La scala inumana: Jan Gehl, il capitalismo e la costruzione di città vivibili

Keywords

Abstract

Creating vibrant pedestrian areas is today an aspirational value and a mark of success for affluent municipalities and many private developers the world over. The Danish architect Jan Gehl, and the eponymous urban design consultancy he founded in 2000, have been widely hailed for their achievements toward making cities more livable. This article contributes a history of urban livability, with an emphasis on Gehl's approach to designing cities for the human scale. Drawing on archival and policy research, the article reveals a story taking place in two different settings: mid-century Italy and turn-of-the-century Denmark. In 1965, Gehl toured central Italy to observe how everyday people use the streets and squares of historic cities, testing a variety of methods for recording his observations. Over the subsequent decades, Gehl made Copenhagen his laboratory for standardizing the methods into an operational public-space design toolkit, while foregrounding the idealized image of Southern conviviality as a benchmark for measuring the quality of life across various sites in his Nordic hometown. Yet it was the Danish capital's embrace of neoliberal policy in the 1990s, marked by revanchist urban regeneration targeting social-housing neighborhoods, that created a precondition for the strategic significance of Gehl's ideas — and a viable pathway to the consultancy business. This article contributes toward a dialogue between architectural history and urban political economy. The idea of the inhuman scale highlights the role of global capital and its structural violence in shaping urban design and expertise.

Biography

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The Inhuman Scale: Jan Gehl, Capitalism and the Making of Livable Cities

What is scale and when is it "human"? In *The Human Scale*, a 2012 documentary celebrating the achievements of the Danish architect Jan Gehl toward making cities more livable, the main protagonist conjectures: "we know much more about the good habitat for mountain gorillas or Siberian tigers than we know about the good urban habitat for *Homo sapiens*"[1] . An urban design celebrity, Gehl has stepped into the global limelight with the success of Jan Gehl Architects, a consultancy he helped set up in 2000 (recently rebranded as Gehl)[2]. Headquartered in Copenhagen, New York and San Francisco, the consultancy provides affluent municipalities and developers in cities on all major continents with urban design strategies, quality assessment instruments such as the "Public Life toolkit," and a series of trademark measures recommended to all clients: pedestrianize downtowns, create vibrant blocks with active bottom floors, make public squares into a neighborhood's living room. In this context, the idea of human scale is not limited to the physical scale of buildings, but has become an aspirational value concerning the patterns of sociality, territoriality and other behavioral characteristics ascribed to the human species as a whole, with an emphasis on open space between buildings. Yet the presumed universality of how individual *Homo sapiens* organisms interact with each other and their physical environment lies in tension with the ways in which Gehl has elevated a particular form of urban culture and configuration as the model for all cities to follow.

My research follows the rise of Gehl Architects to global stardom, on the back of Copenhagen's redevelopment and rebranding as the world's most "livable city," lubricated by the consultancy's high-visibility projects such as the pilot for pedestrianizing New York's Times Square (2008). The publication of *Cities for People* in 2010, nothing short of a bible for the livable city movement translated into more than 40 languages, has consolidated the Danish architect's apotheosis into "the demigod of urban planning"[3]. My motivating concern is with Gehl and the eponymous consultancy's roles in naturalizing capitalism, and how their work helps produce ignorance about the gentrification dynamics among the droves of clients and fans they have in the higher echelons of policy, planning and architecture. This article elaborates by focusing on one episode in the historical geography of urban livability.

In the poster for *The Human Scale*, Gehl's stature is encapsulated in the composition with a close-up, rear-view silhouette of his head overlooking two urban panoramas: the instantly reco-

[1] *The Human Scale*, directed by Andreas Dalsgaard (Final Cut for Real, 2012).
[2] In the remainder I use "Gehl" to refer to the person and "Gehl Architects" to the consultancy.
[3] "more than 40…": Jan Gehl, "'On Daylight' Housing and Urban Planning," *Daylight and Architecture*, 21 May 2024, https://www.daylightandarchitecture.com/daylight-talk/on-daylight-housing-and-urban-planning-a-daylight-talk-by-jan-gehl, last accessed January 14, 2026; "demigod…": in Eugene McCann and Lise Mahieus, "Everywhere from Copenhagen: Method, Storytelling, and Comparison in the Globalization of Public Space Design," in Chris Hurl and Anne Vogelpohl, eds., *Professional Service Firms and Politics in a Global Era: Public Policy, Private Expertise* (Springer, 2021), 115–134: 123.

