

Laura Frahm

## The Rules of Attraction: Urban Design, City Films, and Movement Studies

2014

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18586>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Frahm, Laura: The Rules of Attraction: Urban Design, City Films, and Movement Studies. In: *ZMK Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung*. Producing Places, Jg. 5 (2014), Nr. 1, S. 85–99. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18586>.

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 3.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - Share Alike 3.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

---

## The Rules of Attraction

### Urban Design, City Films, and Movement Studies

Laura Frahm

WILLIAM H. WHYTE'S URBAN RESEARCH PROJECT *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*—one of the most influential projects in urban design and spatial analysis in New York City in the 1970s—started out with a paradox: In spite of the fact that the number of public spaces in New York City had constantly increased since the early 1960s—not least due to incentive bonuses that were given to builders who integrated small plazas for public use in front of corporate buildings<sup>1</sup>—, the reality that Whyte and his team faced in their studies was that most of these newly created public spaces were, in fact, empty and underused. The zoning laws that had been envisioned as a tool to revitalize inner city life in New York in the 1960s soon revealed their inherent failures and misconceptions: The mere fact of providing empty spaces did not fulfill the need to reinvigorate life in New York City—a city that was struggling, according to William K. Reilly, »with dirt, decay, crime, and fiscal crisis.«<sup>2</sup> It was this insight into the limits and inadequacies of an urban planning that acted top-down that paved the way for Whyte's influential study of street life and spatial practices, which would significantly change the principles of urban planning and spatial analysis in the 1970s and 1980s.

Whyte's decade-long study, which resulted in his influential book *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980) and a widely overlooked instructional film of the same title, is not only significant for the history of urban planning and urban design, but it also, and more importantly, offers us insights into a new kind of spatial analysis that conceives of space as a *process space*, thereby prefiguring some of the most advanced approaches to spatial research in the past decades. By analyzing any urban space first and foremost through the range of spatial practices that it facilitates, Whyte shifts the perspective from a given and predefined spatial entity to the open processes of what I will call »becoming place«. In this context, the con-

---

<sup>1</sup> In his study *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, published in 1980, William H. Whyte points out that due to these incentives, which were implemented in 1961, the number of public spaces in New York had increased in 1972 to »20 acres of the world's most expensive open space.« See William H. Whyte: *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Washington, DC 1980, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> William K. Reilly: Foreword, in: *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7: 7.

ditions and formations of »being with« that Whyte outlines in his studies can be described as complex topologies of *affinities*, *attachments*, and *assemblages* between human and non-human actors, whereas his instructional film, which occupies a niche between urban design, city films, and movement studies, further advances and complicates his pioneering visual urban research.

## 1. Being Individual: Organizational Studies and City Planning in the 1960s

When William H. Whyte began his work as an urban analyst and a chronicler of the streets of New York City in the 1970s, he had already had a long career as one of the editors of *Fortune Magazine* and was an important figure in the emerging field of organizational studies. His book *The Organization Man* (1956) was a seminal study of the rise of corporations and suburban life in the 1950s and, moreover, a vibrant proclamation against the conformity imposed by the new »corporate dream.«<sup>3</sup> It is this constant quest for individualism, which Whyte develops against an increasingly uniform corporate and suburban culture that he sees emerging in the 1950s, which also drives, as I will argue, his subsequent work in urban planning. His main publications in this field—ranging from *The Exploding Metropolis* (1958) to *The Last Landscape* (1968) to *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980), and *The City: Rediscovering the Center* (1988)—are distinct articulations of Whyte's relentless fight for open space, or more precisely, for the preservation of those spaces that withstand the increasing tendency for uniformity; spaces, in other words, that facilitate and foster his quest for individualism.

In order to understand how individuals use small urban spaces and to collect data on an unprecedented scale, Whyte founded the research group *The Street Life Project* in 1970, which set out to conduct a series of detailed studies in the streets, parks, and plazas of New York City by employing the method of direct observation—a method that, as Whyte points out, had »long been used for the study of people in far-off lands. It had not been used to any great extent in the U.S. city.«<sup>4</sup> Apart from some »notable studies [...] of crowded animals, or of students and

---

<sup>3</sup> Among the first articles, originally published in *Fortune Magazine*, which were included in his book *The Organization Man* and addressed Whyte's critique of corporate culture and suburban lifestyle were: *The Class of '49* (*Fortune Magazine*, June 1949), *The Transients* (*Fortune Magazine*, June 1949), and *How the New Suburbia Socializes* (*Fortune Magazine*, August 1953); reprinted in: Albert LaFarge (ed.): *The Essential William H. Whyte*, New York 1999, pp. 3–42.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Whyte: *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (as note 1), p. 10.

members of institutions responding to experimental situations,<sup>5</sup> the implementation of this method within the field of urban planning was a radical step towards replacing the common principles of the ›top-down‹ approach that had been in use for decades. Instead, Whyte was convinced that by studying the behavior of people in urban spaces ›from the bottom-up‹, he would produce new insights that, ultimately, aimed at changing the existing zoning laws and fostering a revitalization of urban life in New York City.

