

Social Space Ingredients

1. **Redefine** the street, from a car place accommodating people, to a people place accommodating cars. But we must relearn the language of people places.
2. Street life depends on lingering; we linger only where we feel comfortable.
3. The more strangers on the street, the more vulnerable we feel, the more our “lizard” brain demands safe surroundings before we will linger.
4. Vulnerability increases as we “commit” by stopping, perching, sitting, lying down.

Some Basics

5. **Perceptual Scales** are the social scales
 6. You can spot a person a mile away, but they are an unknown dot.
 1. A quarter mile seems to be the maximum distance we will walk before looking for a ride. This defines the “peopleshed” any neighborhood feature (park, store, bus stop) can expect (car-based) people to walk from.
 2. At approx. 72 feet you can recognize an individual by their body & movement. Friend distinguished from foe, this defines the upper limit to **human scale**; comfortable social turf. You can call to people.
 3. At approx. . 48 feet you can perceive facial expression. Strangers can be evaluated for safety. This defines the upper limit of **social scale**; You can have raised-voice conversations. This is the scale to achieve in neighborhood social spaces.
 4. At approx. . 12 feet you can have normal-voice conversation (background noise permitting) This defines the limit of **polite conversation scale**; 10 to 12 feet is the scale to remember when designing for conversation circles. See #7 for other crucial ingredients.
 5. At about 4 feet you can touch someone. This defines **intimate conversation distance**. Notice how, when introduced, we step forward to shake hands, then step back to converse? We are adjusting our conversation distance to the intimacy comfortable to us.
 6. When we linger inside intimate conversation distance, we are expressing trust and affection. (or aggression, as in “getting in someone’s face”) Public displays of affection are a good indicator that a social space is comfortable
7. **Enclosure** -we like defined, roughly “potato shaped”, spaces.
 1. Positive outdoor space seems intrinsic to our species. Human-scale streets leading to squares is a spatial approximation of paths through forests opening to clearings and meadows; this is the idealized landscape we recreate in parks
 1. Sense of enclosure is not so much physical as a function of our vision; A 60° cone defines our typical outlook.
 2. Vertically, enclosure is a **ratio** of height of bounding element to the distance viewed at:
 3. At 1:2 (height: distance) the bounded area is a world in itself, with the surroundings perceived as dim background beyond
 1. At 1:3 the bounded area is still primary, but the surroundings have become equally important. The bounded space is “spilling over the top”
 2. At 1:4 or less, the bounded space merges with the surroundings, and registers mainly through its silhouette.

3. On a street, our view is not typically across the street, but **along** it: this weakens the boundedness of the street, especially when the vista continues without closure, as in a grid street layout.
4. These ratios apply at most of the scales of human experience, but differ in some particulars. At the more intimate scales, we insist on more transparency to the boundaries. We want to define a turf, but with enough openness to keep tabs on what's outside.
5. Horizontally, boundedness is a perceptual averaging: we accept discrete vertical elements like columns and trees as defining elements, if they group within our 60° horizontal cone of vision.
6. Because we have so little say regarding street widths and building fronts, the most powerful tool available is **trees**. 15-25' apart to create a "wall" of vegetation. They can subdivide a street down to the correct human scales, and bound spaces too open. Most of the great streets in the world are tree lined. Many are so well vegetated they function as linear parks, which is good model to work toward.
7. **Thresholds** -the gateways, at changes of social scale. They distinguish more private realms, but usually not absolutely; the best ones have some interchange across the boundary.
 1. Doorways are our strongest thresholds, distinguishing private from public space. The more effective you can make this threshold, the less horizontal distance it needs.
 1. Thresholds are more effective the more sensory elements are changed as you cross them, e.g. high to low (roofed gates), light to dark; change of orientation, texture underfoot, background sounds (as in fountains), etc. Think of how effectively a courtyard entry lets you leave behind a busy street.
 2. Comfortable public spaces have thresholds that allow people to "claim" smaller spaces on the street as theirs. We especially like to linger in alcoves slightly above the street activity, but close enough for conversation (as in front porches)
 3. Thresholds define **turf**; as the social scale decreases, thresholds define an intimacy gradient, as we look for increasing privacy and personal control of the surroundings.

4. Other Aspects of Places to Linger

1. Tempering sun and wind. Deep shade and strong wind are rarely attractive, but full sun and zero breeze can be uncomfortable at times. Maximize choice, (full sun and dappled shade especially) so people can locate themselves according to conditions. Moveable seats are ideal for this.
1. Food. Always a people magnet.
2. Create a wide variety of furniture, so people can "commit" to lingering at the level they are comfortable. big columns about 7 feet apart, encourage standees to lean, converse and linger; walls at elbow height encourage leaning; (think of conversations around the back of pickup trucks); seats at stool height encourage "perching", which is higher, hence feels safer, than normal seat height on the street. Really wide seats, 30" or more, permits both sitting and lounging, even lying down.
3. Conversation Starters: people are more likely to start conversations with strangers when a third, comment-provoking, element is present: street performers; public art; kids playing; pets;
4. Offset the vulnerability seated people feel, relative to standing people, by protecting their backs, and by raising the seating area so they have visual parity

with people standing. Think of kings on thrones. This vertical distinction defines their turf as well.

Basic Bibliography

A Pattern Language, Christopher Alexander et. al., 1977, Oxford University Press. - Everyone making anything should reread this book annually. The first half, patterns of public spaces, gets far less attention than it should.

Great Streets, Allan B. Jacobs, 1993, MIT Press, ISBN 0-262-60023-4

-the nitty gritty: Plans, sections and observations of what works famously well, and important principles drawn from them.

How to Turn a Place Around, A Handbook for Creating Successful Public Spaces, by the Project for Public Spaces, 2000. ISBN 0-9706324-0-1 - not especially design oriented, probably because a major message of the book is that good public spaces are community creations. Step-by-step guidance for doing just that.

City: Rediscovering the Center, William H. Whyte, 1988, Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-05458-0. Out of print, but easy to obtain at abebooks.com

-real life data, from time lapse photography of actual people using actual places.

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