

‘Heads up’ Versus ‘Heads Down’ Retail: the missing link between good public spaces and good markets?

“Much can be learned about what makes places great by observing successful markets - and vice versa” Project for Public Spaces, October 2005

Markets and Public Spaces

Markets work to create good public spaces and vice versa. We know this because what people say they like about good public spaces dovetails with what they say they like about good markets.

But what exactly is it about markets that make them good public spaces? Although there is a large literature based on direct observation of the factors that make for a good public space, there have been few if any similar direct observations of markets.

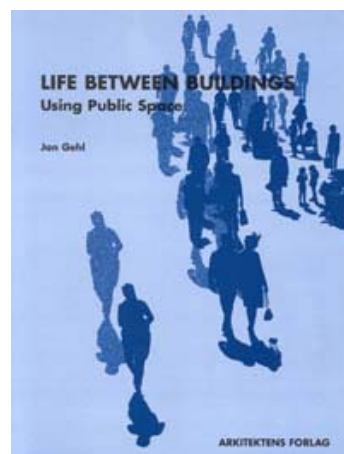
This is what I looked at in my MA study on “Urbanity and Markets”. Focusing on Union Square Greenmarket, in New York, and using a direct observation methodology, I set out to test whether the factors essential for good public spaces (as identified in the public space literature) are also there in markets.

What I found was that some of the factors for successful public spaces were indeed present. Rather surprisingly, though, other factors were *not* present, or at least not to the degree expected.

Direct Observation of Public Spaces – the pioneers

“How many people would say that they like to sit in the middle of a crowd? Instead they speak of getting away from it all, and use terms like ‘escape’, ‘oasis’, ‘retreat’. What people do, however, reveals a different priority.” (Whyte, 1980)

Urban pioneers such as William H. Whyte (New York) and Jan Gehl (Copenhagen) have given us a comprehensive understanding of what makes a good public space. By observing what people *do*, rather than just listening to what they *say*, Whyte and Gehl were able to put an end to some of the deep-seated and destructive myths about what people want from their cities and public spaces.



William H. Whyte conducting pioneering observational experiments in the 1970s (courtesy www.pps.org) and Jan Gehl’s seminal publication, Life Between Buildings – both used direct observation to help change the way we think about public spaces

Direct Observation and Public Spaces – the findings

Despite working in different cities and for many years in isolation from each other, Whyte and Gehl both came up with broadly the same three factors as being crucial for good public spaces:

- Density
- Diversity
- Social encounters

Factor 1 – Density

“...if given a choice of walking across a deserted street or a lively one, most people in most situations will choose the lively street” (Gehl, 2001)

Whyte coined the term ‘self-congestion’ for high numbers of people choosing to be in the same space at the same time. Self-congestion around areas with a natural social pull, such as a café, park or market, encourages social interaction, and creates a sense of collective safety.



Two public spaces, one with and one without people – which would you rather cross?

Factor 2 – Diversity

“What is important...is whether the people who work and live in the different buildings use the same public spaces and meet in connection with daily activities.” (Gehl, 2001)

Whyte and Gehl both found that good public spaces should support diversity. By attracting a range of different people to a public space you offer a chance of positive interaction between people who would not normally mix. This helps to break down stereotypes, and creates interest, identity and a sense of place.



Factor 3 – Social encounters

“...what is most fascinating about the life of the street is the interchanges between people that take place in it” (Whyte, 1988)

Whyte and Gehl also showed that a good public space should have a broad range of social encounters. Whyte believed this range should include,

- *functional encounters*, such as buying a newspaper from a newsstand

But it should also include,

- *chance encounters*, mainly between friends who you might ‘bump’ into unexpectedly, and
- *new encounters*, between strangers who have not met each other before.

For Gehl, a social encounter takes place every time two or more people are together. Thus Gehl’s ‘broad range’ of social encounters is a range in *intensity* – i.e. a range from low intensity social encounters (simply watching and listening to other people) to high intensity social encounters (such as a conversation between close friends).



A range of social encounters recorded in Union Square Greenmarket, New York – (from left to right) functional, chance and new encounters

So, What’s the Bottom Line for Public Spaces?

