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BUMPING INTO PEOPLE

Cities — especially urban villages — are about bumping into old friends and making new friends. Or they should be. The city's job is to bring people together.

The sign at right shows the heart of the urban problem. It is hauntingly located near a high bridge.

For adults, the problem of the city is alienation, districts without community, without a friendly and familiar face.

The Three Rules, which I summarize on the back cover and will discuss in detail shortly, exist to create cities and neighborhoods conducive to bumping into people. Their purpose is not to further some architectural theory but to encourage human connections through serendipitous interaction.

Early cities started as trade hubs, military centers, or religious shrines. Cities still flourish for the same reasons. For each, the city provides a place of contact. The city is a place to make a business deal, enact rules and regulations, make friends, and even fall in love. The city is a place to communicate.

The possibility of the accidental meeting is what makes the city a fertile place. From the chance conversation springs the new business idea. People position themselves in cities so as to be able to make contact with others who have common interests. But our cities work far below their potential. They fail to encourage the unplanned and serendipitous encounter upon which business grows.

Modern cities work even less well for pleasure. As Christopher Alexander puts it, cities are a mechanism for “sustaining human contact.” He says, “People come to cities for contact. That's what cities are: meeting places. Yet the people who live in cities are often contactless and alienated. A few of them are physically lonely: almost all of them live in a state of endless inner loneliness. They have thousands of contacts, but the contacts are empty and unsatisfying.”

People flee cities when they fail as places where casual contact can flourish and create a sense of community. The modern city falls short in providing environments for communication. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls these environments “third places” in his book *The Great Good Place*. He describes the first two places as the home and the workplace. The third place is where one bumps into friends and neighbors in an unplanned manner. Such a place is a public place: the bar, the pub, the coffee shop, the deli. Food or drink is essential; so is proximity to the home. But modern America is short of such places.



Ponder the '90s TV show *Cheers*, which takes place in a tavern of the same name. Its theme song fondly and plaintively describes the tavern as a place “where everybody knows your name.” It speaks volumes about our current civilization that a place where one is recognized as an individual is something unusual enough to merit mentioning in a popular song.

We speak constantly of neighborhoods and community. But without the third place — the commons outside the home and workplace, where people stumble into each other and where your name is known — we do not have a neighborhood but simply an area.

Of course public authorities should not and will not go into the tavern business. But the following principles can help create public places more conducive to meeting people, and they are courtesies that should be no surprise to the Amy Vanderbilts of the city.



Santa Barbara, CA



Santa Barbara, CA



Cannon Beach, OR



St. Helena, CA

Provide seats

A seat is an explicit invitation to stay, either with others or by oneself.

Unfortunately, because of concern that the “wrong” people, i.e., street people, will be the ones to use public seats, too often such seats are removed. It would be naive to assert that some street people present no problem, and it would be heartless to deny any social responsibility for the homeless. The wise social policy about them is far beyond the scope of this book. But removing public seating does not solve the problem: it only denies the rest of the population its due of an inviting city.

Let people purchase food or drink

It seems inevitable that people at almost every party will end up in the kitchen. Oh, perhaps not at the White House or the Elysée Palace, but at pretty much every party where they feel comfortable, they'll end up in the kitchen, around the food. The same principle applies in public: eating together connects us, and a good meal is always the start to a seduction or a contract or a peace agreement. Let us break bread together. Allow and encourage food service that provides seating adjacent to or even on the sidewalk.

Even at a mountain resort, people like to hang around the food.



Boston, MA



Sisters, OR



Vancouver, BC, Canada



Nefertiti Beach, Green River, UT

Offer a conversation piece

Every host and hostess knows that it's nice to have some odd objects lying about for people to notice, exclaim over, and discuss. It's best if the object is a souvenir from one's last trip to Tokyo or Tibet, but it really doesn't matter. The purpose is to divert attention from "I and thou" and to place it on some external object. Third parties are always popular as a subject, but we call that gossip, and that's risky for strangers (not knowing who is who).

In public places, as on the beach, art engages people and always does nicely to help open a conversation by providing an external object on which to focus.

Seattle, WA
photo by Fred House

Do it discreetly

Fostering social interaction is difficult, and an overly enthusiastic or match-making host or hostess can be the surest way to spoil a burgeoning conversation. ("You two will love each other: you have so much in common!" Or "Aren't we all having fun!?")