There seems to be a moment of renewed utopianism in urban planning and urban politics in the 1960s and 1970s—a hope of reinvigorating inner-city life that was informed by century-long ideals of the ›livable city‹, which privileged vital street life over a traffic-oriented city, small, close-knit communities over large-scale housing projects, and the architectural and social diversity of inner-city neighborhoods over the uniformity of suburban life that Whyte saw as a direct result of the rise of corporate culture in the 1950s. This renewed utopianism in urban planning was not least spurred by the enduring fight over downtown Manhattan one decade earlier between two of the most influential figures in urban planning in New York in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs. In this battle, Robert Moses, »New York’s master builder«,<sup>6</sup> who had initiated a series of large-scale projects during his long career as urban planner, and most notably the Triborough Bridge Project, which inevitably shaped the face of New York in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as a modernist and traffic-oriented city, was ultimately defeated in his plans for a new super-highway that would run all across downtown Manhattan by a group of urban activists led by Jane Jacobs, whose seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* became a manifesto for a new bottom-up approach to urban planning when it was published in 1961.

William H. Whyte, who was closely associated with the work of Jane Jacobs—in fact, he published some of her first articles during his time as editor for *Fortune Magazine*—was hired by the New York City Planning Commission in 1969 in order to develop a new vision for urban space in New York City. In clear opposition to Robert Moses’ top-down, grand-scale, and utterly rationalist approach to urban planning, which Whyte saw as an ill-fated extension of the corporate culture that he had attacked in the 1950s, Whyte advocated a new method of direct observation and small-scale studies that took place ›on the street-level.‹ As Nathan Glazer writes in his obituary for Whyte, entitled *The Man Who Loved Cities*, his distinctive contribution to urban planning, »lay in his avoidance of anything so

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Goldberger: Robert Moses, Master Builder, is Dead at 92, in: *The New York Times* (July 30, 1981), p. A1.

grandiose as a vision,<sup>7</sup> for it was »the eye-level view, [...] not the bird's-eye view of grand planners<sup>8</sup> that informed Whyte's practices of urban research.

Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, as I will point out in the following, allows us to identify a crucial shift in urban planning in the 1970s—the shift from a totalizing concept of space shaped from above to a new, process-based concept of space that is conceived from below, or more precisely, from the very practices of standing, sitting, walking, watching, talking, and strolling that Whyte observed in his studies. Moreover, by consistently employing a vocabulary of attraction and attachment, of drawing people into spaces and of keeping them »in place,« Whyte's study not only offers a precise analysis of the changing degrees of affinities, attachments, and assemblages between people, objects, and spaces, but he also delineates a new way of conceptualizing space—as an open process of »placemaking« or »becoming place« that calls for a constant adaptability of urban planning principles.

## 2. The Rules of Attraction: Affinities, Attachments, Assemblages

Parting from the assumption that all urban planning had to develop from »real life questions,« Whyte's studies with the Street Life Project, which were commissioned by the New York City Council in order to obtain recommendations for new zoning laws for public spaces in New York City, were explicitly directed against what Whyte called the urban planners, »holy war against the street.«<sup>9</sup> For urban planners, as Whyte argues, had gone too far in attacking the density of the city as a source for chaos and disorder. Instead, Whyte's close observations revealed that people were genuinely attracted by crowds: they were literally drawn to busy street corners, bustling plazas, and populated parks. Already in his article *The Case for Crowding*, Whyte claimed that higher density constitutes a better city, and even more pointedly, that »concentration is the genius of the city, its reason for being.«<sup>10</sup> Thus, »being with others,« the very fact of a »togetherness« of people in small urban spaces was *the* precondition for Whyte's observations in the first place, or, in Paul Goldberger's words, »Holly's mind had every place filled with people. He only began to see things when the people were in them.«<sup>11</sup>

