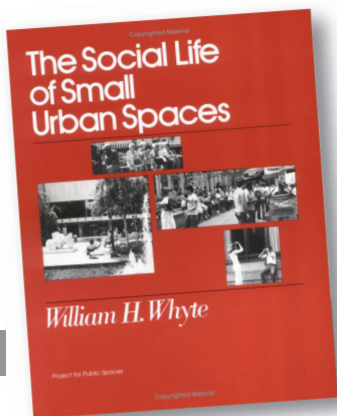




WHAT I'M READING

Carolyn Willitts, CW Studio



CAROLYN WILLITTS

Title The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces
Author William H Whyte
Publisher Project for Public Spaces

“IT IS FAR EASIER,
 SIMPLER TO CREATE
 SPACES THAT WORK FOR
 PEOPLE THAN THOSE
 THAT DO NOT”

WILLIAM H WHYTE

After much thought, and not wanting to upset any of my other well loved books, I've plumped for *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. It's a wonderful book that I was introduced to at college on my landscape architecture conversion course. Coming from a background in theatre design I felt far more familiar with the behaviour of humans than I did of plants. I loved the observations that came from watching the behaviour of ordinary people on city streets.

Shortly after reading the book I went on a college trip to Barcelona and completed my own (completely unmethodological) study of how people moved and rested in the city. I watched and photographed people sitting, leaning and lying down on seats, benches, walls

and ledges, while noticing which were the popular plazas and which weren't. The book encouraged me to look at the behaviour of people in a much more inquisitive way and apply it to public space design.

THE BIG IDEA

This is a book about city spaces, why some work and why some don't. In 1970, Whyte formed a small research group and began looking at urban spaces in New York City. The group discovered that some plazas attracted a lot of people, but that most plazas weren't used for much except for walking across. Whyte thought that if they could figure out why the good plazas worked and the bad ones didn't, they could come up with guidelines and have the basis of a new design code for the city.

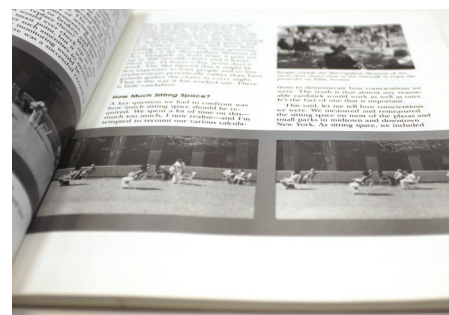
FAVOURITE CHAPTER

My favourite chapter, and the one I refer to most (I photocopied this chapter from the library book at college and referred to it for years before I found a copy of the book for myself) is 'Sitting Space'.

“THE MOST ATTRACTIVE
 FOUNTAINS, THE MOST
 STRIKING DESIGNS, CANNOT
 INDUCE PEOPLE TO COME
 AND SIT IF THERE IS NO
 PLACE TO SIT”

WILLIAM H WHYTE

I go to this chapter whenever I'm designing seating for a project. In addition to the general observations and ideas, it is the guidelines that I find useful. For example: the best range of heights to enable a ledge to



work well as a seat is 1 foot to 3 feet; the depth needed to seat two 'backsides' comfortably is 36 inches; and to help create a successful space, use the same length of sitting space as the length of the entire perimeter of the space. The book also reminds me that sitting on steps usually gives excellent sightlines, making all the 'seats' great for watching the theatre of the street.

LASTING INFLUENCE

This book has stood the test of time for me because it reminds me, when designing, that plazas are for people, not just for beautifully rendered masterplans and empty architectural photographs. The joy of the city can be how the street scene comes alive at eye level with the colour and movement of people. Most of all, the book has encouraged me to question all the assumptions I make when designing (of which there are many) about how people will actually use a space.

ABOUT THE BOOK

After forming research group The Street Life Project, urbanist William H Whyte started to observe public spaces and how people use them. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, published in 1980, explores this topic.