Caution to planners

Be limited in your goals. Creating community — which is what all this boils down to — is a worthy goal. But it is a goal largely beyond the reach of government.

Community evolves from individual conversations. Venues for these conversations are difficult to create. That's one reason very few adults ever hang around the so-called community center. Such places, built and managed by bureaucracy, most often fall flat. Necessarily run by gray government, they lack the unique and quirky personality often contributed by individual enterprise. Interesting public spaces provide only a framework, with the daily details supplied by aware entrepreneurs who recognize what is working and what is not, and act immediately.

Put public space in the sun

The sun is the prime mover and the source of all life on earth. There is science-fiction speculation that life might be able to evolve with another energy source and in the absence of solar radiation. But we are earthlings, and we are all drawn to the sun. Like most animals, such as these elk, we like to gather in the sun in groups.

Thus, if you would like a public plaza to be used, place it on a side of the building where it will receive sunlight. This may seem elementary, but it is still often ignored.

Better to have too much sun than too little. Shade may be needed in extreme climates, or for a few days a year in the temperate zones. But shade can be provided with awnings and trellises. It is much more difficult to bend the sunshine to the north side of the building if that's where you placed the plaza.



Banff, AB, Canada



Nantucket, MA

Encourage the chance encounter

Chance encounter. It could be the name of a movie from the 1930s. But it is the most basic work of a city. Many interesting things happen to us because we bump into someone by accident: new projects, new clients, and new love affairs. Cities provide a venue for these serendipitous and accidental meetings. The city gives us the opportunity to plan to be in a place where accidents can happen, where we can run into others.

For a brief moment in the 1990s, there was a notion afoot that electronic cyberspace would obviate the need for cities. “We’ll all do our work in front of our console from our home office” was a cliché. And even if we don’t work at home, maybe we will shop from there. Physical proximity will not be needed. The purpose of

the city will vanish in a flood of electrons. The virtual office and virtual store via Internet will replace bricks and mortar. Such predictions have obviously failed. Of course it was always impossible for people in construction to work in cyberspace. Information workers can live and work far from each other. But I think that it is generally accepted that people prefer to go to a place where they can see others.

In the traditional office the watercooler is the place where people meet accidentally. The virtual office would have succeeded if it had a virtual watercooler. But it didn’t, and the momentary dream of telecommuting, even in the face of crushing traffic congestion, has failed. People like to go to work for its sociability.

Cities, which still face challenges from suburban expansion, should pay attention to this desire for social contact. Cities successful in facing this challenge will recognize the importance to economic growth of social interaction and chance meetings. In every possible way, from convention centers to the design of sidewalks, cities that are designed to be sociable will be at an advantage in the economy of the future.

The future of cities lies in the possibility they offer for the chance encounter.

Even something as simple as the sidewalk bazaar can contribute to the city of accidental meetings.

Build neighborhoods for the social stroll

People like to walk together.

In many parts of the world, particularly the Latin nations, it is a part of daily life to take an evening stroll. There is a complex and involved ritual to this walk, this promenade, this *passaggiaeta* or *paseo*, as it’s called in Italy and Spain. It was a tradition in France and Britain, and in the United States, too, before the automobile spread us so far apart that now one has to drive to find a place to walk.

Certain groups only walk with each other; men walk in some manner; women in another, perhaps; children, teenagers, and the very old in yet more ways. It all depends on the specific town and its customs. The stroll starts and stops with invisible but predictable regularity. The *passaggiaeta* is good for the health, but it is more a social exercise than anything else. Chatting, watching other people, and being watched are the reasons for the social stroll.

In the U.S. we have teenagers cruising in cars. Older people use the shopping malls for their promenade. The stroll is a universal custom and impulse, though an impulse largely thwarted by the design of our American cities.



Tokyo, Japan

photo by Hiromitsu Yajima

But suppose one had the opportunity to lay out a new town or merely a new suburban subdivision or perhaps just revitalize a shopping district and wished to meet the demand of future residents to take part in this ancient tradition. How would one proceed?

To a remarkable degree, we do have that opportunity. Suburban development still proceeds apace, and there are many, many plats (divisions of streets, blocks, and lots) and new towns now on the drawing boards, so there are plenty of chances to do things differently and more traditionally.

Here are a few rules for walkways suited to the social stroll.

