

Holly Whyte

Visionary for a Humane Metropolis

In June 2002, about 300 urban design practitioners, writers, ecologists, grassroots activists and students gathered in New York City for “The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21st Century—A Symposium to Celebrate and Continue the Work of William H. Whyte.” The Ecological Cities Project at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, organized the event with a grant from the Lincoln Institute and additional support from the Wyomissing Foundation, the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and Laurance S. Rockefeller, a longtime friend and supporter of Whyte’s work.

The symposium was held at the New York University Law School in consultation with NYU faculty, representatives of organizations and programs that continue Whyte’s work, including the Regional Plan Association, Project for Public Spaces, the Municipal Art Society, Trust for Public Land, and the Chicago Openlands Project, and with his widow, Jenny Bell Whyte, and their daughter, Alexandra Whyte. The University of Pennsylvania Press released a new edition of Whyte’s 1956 classic study of postwar suburbia, *The Organization Man*, at the symposium reception.

RUTHERFORD H. PLATT

William H. “Holly” Whyte (1917–1999) was one of America’s most influential and respected commentators on cities, people and open spaces. Through his writings, particularly *The Organization Man* (1956), *The Last Landscape* (1968), and *City: Rediscovering the Center* (1988), he taught a generation of urban designers to view cities as habitats for people, rather than simply as economic machines, transportation nodes, or grandiose architectural stage-sets. As the United States approaches 300 million residents, of whom four-fifths live in cities or suburbs, Whyte’s vision of people-centered urban communities has never been needed more. And it seems safe to assume that this vision would today also incorporate recent insights on urban ecology and sustainability, in short a symbiosis of people and nature.

“The Man Who Loved Cities”

Norman Glazer (1999) described Holly Whyte as “The man who loved cities . . . one of America’s most influential observers of the city and the space around it...” Whyte gloried in parks, plazas, sidewalks and other pedestrian spaces that invite *schmoozing* (a Yiddish term he popularized) or simply encountering other people. Conversely, he deplored *urban sprawl* (apparently his term), particularly the waste of

land, ugliness and isolation of tract development on the urban fringe. I stated in opening remarks the overriding premise of both the symposium and the book to follow:

Contrary to the trend toward privatization, security and “gated-ness” so well documented by Dean Blakely (*Blakely and Snyder 1997*), twenty-first-century America needs a strong dose of Holly Whyte; namely, we need to rediscover the humanizing influence of urban shared spaces. “The Humane Metropolis” for present purposes means urban places that are “more green, more people-friendly, and more socially equitable.”

A native of the Brandywine Valley in eastern Pennsylvania, William H. Whyte, Jr., graduated from Princeton in 1939 and fought at Guadalcanal as an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. Shortly after the war, he joined the editorial staff of *Fortune* magazine in New York, where he began to examine the culture, life style and residential milieu of postwar suburbia, leading to his 1956 classic *The Organization Man*. Among other findings, this book argued that the spatial layout of homes, parking, yards and common spaces is a key factor in promoting or inhibiting social contacts,

helping to account for patterns of friendships versus isolation. Thus began a lifetime career devoted to better understanding how people interact in shared or common spaces.

Appalled by rapid development of his beloved Brandywine Valley, Whyte in 1958 co-organized an urban land use roundtable, jointly hosted by *Fortune* and *Architectural Review*, which attracted a who’s who of urban planners, economists and lawyers. His subsequent essay on “Urban Sprawl” added both a new term and a sense of urgency to the conversion of rural land for suburban development (Whyte 1957a).

But open space per se is not a panacea. In *The Exploding Metropolis* (Editors of

Fortune 1957), Whyte and Jane Jacobs excoriated urban renewal programs that placed high-rise structures in the midst of amorphous open spaces modeled on Le Corbusier’s *Ville Radieuse*. In Whyte’s words: “The scale of the projects is uncongenial to the human being. The use of the open space is revealing; usually it consists of

manicured green areas carefully chained off lest they be profaned, and sometimes, in addition, a big central mall so vast and



Holly Whyte

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abstract as to be vaguely oppressive. There is nothing close for the eye to light on, no sense of intimacy or of things being on a human scale” (Whyte 1957b, 21). And as Jane Jacobs observed in her 1961 classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, without streets and street life, projects are dangerous as well as boring (and all that green grass was soon covered with old cars).

Whyte left *Fortune* in 1959 to pursue a broader array of urban projects. His first technical publication on *Conservation Easements* (1959) became the model for open space statutes in California, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Maryland. In the early 1960s, he served as a consultant to the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, for which he prepared a 60-page report on *Open Space Action* (1962). His association with the Commission’s chair, Laurance S. Rockefeller, led to his role as a one-man think tank on urban land problems with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, which provided him with an office in Rockefeller Center. Whyte also was a member of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Task Force on Natural Beauty and chaired

Society of Planning Officials (Birch 1986). He also advised the city on revisions to its zoning ordinance, leading to improvement of public spaces established by private developers in exchange for density bonuses (Kayden 2000).

