

William H. Whyte: Seeing, Looking, Observing, and Learning from the City

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“If you can see, look. If you can look, observe.”

This epigraph opens José Saramago’s book *Blindness*. It could just as well have been the words of William H. Whyte, the “optimistic social thinker and urban planner” (as *Time* magazine called him) who passed away last January in New York City at the age of eighty-one.

Writing a eulogy for Whyte is not an easy task; there is so much to tell given his prolific writings and observations of the city. Rather than outlining the whole body of Whyte’s work, we have decided to briefly consider Whyte’s ideas in

the context of current debates on urban space. Whyte wrote many seminal works, launching his “urban career” with the implications of his book *The Organization Man* on 1950s sociology. Over the years, Whyte’s has been an avid critique of the sociology of urban development, and his book *The Last Landscape* presented many of his pre-occupations. Later in his career, Whyte committed himself to studying life in cities by becoming a close observer of urban space, coming to see the street as the “river of life of the city” and the city center its downtown, as the “soul of the city.”

The bulk of his “Street Life Project” was first published under the title *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, which, despite a limited publication, quickly became a popular reference in urban design studies. Whyte espoused street life and city centers as stages for spontaneous and informal encounters. His urban ethnographic and behavioral studies brought our attention to street corners, sitting features, blank walls, sun and wind patterns, pedestrian skills, ordinary encounters, and street entertainment. In the opening lines of his book *City*, Whyte wrote:

For the past sixteen years I have been walking the streets and public spaces of the city and watching how people use them. Some of what I found out may be of practical application. The city is full of vexations: steps too steep; doors too tough too open; ledges you cannot sit on...It is difficult to design an urban space so maladroitly that people will not use it, but there are many such spaces (Whyte 1988: 1).

Was he too romantic or optimistic about streets and downtowns while more powerful forces were at work in the life and death (to recall Jane Jacobs) of the traditional city? Perhaps. Nevertheless, Whyte’s efforts were aimed at reviving the use of urban space; he recognized the importance of the everyday spaces of the city for its residents. While Whyte called for the residents of the city to *live* in and use these spaces, he also cautioned designers and planners to think about what the city is and could be. The city, after all, had to give people a “place for dreams.”

Selected Bibliography by William H. Whyte:

1952. *Is Anybody Listening?* New York: Simon and Schuster.

1957. *The Organization Man*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

1959. *Securing Open Spaces for Urban America*. Washington DC: Urban Land Institute.

1964. *Cluster Development*. New York: American Conservation Association.

1968. *The Last Landscape*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

1980. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Washington DC: Conservation Foundation.

1988. *City: Rediscovering the Center*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

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