Whyte and Gehl’s direct observations showed that good public spaces are strong in three factors – density, diversity, and a broad range of social encounters.

So, the question for my study was, are these three factors also present, and to the same degree, in markets?

Direct Observation and Markets – my study

I studied Union Square Greenmarket over 3 days. Using a six-bank tally counter I made direct observations of the same factors – density, diversity and social encounters – identified by Whyte and Gehl as vital to good public spaces.



A six-bank tally counter used to collect direct observation data

Direct Observation and Markets – the findings

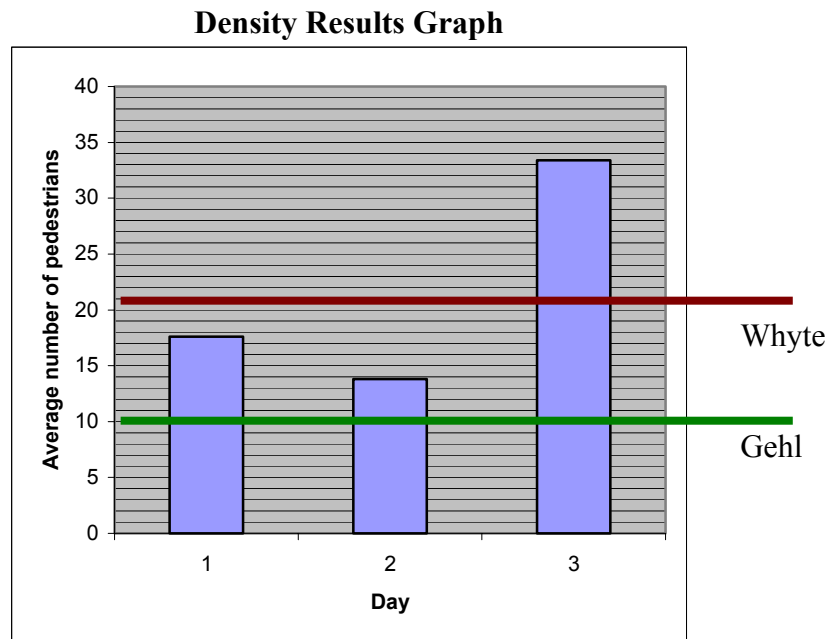
To anticipate a little, what I found was that two of Whyte and Gehl’s factors – density and diversity – were present in Union Square Greenmarket to the degree expected. The third factor, however – social encounters – presented a rather more complex picture.

Factor 1 – Density

Both Whyte and Gehl produced ideal measurements for rush hour densities in good public spaces:

- Whyte, 20 pedestrians per minute per 1 metre of street width
- Gehl, 10 pedestrians per minute per 1 metre of street width

The Density Results Graph below shows that Union Square Greenmarket broadly satisfies this criterion for successful public spaces...



Graph showing the average number of pedestrians per minute for each 1 metre of street width against Whyte (in red) and Gehl's (in green) ideal density measurements

...and the pictorial evidence that Union Square Greenmarket increases the density of people in Union Square is also very strong...



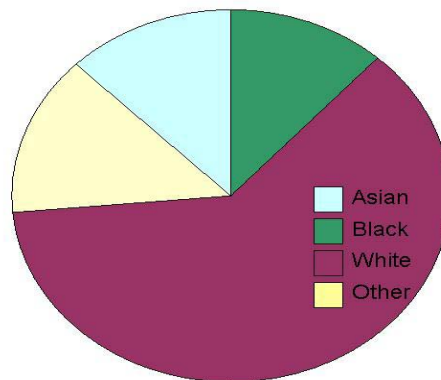
Spot the difference? Two pictures, one on a market day and one not on a market day, taken from approximately the same location and the same time but on different weekdays, shows how effectively Union Square Greenmarket increases the density of people passing through Union Square

Factor 2 – Diversity

My measure of diversity was ‘perceived’ diversity, i.e. whether people were perceived by me to be black, white, Asian or other.

The pie chart below shows that, although Union Square Greenmarket’s predominant ethnicity is white, it does have approximately equal numbers of ‘black’, ‘Asian’ and ‘other’. Like density, then, my findings broadly support the presence of diversity as an important element of successful public spaces.

