

---

## Needs in public space

S. Carr, M. Francis, L. G. Rivlin and A. M. Stone  
[1992]

In order to have effective design and management of public spaces it is essential to understand the role that those places play in people's lives, and why spaces are used or ignored. In our view, the human perspective has been neglected in both public space design and management. Places are proposed, built, and assessed with assumptions about what *should* be done in them. Much of this is based on the goals of space designers, their clients, and space managers and does not address people's needs or the ways that public places can function to serve these needs. All kinds of purposes have influenced the qualities of public spaces. For example, plazas often are designed for commercial reasons, to act as corporate emblems, to give builders and developers bonuses in the form of additional floors and space. Parks have taken their form from the past, acting as city emblems, often making statements about the city rather than its citizens. An understanding of the purposes of public places and their use by people is essential to any speculation about their qualities.

Using an open space may be the result of a deliberate plan, or it may be accidental and serendipitous, for example, stopping in a plaza that happens to be along a route, or pausing in one that is a short-cut to a destination. Chance discovery can uncover places worth a stop, and a brief pause may provide a new resource for future use. But the opposite effect also is possible. An uninviting or threatening setting may repel potential users, depositing an unfriendly memory of a place to be avoided in the future.

These incidental users probably make up a minority of the people we find in public places, although they cannot be ignored. Most people go to public open spaces for specific reasons. Some involve immediate needs – to get a drink of water, to eat lunch in

a sunny area, or to rest. Others are long-range purposes and may be less obvious, for example, the need for a change or the opportunity to exercise.

The specific reasons drawing people to public areas reflect many aspects of life, especially urban life. A stop in a public place may enable a person to rest and escape from the confusion, noise, crowds and "overload" (Milgram, 1970) in the surroundings – a common need in complex, urban settings. In this instance the place becomes a haven, a "stimulus shelter" (Wachs, 1979), providing a contrast to the outside. It satisfies the periodic need people have to regroup their resources before moving on. In their study of Bryant Park, Nager and Wentworth (1976) classify a series of reasons users gave for coming to the park under the heading of "park as retreat." People used such words as "relaxing and comfortable," "tranquil, peaceful urban oasis, sanctuary" – words that we also have heard in our own interviews with users in Greenacre Park, another Manhattan green area. These same places also offer a contrast to the daily routine or a transition from the world of work to that of leisure, however brief the stop may be.

There are other reasons to stop, reflecting the need *to go to* rather than the need *to get away from*. Public areas also enable people to connect with others, to affiliate in some way with other people. This may occur in a very passive mode, as in cases where people position themselves to watch the passing scene, content to have their eyes follow the flow of strangers moving by. In other cases a more active participation is desired, where a place is used to meet friends.

Some users may seek specific activities hoping or certain that they will be available in a site. These may be bicyclers going to use paths in parks, people going