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# The Observation Man, A Study of William H. Whyte

Eugenie L. Birch

*University of Pennsylvania*, [elbirch@upenn.edu](mailto:elbirch@upenn.edu)

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## The Observation Man, A Study of William H. Whyte

### **Comments**

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erched in his office 55 stories above Rockefeller Center, William Hollingsworth Whyte surveys the city: Manhattan's brown and white skyscrapers give way to the blue-grey waters of the Hudson River and the green shores of New Jersey. But Holly (his longtime nickname) Whyte has never stayed long in this office. His mission has taken him into the streets and squares of cities, the fast-developing suburbs, and the sprawl-threatened countryside, into courtrooms, architects' studios, and planning board and city council meetings. He has gone to observe and later comment, often with practical suggestions for a design or a piece of legislation. As a critic and a teacher, he has recorded, analyzed, and explored the functioning of metropolitan environments for the past 30 years.

Whyte has shared his observations in several significant books, each more interesting to planners than the last. In 1956, he dissected the newly emerging postwar suburbs in his classic, *The Organization Man*. Two years later, he pointed out the evils of urban sprawl and thoughtless urban renewal in *The Exploding Metropolis*. In the 1960s, he outlined plans for conserving rural lands in *Open Space Action*, *Cluster Zoning*, and *The Last Landscape*.

Perhaps he is best known, however, for his most recent work on the design of urban open space. His highly acclaimed film and its companion book, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, reported the results of a decade-long research project observing human behavior patterns in streets, plazas, and malls.

Whyte is more than a writer. He is an activist, persuasively marketing his recommendations, translating words into laws and laws into livable environments. Few states in the nation have not been influenced by his conservation work; few downtowns of our largest cities have been left untouched by his findings on the use of public space.

Whyte began his writing career in 1946, when he joined *Fortune* magazine. Although a rookie, he brought with him a degree in English from Princeton and the experience of a Marine who had weathered the Guadalcanal campaign. At *Fortune*, he was a bit of a maverick, taking on unstructured assignments and often working several months before turning out a story. But those stories were always stable and often controversial, like the articles that became *The Organization Man*.

While his earliest work concentrated on the corporate world, he made the connection between planning and business in editing a series on metropolitan growth

that later was published as *The Exploding Metropolis*. Here, he got Jane Jacobs to write her first attack on urban renewal, a precursor to her 1961 book-length critique, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. His contribution, an essay on urban sprawl, evolved from his dismay at seeing his own birthplace, Chester County, Pennsylvania, carelessly transformed from a rural to an urbanized area.

Struck by the conservation issues he touched on in this essay, Whyte left *Fortune* in 1959 to work on them full time. His basic concern, to preserve land in the most economical fashion, led to an Urban Land Institute report called *Conservation Easements*. In it he proposed legislation that became the model for open space statutes in California, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maryland.

For the next 10 years, he drafted influential reports for the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission and the American Conservation Foundation. He served as a consultant to Connecticut and New Jersey, which both enacted his recommendations for open space programs financed by bond issues. He was a member of President Lyndon Johnson's Task Force on Natural Beauty and drafted its final report. It included his own proposal for urban beautification, which ultimately became a \$50 million tree planting program. Later, he became codirector of the White House Conference on Natural Beauty and chairman of New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller's Conference on Natural Beauty. This period for Whyte culminated with the publication of *The Last Landscape* in 1968.

## The Observation Man

By Eugenie L. Birch, AICP

"Every thoughtful practitioner in the country has read his works and been deeply influenced by them," says one planner of William Whyte, who has devoted the last 40 years to observing—and improving—America's landscape and cities.

In the early 1970s, he turned his sights on central cities, attacking a recent flurry of regional plans premised on decentralization. During this time, he took on the year-long assignment of writing the text for the *Plan for New York City*. This 1969 official master plan was hailed by the *New York Times* for its concise and compelling writing and praised by the American Society of Planning Officials for its breadth of vision.

Work on the plan drew Whyte's attention to incentive zoning, particularly the provisions encouraging developers to create public plazas or arcades in exchange for additional floor space. While serving as distinguished professor of urban sociology at Hunter College of the City University of New York, he and some of his students organized the Street Life Project to study how people used streets and open spaces in the center of the city.

