

A Modern City's Approach: Looking on the Space Between Buildings

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BY MARITZA COSANO
PHOTOS: ADDIEL PERERA

Danish architect and urban visionary Jan Gehl, while advocating for people-centered city design during a 2020 interview on the Environment Show, said: “All the old cities were built on the way people moved with their feet, how far they could look with their eyes, and how they used the environment. So, first you have the life, then you have the space for the life, and then you put the buildings on the side of the spaces. Life, space, buildings... in that order.”

Arguably, Gehl is one of the most influential thinkers in the world when it comes to city design. As a researcher and urban quality consultant, Gehl has

Enhancing our urban landscape.

As West Palm Beach's population grows, particularly among young professionals, places like Johan's Joe in downtown West Palm Beach and other lively public spaces bring DDA's people-first urban design philosophy to life.





studied and worked with over 70 cities in his 50+ years and has influenced many of them, including West Palm Beach, in how they think about their streets and public spaces.

Public spaces serve as gathering places, and here in West Palm Beach, the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) effectively recognizes Gehl's philosophy. When examining the public realm or the space between buildings, the DDA concentrates on gathering data for the city. As part of their place-making initiatives, they typically

collect this data through observational research, which has led them to innovative urban planning and design.

This process has evolved significantly over the years. Before COVID, the DDA recruited volunteers and sent them into the streets of the downtown area, equipped with maps to collect these experiences by hand. During this time, the DDA created an outdoor program called "Dining on the Spot," collecting data for the first time with an app. Residents and local merchants downtown connected with the app,

which provided the DDA with data on how people occupied outdoor spaces and why they gathered.

"The app also helped us to understand how we can make public life in public space better," said Sherryl Muriente, M.U.R.P., Public Realm Director for the West Palm Beach Downtown Development Authority. "We did a very large community engagement project called "Troy and Rocking Horse," and using data, we collected people's dreams for the future of the city."





Left, Sherryl Muriente, an innovative thinker in urban design and placemaking who oversees the programming of public spaces to further enhance the quality of life for Downtown residents and visitors. **Top of the page**, two locals play chess at Fern Street Chess Park, an initiative supported by the DDA to meet the increasing locals' appetite for social bonding outside.

From Dreams to Reality

The dreams were analyzed through AI, and Muriente and her team used trackers to understand where the horses were in the different points of the city. The analysis allowed the team to dive deep and collect people's input—definitely more effective than having a public meeting, where time

is limited and people must share it. The app made it feasible for people to be more open and creative with their answers. In total, the DDA's Urban and Planning department collected 1,300 responses in five days, gaining insights into what residents of West Palm Beach desired for their public spaces.

And what do people want? To feel connected with nature. People's number one dream topic was the environment: more trees, parks, and open spaces. Interestingly, with all the modern technology, the waterfront is what people want the most. And, just as important, to have creative outlets or activities in these public spaces close to the water's edge.

The data was collected from eight different points in the city, gathering

input from diverse communities, including adults and children.

"Many children participated, which is not necessarily the norm," explained Muriente. "We placed the horses in schools, so the kids' dreams were over the top! Things like 'I want free ice cream!' But they were also concerned about the environment, which is outstanding to see that kids care about their place and future."

As Muriente looked back at her generation, she noted that the environment wasn't the number one thing they discussed. "We talked about beauty as it related to design, while today's kids look at beauty through the environment, so they include it in how they want us to design our cities."



Sherryl Muriente appears to be engaging with one of Beju's Dudali sculptures at the CityZen Garden, a tranquil and serene retreat at 400 Datura Street, created by the West Palm Beach Downtown Development Authority Public Realm Director (Sherryl Muriente) in collaboration with her husband Beju and Finnish artist Marco Casagrande in 2018. The colorful copper statue is one of many spontaneous humanoid figures that vividly illustrate a range of human interactions, from the simplest to the most intricate.

Their dream is simple: they want a clean, smart, and aesthetically pleasing environment. They see technology as a tool for designing cleaner and smarter cities for the future.

Designing Smarter Cities for the Future

Children's insights are valuable here: technology is indeed key when designing smarter cities for the future. Even though a tree is a natural element to add to a public space, with today's technology, we can measure through information how much air is being cleaned by how many trees we're planting. And that awareness, Muriente explained, is essential as well.

Electric vehicle infrastructure has also emerged as a priority, something not part of our conversations a decade ago. Now, FPL has just opened a new charging station across Brightline. The Palm Beach Ebike Rentals station is at 510 Evernia Street. Circuit, a local electric shuttle service, is now operating to simplify getting around and enhance innovative connections—all through an app.

The planning and urban design strategies evolve as the city continues to design and accept more minor mobility changes, and we're going to see a lot more in the coming months, admitted Muriente, who pointed to new developments in electronic artistic installations throughout the downtown area.

Art Forms + technology = An Interactive + Energetic Experience

She said the DDA is working on an

augmented reality app. For several months, they have been collecting data on all the art around town and developing an interactive interface. The augmented reality item could be an animation where the art comes to life, or the artist could show up virtually and explain their art piece.

The new augmented reality app promotes our city landmarks and educates people about what they see in reality through their phones.

The next item is a silent disco—a disco party or a guided wellness dance using high-tech headsets to enhance your experience. Presented in front of the Lourdes Noreen McKeen luxury senior living retirement community at 315 S. Flagler Drive, it will bring joy to the people who use it on the dance floor and those who will be watching from their balconies.

It boggles the mind that five years ago, West Palm Beach's downtown had nearly 5,000 residents; now it is over 13,000 and growing. So, what are the age groups that are moving into town? What are their likes and dislikes? What is it that people are looking to do? The DDA's development team is collecting data to ensure their office provides the correct spaces for them to enjoy and live in. The DDA's team has found that the average age of the people moving into town is young professionals in their 30s.

The next data they have collected may sound strange, but it's not surprising. There are buildings with one-to-one ratios of dogs and people. Ours is a super pet-friendly city. In fact, every building in our downtown area has a

pet spa and nearby shops, groomers, hospitals, and places they can stay overnight—a pet-friendly vibe that's very specific to us.

Localness Designed Just For Us

After COVID, many cities nationwide experienced a significant exodus and loss of vitality. People in big cities left town looking for a mid-size city. In terms of our population, West Palm Beach has seen growth, which is reshaping who we are as a community."

That localness can be studied by setting up smart benches throughout the downtown area near the waterfront at the visitor centers, where people come to charge up their phones and book a boat trip or a canoe and kayak ride. This data is collected, as is the information gathered by a company called Block by Block that takes care of the cleaning, power washing, safety, and their ambassador program for the city. Their phones have an app that tracks specific data from them, like how much square footage of sidewalk they've power washed, how many gallons of water has been used, how much trash has been picked up, and how many service calls have been made.

As the stewards of the downtown area, the DDA finds this information extremely useful. Their overall objective is to examine the space between buildings and improve plans and designs for a more compact and better-connected city. This modern city approach involves the community in forward-thinking plans. In the process, the city is designed creatively and lovingly by and for the people.