



# Are we listening to William Whyte?

A research on the behaviour of people in open space

*“Look, look hard, with a clean, clear mind and then look again. And most of all: believe in what you see, believe that the people who use cities are often way ahead of the people who design them”*

William H. Whyte  
Paul Goldberger in *The Essential William H. Whyte* (2000)

A quote that describes exactly who William Whyte was. An observer. An urban anthropologist. A critic. A researcher. One of his researches is called the Street Life Project and started in 1970 in New York City. It was a study on how people actually use the streets and spaces in the city centre. The amount of open space in the city was still increasing, due to the bonuses developers received here since 1961 for providing open space; for every square feet of plaza, they could add ten square feet of extra commercial floor space. Twenty acres of open space in 1972 was the result. A zoning ordinance that later was implemented (trade-off) in other cities in the USA, like Hartford, Los Angeles, Seattle and San Francisco and in other countries like Chile, Hong Kong, Iran, Japan, Taiwan and Thailand. (Dimmer, 2013, 8-11)

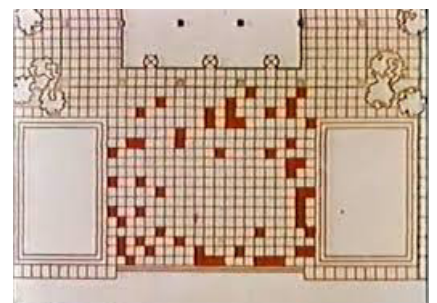
The Street Life Project, Whyte his research group, studied sixteen plazas and three small parks of this open space in New York City (also ledges along the street or around fountains, places where people sit and spend time). A research to answer questions as which spaces attracted people and which ones were empty and unused? Is there a difference in the behaviour of people in these spaces that can explain this differentiation in occupation? A research, that was conducted by looking at the city space, measuring heights of benches and ledges, watching what the people do, time-lapse filming and photography, talking with people and making notes to discover the daily patterns and rituals of people in these place. (Whyte, 1980, 10-15)

In big cities all over the world comparable research has been done: Tokyo (by Whyte himself), Copenhagen (by J. Gehl) and in Australia (by M. Ciolek) for instance. (Whyte, 1980, 22-23) But never in Rotterdam, the city I live in. These researches have made me interested in the daily patterns and rituals on a plaza here. Is the behaviour of people in open space in Rotterdam comparable to what Whyte observed in New York City? According to my observations and Whyte his findings; should it be a good plaza? Whyte published his results of the Street Life Project research in a book and an one-hour long documentary, both called *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980 and 1988). By studying this book and documentary, I got inside in his research methods and findings. I used his methods to determine the behaviour of people in open space in Rotterdam. A day of observing, taking a picture every ten minutes and mapping the behaviour of people (the pedestrian flows and places of sitting).

## Introduction



*A picture of William H. Whyte*



*Some examples of Whyte his research methods. On the top, the set up of cameras for the time-lapse filming. On the bottom, the mapping of people standing on Seagram's plaza.*

# The findings of Whyte

During his study (The Street Life Project), Whyte discovered consistent rhythms of plazas. Before noon the patterns are sporadic, between twelve and two o'clock there is a peak in activity, between two and six o'clock the patterns are sporadic again and after six the plaza is dead. These daily rhythms are consistent in weather and seasons, only the number of people varies. (Whyte, 1980, 16-23)

The main pedestrian flows on these plazas are not only preferable for moving, but also for conversations and sitting. Whyte thinks that in these paths the possibility of meeting people and the choice of breaking of the conversation is the highest and therefore people choose to be in these paths. The dense paths within the plaza get denser.

And for the plazas itself; the occupied plazas get more occupied. People seem to attract people. Take Seagram Plaza, one of the excellent plazas according to Whyte. On a good day 150 people were sitting there at peak time (12.30-13.30 hrs.).

But how come Seagram's Plaza is more occupied than others? Is it the aesthetics, the shape or the amount of space? No. The critical factor, Whyte states, is the amount of sittable space. People tend to sit where there are places to sit; ledges and steps. Whyte doesn't mention benches: they are fixed, often too small, isolated and few in space and therefore not good for sitting. People decide where to sit; not too far or too close to others. A choice. A key factor to the socially comfortableness of a plaza: people will stay longer.