Convinced by his initial observations of the bustling life of Seagram Plaza—the

7 Nathan Glazer: *The Man Who Loved Cities*. Obituary for William H. Whyte, in: *The Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 1999), pp. 27–33: 29.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

9 Paul Goldberger: Foreword, in: Albert LaFarge (ed.): *The Essential William H. Whyte* (as note 3), pp. vi–ix: p. viii.

10 William H. Whyte: *The Case for Crowding*, in: *Ibid.*, pp. 217–224: 224.

11 Paul Goldberger: Foreword (as note 9), p. ix.

first case study with the Street Life Project—that it should be, »difficult to design a space that will not attract people,« Whyte drily adds: »What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished.«<sup>12</sup> In order to counteract the increasing number of empty plazas in front of corporate buildings and office towers that spread across New York City—the paradox that had initiated his studies in the first place—, Whyte started to observe activity not only in corporate plazas, but in all types of small urban spaces that allowed for an encounter and thus fostered, as I will point out, different degrees and intensities of »being with«: small plazas, mini-parks, street corners, sidewalks, and even children’s playgrounds. Whyte and his team spent months and years collecting data and analyzing the patterns of people’s behavior, assembling thousands of files, transcripts of interviews with pedestrians, maps of the shifting population of plazas, and graphs detailing the amount of sit-table space. Moreover, he employed a complex set-up of several Super-8 cameras, discretely positioned in the windows of adjacent buildings or secretly hidden in bags or other tourist utensils, seemingly pointing at something else, while spending »over 100 man-hours,«<sup>13</sup> as he recalls in the appendix of his book, evaluating the data of only one day in the life of a small urban space. It might come as no surprise, then, that when Whyte finally published his study in 1980, nine years after he had begun his work with the Street Life Project, he still introduced it as a »pre-book« and moreover, as a mere »by-product of first-hand observation.«<sup>14</sup>

By turning the lens on all kinds of small urban spaces, Whyte’s study offers a precise and pioneering spatial analysis of the ephemeral groupings of office workers, girl-watchers, schmoozers, strollers, and passers-by. Driven by his vision to change and to improve the existing conditions of urban life in New York in the 1970s, Whyte’s study, above all, aimed at detecting and unveiling those hidden »rules of attraction« that make small spaces work. Convinced that it is the specific *use* of spaces that should define the way in which these spaces are designed, he called for the implementation of new urban planning principles that reflected those »rules of attraction« that began to surface in his studies and that I will discuss in the following as different degrees or intensities of »being with«—ranging from loosely defined *affinities* with the most populated spots to stronger degrees of *attachments* to specific objects and spatial amenities to the force fields of attraction that create complex *assemblages*, if only for a moment, of people, objects, and spaces. By deriving his findings from direct observation, that is, from the very practices that people employ in small urban spaces, Whyte advocates a quintessentially process-oriented approach that defines space from bottom-up, and more-

<sup>12</sup> William H. Whyte: *City*. Rediscovering the Center, New York 1988, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> William H. Whyte: *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (as note 1), p. 110.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

over, that conceives of space as an *open process* that is shaped and reshaped by the practices on the street.

Parting from the assumption that »what attracts people most [...] are other people,«<sup>15</sup> Whyte's study shows that most people have a distinct *affinity* with populated spots and, moreover, a decided tendency to position themselves in the middle of the so-called »100 percent location,«<sup>16</sup> located right at the center of the pedestrian flow. Rather than finding their own secluded spots and niches within a crowded place, people tend to be attracted, as Whyte never ceases to underline, to the most impossible areas: busy street corners serve for an impromptu conference, the girl-watchers and schmoozers are observing the hustle and bustle right from the center, picnics are held on the steps in the middle of the pedestrian flow, and even lovers, instead of searching for the more secluded areas, are often found right in front, openly displaying their affection on what Whyte calls »the theater of the street.«<sup>17</sup>

While Whyte's precise analysis of the ephemeral groupings of people in small urban spaces, or what we could call the changing »topologies of affinities« between the office workers, girl-watchers, schmoozers, strollers, and passers-by, forms a crucial part of his studies, the most substantial chapters are focused on the implementation and use of objects and spatial amenities within these small urban spaces. Here, his observations shift from a mere »affinity« with the most populated spots and crowded areas to a higher degree of *attachment with specific objects and amenities* that make an urban space unique. In his detailed chapters on the ideal amount of sittable space, the vital relation to the street, ample supplies of sun, the general availability of food and food carts, the best distribution of trees, as well as the integration of water in all possible forms—as »waterfalls, waterwalls, rapids, sluiceways, tranquil pools, water tunnels, meandering brooks, fountains of all kinds«<sup>18</sup>—, Whyte constantly highlights the binding forces, or rather, the force fields of attraction around these objects and spatial amenities that virtually draw people into these small urban spaces and keep them »attached.«