gnizable Piazza del Campo, a medieval square in Siena, Italy famous for various gatherings and social events, and the skyline of a nondescript megacity — a closer scrutiny reveals this is to be Chongqing, China — dominated by high-rises and cranes, placed upside down at the top of the poster. The distinctive black fedora hat that the Dane often sports during public engagements and photoshoots divides the poster in two halves, tapping into the magic mirror archetype with Gehl himself as the truth-telling mirror. Oddly, the hat is squashed as if by the weight of the challenge hovering, quite literally in the poster, above his head: to put cities back on their feet and make them livable again. As the poster invites the audience to observe life on the Italian square through the architect's eyes, it accurately (even if inadvertently) conveys the kernel of Gehl's consultancy work: extrapolating and exporting a historically specific, Eurocentric conceptions of public space in order to revitalize cities the world over, including the narrowing of human conflict to questions of using and improving that space.

A Grand Tour in Italy

Siena, indeed, plays an important role in Gehl's approach to livability. It is here, along with Lucca and other central Italian cities, that the Danish architect first developed the trademark methods for studying public space. In 1965, supported by the Danish Academy in Rome and the New Carlsberg Foundation, the then 29-year old Gehl spent half a year touring Italy (including a month in Greece) to "study the use of squares and plazas in Southern Europe"[4]. However, while commentators, exhibitors and the Dane himself have repeatedly highlighted the formative role of this trip, to my knowledge there hasn't been any deeper engagement with this material[5]. Drawing on privately archived notebooks and sketchbooks, I am analyzing what exactly the Danish architect observed during this trip and how he framed, represented, and interpreted the said observations. I am doing this not to add to the already large chorus of voices venerating Gehl, but to ask how and where urban expertise is created — and how ignorance about capitalism is produced along the way.

For centuries, hordes of architects have criss-crossed what is now Italy to look for inspiration in the architecture and artifacts that have dotted the peninsula since antiquity. Gehl, however, spent the six months sketching, photographing and scribbling notes about its contemporary users. The first stop by the Danish architect and his family — he was travelling by car with his wife Ingrid and their toddler daughter — was in Lucca[6]. Gehl began by measuring the dimensions of Piazza San Michele, Piazza dell'Anfiteatro and the connecting Via Fillungo, but soon turned his focus to counting people in order to chart a typical what he called "day cycle" of these historic places. On August 19, for example, Gehl spent an entire day on Piazza San Michele, noting down how many men, women and children were present on the square at different hours, also counting cyclists and cars (moving and parked) for comparison. From Lucca, the architect ventured to Siena, where he got interested in bollards, noticing their dual function: preventing cars from entering certain zones, while doubling as street furniture. During the trip Gehl took many photos

[4] Jan Gehl and Ingrid Gehl, "Torve og pladser," *Arkitekten* 16 (1966), 317–329: 317.

[5] For example, McCann and Mahieus, "Everywhere from Copenhagen"; "Exhibition 'Changing Mindsets'—Jan Gehl's Life of Work," *Danish Cultural Institute*, October 16, 2017, https://www.dki.lv/exhibition-changing-mindsets-jan-gehls-life-work/, last accessed January 14, 2026; Ida Kyvsgaard Bentzen, "Jan Gehl: Good Cities Should Feel Like One Big Hug," *Danish Architecture Center*, October 30, 2025, https://dac.dk/en/magazine/jan-gehl-good-cities-should-feel-like-one-big-hug, last accessed January 14, 2026.

[6] The following three paragraphs draw on material in Jan Gehl's private archive.

of people, mostly older men, leaning or sitting on bollards, reading newspapers, feeding pigeons, or watching other people. The archive also includes photos of people leaning against arcade columns and various other elements, including a slightly voyeuristic back view photo of a young woman leaning against a fence: the point seems to be about an unhurried, leisurely, erotically charged even, life on the street, and the everyday as a theatrical performance. Later that year he returned to Siena to sketch Piazza del Campo (the square featured on the *Human Scale* documentary publicity): seen through the eyes of Gehl placed at the intersection of Via dei Pellegrini and Via di Città, the scene is dominated by six bollards marking the proscenium to the theater of everyday life unfolding on the piazza.

