



# JAN GEHL PUTS PEOPLE FIRST

## LESSONS FROM MISTRA URBAN FUTURES' ANNUAL LECTURE 2018

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Av: Mistra Urban Futures

**Mistra Urban Futures' Annual Lecture 2018 was given by Founder & Senior Advisor of Gehl Architects, Professor and Architect MAA, Jan Gehl. With over 40 years of experience of working with liveable cities and putting people first in city planning, the legendary architect filled Chalmers largest auditorium on December 5th.**

Before Jan Gehl enters the stage, he asks with a smile "Who are all these people here to listen to?". There is an excitement in the air and someone in the audience tweets; "If anyone wonders where all of Gothenburg's planners and architects are right now, the answer is Jan Gehl's entertaining and clever lecture."

Cities for the future, there is clearly some confusion here! Jan Gehl starts off the lecture with several images of how the future is represented. Google the words "future cities" and you will get the message. There is a hype surrounding automated cars and technology, what is not solved by cars will be solved by drones and helicopters. The images shown do not portray liveable cities, though. What if the future has already arrived? And what if we have the models we need and can implement them right away? he asks.

### Planning paradigms

Jan Gehl guides the audience through the two planning paradigms which according to him has "screwed up" the cities we are living in. From 1960 and onwards, modernism was the dominant paradigm for planning and the human scale was removed from the discussions. Modernism separated functions as work, living, recreation and communication from each other and the focus on spaces was replaced by a focus on objects. Cities were organised top-down, which Jan Gehl cleverly illustrated by playing around with a bottle and a couple of glasses. But people do not live and thrive in leftover spaces.

The other paradigm which has been influential was the car invasion in the 1960's. The car became so dominant in the urban environment that the urban planning process soon started to circle around it. This confused the scale further. Historically, cities were made for walking and were adapted to our senses, the car created a necessity of a larger scale.



## The story of Jan Gehl

The first opponent of the large scale and car focused planning process was Jane Jacobs with the book *The death and life of great American cities*, considered as the bible of humanistic city planning. My work has been in the spirit of Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl says. In 1960 Jan graduated as an architect and the students of his class had all been taught a modernistic approach to architecture and city planning. One day his wife, who was a psychologist, asked him why architects weren't interested in people. By then, Jan Gehl claims, there was no knowledge regarding how spaces and places influence people. That was the main reason for his decision to go back to the School of Architecture and start investigating how people could become more visible in architecture and the urban planning process.

47 years ago, in 1971, the book *Life between buildings* was published. It would, though, take 16 years for the book to become translated and published in several languages. The book *Cities for people* was published in 2010 and is available in all major languages, summarising Jan's 40 years of experience.

Today we know a lot of how to make great cities for people, we have a new planning paradigm – the humanistic approach. All cities are striving to be liveable, sustainable and healthy. Ask any mayor and you will get the same answer. However, this new paradigm doesn't mean that cities are changing in the way they should be.

## Journey around the world

Gehl Architects has worked in almost any country you could think of. In an informal chat before the lecture, Jan Gehl mentions that Moscow is the most interesting city he has worked with, but he wouldn't reveal why. "You will find out in the lecture", he says with a smile.

Before the audience ends up in Moscow he takes us on a journey around the world. From the pioneering city Melbourne, that started making liveable and walkable urban landscapes with widened sidewalks in 1985, to a quick stop in Sydney. Broadway in New York is perhaps one of the more well-known examples of how to transform a street. In 2007 Mayor Bloomberg stated that he wanted to make New York the most sustainable city in the world. After visiting Copenhagen where everyone bicycled around Jan managed to convince Bloomberg to remove all traffic from Broadway and to transform Times Square into a square worthy of its name.



In 2012, Moscow wanted to humanise the city. But when Jan Gehl arrived there, he was completely shocked. Did freedom from communism include the right to park anywhere? he asks ironically. There were advertisements and cars everywhere. The images of the new and transformed Moscow shows a city that has reclaimed the river front, made the metro stations accessible and built a square with swings.

We finish our journey in Copenhagen, the city where Jan Gehl has lived and worked throughout his career. In 1962 the city removed cars from Strøget, in spite of protestors claiming that this would affect the shops. Today, anyone walking along the busy street can tell this is far from reality. In 2014 the car free streets have spread throughout the city. The vision "A Metropolis for people" adopted in 2009 is realised throughout the whole city, represented by car free squares, continuous sidewalks, activity parks and bicycles everywhere. Jan Gehl's mantra Cities for people has become reality in Copenhagen and a close relationship has developed between the city and the university. Universities can change the world if we work hard, Jan says with emphasis.

### **But what about new cities?**

Gehl Architects is frequently hired to make existing cities better, but what about the new cities? Have they learned from mistakes made by others? Modernism is still influencing planners. They cling tightly onto their models, as if the sheer number of buildings would create a city. Dubai and Ørestad in Copenhagen are two examples mentioned. Form must follow function – the architect clearly states.

So, how should we create cities for the future? Jan Gehl leaves the audience with a final message: Put people first in urban planning, it is the most simple and the cheapest thing you can do, it creates better cities for everyone.