Moreover, Whyte's constant quest for individualism, which had already shaped his organizational studies and his critique of corporate culture in the 1950s, markedly resurfaces in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* in the form of his repeated claim to allow for an open, creative, and, above all, individual use: The entrance to the street should be open in order to draw people in, water should be actively used and not put behind fences, food should be offered in great varieties, and

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

chairs, above all, should be movable, thereby giving the people at least the impression of being able to create and shape their own space.<sup>19</sup> In this process, Whyte's meticulous study of spatial practices and the often unconventional methods of spatial appropriation—like for example his close examination of the most impossible seating spots on fences, sculptures, and other uninviting objects—evolve into a matrix of objects and amenities that do not only allow for a range of open spatial practices, but that also foster a high potential for attachment, with probably the most successful example being Paley Park, with its openness to the street, its distribution of seating space, its trees, and its sounding waterwall. It is in this space where Whyte observes some of the most nuanced spatial practices, including what he calls »reciprocal gestures,«<sup>20</sup> which are based on a choreography of slightly delayed repetitions.

The strongest form of »being with« that Whyte outlines in his study, however, is the process of triangulation, which he defines as a »process by which some external stimulus provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other as though they were not.«<sup>21</sup> Street entertainers, jugglers, acrobats, mimes, and magicians have, according to Whyte, a strong binding effect that creates, if only for a moment, complex *assemblages of people, objects, and spaces*. Yet this specific »triangulation effect« cannot only be attributed to street entertainers and magicians, but also to public art and sculptures, like for example Jean Dubuffet's *Four Trees* on Chase Plaza, to and through which people are literally drawn: »They stand under it, beside it; they touch it; they talk about it.«<sup>22</sup> Even an open window to a church on Lexington Avenue has the potential to draw people, because »there is a communal sense to these gatherings and though it may be fleeting, it is the city at its best.«<sup>23</sup>

In the final chapter of his book, entitled *Triangulation*, Whyte employs the strongest vocabulary of attraction, pointing out how seemingly insignificant small urban spaces—a simple bank with two window ledges, a glass-covered bus stop, a populated sidewalk—can nevertheless elicit strong binding forces that, in many cases, involve all the senses: looking, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling.<sup>24</sup> In

<sup>19</sup> In one of the most remarkable sequences of Whyte's film, he chronicles the constant rearranging of chairs by different users, only to end with the ironic conclusion: »The interesting thing, though, is that about four minutes after the beginning of this, all chairs were back where they started from.« THE SOCIAL LIFE OF SMALL URBAN SPACES (USA 1980, William H. Whyte), Timecode: 0:20:33–0:21:55.

<sup>20</sup> William H. Whyte: *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (as note 1), p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> THE SOCIAL LIFE OF SMALL URBAN SPACES (USA 1980, William H. Whyte).

<sup>24</sup> In his book *City: Rediscovering the Center*, Whyte further develops this perspective on the multisensory attachments in urban space in view of his analysis of Lexington Avenue.



this process, he suggests an alternative geography of the city, which is composed of all kinds of ›spatial leftovers‹ that he highlights in his final remarks, *In Praise of Odds and Ends*, where he writes: »Some of the most felicitous spaces [...] are leftovers, niches, odds and ends of space that by happy accident work very well for people.«<sup>25</sup> Whyte's decided focus on chronicling the spatial practices in the city ›from below‹ thus corresponds with a perspective on the city ›from below‹ that assembles a network of overlooked places, which altogether create a new kind of microgeography of the city.

### 3. Urban Design, City Films, and Movement Studies

If Whyte's long-term studies of the life of small urban spaces can be seen both as a symptom and as a motor of a new bottom-up approach to urban planning that emerges in the 1970s, leading to a new concept of ›placemaking,‹ or ›becoming place,‹ his film of the same title, which Whyte directed as a mere ›visual companion‹ to his studies, seems to be much more difficult to position. In spite of Whyte's constant assertion that he uses the camera as a strict ›research tool‹ that allows him to ›multiply [himself] as an observer, [to] study many areas simultaneously, and [to] do it with an accuracy and stamina few humans could match,«<sup>26</sup> his film, which operates at the boundaries of urban design, city films, and movement studies, delineating a new field that we could describe as ›urban instructional films,‹ involves a constant reflection on the impact of movement and moving images on his spatial analysis.

