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September 02, 2012

What makes a great public space?

Many cities have lost these spaces, but cities such as Copenhagen, Barcelona, and Portland have shown how to revive them, thus reviving downtown life.

By Jay Walljasper

It's a dark and wintry Thursday night in Copenhagen, and the streets are bustling. The temperature stands above freezing, but winds blow hard enough to knock down a good share of the bicycles parked all around. Scandinavians are known for stolid reserve, but it's all smiles and animated conversation here as people of many ages and affiliations stroll through the city.

A knot of teenage boys swagger down the main pedestrian street. Older women inspect shop windows. An accomplished balalaika player draws a small crowd in a square as he jams with a very amateur guitarist. Earnest young people collect money for UNICEF. Two men pass, pushing a piano. Candlelit restaurants and cafes beckon everyone inside.

"Cultures and climates differ all over the world," notes architect Jan Gehl, "but people are the same. They will gather in public if you give them a good place to do it."

Cut, now, to scenes from the Republican National Convention in Tampa the past week, and the Democrats' upcoming convention in Charlotte next week. Love them or hate them, those people packing the convention halls - convening from different places and backgrounds - have come together to take part in rituals that, for better or worse, help perpetuate our democracy. What does that have to do with a cold Copenhagen street? Only this: Democracy requires public places where people can congregate. Further, people are drawn to public places where they find other people. We all need those public places - good public places.

Architect Gehl, an urban design professor emeritus at the Danish Royal Academy of Fine Arts and international consultant, describes how Copenhagen's central pedestrian district opened in 1962. Back then, cars were overrunning the city, and the pedestrian zone was a way to bring vitality to a declining urban center. "Shopkeepers protested vehemently that it would kill their businesses," he recalls, "but everyone was happy with it once it started. Some now even claim it was their idea."

The pedestrian district is now the thriving heart of a reinvigorated city.

Copenhagen's comeback gives hope to people around the world who want to make sure lively public places don't disappear, even in this era of rampant traffic, proliferating privatization, and commercialization.

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A century ago streets almost everywhere were crowded. Now many are nearly empty. Walking through the center of certain North American communities can be a profoundly alienating experience, as if the whole place had been evacuated for an emergency no one told you about.

The decline of public places represents a loss far deeper than simple nostalgia. "The street, the square, the park, the market, the playground are the river of life," explains Kathleen Madden of the New York-based Project for Public Spaces, which works with people around the world to improve

Amsterdam neighborhood.

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