people-centered’ future. It is also legitimized by the evidence he develops from his particular way of studying public spaces.

### **“Taking a good look:” Gehl on the street**

As we have argued, the process of generating credibility and mobilizing a model of expertise across geographically dispersed cities involves persuasive storytelling about the foundations of and principles upholding the model. It also involves the development of methods and measures that emphasize the model’s scientific, factual, or quantitative credibility and objectivity. If those methods can make it easier for potential customers or adopters to compare their situation to that of others elsewhere, through the creation of comparable measures and equivalences, all the better.

Gehl’s professional ‘origin story’ as a practitioner who has long combined on-the-ground experience with academic analysis is central to his credibility. A study trip took Gehl and his wife, psychologist Ingrid Gehl, to Italy in 1965. “While in Italy, they amass and observe many ‘best practice’ examples and gain inspiration away from the newly built ‘lifeless’ suburbs which were emerging in Denmark” (Gehl Architects, nd c). While observing interactions in the *strate* and *piazze*, Ingrid Gehl insisted that “human behavior should be considered and used as the starting-point for architecture” (Gehl Architects, nd d). They returned to Copenhagen and used the city as a “laboratory” for their ideas through the subsequent decades.

In response to their diagnosis of the lifelessness of the modernist car-oriented city, Gehl’s firm is intent on “recording the ‘life’ that occurs in our study areas, as well as the qualities of the

surrounding ‘space’” (Gehl Architects, nd a). Indeed, for a number of years until at least October 2019, its website noted that,

“At Gehl we use *architectural ethnography* [our emphasis] as a tool to understand the context, culture and behavior of people in the cities that we work with. These findings form the foundation of our project work and allow for long-term collaborations with our clients" (Gehl Architects, 2019).

The firm emphasizes the time invested in surveying and understanding the public spaces they work on. They discuss "spending days, weeks, months and years" (Gehl Architects, nd a) to develop “the ‘Gehl way of seeing’” (2019). They claim that their methods, geographic scope, and longitudinal studies provide them with “a huge pool of knowledge that allows us to compare how people interact and behave in cities all around the world” (Gehl Architects, nd a). This knowledge pool is traced back to the Gehls’ Italian sojourn its expansion beyond Copenhagen and into practice (as opposed to academia) is defined by Gehl’s 1986 ‘Public Space Public Life (PSPL)’ survey in Copenhagen (Gehl Architects, nd e).

The firm surveys public life for two stated reasons: First, "making people count by making them visible for decision makers in planning and design processes" (Gehl Architects, nd f) and, second, to make “the entire municipal government more people-focused and more evidence driven." The following section highlights how method, measurement, evidence, and comparison are central to this surveying practice.

### ***Methods for studying public life***

Gehl’s co-authored book, *How to Study Public Life* (Gehl and Svarre, 2013), codifies the firm’s method and is billed as a ‘how to’ guide that provides “concrete tools and stories ... about the

interaction between life and the built environment" (Gehl Architects, nd h). The book's preface outlines his methodology: "Public life studies are straightforward. The basic idea is for observers to walk around while taking a good look. Observation is the key and the means are simple and cheap" (Gehl and Svarre, 2013, xii). Appeals to the straightforward, the simple, the basic, to low-tech visual observation and to "manual methods" pervade the book's descriptions of Gehl's method: "using one's senses, common sense and simple registration techniques with pen and paper" (Ibid., 6).

"[G]eneral study questions: how many, who, where, what, how long?" (Ibid., 11) guide the approach and frame a set of methods: counting, mapping activities, tracing lines of movement, tracking (following) people, photographing (including time-lapse and video, a la Whyte (1980)), keeping a diary to note "details and nuances" as a "qualitative supplement to ... elucidate hard [quantitative] data", and test walks to immerse the observer in the study environment (Ibid. 22-35).