From Lucca, Gehls continued northward, crossing the Apennines to Sabbioneta — whose Piazza Castello served the architect as the first test-bed for recording how people distribute themselves in an enclosed open space — then after a few days drove south to the Marchigian town of Ascoli Piceno, where Gehl further developed the method. Around one month into the trip, the Dane started using a dot distribution map to record patterns of human concentration: a map of a place is populated with a series of dots, each representing one individual and their location. While the previous two methods focused, respectively, on rhythms and scenography of a place (with some rudimentary attempt or at least possibility to differentiate users by identity), the third is a kind of heat map representing aggregate human activity. For example, a dot map representing Piazza del Popolo, the town's main square, reveals that people gather near cafés or under porticos where they are shielded from elements — an underwhelming finding to say the least. When Gehl sat down to work he looked no different from those enthusiasts one encounters in the historic Italian cities sketching away old architecture. Yet the fact that he often visited at odd hours sometimes gave him away: in Ascoli Piceno, his presence caught the attention of a local journalist, who went to write a feature describing the Danish architect as "looking like but not being a beatnik". "The foreigner was constantly taking notes on all the passers-by," the article noted with bemusement. The article is proudly displayed on Gehl Architects' website as a token of the office founder's affable eccentricity[7].

I have been interested in how observations about apparently ahistorical patterns of human behavior were made at the specific time and place: mid-1960s central Italian historic cities. Gehl's trip echoes the structure of the early modern Grand Tour, in this case a Northern European benefiting from Denmark's post-war growth exploring the comparatively poorer European South. It is revealing that Gehl didn't take the motorway exit to any of the major cities in Northern Italy, where Italy's own post-war growth was concentrated — presumably a form of primitivism premised on idealizing underdevelopment. That people like to sit on or rest against objects not specifically designed for such ends, or that they congregate in bars, is not much of a discovery, yet it is just these kinds of truisms that the Copenhagen architect would instrumentalize in order to replicate in his Nordic hometown the idealized scenes he found in Southern Europe.

[7] "It Began With a Love Story," *Gehl Architects*, https://www.gehlpeople.com/knowledge-hub/articles/story/, last accessed January 9, 2026.

[8] Jan Gehl and Ingrid Gehl, "Torve og pladser," *Arkitekten* 16 (1966): 317–329; Jan Gehl and Ingrid Gehl, "Mennesker i byer," *Arkitekten* 21 (1966): 425–443; Jan Gehl and Ingrid Gehl, "Fire italienske torve," *Arkitekten* 23 (1966): 474–485.

[9] Jan Gehl, "Mennesker til fods," *Arkitekten* 20 (1968): 429–446. Examples of Gehl being credited for pedestrianizing Strøget: "Strøget District," *Project for Public Spaces*, July 15, 2005, https://www.pps.org/places/strooget-district, last accessed January 14, 2026; Richard T. LeGates, Frederic Stout, Roger W. Caves, "Editors' Introduction," in Richard T. LeGates, Frederic Stout, Roger W. Caves, eds., *The City Reader, 7th Edition* (Routledge, 2020), 608–610: 608.

[10] Jan Gehl, "Vore fædre i det høje!," *Havekunst* 48 (1967): 136–143. "Action research": Jan Gehl and Birgitte Svarre, *How to Study Public Life* (Island Press, 2013): 94–95. On the territorial stigmatization of Høje Gladsaxe see also Henriette Steiner, "Gigantic Welfare Landscapes and the Ground Beneath Høje Gladsaxe," *Landscape Research* 46, 4 (2021): 527–41.

[11] Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzøe, *Public Spaces—Public Life* (Danish Architectural Press and Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts School of Architecture, 1996); Gehl and Svarre, *How to Study Public Life.*

[12] "modernistic...": Jan Gehl, *Cities for People* (Island Press, 2010), 25.

[13] In 2021, for example, 36% of Gehl Architects' annual revenue came from real estate developers, 33% from the private sector, and only 11% from the public sector (which moreover included revenue from business improvement district organization). Gehl, *Gehl Annual Report 2020–2021* (Gehl, 2021), 35.

[14] Jan Gehl, "A Changing Street Life in a Changing Society," *Places* 6, 1 (1989), 8–17: 15.

[15] A key document is the government-commissioned report, Initiativgruppen om Hovedstadsregionen, *Hovedstaden, hvad vil vi med den?* (Statsministeriet, 1989). On Copenhagen's transformation see Henrik Gutzon Larsen and Anders Lund Hansen, "Gentrification—Gentle or Traumatic? Urban Renewal Policies and Socioeconomic Transformations in Copenhagen," *Urban Studies* 45, 12 (2008): 2429–48; Henriette Steiner, "Constructing Copenhagen in a Time of Economic Downturn: Reevaluating 1990s Postmodernist Urban Development before the City Became 'Livable'," *Architecture and Culture* 10, 1 (2022): 76–95; Deane Simpson, "Between 'Circumscribed' Neoliberalism and Welfarism: Copenhagen under the Metric Regimes of the 'Competitive' and 'Attractive' City," in Jannie Rosenberg Bendsen et al. (Eds.), *Forming Welfare* (Arkitektens Forlag, 2017), 146–71.

