American Urbanist

How William H. Whyte’s Unconventional Wisdom Reshaped Public Life

Richard K. Rein

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After a reporting career that included stops at *Time Magazine* and *People*, **RICHARD K. REIN** launched a nationally acclaimed weekly newspaper, *U.S. 1*, that helped the Princeton–Route 1 corridor become more than just another “edge city.” Rein now serves on the council of Princeton Future, a non-profit that promotes sustainable urbanism in his hometown.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ever since the publication in 1952 of *Is Anybody Listening?* William H. Whyte, Jr., has been recognized as one of the leading figures in the analysis of contemporary American culture. As Assistant Managing Editor of *Fortune*, he has been engaged in a continuing exploration of American organization life. This book, on which he spent three years of original research and study, is his attempt to trace the long-range shift this life is bringing about in Americans’ personal values.

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‘Whyte is an unusually brilliant boy whose temperament is such that he can scarcely be classified in the ordinary way.’
Groupthink

‘A rationalized conformity—an open, articulate philosophy which holds that group values are not only expedient but right and good as well.’
in favor or against, without fear of offending a friend, a co-worker, or a boss.

We suggest that you build a Thinkometer and try it at a club meeting, or in a class discussion. You may find that it gives you a much more accurate reflection of what people think about controversial issues. Someday perhaps, legislatures may vote electronically, with equipment much like the Thinkometer.

Construction can be completed in an evening if you use the Premier metal case (Fig. 2). It comes pre-drilled with a 2-in. hole that needs only a little filing to fit the body of the meter. Drill 3/4-in. holes for mounting the meter and outside terminal strips, using these parts themselves as drilling templates.

Now take two of the five-point tie strips and make a 5-rung ladder, using 10,000-ohm resistors as each rung (Fig. 3). Solder each resistor
“While industry does not ignore the brilliant but erratic genius, in general it prefers its men to have ‘normal’ personalities.”

From industry trade journal, Personnel, 1953
‘If another woman would not be out of place, might I suggest that a substitute be Mrs. Robert Jacobs—Jane Jacobs on our masthead.’

Douglas Haskell
THE EXPLODING METROPOLIS

THE EDITORS OF FORTUNE

A STUDY OF THE ASSAULT ON URBANISM AND HOW OUR CITIES CAN RESIST IT
the hands of state highway engineers, and though they are supposed to hold public hearings, there is no provision that they must take any heed of what people say in the hearings. New rights-of-way, for example, will eat up a million acres of land. Yet the highway engineers are likely to favor precisely the land that planners would most like to keep untouched—parkland in the built-up areas, flat or gently rolling land in the country.

Santa Clara County is again a case in point. No sooner had the agricultural zoning been put through than the local people found that the state highway engineers were planning to lay a new highway right in the middle of the narrow floodplain of the southern part of the county. The county people opposed the highway department to put the route on the edge of the foothills; this would add a little more mileage to the route but it would save the valley for both agriculture and amenity's sake, and it would also make for a much more scenic route. The highway engineers are thinking it over.

But perhaps the most important feature of the new highway program will be the location of the interchanges, for these will be to the community of the future what river junctions and railroad division points were in the past. The interchanges become the node of new developments, and whatever ideas planners may have had for the area, the pressure of land prices can be an almost irresistible force for hit-or-miss development.

But there can be coordination between the engineers and city planners, and if there is, the highway program will be a positive force for good land use. Through "excess condemnation," right-of-way can be made broad enough to conserve large areas of open space. The spacing of interchanges can also help preserve open space. At the very least the highway program has provided a deadline. The program is going through whether the communities like it or not; there will be no chance of controlling it unless they get together in an effective program to secure a pattern of open space and orderly development.

Enlightened opportunism

What should the program be? Ironically, for the fundamentals of a workable plan, the best guide is not what is being done now but what was done. For there have been open-space programs in the past—brilliant ones—and unique as each may have been, together they provide several valuable lessons.

