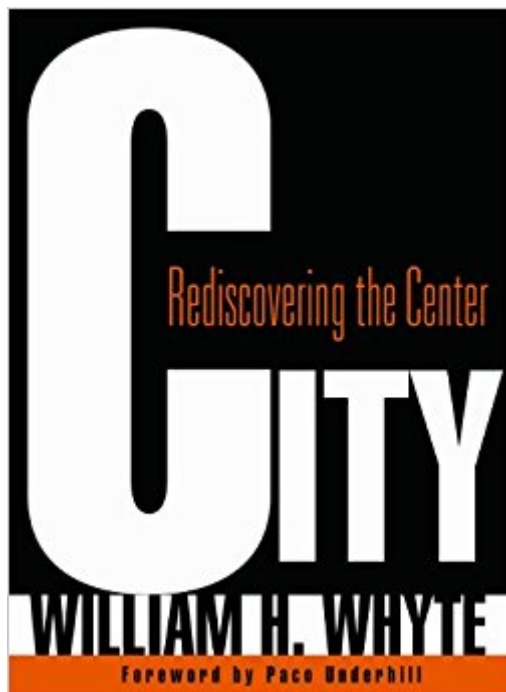


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# City: Rediscovering The Center



## Synopsis

Named by Newsweek magazine to its list of "Fifty Books for Our Time." For sixteen years William Whyte walked the streets of New York and other major cities. With a group of young observers, camera and notebook in hand, he conducted pioneering studies of street life, pedestrian behavior, and city dynamics. *City: Rediscovering the Center* is the result of that research, a humane, often amusing view of what is staggeringly obvious about the urban environment but seemingly invisible to those responsible for planning it. Whyte uses time-lapse photography to chart the anatomy of metropolitan congestion. Why is traffic so badly distributed on city streets? Why do New Yorkers walk so fast—and jaywalk so incorrigibly? Why aren't there more collisions on the busiest walkways? Why do people who stop to talk gravitate to the center of the pedestrian traffic stream? Why do places designed primarily for security actually worsen it? Why are public restrooms disappearing? "The city is full of vexations," Whyte avers: "Steps too steep; doors too tough to open; ledges you cannot sit on. . . . It is difficult to design an urban space so maladroitly that people will not use it, but there are many such spaces." Yet Whyte finds encouragement in the widespread rediscovery of the city center. The future is not in the suburbs, he believes, but in that center. Like a Greek agora, the city must reassert its most ancient function as a place where people come together face-to-face.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Informal, spontaneous interactions give the modern city its vitality, so Whyte's ( *The Organization*

Man ) enemies are urban planners who evince disregard and even contempt for street life. Part meditation, part design manual, this marvelously observant tour of cities will please anyone who cares about urban livability. Whyte (who also wrote *The Exploding Metropolis* and *The Last Landscape* ) offers astute observations on recognizable street typesnimble pedestrians, food vendors, handbill distributors, loitering gossipers, panhandlers. With the help of 120 photographs, he measures the rhythms of neighborhood parks and playgrounds; shows how taken-for-granted design elements like stairs, entranceways, sidewalks and plazas influence human interaction; and dissects office/store mega-complexes, covered pedestrian areas, shopping malls and other artificial environments that destroy spontaneity. Of special interest is his thesis that charges of "gentrification" are misguided when applied to the revival of neighborhoods sapped by federal and local disinvestment. Copyright 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Whyte's Street Life Project studied the use of urban spaces for 16 years. This follow-up to *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* ( LJ 4/15/80) is an engaging look at the variety of human interactions which make "downtown" vibrant. Whyte looks at such diverse topics as pedestrian movement, concourses and skyways, sunlight and its effects--all from the perspective of a confirmed city-lover. His observations and recommendations can be read with profit and pleasure by professional planners and readers interested in what makes a city tick.- Diane K. Harvey, SAIS-Johns Hopkins Univ. Lib., Washington, D.C.Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book is a must-have for any architect, urban designer, sociologist, or anyone interested in how people work, how places work, or how people and places work together. I flew through this book faster than any book I've read in the last five years; it is an absolute joy to read. Whyte's sense of humor is so much fun and his extensive research drives home the points he is trying to make. Whyte's research is fascinating, from human personalities to human interaction, and from physical street design to the amenities that make spaces lively. No matter what you do for a living or what you enjoy, I think there's a small part in everyone that is intrigued by people and how we operate, and I also believe that there is a part of everyone who is interested in designing things. This book gets down to business right from the start at identifying these things that pique our interest and explaining them in great detail, in a plain-language, easy to read way. You will be hard-pressed to find a book - in any genre - where so much genuine and relevant research is so simply and clearly

explained. Just buy it. If you're on the fence, just get it. You won't regret it.

Brilliant analysis by a wonderful observer and lovely writer transformed or understanding of cities. Urbanites are in his debt today.

Almost too much detail on the little things that make cities tick but loved every second of this delightful book

In my opinion, part of being a successful business owner is learning about how your business is impacted by different influences. In *City*, Whyte discusses urban renewal and development and what is effective vs ineffective urban development as well as the impact it has on businesses. I learned a lot from this book and was able to apply some of it to a recent class on leadership that dealt with economic development. Economic development is definitely tied into urban development. This book explains a lot of that and also provides insights into the social life on the streets of any city.

This book is a very valuable supplement to Jane Jacobs' "The Death and Life of Great American Cities", but it is considerably longer than it should be, so that skimming is a must. Alternatively, you might begin with chapter 16, "The Rise and Fall of Incentive Zoning". Whyte's book was copyrighted in 1988, but it has not lost its relevance, no more than Jacobs' book has. In zoning there is a tension between GOOD standards and allowing variances. In theory the latter is fine, but community groups/planners can succumb to pressures or "take ownership" of bad designs by being allowed to play with models and make suggestions, most all of which are subsequently ignored. I now view plaza's in a new light. Do they allow for enough seating, if only on comfortable ledges at a proper height, are they easily accessible (few stairs), is there grass, trees, sculpture, or even fountains, are they within 3 blocks of high density concentrations of people, do they permit good views of street life (and visa versa for security)? Whyte talks of dysfunctional trash receptacles which did function as tables - I would add almost all plazas skimp on or totally lack tables. I wholeheartedly endorse Whyte's call for more public restrooms, even as part of zoning. Surprisingly, setbacks with arcades find little use (this is where Whyte's time lapse cameras had a role to play), as people will stick to the main sidewalk unless it is raining hard. Blank walls facing the street are anathema. Tall buildings blocking the sun can create dark canyons, especially on side streets, and impact on plazas. Reflected light can be important, and the quantity and quality depends on the building facades, with

porous surfaces best as in brownstones. Whyte suggests reflectors on skyscraper roofs. As to gentrification, while it may have undesirable side effects, Whyte points out that more low rent housing was lost to abandonment than gentrification, and that most renters move frequently (both stats are based on New York city and are old).

This book is terrific because William Whyte doesn't rely on any theory. Instead, he logged countless hours watching street corners, public parks and plazas to see how people actually use them, and draws conclusions on how to make them better, safer, and useable. His ideas of planning public areas were first used to a great extent in redeveloping Bryant Park in NYC. Formerly a haven for drug users, the city used his findings from this book and turned it into one of the city's most livable and exciting public areas. If only we could design all our streets and plazas with such good common sense!

I'd give it five stars as an urban planning book, but only four stars in comparison to Whyte's landmark *The Organization Man*, a truly great, but nearly forgotten book of the fifties. The analysis of corporations moving from Manhattan to the suburbs, wherein Whyte plots distance from the CEOs home to the new headquarters is priceless.

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