Diversity Results Pie Chart



Pie Chart showing the ‘perceived’ ethnic mix of visitors to Union Square Greenmarket

Factor 3 – Social encounters

Whyte and Gehl do not give actual threshold figures for different categories or intensities of social encounter, but, as noted above, they both stress the importance of a broad *range* of social encounters.

For practical reasons I focussed mainly on Whyte’s categories (functional, new and chance) but I return to Gehl’s ‘intensity’ scale later. The pie chart below shows that, contrary at least to Whyte’s findings, the social encounters in Union Square Greenmarket, far from representing a broad range, are predominantly functional, with very few chance encounters between friends and new encounters.

Social Encounters Results Chart

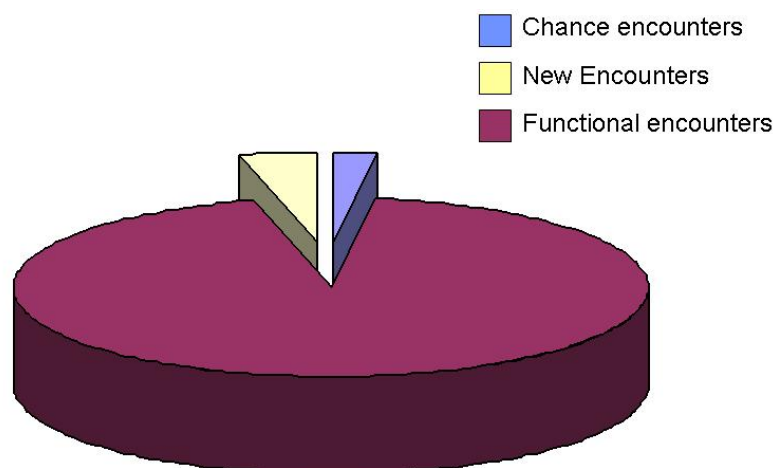


Chart showing the ratio of encounters present in Union Square Greenmarket

So, What Was The Bottom Line for Markets?

Did Union Square Greenmarket show the factors that Whyte and Gehl identified as creating good public spaces?

1. Density – Yes
2. Diversity – Yes
3. Social Encounters – No, or at least not to the degree expected

What do the findings mean? ‘Heads up’ versus ‘Heads down’ retail – the difference between a market and a supermarket?

The results for social encounters in Union Square Greenmarket might appear surprising: after all, ‘chance’ and ‘new’ encounters were considered (particularly by Whyte) as vital to good public spaces, and yet both scored low on the results chart for Union Square Greenmarket.

If we look a bit deeper, however, we find that it is not so much the *amount* but the *type* of functional encounters that is the key to how markets help create good public spaces.

In a market, functional encounters are ‘heads up’ encounters. People congregate around stalls with their ‘heads up’, absorbing the sights, sounds and smells of the market, and actively engaging with the public realm. In a supermarket, by contrast, functional encounters are ‘heads down’. The focus is on the task of shopping, with little designed to distract or to cause heads to look up.



Examples of ‘heads up’ (market) and ‘heads down’ (supermarket) functional encounters

This makes sense! After all, the findings for Union Square Greenmarket – that there is density, diversity and predominantly functional encounters – might well fit a supermarket as well as a market. But the *type* of functional encounter in a market is entirely different.

My findings also make sense in terms of Gehl’s emphasis on the importance of a *range* of low to high intensity social encounters. Thus in a supermarket, the range of encounters is very restricted, being in Gehl’s terms, predominantly low intensity. Indeed as the picture of a supermarket queue (above right) suggests, the encounters could be called ‘zero intensity’! But in Union Square Greenmarket, by contrast, the functional encounters I witnessed covered a very wide range, varying in length from a few seconds (low intensity functional encounters) up to half an hour (high intensity functional encounters).

Thus, by creating ‘heads down’ retail environments with a narrow range of functional encounters, supermarket-type retail environments remove the process of shopping from the process of public life; whereas the ‘heads up’ type of retail that is created by successful markets, with the broad range of intensities of functional encounters that they support, brings the two together.