1. New York's Central Park. In 1844, William Cullen Bryant took a walk over the hilly countryside north of the city. It struck him that a large tract should be bought for a "central reservation" while land was still cheap, for eventually it would be surrounded by the growing city. He started to agitate for it. Ridiculous, said the Journal of Commerce: there is plenty of countryside for people to go out and see, so why pay for it? But the populace liked the idea; the politicians declared for it, and in 1856 it became a reality.
A PLAN TO SAVE VANISHING

An expert observer tells how to protect our open spaces and halt the land-killing disease of urban sprawl

BY WILLIAM H. WHITE JR.

Most of the housing to take care of the increase will be built on the edges of our metropolitan areas. And long before that the pattern will have been set. The new federal highway program, just now going into gear, will vastly accelerate the exploitation of grazing areas. With each new interstate, towns and villages in the tracts of grazing are vanished, borders, suburbs, hamlets, even small towns caught up in the sprawl of urban sprawl and its expression on the land in the countryside. A fuller and more detailed examination of the parts of the article which are not visible would be available from the Urban Land Institute at Washington, D.C.
The Last Landscape
William H. Whyte
Author of THE ORGANIZATION MAN

How our cities and suburbs can be better places to live in -- because more people will be living in them
The 1960s - The Protest Era

‘Don’t write off the revolution because it is being made by men in business suits.’

Ada Louise Huxtable
Every day two million people pour into this partially dysfunctional, potentially lethal environment.

Can the NYC Planning Department save the day?
Experts are full of ideas. Residents sometimes have better ones.
Nothing I have done demonstrates the lessons I learned on Guadalcanal as much as the Street Life Project, initiated in New York City in 1970.
THIS MAN HAS BEEN SPYING ON US

His conclusion: We live in the greatest city in the world...and thanks to his research, it's going to get better.

See Page 2 OVER
The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces

William H. Whyte
Whyte presents an underlying premise about what makes some public spaces work, and some not work. But first he shows his work.
Whyte’s film on plazas does not end at a plaza, but someplace else, even more important.
Elements of a Successful Public Space

Sitting Space

Sun, Trees, Water

Food

Triangulation

The Street
‘It is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished.’

- William H. Whyte
Planners would prefer to go to hell with a plan than to heaven without one.
The following are prohibited in the plaza -

SKATEBOARDING
BIKING
HORSEPLAY
SMOKING
ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

The Plaza Closes at Dusk
“Some might be impressed by a torrent of details, particularly if accompanied by elaborate overlays and sketches. Actually passing on such a report amounts to saying, ‘The devil with it -- you figure it out!’”

- Marine Corps Gazette
‘Observation is an extremely tough business. It will take much patience, many long hours of watching for the little things.’

- Marine Corps Gazette
Pros and Cons of Concepts A and B

**Concept A**
- Pros
  - Traffic calming to slow cars
  - More and safer pedestrian crossings
  - Promenade character
  - Allows for most existing trees to remain
  - Minimal changes for buildings/houses on Witherspoon Street
  - Additional room for benches, bike racks, etc. on bump-outs
- Cons
  - Loss of parking (35%)
  - No dedicated bicycle lanes - continue to share street with cars

**Concept B**
- Pros
  - Protected bike space southbound for 4 blocks; 1 block unprotected
  - More and safer pedestrian crossing opportunities
- Cons
  - Loss of parking (45% or more)
  - Conflicts between pedestrians and bicyclists at intersections and along route
  - Conflicts between bicyclists and vehicle users at parking areas and driveways
  - Loss of mature trees, with potentially fewer replacements - incl. all existing on neighborhood side
  - Removal of green buffer between sidewalk and drive lane - need to find space for signs, poles, bus stop waiting areas, bike parking, etc.
  - Driveways moved to sidewalks - sloping down sidewalks
  - Garbage & recycling cans in parking spaces, bike lane and/or sidewalks
  - New parking paystations required - no room for meters
'Group harmony is not an unmixed blessing. . . . Progress is often dependent on producing rather than mitigating frustrations and tensions.'

- The Organization Man, 1956
‘Now coming of age is a whole generation of planners and architects for whom the formative experience of a center was the atrium of a suburban shopping mall.’
‘Intelligence fundamentals remain the same no matter how many technical devices supplement human observation and communication . . . The principle will remain the same. Get the data recorded, then classify it.’

- Marine Corps Gazette, May 1946
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