Erik Rietveld introduces *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*
19 June 2013 / Erik Rietveld

URBANISM, THEORY

On Wednesday last week Erik Rietveld — philosopher at the University of Amsterdam and partner at RAAAF [Rietveld Architecture-Art-Affordances] — introduced the film *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* by William Whyte during a screening at Non-Fiction Film in Amsterdam. For those who couldn’t make it, here’s an extended summary of his introduction, followed by the film.

Still from *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*

In many daily situations we act without deliberation. For example, we step on or off the tram in one smooth movement, maintain the appropriate distance from others in the lift, or immediately grab the pedestrian beside us who doesn’t see the oncoming car while crossing the road. We often do simply what must be done in a particular situation. The overarching aim of my philosophical research at the University of Amsterdam is to contribute to a better understanding of such adequate everyday acts we perform without reflection. One conclusion from this research is that we are constantly responding in a skilled manner to ‘affordances’ — the possibilities for action afforded to us by our surroundings.
A chair, for instance, offers us an opportunity to sit down, but we can also stand on it if we have to turn the video projector on or off. Without thinking about it, we are constantly responding to the affordances that are relevant in the particular situation in which we find ourselves. They might also be social affordances, possibilities for social interaction offered to us by our surroundings, such as an outstretched hand or a campfire.

The city of New York commissioned urbanist William Whyte to study what factors make a public space a good public space. It resulted in 1980 in, among other things, a documentary called *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*.

Still from *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*

The documentary is a feast for anyone interested in design and the skilled context-sensitive interaction between people and their environment. I want to share with you nine of my fascinations, though I could just easily share ninety.

**Fascination 1** - First of all, this film contains lots of incredibly beautiful images, such as the opening shots with the footage from the time-lapse camera that recorded not only the movements of people but also the way the sunshine crosses the Seagram Building’s Plaza.
Fascination 2 - Whyte’s acute powers of observation, which always focus on what people are doing. This reflects one of my favourite philosophical quotations, from Wittgenstein: ‘Don’t think but look!’

There are two observations by Whyte that I hope we never forget. The first is ‘People tend to sit where there are places to sit.’ And, the second, which he utters so emphatically, is: ‘The number one activity is people looking at other people.’ Although neither observation is all that surprising, it is remarkable that we seldom come across places that have been designed with them in mind primarily.

Fascination 3 - The best public spaces are sociable places. Social affordances contribute to a good public domain. Whyte refers to this process as triangulation. A good example is a window through which people can look into a church from above, prompting them to strike up a conversation with strangers. Whyte makes it clear that we can make better spaces if we look carefully at what people do, experiment and really make an effort to design something good.

Fascination 4 - Whyte makes a number of critical remarks about designers that are still relevant. How come, for example, designers still frequently overlook the fact that people like to look at other people?

Fascination 5 - The documentary contains lots of humour. Take the passage introduced in playful fashion with the words: ‘Here are the girl watchers.’ Whyte analyses them and pokes fun at their macho posturing.
Fascination 6 - The wonderful images of skilled responses to affordances in daily life. The chair offers not only an opportunity to sit but also an opportunity to move it. And that’s important, because people gladly avail of that chance. Skilled human actions are highly sensitive to context and the mobile chairs facilitate this tendency to move towards an optimal grip on our situation.

The film also reveals Whyte’s faith in people. The images of people on the dangerously looking fountain in Portland show that much more is possible in public space than we often think.

Fascination 7 - Whyte is a good phenomenologist. For instance, he notes that the water on the Seagram Building’s Plaza looks unusually liquid. Could this have something to do with the possibility of touching the water? To me that seems a plausible explanation. Research in cognitive science teaches us that a relevant affordance, such as the opportunity to touch water, can generate a bodily action readiness, which influences how we experience something.

Still from The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces - Paley Park, New York

Fascination 8 - Paley Park in New York plays a prominent role in the film, and what a fantastic spot that is! The footage of the entrance shows very well how a relevant place-affordance solicits people and evokes action. The park with the waterfall sucks people in, so to speak. By simply responding to the possibility to enter, the individual ‘drifts’ into the park without the need for any conscious decision. That is typical of the way in which an
affordance can guide action. Relevant affordances of this kind generates a physical readiness to act in order to pick-up the affordance in question. Whyte also underlines the importance of well-designed details such as the low treads of the steps that allow people to enter the park effortlessly. He also emphasises an oft-forgotten ‘secondary value’ of a well-designed place: it makes people happy and they share that - sometimes proudly - with others.

Fascination 9 - The final fascination I want to share with you is Whyte’s love for urban life. This is wonderfully expressed in the closing images of two young women who are spoken to by someone outside the picture frame, and they laugh contagiously in response. The more times I see this film, the more I suspect it was William Whyte himself who made them laugh.

Enjoy this exceptional film!

Link to movie: https://archive.org/details/SmallUrbanSpaces