It might seem odd that a private firm would freely share their methodology. Why would they not control and monetize it through proprietary protection? We suggest two reasons: (1) placemaking consultants genuinely want to improve cities and they believe their methods are fit-for-purpose, so they are willing to share for the greater good; and (2) the methods are so tied to the experience and reputation of Gehl and his firm that, even though they describe them openly, clients still see the architects' direct involvement in the implementation and interpretation of the study techniques (e.g., Gehl's name on the published report) as worth employing the firm. In many ways, consultancy is an industry built on networking and branding although, as one of this book's the editors pointed out, the reliance on a personal brand (e.g., Gehl's) may be a different mode of operation than that of the Big Four accounting firms, which tend to downplay personal discretion in their metrics.

***“Public Space Public Life” as a key consulting and branding tool***

The ‘Public Space Public Life’ study or survey (PSPL) is the core product of the firm’s consultancy business, with versions having been produced for clients across the world. These studies combine the methods described above that are intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of the character of ‘public life’ in a specific street, neighborhood, or district, town, or city. Some of the elements of the studies “are constant, such as counting pedestrians and registering stationary activities,” but the combination and focus of each study is molded to the local context through “a close dialogue with local partners” over a long period of time, sometimes extending across decades (Gehl and Svarre, 2013, 126).

‘Long-term’ is a crucial term in the Gehl method. The first study in Copenhagen was undertaken in 1986, with follow-up surveys in 1996 and 2006 charting the gradual increase in both the amount of car free space in the city center and also the number of people engaged in “stationary activities,” as opposed to simply traversing the space (Gehl and Svarre, 2013, 126). This longitudinal approach has been replicated elsewhere. In Melbourne, for example, an initial study in 1994 served as a baseline against which to measure interventions aimed at changing the character of that city center. In the next decade, initiatives including, “narrow passageways through blocks of buildings were converted into attractive places for staying and sauntering. ... [and make] downtown Melbourne a more attractive place to live and to visit – by day and by night.” Gehl’s 2004 survey showed a growth of 71% in the amount of public space in which people could stay and a 98% increase in pedestrian traffic in the area (ibid., 31). While acknowledging that these changes were the result of the collaboration of various actors and interests, they argue that, “having a public space-public life study as a tool in the process

increased understanding of the importance of providing quality space” for people (ibid.).

Repetition over years provides “a clear picture of what’s working and what’s not, and [allows planners] to track long-term development” (Kielgast, nd).

According to Gehl Architects (Copenhagen) Associate, Louise Vogel Kielgast, the long-term nature of PSPL projects is complemented by data it produces and the utility of that data for cross-city comparison. “[T]his is ... the magic of the PSPL methodology!” she suggests,

We know that data and numbers are things that you can agree on objectively, a layer underneath the subjective feeling and opinion of place, and this is important when planning decisions have to be made – to have the hard numbers.

Yet, we suggest that the apolitical and (ironically) asocial appeals to ‘people’ and ‘the public’ in the work of placemakers like Gehl and related appeals to uncomplicated counting or “registering” (Gehl and Svarre, 2013, 22) methods, largely based on detached observations in public spaces offer a superficial understanding of public space. Appeals to objective data elide, or ‘bracket’ (cf. Fraser, 1990), the range of inequities, feelings and opinions that constitute publics as differentiated and conflictual producers of public spaces. Work by Valentine (2008), among others, suggests that the detached observation of fleeting moments in urban public space tends to capture thin gestures of urban etiquette, rather than any kind of deep (dis)connection among users. We argue that policymakers may be attracted to the ‘cleanness,’ or clarity, of the Gehl method, its results, and the directions for change that it prescribes precisely because of its apolitical character. Moreover, as time goes on and the model travels, local governments are attracted to tales of success from elsewhere. They hope to ‘Copenhagenize’ (Colville-Andersen, 2018) their cities, so to speak. In doing so, they validate and reinforce a ‘common sense’ among



placemakers about what makes a vibrant and attractive public space and for whom that space is to be made.