Using time-lapse photography, Whyte and his team recorded "schmoozing patterns, the rituals of street encounters" and sought to find out why "people flocked to some plazas and left others empty." Funded by grants from the National Geographic Society and others, Whyte had enough evidence by 1973 to stimulate a complete overhaul of the incentive zoning provisions in the New York City code.

Many other cities emulated this ordinance, with its specifications for seating, planting, food concessions, and other amenities. To disseminate his findings more widely, Whyte edited thousands of feet of time-lapse photographic film into a movie, "The Social Life of Small Urban Places," screened nationally on the Public

Photos by Janet Charles





Broadcasting System and currently being shown at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Noting that he has always found a way to do what he enjoys doing, Whyte's face lights up as he describes his future plans. A book, an extension of *Social Life of Small Urban Places* and another movie, one including footage on Japan and Europe, are immediate projects. And there is the ongoing work of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, which he helped found.

At age 69, Whyte keeps up a steady round of consulting. San Francisco, Dallas, Kansas City, Seattle, and San Diego have called for his advice. Yet New York is his base; he has lived there with his wife and daughter for about 40 years.

For these continuing efforts, last December Whyte was awarded an honorary membership in the American Institute of Certified Planners, joining such



luminaries as Lewis Mumford and James Rouse.

One crisp morning last winter, Whyte took me on a walking tour to show me the workable spaces in midtown Manhattan. We paused in Rockefeller Center to watch natives and visitors enjoy the holiday display, then moved quickly to Paley Park, deserted on this subzero morning but still a perfect demonstration of the virtues of easy entry, movable furniture, trees, the soothing tones of a waterfall. On we went to the IBM Building's interior plaza, where Whyte expressed dismay at the removal of some of the seating, although it remains a haven for many.

Finally, we ended up at the Whitney Museum sculpture garden in the Philip Morris Building, a space Whyte worked on directly with architect Ulrich Franzen. It is not a big space, but a welcoming and interesting one, with a life-sized sculpture of dancing women, an ample supply of tables and chairs, and a little cappuccino stand. People of all ages came and went, and

Whyte sighed contentedly.

After spending almost 10 years watching his fellow New Yorkers, Whyte knows what to expect of them. Walking on Madison Avenue, he spotted a pedestrian near the Urban Center. "Watch him," he ordered. Almost by command, the man stepped from the sidewalk, ignored the crosswalk, and paced diagonally across the street to the opposite corner. Whyte beamed. "They always do that," he observed. "I feel as if I'm controlling them, although I know I'm not. I have to be careful," he laughed with reference to his new AICP status, "or they really will have me certified."

In the following interview, conducted in his office later that day, Whyte shares both his philosophy about urban activism and his views on some contemporary planning techniques.

**Planners from around the country are calling on you for advice. What are you saying?**

It's really my job and obligation to be

frank. For instance, in the case of Dallas—not that it did any good—I was asked by the city council to do a study of the City Hall Plaza. It was an absolute bomb. I. M. Pei's wonderful monument—very striking, especially at night, but oh, that plaza, and all that concrete! In the plaza, there are a group of little stunted trees; Pei didn't want big trees interfering with the view. There were benches—horrible, concrete benches—and exactly four were within the shade of the trees. Now there are movable chairs, and people use the benches for footrests.

In addition, the city wanted me to look at the downtown. I've done enough counting to know that if you go to a downtown sidewalk at noon and you haven't got well over 1,000 people per hour per sidewalk, there's something very wrong. Dallas actually has a very high-density core. So where were all the people? Well, it's partly the southwest culture: clubs, in-house cafeterias, a short lunch hour.

But they also have an underground concourse, which they need like a hole in the head. These things are self-proving. The more underground links you have, the more pressure builds for them in every new development.

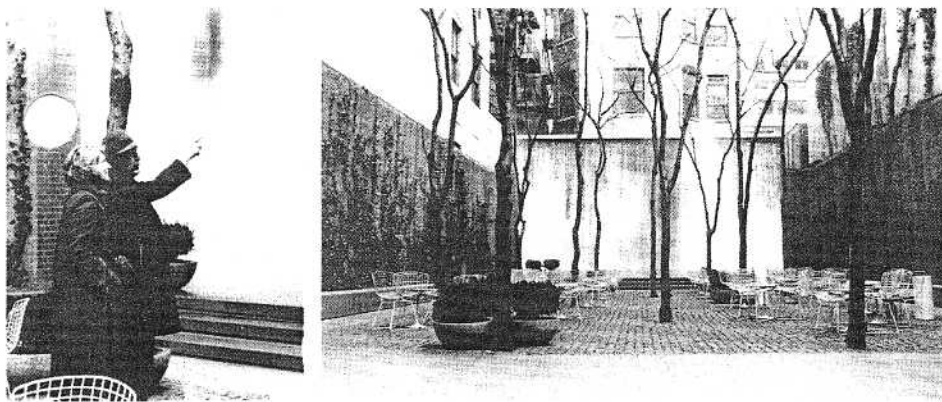
**What's your opinion about using incentive zoning to obtain things that a city might need, like subway station improvements or a riverfront promenade?**

