

# Urbanist William H. Whyte and the Observational Study of Public Spaces in New York City

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## Abstract

I visited the Rockefeller Archive Center to research the William H. Whyte papers for my doctoral dissertation, “Transactional Terrains: Partnerships, Bargains and the Postwar Redefinition of the Public Realm, New York City 1965-1980,” that traces the architectural and urban history of the privatization of the public realm. At the center of the research is New York City during the “urban crisis” years of the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> The period saw an ongoing shift in how city and state governments initiated, financed, and managed architecture and urban development. As an administrative apparatus of crisis management, the public-private partnership was the fiscal and legal device that was at the center of this shift. With the public-private partnership, there was an increased emphasis on transactions between jurisdictional authorities and private sector actors. The 1960s witnessed the beginnings of organized cultivation of private sector participation by city and state governments, in the funding, management, and provision of public goods (parks, plazas, and housing). By examining the ecology and economy of these public-private partnerships, the dissertation seeks to examine the privatization of the public realm in New York City as a series of complex intersections between the city’s economic, political, urban, architectural and real-estate histories beginning in the 1960s. Urbanist William H. Whyte’s writings, research, and speeches on the design and value of public spaces in New York City have shaped policy and theory in architecture, urban design, and planning since the early 1960s. He was a prominent figure, specifically for my first chapter.

## Project Background

My dissertation “Transactional Terrains: Partnerships, Bargains and the Postwar Redefinition of the Public Realm, New York City 1965-1980” traces the architectural and urban history of the privatization of the public realm in postwar New York City. My research first sought to complicate the ways by which architecture as a disciplinary construct, is implicated in privatization’s processes. To this end, the dissertation’s chapters each examined the ecology and economy of public-private partnerships to unravel the terms of the transactions that determined the design, viability, and function

of architecture and urban development projects in New York City. The nature of these transactions dictated that developers, financiers and other members of the private sector offer investments in the form of funds, expertise and human resources in the provision and management of public services and public goods to the government. In return, the government offered incentives such as tax cuts, floor area bonuses, zoning variances, and board memberships.

My research centers around a few fundamental questions: what does the privatization of the public realm mean in legal, aesthetic and economic terms? How have questions of aesthetics, real estate speculation, bureaucratic management and expert culture operated through the terms of these transactions? How were the particulars of ownership, use, and design in a public park or public plaza, for example, altered by these partnerships? Most importantly, how has this restructuring of the public realm redefined the many imaginaries of the postwar city? By imaginaries, I mean the social imaginaries that emerge from the experiential, historical, physical and geographic aspects of the city, which are sites for conflicting cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic ideologies and discourses.<sup>2</sup>

Architectural and urban historians are inclined to accept privatization as an economic and political force that is external, and often folded into the “neoliberal.” The privatization of the city or the public realm is often examined as an end result: New York’s Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS) or Zuccotti Park after the Occupy Wall Street protests, for example. My dissertation’s disciplinary motive is to extract the privatization discourse from its multidisciplinary theoretical moorings in economics, sociology, political economy, public policy and urban theory, and study the history of the privatization of the public realm as a series of complex and multifarious intersections between the city’s economic, political, urban, and architectural histories beginning in the 1960s.

The dominant narrative on privatization in cities ties it to the mid-1970s and early 1980s with the international stock market crash and oil embargo, which spelled an end to western Keynesian welfare state politics and the rise of a Frederick Hayek-inspired neo-liberal moment, with an argument for deregulation, retrenchment of government, tax cuts and urban competition. The writings of geographer David Harvey, sociologists Harvey Molotch and Sharon Zukin, urban theorist Neil Brenner and so many others

have epitomized this moment.<sup>3</sup> My research backdates the history of privatization in the American city to the 1960s. By doing this, the study reveals how the processes of privatization saw their early beginnings in this period of expansion of governmental regulatory powers, at a moment when the city was experiencing intense upheavals. The dissertation asserts that privatization did not always result in the dismantling, retrenchment and shrinking of government. Instead, these were lateral displacements to informal techniques of government—what sociologist Thomas Lemke called a “prolongation of government,” where power relations between the state and civil society actors were simply restructured. Control was merely handed over from one set of bureaucrats to another set of experts.<sup>4</sup>

There are several common threads in the dissertation’s chapters that define the context of New York City in the period. The first of these threads is the notion of crisis. My research, however, does not focus on theorizing crisis as a category as there is plenty of literature already available on the subject. What the research engages with are the crisis narratives that emanated from New York City in the period, which spoke about the city through nostalgia, fear, pragmatism, cynicism, and hope and that was internalized into the political, journalistic, literary and policy-driven vocabulary. A second thread that determined the political and economic context of New York was the rise of managerialism in urban governance in the 1960s. Managerialism included the organizational restructuring of governmental bureaucracies, seeking expertise and incentive structures, and operating with ideological confidence that the performance of all organizations, including city government, can be optimized by the application of project management skills and theory.<sup>5</sup> A third thread that connects the various aspects of the dissertation is how both public and private sector actors reduced New York City’s problems to its aesthetic register. This was as an essential strategy that allowed the intentions of redevelopment to be introduced as valid responses to the city’s needs. It was also a crucial aspect of place marketing that valorized certain parts of the city as aesthetically pleasing, culturally significant, unique, safe and ready for investments, even as exclusionary mechanisms were incorporated in their very processes that promoted a particular type of use and user.