Deeply fascinated by the fact that his small super-8 camera was able to record ›the hundredth of a second,‹ Whyte was convinced that there are ›many tales in all those little pictures and the finding of them can be rewarding.«<sup>27</sup> His passion for and belief in the effectiveness of time-lapse photography even went so far that he allegedly entrapped Donald Elliott, the chairman of the City Planning Commission, ›into spending a weekend looking at time-lapse films of plaza use and nonuse,« resulting in the fact that Elliot finally ›felt that tougher zoning was in order.«<sup>28</sup> In order to advance time-lapse photography as a veritable tool for visual research, his *Appendix A: Time-Lapse Filming* is filled with detailed instructions on the equipment, the technical set-up, as well as discussions of the advantages and

---

See William H. Whyte: *The Sensory Street*, in: Albert LaFarge (ed.): *The Essential William H. Whyte* (as note 3), pp. 296–310.

<sup>25</sup> William H. Whyte: *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (as note 1), p. 99.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

disadvantages of different camera models. Yet even more importantly, it is in this part that the seemingly »smooth« process of Whyte's research on the gatherings and encounters of people in small urban spaces reveals its complications and obstacles: the difficulties, for example, of getting permission to film in an adjacent building that overlooks the plaza, the annoyance of the beeping sound of the cameras for the office workers that often interrupted his studies, the impossibility of finding clean and clear windows in the city of New York, and, not least, the risk of positioning the camera on a rooftop, with the »very real hazard that the camera will fall or be blown over and land in the street with serious consequences«<sup>29</sup>—factors that, taken together, render the process of gaining usable visual data almost impossible.

If the technical set-up of the camera reveals the complications and breaks within the process of Whyte's research, his instructional film likewise comments, at specific moments, on the misconceptions and fallacies of his first assumptions. The very first minutes of his film playfully intertwine Whyte's remarks on the complex technical set-up for his visual research of Seagram Plaza with the soundtrack of an early slapstick comedy, immediately evoking the light and joyful sounds of films by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and maybe most precisely, Harold Lloyd, whose film *SAFETY LAST!* (USA 1923) similarly centers on a giant clock hovering over the city. Moreover, in its constant chronicling of the passing of time, Whyte's film playfully evokes the city symphonies of the 1920s and their focus on the daily »life cycle« of a city with its changing rhythms, circulating masses, and movement patterns. Yet the predictability of movement patterns and the specific use of small urban spaces that shaped, as Whyte concedes, the first assumptions with which they began their study of Seagram Plaza, soon turned out to be, at least to a certain degree, misconceptions. Thus, by evoking the sounds and images of early slapstick comedies and city symphonies only to break with this tradition in the next moment—a process, which Whyte repeats several times throughout his film—, these images become visual markers of a self-ironic commentary, or more precisely, they become visual question marks through which Whyte queries and challenges his own initial conceptions while at the same time pointing to the complex relationship between the visual language of his film and the visual tropes of the city film movement.

Whyte's instructional film seems to be simultaneously rooted within and beyond three different histories: On the one hand, it is closely connected to the history of city films, which Whyte playfully alludes to at specific moments in his film and which become a marker of the potential fallacies of his own visual research. On the other hand, Whyte's film also bears the traces of early educational films, and more specifically, of the aesthetics of time-lapse photography, which are

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

deeply rooted in the early history of educational films and the cinematic experiments of Percy Smith around 1910.<sup>30</sup> Yet beyond these references to earlier cinematic traditions—and according to Whyte’s constant quest to employ the techniques of his own time—his film is also, to a certain extent, linked with the experimental film scene in the 1970s, which saw a similar conflation of city films and time-lapse photography—as in the case of Hilary Harris’ *ORGANISM* (USA 1975) or, most prominently, Godfrey Reggio’s *KOYAANISQATSI* (USA 1982)—, films that can be read as symptoms of an increasing ›contamination‹ of the city film movement with a new, analytic mode of spatial analysis.