There's nothing wrong with the approach. But when you're thinking up innovative programs, you'd better be sure to check back to find out what's happened before.

For most of these things, you can tell in about a month whether or not they work. Look at arcaded sidewalks. It took us 15 years to acknowledge that these things don't work very well because they recess the stores away from the main traffic stream. That's why you see so many for sale signs. Well, we could have found that out very early, the second or third day out. So, on incentives, yes. But very few, and let's check to see if we're getting our money's worth.

**How would you do such a check?**

Back in 1969, I proposed a little evaluative unit that would report directly to the chairman of the New York City Planning Commission—not to the Urban Design



Group, not to the Office of Midtown Planning, but directly to the chairman, so he could say, "Check this thing out. Is Mr. Potemkin really doing the job?" But the idea never went anywhere. To my knowledge, in fact, there is no planning commission in the country that has built in an evaluative capability.

#### **How would an evaluative unit work?**

It would be like the Inspector General's Office in the Army: Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. When it does work, it can be very useful. It doesn't have the clout to go public—and you know what happens to someone within a department who does go public—but at least it can go to the boss.

I must say, though, for all my criticism of New York city planners, they've been pretty damn responsive.

#### **What other cities are good models?**

San Francisco. They're leaning over backward to be responsive. I spent a day a while ago with George Williams and his whole urban design group. We talked about their new urban guidelines, and I thought they were pretty good. Philadelphia looks pretty good, too. Pittsburgh rates a salute. The planning commission did a fine survey of their downtown space and applied the findings in their guidelines.

#### **So the large cities have been conscientious in trying to improve their downtowns, but are the medium and small cities less so?**

The medium-sized cities have a tougher job downtown. They are much more immediately hit than the big cities by the competition of the suburban shopping mall. They are much more apt to copy the shopping mall. That's a hideous mistake. For the form that works so well out on the interchange doesn't make much sense downtown. Developers can write their own ticket in most cities, and they get away with murder. But I've also found that when you bring in good legislation, they turn into pragmatists.

#### **Then once something is legislated, the developers go along?**

They won't fight it. They've got other things to do. This is what I preach if I'm lec-

turing to a civic or planning group. I say, "You guys aren't asking for enough. The developers will give it to you, but you have to stretch for it. It's for their own good. They might not know that, but in the long run, it is."

#### **What's your opinion of the new festival marketplaces?**

I think Quincy Market [in Boston] and Harborplace [in Baltimore] are really exemplary in their way. Rouse is a very shrewd observer. He doesn't miss a trick. I was struck by the way he organized Quincy Market, with the street going through it and the very tight spaces. Of course, a lot of that was a given. I talked to him when he was working on Harborplace, and he said he realized how lucky he was in Boston to have so many key decisions already made for him by the site and the buildings. In Baltimore, he had much more of a clean slate.

Harborplace has worked very well. Some people complain that the activity is

not vital, that it's not at the very core. No, it's not. It's a recreational place. You don't go there because you have to but because you want to. I'm persuaded that when you see the crowds there using it consistently and having a good time, something must be right. I think it has been very well done.

As for South Street Seaport, I always thought it would become the Wall Street office workers' place, and it did. Suddenly at 12 o'clock all these dark suits appear.

I'm not wild about some of the other festival marketplaces. The trouble is, you've seen them once too often, and some of the copies omit the key elements of the original. Rouse told me once he gets many requests from mayors who say, "We have a wonderful old warehouse with lots of brick. Come do it." He says, "They miss the point."

The Faneuil Hall Marketplace is a very workable place, for there are a lot of very tough merchandizing lessons demonstrated there: The street is central to it, as is a critical mass of people. It's a

William H. Whyte





beneficently congested place. There is a wonderful second-story mix—which is important. There are lots of things to learn.