- *Continuity:* Create a path that forms a continuous loop, such as around a square or a small pond. People of all ages generally prefer to walk in a loop, which gives a sense of departure and arrival. Furthermore, it is important that the route be clear, routine, and “automatic” enough so that decisions about which way to turn are unneeded and hence can never interrupt the conversation.
- *Length:* The path must not be too lengthy so that people may pass each other more than once. Flirting can’t be hurried. One must be able to make eye contact, remake it, and then remake it again in order for the social contact to take root.
- *Width:* It would be ideal for the path to be wide enough for two groups to pass each other without awkward rearrangements to interrupt the conversation.



Bryant Park, New York, NY
photo by Christopher K. Leman

Put your cards (or chess pieces) on the table

People enjoy the amusement and challenge of board games. They are engaging and fun. But such distractions are a staple of culture for a deeper reason: they allow easy and nonthreatening socializing, with the enormous exception of the temptation to cheat. But cheating aside, card and board games provide an opportunity to be with people for hours and hours, actually enjoying their company, with nary a word of consequence ever spoken. There is no obligation to make conversation or, worse, to become ensnared in a pointless and unpleasant argument on politics, religion, money, sex, or any of the other aspects of life that are so interesting and that can divide us most disagreeably.



Cannon Beach, OR

Build close to the sidewalk

One of the benefits of smaller scale is that conversation is encouraged simply by physical proximity. People don't have to raise their voices if they are sitting close to the sidewalk.

Not incidentally, seating close to the sidewalk is good for business; the power of suggestion can work on the passerby who sees customers enjoying what they have bought.

This scale is often called human scale. What does that mean?

One useful definition of human scale is a functional one. For example: an apartment building in which a child on the sidewalk can converse with his/her mother at a window up above. That is human scale: a place where the ability to have a conversation is allowed by the very size of the space.

Note: The town in Oregon where I took this picture has approximately eighty benches in its four blocks of main street. That's seating for about four hundred people: a superb seating-to-sidewalk ratio. It is a very comfortable town.



Queenstown, New Zealand



Bellingham, WA

Gather 'round the hearth

Everyone has been to a party in a large house in which by 11 P.M. the “living” rooms are empty and the guests are all crammed together in the kitchen. Such is the power of the hearth.

Create something similar in public spaces, such as at this shopping mall (above) or outside this restaurant.

Seattle, WA
photo by Fred Houseel

Provide a place for music

These entry steps to a major office building function well in several ways. Of course, access to the building is their first function. They also act as a viewpoint to observe the passing scene.

But their circular shape also creates a small amphitheater and a place for performance, particularly music. This small space is adjacent to but off a bustling sidewalk. Musicians (either street or school) can play here without inconveniencing passersby who do not care to stop to listen.

Noontime concerts (called the Out to Lunch Series in Seattle) add music to daily life. Music is an unobtrusive way to bring people together. It soothes. It helps us while away boring times. It is an ancient pathway to religious and community experience.



Bainbridge Island, WA

Reclaim and people the parking lot

The entrance to a supermarket is an ideal place to sell potted plants and cut flowers. It is also ideal for selling newspapers, which of course leads to espresso, without which a newspaper would be dry indeed. But what good is a newspaper and a morning drink without a table and chair? So soon enough there is a new hangout, an ongoing liveliness to make the parking lot more human, and an additional attraction for the store's customers.

The informal series of open roof and tents was so successful that since this photo was taken the arrangement has been formalized with a more permanent all-weather structure.



Seattle, WA

Build bus shelters with public services

Large terminals often have shops and services — consider Grand Central Station — so why not make the small stop more pleasant?

Some transit stops are too small — with too few riders — to support any services at all. But surely a number of bus stops generate enough pedestrian traffic to support an espresso bar, newspaper and magazine kiosk, bank machine, flower shop, shoe-shine stand, video rental in the larger ones, or at the very least a public telephone.

The transportation authority might build a kiosk with a “pop-out” end so entrepreneurs could plug in their own self-contained gear. The authority should not have to do too much: utility lines would be sufficient. The authority might be paid a percentage rent to reflect excellent locations. The successful retailer would inevitably gain the status of informant on bus schedules, lost dogs and cats, and general watchkeeper.



Seattle, WA

Use sound to permit conversation

Not only spies but ordinary folks can benefit from “white noise” to give them privacy. This park is located on a harsh urban corner where no one would want to spend much time chatting. Yet the background of the roaring waterfall provides a little bit of pastoral peace and creates privacy for conversation.