Fixing Copenhagen and More

As soon as Gehl returned back to Denmark he plunged himself into operationalizing the methods. Day cycle, public space ergonomics, heat map of the urban everyday: in 1966, three articles appeared in the Danish architecture journal *Arkitekten* — authored by Gehl "in collaboration with Ingrid Gehl" — as the main report on the tour aimed at the Danish audience[8]. Over the subsequent years, enabled by the comfortable professorship as an urban design professor at Copenhagen's Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Gehl undertook a series of public space studies with students across various sites in the Danish capital. The emphasis in this period shifted from learning by observing to assessing, comparing and advocating change: the Italian material is construed as best practice against which to compare and contrast good and bad practices at home. Above all, Gehl directed his and his students' attention to a contrast between two places in Copenhagen. On the one hand, they studied Strøget, the city's main pedestrian shopping street, as a local best practice example (to the point that international commentators have persistently but wrongly credited the Dane for closing the street to vehicular traffic)[9]. On the other hand, representing a form of "worst practice," Høje Gladsaxe, a then-newly built large social-housing project, became a focus for Gehl's and his students' various satirical interventions and "action research" with the intention to fix the place deemed unlivable[10]. During the 1980s, Gehl expanded his research to other Nordic cities and to cities on other continents. These efforts culminated with a series of co-authored urban design handbooks introducing the Public Life toolkit, and the opening of Gehl Architects in 2000 with the help of Helle Søholt, a former student[11].

By the millenium's turn, Gehl's message solidified into a comfortable "cars-and-Corbusier" narrative: although the Danish architect has undeniably contributed to raising alarm about the dangers of car-oriented urbanism, blithely blaming unlivability on traffic planners, apparently out-of-scale housing programs and vaguely invoked "modernistic planning ideology" represents a whole other danger: naturalizing capital[12]. Scroll through the recording of any of the innumerable talks Gehl gave from Helsinki to Hobart and Honolulu and you'll encounter a version of the story about misanthropic planners — as historically simplistic as it is strategically effective as a foil to Gehl Architects' business model premised on neoliberal urban regeneration. Keep delivering more sidewalks, cafés and quality public space is a word of advice directed at city officials, but a finger-wag really — lest your city becomes unlivable! And what about housing? The market will fix that! Indeed, although consulting municipal departments has been key to Gehl Architects' reputation as stewards making cities livable for all citizens, the consultancy's revenue comes overwhelmingly from real estate developers and the private sector: quality public space as an adjunct to luxury housing[13].

"The Danes indeed were not Italians, but given the spaces and the time a very Italian street life has certainly evolved," Gehl reflected on the transformation of twentieth-century fin-de-siècle Copenhagen[14]. Yet it is safe to say that a "very Italian street life" (read: café terraces) developed in Copenhagen not because of Jan Gehl's ideas about human-scaled public spaces, but because of a

series of economic and policy measures promoting the city centre and waterfront redevelopment — which in turn created a precondition for the strategic significance of Gehl's ideas and a viable pathway to the consultancy business. In the years leading up to the new millenium, the national and city governments joined forces to make Copenhagen more competitive as a solution to the downturn that had plagued Denmark's economy since the 1980s[15]. While social housing programs were not entirely phased out as planned, the municipality began targeting the existing predominantly social-housing areas for social cleansing and redevelopment. In 2000, for example, Copenhagen's Head of Planning explained that the municipality must transform its housing strategy so as to attract the middle classes and repel the "thrash" people living downtown because housing there was too affordable[16]. Other senior city officials have used the same expression to describe Vesterbro, a predominantly working-class, ethnic-minority community, that became the epitome of the Danish capital's state-led gentrification around the millenium's turn — and it was nowhere else than right at the edge of Vesterbro that Gehl Architects opened their first office in 2000.

Denmark's current national-level housing strategy follows in the same vein, targeting social housing areas for redevelopment with a clearly racialized agenda and "ghetto lists," which the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) declared potentially unlawful[17]. In Copenhagen, regeneration operations have expanded farther away from the city centre, to neighborhoods such as Mjølnerparken, whose residents took the initiative of contesting the law by filing a suit against it with the CJEU. Mjølnerparken stands out equally for being abutted by one of the most celebrated urban design projects in twenty-first-century Copenhagen: the Superkilen urban park (BIG, 2012) promoted as a "giant exhibition of urban best practices"[18]. Such interventions help facilitate a giant housing grab underwritten by the livability narrative: the municipality commissioned Superkilen in collaboration with RealDania, a powerful private real estate foundation, while a Danish building industry journal envisaged how Mjølnerparken's "unsafe isolated environment" would be "replaced by a vibrant street life" presumably seeping there from the park[19]. In 2023, the neighborhood was indeed removed from the ghetto list due to ongoing displacement and redevelopment[20]. Gehl is part of the story in several ways: while RealDania financially supported his work on *Cities for People*, he used his speaking circuit to promote Superkilen as a decontextualized, best practice example to inspire others[21]. Refracted through boosterist policies and permeated by species-level thinking, the quest toward defining the parameters of a habitat desirable for all members of *Homo sapiens* represents a highly reductive conception of city planning, whose effect ultimately is producing ignorance about the socio-economic conflict and institutional complexity.