Another factor that contributes to a lively plaza is the presence of a food vendor, Whyte writes. A good example is St. Andrews Plaza, a sociable plaza. The plaza is used as a cafe with a bunch of bakeries, cafés, a clam house and soul and Chinese food. People waiting in line and weaving their way through the (closely put together) tables made that people were compressed in meeting people. (Whyte, 1988, 50-53)

These food vendors can be seen as a form of triangulation: an external stimulus that provides a linkage between people. It makes it easier to meet and mingle on the plaza, Whyte states. Other forms are a physical object, a statue or musicians etc.

*above: a food vendor, middle: a statue and below: a street musician*



*On top: diagram of a day in the life of the north ledge at Seagram's, left in the middle: still of the Social Life of Small Urban Spaces: people sitting in the main pedestrian flow at Seagram's, right in the middle: people sitting on the ledge of the same plaza, on the bottom: another still from the Social Life of Small Urban Spaces: the moveable chair; the ultimate choice*





Examples of undesirable people. On the top a mugger and below two hippies.

Street musicians, muggers, drugs dealers and hippies: the undesirable people. People that cost fear, according to the designers, not in my opinion. But if you do want to keep these people out, the plaza needs to be attractive to anyone else, Whyte says.

A greater experience on a plaza can be achieved by the presence of sun, water and trees and the absence of wind, Whyte states. They make the plaza warmer, brighter and more enjoyable with protection from the natural elements and a feeling of peace and privacy.

The last key factor Whyte recalls, that contributes to a occupied plaza, is the relationship between the plaza and the street corner. A not clear transition between the two, let the passers-by become the users. A small threshold (low and inviting steps, ledges) becomes a front row seed to the scene of the street corner.

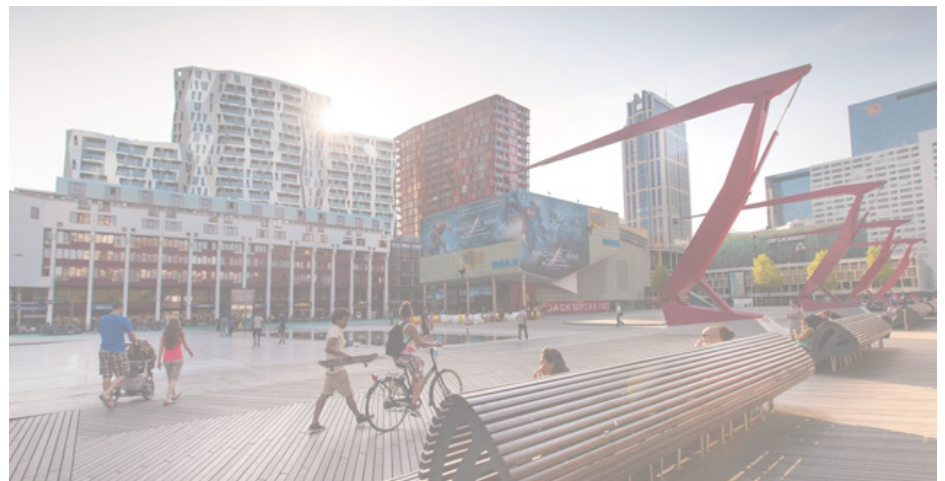
Despite the transitions, people always need to be able to look at the plaza from the street; a stimulation of impulse use and a secondary joy of people having fun. (Whyte, 1980, 54-59)



On top: the life at the corner of Seagram's plaza. In the middle: a still from the Social Life of Small Urban Spaces: a conversation at the street corner. On the bottom: the small threshold of Paley Park (Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, 1988)

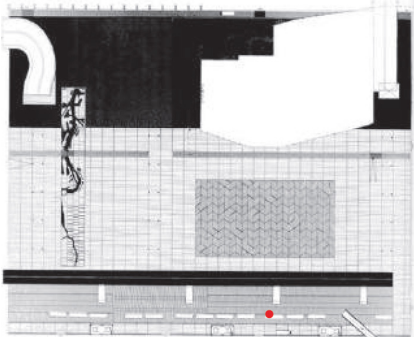
## My observations at Schouwburgplein

Now, taking the findings of Whyte to Rotterdam, a city with high pedestrian volumes and a concentration & mixture of activities like New York City, Tokyo and Copenhagen. All the researched plazas and parks were on major avenues, with an occupied block front, close to public transport and with strong pedestrian flows next to the plaza. (Whyte, 1980, 113-114) Hereby I have chosen Schouwburgplein, designed by West 8.