‘Heads up’ retail → ‘heads up’ public spaces → ‘heads up’ cities

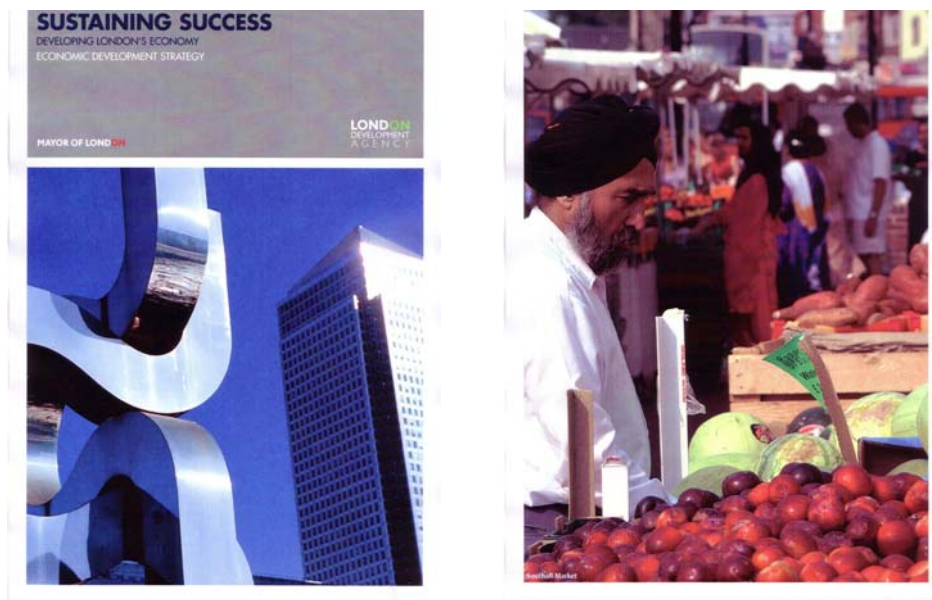
By creating ‘heads up’ retail, successful markets can help to create ‘heads up’ public spaces and eventually ‘heads up’ cities.

This is important, because ‘heads up’ environments help to bring people together who would normally be living apart – even though they may pass each other everyday on the street with their ‘heads down’. This will improve peoples’ day-to-day lives by helping to break down harmful stereotypes, which in turn reduces social friction and strengthens community buy-in and identity.

Putting Theory into Practice: ‘heads up’ versus ‘heads down’ and the need for a new kind of ‘social impact assessment’

Vibrant and colourful pictures of markets often feature prominently in glossy government publications and initiatives that direct urban policy.

Such images capture exactly the kind of urban environment that people want and that local authorities and national governments seek to create. But beyond this there is little if any actual mention of markets in policy documents, town planning briefs, or other long-term strategic contexts.



The Mayor of London’s ‘Economic Development Strategy’ (left) features prominently placed pictures of markets (right), but lacks any long-term strategy for their development

One reason for this lack of long-term strategic focus is the difficulty of quantifying, on the macro level, the positive impact that ‘heads up’ retail, ‘heads up’ public spaces and ‘heads up’ cities have on peoples’ daily lives.

My study, although on a very small scale, suggests that, as with Whyte and Gehl's work with public spaces, direct observations of markets can help to make abstract concepts such as 'heads up' tangible. At this micro level the effects of 'heads up' are visible and quantifiable, making them more accessible for integration into government policy and funding streams. Without quantifiable goals, government policy for markets, however well intentioned, is bumped down the pecking order as the struggle to meet other more tangible goals intensifies.

Organisations such as PPS and New Economics Foundation have used economic impact assessments to support the economic benefits of markets. Perhaps a new kind of social impact assessment – based on direct observation – that focuses, as Whyte and Gehl did, on what people *do* rather than on what they *say*, could play as important a role in establishing the value of markets to public spaces, as direct observation has been for establishing the value of public spaces to cities.

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Quotation references:

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This article develops ideas from his MA Dissertation 'A Study of Urbanity and Markets'. To receive a pdf of the full document, or to discuss any points raised in the article, please contact Will on any of the contact details below.

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