In a time where time-lapse photography increasingly enters into and affects the aesthetics of city films, revealing, as Scott MacDonald points out in light of Hilary Harris’ *ORGANISM*, »the systematic structures of urban life.«<sup>31</sup> Whyte employs a complex set-up of Super-8 cameras for regular, slow motion, and time-lapse studies in order to capture and chronicle the ebbs and flows, the drifts and vortices in what he calls the »river of life.«<sup>32</sup> As Hillary Harris and Godfrey Reggio connect their time-lapse studies to the microscopic view of the human body and the macroscopic view of the entire history of civilization, capturing the city as a living organism by means of new image technologies—a tendency that we could also trace in Michael Klier’s *THE GIANT* (D 1983) and Harun Farocki’s *COUNTER MUSIC* (D 2004), which capture urban space through the imagery of surveillance—, Whyte sets out to study the ›inner life‹ of small urban spaces in a long-term perspective, tracing their life spans over a decade in order to prevent, in Jane Jacobs’ words, the ›death of a great American city.‹

There exists, or so it seems, a new fascination with movement studies that equally affects the fields of city films and urban design in the 1970s. In its strongest moments, Whyte’s film reveals a unique sensibility to the shifting movement patterns within small urban spaces that sounds out the potential of movement studies for urban planning and urban design. Already in his initial study of Seagram Plaza, Whyte highlights »the movement of people across it: choreography is wonderful, and choreography really is the right word; the way people move, circle,

<sup>30</sup> In the past years there has been an increasing number of new studies in the field of educational film, especially in view of the history of educational film in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; see Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, Dan Streible (eds.): *Learning with the Lights Off. Educational Film in the United States*, New York 2012; Charles R. Acland, Haidee Wasson (eds.): *Useful Cinema*, Durham/London 2011; Jennifer Lynn Peterson: *Education in the School of Dreams. Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film*, Durham/London 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Scott MacDonald: *The Garden in the Machine. A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place*, Berkeley 2001, p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> *THE SOCIAL LIFE OF SMALL URBAN SPACES* (USA 1980, William H. Whyte), Timecode: 0:57:24.

stop, speed up, the colors they wear; there is a beauty that they must often have sensed themselves, you see none of this in architectural photographs, they are usually quite empty of people; but visually, this movement is the ultimate test of a design.«<sup>33</sup> The sensibility towards movement is not least reflected in Whyte's remarks on his own graphs and maps of movement patterns at Seagram Plaza, which he discusses in terms of a musical notation, envisioning that »the roll could be orchestrated and it would be music. I hope one day it will be *A Day in the Life of the North Front Ledge at Seagram's, Adagio*.«<sup>34</sup> It is in these moments, in which Whyte comments on the visual nuances and the inherent musicality of the »ebbs and flows« of urban movement and in which he reflects on the potential of film to generate new *process-oriented* findings, where film becomes more than a mere research tool; film becomes a conspiring agent in the emergence of a new kind of space—a flowing, transformable *process space* that constitutes the core of Whyte's quintessentially process-oriented spatial analysis.

Whyte's visually complex movement studies—which, at least partially, entered into new zoning laws for public spaces in New York in 1975<sup>35</sup>—also seem to prefigure the work of Space Syntax, a London-based firm that specializes in conducting movement studies to increase the efficiency of urban design while at the same time highlighting the social effects and benefits of efficient and »smart« urban spaces. Founded by Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson in the early 1980s, Space Syntax today employs complex technologies and movement analysis for high-profile projects in larger cities. Yet in contrast to Space Syntax's vision of quintessentially *streamlining* the movements and interactions of people and goods, and in contrast to their impetus to design spaces that allow for an optimal use and thus are, ultimately, geared towards securing the overall »flow« of social and economic trade, Whyte's studies did not aim at a rationalization of space; his work was not about optimizing the spatial flow in crowded areas, but on the contrary, his findings were full of recommendations on how to stop the urban flow, how to make people halt, and how to attract and to lure them into small urban spaces. Thus, the different forms of »being with« that I have analyzed in terms of the changing degrees of affinities, attachments, and assemblages between human and non-human actors, which form the central part of Whyte's study, can be understood—rather than through the trope of the »urban flow«—as drifts, vortices, and turbulences in the river of life, creating force fields of attraction, if only for a moment, that foster a new sense of being with the city.

<sup>33</sup> THE SOCIAL LIFE OF SMALL URBAN SPACES (USA 1980, William H. Whyte), Timecode: 0:09:59–0:10:21.

<sup>34</sup> William H. Whyte: The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces (as note 1), p. 69.

<sup>35</sup> The full version of the Digest of Open-Space Zoning: Provisions New York City (1975) is printed in: *Ibid.*, pp. 112–119.