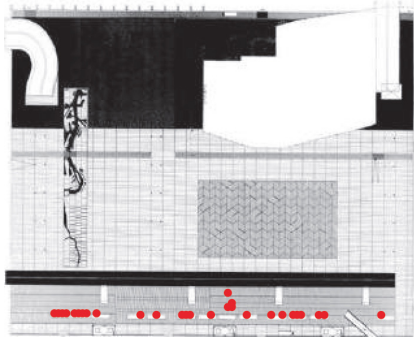


An image of Schouwburgplein on the right

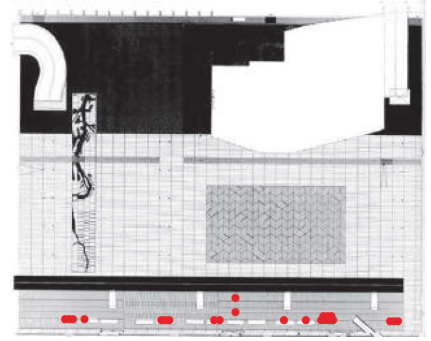
The number of people sitting on Schouwburgplein before twelve o'clock. A red dot represents one person.



The number of people sitting on Schouwburgplein between twelve and two o'clock. A red dot represents one person.



The number of people sitting on Schouwburgplein between two and six o'clock. A red dot represents one person.



On the sixteenth of December 2014, I stayed on Schouwburgplein from ten till six o'clock. Observing, making a time-lapse overview, watching people and mapping their behaviour (pedestrian flows and where people sit). I discovered a rhythm of the plaza, like Whyte. Before twelve o'clock the plaza was almost empty (a single person sitting on the plaza), a peak in activity between noon and two o'clock and after two o'clock it was less crowded again, but more activity than before 12. The people tend to sit at the benches of the plaza.

The main pedestrian flows were consistent throughout the day: people were mainly walking from corner to corner. The other main flows are making a cross at the square. If people tend to stop at the plaza, they often stand in these main pedestrian flows or around the benches.

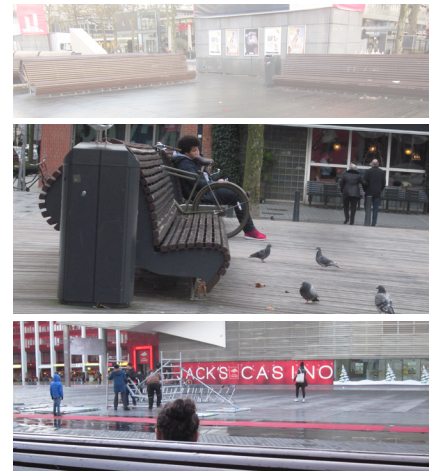
At the corner of Schouwburgplein, at the entrance of Korte Lijnbaan (a shopping street), there were two food vendors. People were gathering at this corner, eating, talking, sitting on a ledge or on the plaza.



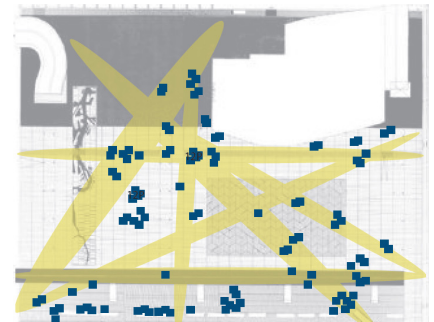
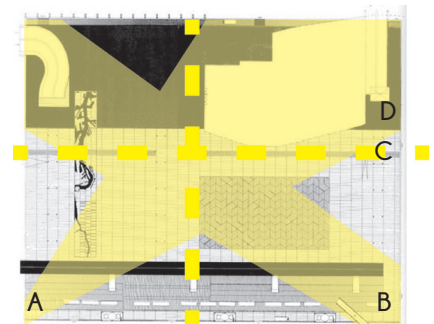
People gathering around the food vendors.



The images of the main pedestrian flows on Schouwburgplein. The letters correspond with the letters on the image of the main pedestrian flows on Schouwburgplein.

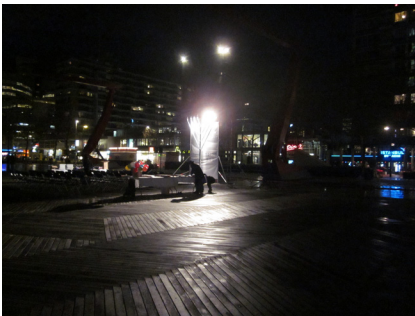


On top, some of the benches on Schouwburgplein. In the middle and the bottom one, people sitting on the benches.