The Inhuman Scale of Capital
By revealing an episode in the history of urban expertise — how the notes that Gehl was constantly taking on the passers-by in mid-1960s Italy were transformed into a method toolkit with canonical influence in and beyond urban design — this article contributes toward a dialogue between architectural history and urban political economy. Although it would be wrong to claim that the livable city

[16] Quoted in Larsen and Hansen, "Gentrification—Gentle or Traumatic?": 2433.
[17] Janni Sorensen, Michael Tophøj Sørensen and Finn Kjær Christensen, "Nuances of 'ghetto' policies in Danish spatial planning," *Nordic Journal of Urban Studies* 4, 1 (2024): 1–9; "Denmark: ECJ ruling that ghetto law is potentially unlawful is important step in protecting basic human rights," *Amnesty International*, December 18, 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/12/denmark-ecj-ruling-that-ghetto-law-is-potentially-unlawful-is-important-step-in-protecting-basic-human-rights/, last accessed January 14, 2026.
[18] "Superkilen," *BIG*, https://big.dk/projects/superkilen-1621, last accessed January 9, 2026.
[19] Peter Kargaard, "Arkitektur skal bremse yderligere ghettodannelse på Nørrebro," *Licitationen*, November 13, 2015, https://www.licitationen.dk/article/view/228255/arkitektur_skal_bremse_yderligere_ghettodannelse_pa_norrebro, last accessed January 14, 2026.
[20] "EU Top Court to Review Denmark's 'Racially Discriminatory' 'Ghetto Package'," *Open Society Justice Initiative*, June 17, 2024, https://www.justiceinitiative.org/newsroom/eu-top-court-to-review-denmark-s-racially-discriminatory-ghetto-package, last accessed January 14, 2026.
[21] In a 2017 lecture, Gehl included a slide with images of the Superkilen "activity park" to illustrate the argument about a new phase in urban design, marked by an emphasis on sports and physical activity-oriented public spaces (Jan Gehl, "Livable Cities in the 21st Century," lecture at the Aalto University, Helsinki, February 21, 2017). RealDania's support is acknowledged in Gehl, *Cities for People*: XI. RealDania also financially supported *The Human Scale* documentary.

movement is directly responsible for gentrification and displacement, the narrow humanism on which it is premised has added a great deal of insult to the injury caused by capitalism and neoliberal policy.

It is therefore equally safe to say that not everyone is happy in, or benefits from, a "livable" city. Gehl's humanism doesn't go as far as considering basic universal needs such as food and shelter, or the institutional complexity of specific human societies. The irony is that the human scale so often invoked in the urban design arena is inseparable from the inhuman scale of global capitalism. The notion of inhumanity connects an emphasis on global capital with the structural violence of what the Marxist geographer Neil Smith called the revanchist city: the role of gentrification as a policy of revenge on the poor and vulnerable[22]. The link between boosterism, revitalization and gentrification was obvious for the critical geographer even before the livable cities marching band really took off: "making cities liveable," he wrote, means "liveable for the middle class. In fact, of necessity, [cities] have always been 'liveable' for the working class"[23].

One lasting contribution by Smith is a rethinking of scale in geography: scale is not an absolute category, an extent over which a phenomenon occurs, but the containers of action we call neighborhood, city or state are themselves historically produced through the simultaneous accumulation of capital in one place or territory and devaluation in another[24]. There is a clear contribution to architectural and design research, too: not only is the "human scale" irreducible to proportion and representation, it is also reckless to believe that studying *Homo sapiens*' putative behavioral universals will unlock the mysteries of urban change or address metropolitan inequity. Rather, any effort to make cities more habitable must start by grappling with the structural inhumanity of capitalism to which livability gurus all too easily adhere.

[22] Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (Routledge, 1996).
[23] Neil Smith, "Gentrification and Uneven Development," *Economic Geography* 58, 2 (1982), 139–155: 152.
[24] Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (University of Georgia Press, 2008 [1984]).