#### 4. Becoming Place: Urban Design and the Legacy of Whyte

When William H. »Holly« Whyte was asked in a television interview in the early 1990s by Adam Smith to name his three favorite American cities, he simply answered with a chuckle: »New York, New York, New York.«<sup>36</sup> This statement, which might seem nothing more than a small, entertaining anecdote illustrating Whyte's rather opinionated nature and outspoken personal preference for ›his city,‹ New York, nevertheless reveals a crucial point in view of his approach to urban design. In his decided bias towards and affection for a specific city, we can detect, as I will point out in my final remarks, a tendency that also drives Whyte's urban research in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. For Whyte's utterly unambiguous answer to Smith's question not only reveal his open affection for New York, it also allows us to critically evaluate his research methods: On the one hand, Whyte's bias for New York clearly predefines the prominent sites for this study—in fact, other American cities are rarely mentioned in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, and if so, they often serve as examples of the gradual eradication of street life, fostered by the growing presence of malls, concourses, and megastructures in inner-city areas.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, his affection for a specific city also markedly inspires his general concept of urban design: Whyte's studies delineate a new vision for city planning that is driven by the ›unclassifiable‹ categories of attraction and attachment, of likability and happiness—quintessentially subjective and fleeting categories that Whyte nevertheless tried to capture and to quantify in his graphs, maps, charts, and instructional film.

Whyte's study is filled with precise calculations and meticulous recommendations, defining, for example, the ideal number and height of trees in a given public plaza, as well as the correct amount of seating space for a certain number of square meters. Yet at the same time, his detailed lists are always intertwined with long descriptions of the ›lovability‹ and ›pleasures‹ of small urban plazas, detailing, for example, the right amount of sunlight and southern exposure, the joys of water sound and ample supplies of movable chairs, as well as recommendations for an overall ›friendliness‹ of these small urban spaces. According to William K. Reilly, one of the leading figures in urban preservation in the late 1970s, the uniqueness of Whyte's work lies in the fact that he not only meticulously studied the inner

<sup>36</sup> Albert LaFarge: Introduction, in: *The Essential William H. Whyte* (as note 3), pp. xiii–xv: xv.

<sup>37</sup> In one chapter, entitled *Concourses and Megastructures*, Whyte discusses the uniform and corporate architecture of malls, concourses, and megastructures in cities like Los Angeles, Detroit, and Atlanta in order to distinguish ›his‹ city New York with its manifold small urban spaces as »the most sittable city in the country.« William H. Whyte: *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (as note 1), p. 75.

workings of urban places, »that is, what gives them life or kills them. What draws people. What keeps them out,« but Whyte also had the strong sense that his findings would ultimately lead to the creation of a new type of places—of »places that people like in cities, places that contribute to happiness, places that can bring out a smile.«<sup>38</sup> In this process, Whyte's unconventional and almost unclassifiable mode of urban analysis that is stimulated by categories like attraction and likability, by happiness and smiles, thus, seems to resonate to a certain extent with Nietzsche's »gay science,« describing and reacting to a condition in which New York, in spite of being classified as run-down and unhealthy, caught in the middle of a fundamental crisis, is »sudden[ly] attacked by hope, by hope for health, by the *intoxication* of recovery.«<sup>39</sup>

Paul Goldberger, who once described Whyte as a »prophet of the public realm«,<sup>40</sup> pointed out how his work shows a constant fight against the privatization of public space and, by extension, against the increasing emergence of »malls and atriums and gated communities,«<sup>41</sup> which Whyte perceived as signs of the eradication of street life, because they threatened the idea of a city that is both livable and, in Whyte's terms, »alive.«<sup>42</sup> Yet the public spaces that Whyte tried to preserve and reactivate, as I would argue, are not the public spaces of large demonstrations, political upheavals, or urban riots; the spaces that feature most in his studies are not the spaces that would allow for large-scale assemblies and political actions. Rather, Whyte's public space is composed of small entities, of odds and ends and all kinds of spatial leftovers, which work, according to his main credo, from »the bottom-up,« thereby advocating a new form of micropolitics of small urban spaces that operate on the margins of what is mainly and prominently addressed in urban discourse and political theory as the public sphere.