Seattle, WA

photo by Barbara Gray

Promote growing

The urge to plant and cultivate is deep but not easily satisfied if you have no ground of your own. P-Patches are common ground where people can lease their own patch of dirt (typically from a city agency) and gain support from others. It is in such informal places that neighbors can meet and the practical wisdom of older people can be passed along.



Seattle, WA

Allow strangers to sit together

Some out-of-town restaurateurs came to visit. They praised one restaurant highly and complimented the proprietor. “It’s awesome! We love it! The only thing you’ve got to change are the tables. They are too big. They’re big enough for twelve!” The proprietor smiled. Without the large tables, his restaurant wouldn’t be a neighborhood hangout.

To join a stranger at a restaurant table for two or four is, for Americans, a very forward act. It is an aggressive and committing gesture, unless the seat is the last one in the house and one can point to the excuse of necessity.

But to sit down at a common table (when there are nothing but common tables) where a stranger is already sitting, is nothing at all except playing by house rules. To make an idle remark to that stranger, to which he or she can casually respond or just as casually decline, is nothing out of the ordinary and, for shy people, a more comfortable engagement.

The great abyss of urban loneliness is bridged by the large table of this restaurant, this “third place,” and such casual contact is what cities are all about.

The only warning: such community tables are a public place, albeit small. They are not the place to propose marriage, interview for a job, or negotiate the “big deal.”

Another danger: such third-place socializing becomes addictive.



Seattle, WA

Build in bus stop seating

This modest gesture to the street is well used by neighbors waiting for the bus. (It was being used, in fact; but the photographer was shy and waited for riders to board their bus before shooting.)

The landlord lost some rentable square footage, but the neighborhood gained a speck of sheltered repose.



Seattle, WA

Create public spaces simply with seats

Seats of any kind are an invitation and an announcement: “This is a public space. Sit down and give your brain a rest.” It doesn’t take much. One can create a public realm by simply giving people the opportunity to sit and linger.



Seattle, WA

Quench the thirst for community

The physical surroundings of this corner are every bit as barren and unfriendly as they appear.

Yet the urban thirst for new experiences and stimulation is so great (and obvious to all) that even here in an urban Sahara the entrepreneur can — with the most minimal investment — create an oasis for people to hang out, meet people, swap ideas — as the stand’s sidewalk board (to the right) proposes.

Like the lichen — which pioneers the barest and most inhospitable mountain summit and gradually, through its own chemical action, breaks down the hardest rock into soil where plants can grow — the espresso bar creates a fertile ground for community.

Again, government action can thwart such small improvements as this espresso bar. But its creation — so very vital to the real life of cities — is beyond institutional reach.



Seattle, WA



Seattle, WA
photo by Barbara Gray

Use movable chairs

Communities are not announced by planners but emerge out of places that people make their own. Spaces to sit and chat allow such ownership to develop. People gain such a sense of ownership by lingering at a spot.

Enliven a sterile plaza with tables and chairs. They are inexpensive, flexible, and allow the users to program the space on a short-term basis. People can rearrange them to face into or away from the sun and wind, to avoid noise, to better hear one another, to accommodate the larger group, or to provide privacy for the couple or individual.

William Whyte, the observer of public space, observed that there is an inescapable ritual of sitting down. As the sitter takes a chair, she shifts it — if only a few inches — and in doing so she exerts her territoriality, making the space more her own. A space becomes more meaningful when people are allowed to create this personal and temporary territoriality with movable chairs. One might fear the hassle and property loss from loose seating, but the comfort level is worth the cost.



Portland, OR

Let readers sip

A welcome trend in bookstores (now a delightful cliché) is to allow customers to eat and drink (once the book or magazine has been bought, of course).

“Oh! Is that the new issue of _____? Anything good in it?”

The magazine or book, its cover quite visible, acts like a state’s sign at a political convention, bringing together those of like inclination and interest.

As yet another illustration of the tumultuous pace of change in today’s world, the current trend is to provide wireless Internet access in coffee bars. As I read on the Web edition of *The New York Times*:

Ms. Kachouh, who used to work in a Starbucks in Union Square where she said the clientele consisted entirely of office workers and tourists, said many of her regulars work at home. They include writers, psychologists, psychiatrists, lawyers and others. Accordingly, she said, she had recently arranged for wireless Internet access for the store.

“I have all these people who need it,” she said sympathetically. “It’s too hot for them to work at home.”

But did she really want tables tied up for hours?

“It’s good,” she said. “The busier I look, the busier I get.”