### *Comparative and Competitive stories creating markets*

Hard data not only overcomes subjectivity, according to the firm, but it also positions a city to compare and compete with others. For Gehl and Svarre (2013),

Given the fact that a number of cities around the world have carried out PSPLs, we have a substantial amount of data that we can draw upon, to identify common patterns in human behaviours according to spatial design. This gives cities comparable data, to understand how your city performs in relation to public space and public life in other cities.

As the policy mobilities literature argues, comparison through metrics often involves ranking and competition under neoliberal urbanism. The treadmill of competition compels most urban business and political elites to emulate other cities' successes in order to out-perform and out-compete them in a zero-sum game of inter-urban competition (McCann, 2004, 2013). As Gehl and Svarre (2013, 3) note in their book's introduction, from the late 1980s onwards, "[c]ity planners and politicians wanted to make conditions better for people in order to have an edge in inter-city competition. It became a strategic goal to create attractive cities for people." Tellingly, it is on this theme of competition that they also conclude their book:

Copenhagen and Melbourne [among others] show how research, public space-public life studies, visions, political will and action can put cities on the world-class map ... On lists of the "World's Most Livable Cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is no surprise that year after year Melbourne and Copenhagen continue to rank among the best" (Ibid., 159).

Thus, a model like Gehl's is performative in that it sets the terrain for its own adoption and circulation through its provision of comparative – and competitive – techniques and technologies.

## **Discussion**

In this chapter, we have used a study of Gehl Architects to highlight some of the ways in which private consultancies create markets for and circulate their products. In Gehl's case, and the case of other urban planning and design consultants, their products are intellectual and methodological, as much as physical. They must persuade potential clients that their models and the research metrics and methods underpinning them are valid, locally-appropriate, and globally-tested. As we have suggested, however, these products, or travelling models, embody assumptions about, and elisions of socio-spatial power relations. These forms of placemaking storytelling, organize attention and tend to reinforce hegemonic notions of the public and desirable public life. Thus, the models are particularly attractive as technical, apparently apolitical, 'solutions' to narrowly-defined urban problems.

Analyzing Gehl's writings and Gehl Architects' website in the light of the longstanding critical social science literatures on public space emphasizes Gehl's undifferentiated and apolitical notions of 'public space' and 'the public.' Both the firm and Gehl, himself, in his writing, emphasizes that they plan for 'the public' and that cities should be 'for people.' Yet, they rarely unpack to whom these labels refer, apart from a few references to gender and age. This critique is particularly apropos in the dual contexts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. On the one hand, 'placemakers' and 'urbanists,' including Gehl, have been vocal in their proposals for modeling changes to the future design, funding, use, and regulation of temporarily car-free streets (McCann, 2020). Many of their ideas are attractive

to politicians and planners because they are couched at a level of analysis where ‘the public’ remains a unitary category, but, on the other hand, the murder of George Floyd has catalyzed a debate among planners about whether ‘urbanism’ is for *all* people equally or whether the blind spots of what some critics refer to as hegemonic ‘white urbanism’ are founded upon and also perpetuate longstanding inequalities, exclusions, and violence in the urban built environment. As planner Amina Yasin (2020) recently put it,

Given the number of Black people profiled and murdered on our streets, how can urbanists remain singularly focused on fighting inanimate objects — like cars — while actively ignoring human rights, and silencing advocates who point out that streets aren’t in reality for everyone? Perhaps systemic racism, in which ableism is entrenched, is the greatest enemy to cities and not cars? (see also Walker 2020a, 2020b)

Certainly, this caution, resonates strongly with critical social scientists’ arguments about the inequalities and exclusions that parallel and frequently overwhelm the political and social benefits of public space, as traditionally conceived. This homogenized conception of the public resonates with what Nowicka (2020, 32) calls the “fantasy of equality,” which clouds the perception of, and stymies efforts to overcome, spatial injustices.

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