The turbulent year of 1968 yielded three environmental literary milestones: Ian McHarg’s *Design with Nature*, Garret Hardin’s “The Tragedy of the Commons,” and Holly Whyte’s *The Last Landscape*. The latter was Whyte’s “bible” for the fast-spreading movement to save open space in metropolitan America. Open space was to the conservationists of the 1960s what anti-congestion was to early twentieth-century progressives, and sustainability and smart growth are to environmentalists today. Whyte’s book embraced a variety of negative effects of poorly planned development, such as loss of prime farmland, inadequate recreation space, urban flooding, pollution of surface and groundwater, aesthetic blight, diminished sense of place, and isolation from nature. *The Last Landscape* confronted each of these and offered a legal toolbox to combat them, including

Fund. Based at Hunter College in Manhattan, where he served as distinguished professor of urban sociology, the project documented social activity in public spaces through interviews, mapping, diagrams and film. That research underlay Whyte’s 1980 book and film titled *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* and his 1988 capstone book, *City: Rediscovering the Center*.

From Park Forest in the 1950s to New York City in the 1980s, Whyte was a diehard urban environmental determinist. He believed that the design of shared spaces greatly affects the interaction of people who encounter each other in those spaces, and their resulting sense of well-being or discomfort in urban surroundings. This in turn helps to shape the success of cities and suburbs as congenial or alien environments for the millions who inhabit them. Paul Goldberger, architectural critic for *The New Yorker*, writes in his Foreword to *The Essential William H. Whyte* (LaFarge 2000):

His objective research on the city, on open space, on the way people use it, was set within what I think I must call a moral context. Holly believed with deep passion that there was such a thing as quality of life, and the way we build cities, the way we make places, can have a profound effect on what lives are lived within those places.

Celebrating and Continuing Holly Whyte’s Work

A major goal of the symposium was to revisit Holly Whyte’s work, which anticipated many of the ideas behind smart growth and new urbanism, and reintroduce him to a younger generation of planners and urbanists. This goal was accomplished during the opening sessions through personal tributes by friends and family (Donald Elliott, Amanda Burden, Fred Kent, Eugenie Birch, Lynden B. Miller and Alexandra Whyte) and fellow urban writers (Charles E. Little, Paul Goldberger and Tony Hiss). Planners Frank and Deborah Popper and environmental historian Adam Rome offered perspectives on Holly as viewed from the twenty-first century. A second



Courtesy of Project for Public Spaces

Bryant Park, New York City

Governor Nelson Rockefeller’s Conference on Natural Beauty in New York. At the invitation of Donald Elliott, then chair of the New York City Plan Commission, Whyte wrote much of the 1969 Plan for New York City, which was acclaimed by *The New York Times* and the American

cluster zoning, conservation easements, greenbelts, scenic roads, tax abatements and so on.

Whyte’s fascination with the social functions of urban space was the focus of his Street Life Project, a long-term study sponsored by the Rockefeller Brothers



Paley Park, New York City

goal was to trace the influence of his work in contemporary efforts to make cities and suburbs more livable and more humane, which was accomplished through an address by Carl Anthony of The Ford Foundation, and his introduction by Robert Yaro of the Regional Plan Association. Subsequent sessions, both plenary and concurrent, reviewed a variety of initiatives in New York City and around the nation that carry on the spirit of Holly Whyte. Session topics included:

- Protecting Regional “Last Landscapes”
- Urban Livability
- Ecological Restoration: Practice and Ethics
- Green Design in the Built Environment
- Regreening Older Neighborhoods
- Green Infrastructure of Greater New York
- Urban Environmental Education
- Privately-Owned Public Spaces
- What Makes a Great City Park System?
- Green Urbanism in European Cities

Some of these topics departed somewhat from Whyte’s own areas of focus, but the organizers felt that he would have applauded the inclusiveness of our agenda. He no doubt would have added many topics, such as urban gardens, green roofs, brown-field reuse and ecological restoration, if he were here to write a sequel to *The Last Landscape* today. In particular, no appraisal of current approaches to making cities more humane would be adequate if it failed to consider issues of social justice in relation

to urban sprawl and inner-city land use or abuse.

Next Steps

The symposium deliberately closed without the usual “Where do we go from here?” session, but the next major task is to produce an edited volume of selected papers presented at the symposium, and possibly a film. We hope “The Humane Metropolis” (symposium and book) will provide a template for regional symposia in other cities and metropolitan regions of the U.S. These could be locally funded and planned with guidance as requested from the Ecol-

ogical Cities Project and its allies across the country.

An elusive but critical function of events like “The Humane Metropolis” is the energizing of participants through sharing of experience and specialized knowledge. Feedback from speakers and attendees indicates the symposium stimulated new contacts among participants from different disciplines and geographic regions. In particular, it seems to have well served a key goal of the Ecological Cities Project, to promote dialogue between urbanists and natural scientists. According to Peter Harnik, director of Trust for Public Land’s Green Cities Program, “You are on the cutting edge of an up-and-coming topic that is given almost no attention by anyone else—since urban experts rarely talk about nature, and conservationists virtually never talk about cities.” As the consummate synthesizer of things urban, Holly Whyte should be beaming with approval. **L**

RUTHERFORD H. PLATT is director of the Ecological Cities Project at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and organizer of the symposium and related activities. The full list of speakers and other information about the symposium may be found at www.ecologicalcities.org. Contact: platt@geo.umass.edu.

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