William H. Whyte, this »Thoreau of the streets,«<sup>43</sup> as *The New Yorker* once called him, might not have changed the principles of urban planning completely. Yet his innovative vision of designing urban space only and exclusively from practices on the street-level certainly had an impact and is still present in the ongoing work of the Project for Public Spaces, which adopted and further advanced Whyte's con-

<sup>38</sup> William K. Reilly: Foreword (as note 2), p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: Preface to the Second Edition (1886), in: Id.: *The Gay Science*, edited by Bernard Williams, Cambridge 2001, pp. 3–9: p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Goldberger: Foreword (as note 8), p. viii.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> It is specifically William K. Reilly, who underlines Whyte's notion of the city as a »living entity,« for example when he writes in his foreword on the legacy of Whyte: »But if we learn to take advantage of our small urban spaces, if we design new ones well, and fix up the old ones, we will keep the streets alive. We may even encourage more people to use them—and to smile about it.« William K. Reilly: Foreword (as note 2), p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Albert LaFarge: Introduction (as note 36), p. xv.

cept of ›placemaking.‹ Parting from the assumption that placemaking is »both a process and a philosophy,« one of the main principles that the Project for Public Spaces introduced into the field of urban planning is the principle of the so-called »Power of 10,«<sup>44</sup> which is based on the idea that every place should feature at least ten attractions in order to draw people—attractions that could range from »a place to sit, playgrounds to enjoy, art to touch, music to hear, food to eat, history to experience, and people to meet,«<sup>45</sup> thereby highlighting that space is, above all, a complex network of human and non-human actors, and moreover, that the very idea of urban design conceives of space as an *open process* of constant revisions, adjustments, and modifications.

The lesson that we can learn from Whyte, then, is that »being with« is not only a question of being with other people; it is not only a question of self-congestion or a desire for the most crowded spaces; »being with« is not simply the condition of possibility of an urban encounter and exchange—as many urban theorists before Whyte would have argued. Rather, Whyte's studies show us something different; they show us something more complex for our conception of urban space—or any space for that matter: »Being with,« in Whyte's terms, is always a »being with space,« which is informed by a new spatial sensibility that has been addressed in recent years in the context of non-representational theory. In his programmatic article *Space*, Nigel Thrift outlines the program of what he calls a »new a-where-ness,«<sup>46</sup> which defines the conditions of a spatial sensibility that conceives of space, as Thrift formulates, as an »open, consistent and intensive multiplicity,« and moreover, as something »both caring and in the need for care.«<sup>47</sup> It is this vision of an overall ›care for space‹ that also seems to drive Whyte's urban research and that incites him to inject ›his city‹ New York with a new hope for health, with an *intoxication* of recovery. Moreover, Whyte's approach to urban design prefigures Thrift's study of the politics of everyday life, or what he calls »*the geography of what happens*,«<sup>48</sup> by conceiving of space as a topology of affinities, attachments, and as-

<sup>44</sup> This term, as the group announces on the website, is borrowed from Charles and Ray Eames' seminal film *POWERS OF TEN* (USA 1977); see Project for Public Spaces: The Origin of the Power of 10, under: <http://www.pps.org/reference/powerof10/> (04.01.2014).

<sup>45</sup> Project for Public Spaces: The Power of 10, under: <http://www.pps.org/reference/the-power-of-10/> (04.01.2014).

<sup>46</sup> Nigel Thrift: *Space*, in: *Theory, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 23/2-3 (2006), pp. 139-155: 140.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>48</sup> Nigel Thrift: *Non-Representational Theory. Space, Politics, Affect*, London/New York 2008, p. 2. In this context, Thrift describes his project as the »outline of the art of producing a permanent supplement to the ordinary, a sacrament for the everyday, a hymn to the superfluous« (*Ibid.*).

semblages that closely resonates with Thrift's ›three vignettes‹ of *being with others*, *affecting others*, and *organizing others*.<sup>49</sup>

To end with, what had started with a paradox—the discrepancy between the constant quest for more public spaces and the growing number of empty plazas in front of corporate buildings in New York City—eventually turned into a study of the unexpected pleasures and binding forces of small urban spaces, thereby advocating a new practice-based and bottom-up approach to urban design, and moreover, a new microgeography of small urban spaces. By implementing new methods of visual research and direct observation, which transferred the study of ›crowded animals‹ and ›people in far-off lands‹ to the inner workings and spatial practices of life in the city, Whyte's urban research project opens up a field that integrates visual research into the realm of urban design while at the same time highlighting the potential of film to generate genuinely process-oriented findings. Against this background, Whyte's seminal study of street life in New York City in the 1970s is not only a testament to a crucial transformation within the field of urban design, but his strong belief in the transformability of urban life through the implementation of specific planning principles also fosters a novel, visually nuanced conception of *spatial design* in the strongest sense: For space, in Whyte's terms, is always something that is worked upon—and always in the process of becoming place.

---

<sup>49</sup> See Nigel Thrift: *Space* (as note 46), pp. 142–155.