On top, the main pedestrian flows on Schouwburgplein. The one below, the place, where people were standing, compared to these flows. One blue square represents one person.

The red cranes, a BMX-rider performing stunts, a man that was giving me a serenade or the setting up of some kind of ceremony by a religious group at the end of the day. All elements Whyte calls triangulation.



Examples of triangulation: on the top the red cranes of Schouwburgplein, the next one is the BMX-rider, the third image is the man of the serenade and the last image is the setting up of the ceremony by the religious group.

The plaza is a few steps higher than street level, which makes the ledges and steps a front row seat for the streets next to it.



Some examples of the ledges and steps at Schouwburgplein.

There were no elements for a greater experience on the plaza. No sun, no working water element (it does work in warmer periods), no trees and no specific protection from the wind, excepts for the buildings surrounding the plaza.

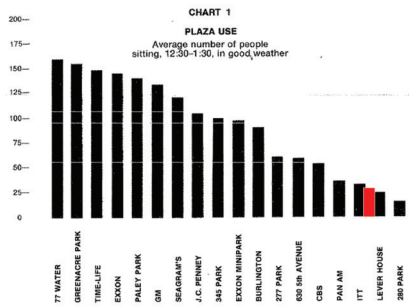


The element of water on Schouwburgplein in summer time (bottom) and people enjoying it (top).

## Conclusion

“People in big cities tend to behave like their counterparts in other world cities, the patterns were remarkably alike,” Whyte stated. And he was right about this: the rhythm of Schouwburgplein is similar to the one he discovered in New York City: a peak of activity between two and four o’clock. In Rotterdam though, the activity between two and four o’clock was still quite high. A difference that can be due to the locality of the plazas in New York City, the business district. People will get back to their offices after lunch, where on Schouwburgplein people would stay. A public plaza, not only depended on the business.

Not only the rhythm of the plaza is similar, also the behaviour of people for standing: most of the people stood in the main pedestrian flows. Where Whyte stated this also counts for sitting, Schouwburgplein showed otherwise. People sit on the benches, although ledges and steps were present. The cold and slightly wet weather of that day in Rotterdam can be a reason or the benches here are not isolated, not few in space and too short, as Whyte stated the reason of people not sitting on them. Maybe we did listen to Whyte and changed the design of these elements or the behaviour of people evolved in time (his researched started 25 years ago). But even with this amount of sittable space, the amount of people sitting is very low compared to the plazas in New York City. If we put Schouwburgplein (28 people sitting on the plaza between 12-14 hrs.) in his ratings, Schouwburgplein would be in the bottom three. Maybe even the bottom one, if I would have had the specific number of people sitting between 12.30-13.30 hrs.



*the diagram of use plaza by Whyte. The red bar is Schouwburgplein on the sixteenth of December 2014.*

Also, Whyte based his ratings on a good day, but what is a good day? More people could have been sitting at peak time on Schouwburgplein on other days, the observation of Schouwburgplein was only one Wednesday in December. The number doesn't represent the various days and seasons, like the extensive studies of Whyte in New York City and Jan Gehl in Copenhagen during days, evenings, weekdays, weekends and seasons. For a more representative conclusion, more extensive research should be done.

If we then look at the presence of the elements, Whyte mentions for a good plaza, Rotterdam possesses all the elements. A good amount of sittable space, a food vendor or another element of triangulation, no undesirable people (and therefore it's an attractive plaza to anyone else, Whyte says), a small threshold from the street to the plaza and elements for a greater experience like sun and water, could be there. A good plaza, he would state, that can be even better with the addition of trees and protection from the wind. But do I miss the trees or the protection from the wind? No and maybe other people neither. That's why I wonder whether the elements have the effect Whyte states. The food vendors attract people for sure, I even got tempted to buy something, only I haven't seen any mingling in line or around the truck. The line was maybe too short and there were no elements forcing a meeting between people, like the tables. And is it really necessary that people meet and mingle? I noticed that for the elements of triangulation, people also talked within their group. People apparently enjoy the time on the plaza without having to meet people: a single man spent the longest amount of time on the plaza without talking to anyone. Although I really liked my serenade, who wouldn't? Are street musicians really undesirable, Whyte?

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