**Talking about selling, you're pretty good at it, too. Your studies don't just lie around on shelves.**

Well, I knew, after finishing *Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, that our findings were good. But we had to sell them, or they would have disappeared. Rather than wait for a full book, which was going to take forever to come out, I wanted to start the practical application of our ideas. I really wanted to get them known by the architects. Their assumptions are often so wrong that I thought it was really important to say something to them.

**And what did you do to make sure your ideas got across?**

I did my homework. So I was able to anticipate the questions. The lawyers always ask the toughest questions. For instance, "If all this comes through, and we have more trees and this and that, aren't we going to attract too many people?"

It's nice, then, to be able to talk about the facts of the situation. To tell them that, in fact, there is no saturation point. And we have in no way begun to touch the demand for amenities. So the fact that Manhattan's Paley Park, for example, has been very, very well used doesn't mean that you shouldn't have a similar park maybe three blocks away.

**Certainly you have encountered resistance to your proposals for zoning changes. Where did it come from?**

There was a lawyer who was appointed head of the parks and recreation committee of a community board, which oversaw development in midtown Manhattan. I'd run into him at conferences, and I could

tell from his criticism that he didn't like what I was aiming for—more or less as-of-right legislation.

My as-of-right guidelines showed what developers could do. Then they wouldn't have to go through the conventional land-use review process. So, of course, stiff guidelines were needed. You couldn't be ambiguous. And we had them all: One linear foot of sitting space must be provided, a minimum for every 30 square feet of plaza. That is in the zoning of most big cities now. They all copy one another.

But this lawyer made unholy fun of that guideline. "Look," he said, "let's cut through all this red tape. Let's sit down with the developer and work it out case by case." Sounds good, but what it means is, tennis without the net and one man is in charge.

We went on about the issue for two full years. Finally, we had to cut out one of the best pieces of the legislation, the part that said, in effect, "Mr. Developer, there are a lot of places where it's best not to have a plaza. Instead of a plaza, find a lot within two blocks of your site and give us another Paley Park." My idea had been that we could make the developers work with us. We worked out quite stiff guidelines. But in the end, John Zucotti, head of the planning commission, gave up this provision to get the rest through.

**You have been involved in some very dramatic actions, haven't you?**

You can't go off in an ivory tower when you're dealing with issues like these. For example, we had a big fight on a sun question at Greenacre Park. I got involved through the New York Landmarks Conservancy. We were asked by the city's official landmarks commission to monitor a preservation easement on a landmark building whose air rights were being acquired by a developer. He was going to put

up a high rise on Third Avenue. When I saw the plans for it, I thought that, at 34 stories, it might shadow Greenacre Park.

"No, no," said the developer and his people. "It's going to be a redundant shadow." In other words, the shadow would fall on the neighboring building, not on the park. When I started to do some sun angle analysis, I found that the new building would cause about 25 minutes' loss of sun at the critical midday period.

Well, the planning commission approved the project anyway. The last step was the Board of Estimate, which rarely goes against the planning commission. But we went there with our sun data. The developers were very confident. They had already started building the thing. They told the board that they had rented out the whole building, 34 stories and all. If they had to drop off some stories, many prospective tenants would have to leave New York. The lawyer didn't even address himself to the shadow issue, and we invoked it for all it was worth. The board reduced the building by three stories.

As the building was being built at the time, they had signed up every inch of space. It cost them \$25 million. The *New York Times* took the developers' side. They said the environmentalists played dirty pool. But it put the fear of God into a lot of developers, let me tell you. They started doing their sun studies.

**With all your lecturing, lobbying, and consulting, do you ever have the opportunity to talk to students, and if so, what do you tell them?**

I was just up at Winnipeg University in Manitoba, sitting on a jury for a design studio. The student projects are always the same—a redo of the downtown. They had all these overhead bridges encased in glass, all sorts of architectural acrobatics, sunken plazas, the works. You realize that this is a generation that never knew a city. They never knew a successful downtown. It's not their fault. Their image is of a suburban shopping mall. They recreate it. They don't know how important the street is.

That's where my mission is. I want to show them that the best contemporary developments, just like the best old ones, have a strong street presence. This is what unifies. It's what brings it together.

Eugenie Birch, AICP, is associate professor of planning at Hunter College in New York City.