In essence, the dissertation unpacks the story of the quintessential postwar American city that came out of the 1950s into the tumultuous 1960s as a declining manufacturing base. By the end of the 1970s, New York had to compete for investments and resources

with other urban centers, both nationally and internationally. To attract and keep place-based industries such as real estate and tourism, New York adopted the image of a clean and safe city that was suitable for middle-class families and corporations. Best echoed in the “I Heart New York” campaign of 1977 which is part of my fourth and final chapter, that cemented a new narrative for the city as a consumable and timeless given that was on the mend for economic development.

The dissertation’s chapters are not chronological. Chapters One to Three center on a public-private partnership and the consequent restructuring of a public good, arranged around the broad rubrics of zoning, open space and housing. Chapter Four investigates the broader transformation of New York City in this period, from the 1960s to the 1980s, through the notion of the image. The chapters reveal how privatization is not a vertical directional shift, but rather a series of processes that work with inherited systems and institutions.

## **The Archives**

I visited the William H. Whyte papers specifically for research towards the dissertation’s first chapter. That being said, any dissertation that engages with the public realm in the United States—especially in New York City—cannot avoid the works of urbanist and journalist William H. Whyte. While his first book, *The Organization Man*, from 1956 is a classic that revealed the management ethos of the collectivism that was fostered by corporations on individuals in the United States, his subsequent work centered on the study of urban public spaces.<sup>6</sup>

Materials that touched on Whyte’s work with the New York City Planning Commission through the 1960s were of particular interest for Chapter One, which examines the New York City zoning amendments of 1967. With the 1967 amendments, the Planning Commission introduced discretionary zoning laws in the city. Discretionary zoning laws were markedly different from the existing rule-based zoning laws, as they were enforced on a case-by-case basis through negotiations with individual developers and owners. The Planning Commission offered tax benefits and floor area bonuses to developers in return for developer investment in public benefits such as plazas and landmark

preservation. Discretionary zoning laws gave rise to privately-owned public plazas and Special Zoning Districts in New York City. The chapter argues that with discretionary zoning laws, the city government set processes of privatization in motion, that worked through bureaucracies and regulatory systems in coordination with developers and financiers.

When Whyte saw the proliferation of privately-owned public plazas in New York City, he started to collect data on the ways people used these spaces—what he later called the "social life of public spaces."<sup>7</sup> He interviewed, filmed, photographed, sketched and mapped people's movements in public spaces in relation to sunlight, benches, landscape features, crowds, and materials. As his research took form, Whyte received funds to continue the project as *The Street Life Project* in conjunction with the Municipal Art Society of New York. The research eventually culminated in the hugely influential, *The Social Life of Urban Spaces* of 1979. My dissertation was keen to uncover how Whyte's studies influenced open spaces zoning legislation. His speeches, writings, and correspondence from the 1960s and 70s that are present among the papers were extremely helpful towards this end.

Whyte's *Bryant Park Study* revealed his research methodology very clearly.<sup>8</sup> He talked of how people mingle in certain parts of the lawn and how certain sunless corners are never used. Every detail counted: the size and positioning of balustrades, steps, tiling, materials, and soft and hard surfaces. In correspondence dated January 3, 1974, between Whyte and John E. Zuccotti, the Chairman of the Planning Commission, Whyte drew up a list of the best public places in New York City and their outstanding features. The list was an effort to show how good plaza design was achievable, and how well-designed public spaces were an asset to everyone: citizens, developers, and the city government.<sup>9</sup> As Whyte explained, "the problem with public space is not technical, but philosophical. Places that work well for people are a great asset, not only for the city, but also the developers, real estate people, and corporations. If this can be gotten across to them then their standard objections—dangers of drunks, bums, vandalism, etc.—will fall by the wayside. A lively well used place is more practical than one that isn't—and in dollars and cents too—seems a novel thought. Whenever we present them with a design critique by pointing out missed opportunities, the characteristic response is—it never occurred to us. To make it occur to them is a good thing to do, and anyway we can help you in this we will."<sup>10</sup>

Whyte's speeches were particularly revealing of his position on research, design and the need for public spaces in a city such as New York. In his speech, "The Center is the Center," he discussed the popular perception among Americans in the mid-1970s: New York City was functionally dead.<sup>11</sup> Whyte then proceeded to deftly argue that the charge was false. According to Whyte, while the federal government's anti-urban policies had hurt the city badly, the center of New York was still alive. New York's shift from a blue-collar to a white-collar economy was detrimental to the city's urban poor in Whyte's opinion. However, he also thought that the shift would be a "positive development" in the long run. Whyte reasoned that white flight would eventually make suburbia expensive. The suburbs would lose the advantages that made migration attractive in the first place. Whyte's forecast for New York's future in the mid-1970s was pretty spot on. The city not only survived, but thrived by the 1990s. His predictions about the plight of New York's urban poor due to the city's shift from a blue collar to a white-collar economy was unfortunately correct, as well.

New York's deterioration in the mid-1970s was a call for action for Whyte. His faith in the benefits of research such as *The Street Life Project* for New York is apparent in his correspondence with Harold Snedkoff of the Rockefeller Family Fund on December 29, 1972. In this letter, Whyte clarified the immediate applications that were possible from his research. New York was "still an amenity," and his plaza design recommendations that included looking at activities as magnets to attract people, organizing daytime and nighttime use of plazas, and conducting comparative studies between public spaces, were enforceable in the city. In Whyte's opinion, observation and social factors were as crucial to the success of urban space as design and materials. In his speech "The Open City, Potential in Urban Space" given at a symposium on land, Whyte talks at length about how observing people and their use of public spaces was the most important tool for better public space design.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of the 1970s, Whyte critiqued the Planning Commission's practice of offering what he thought were too many floor area bonuses to developers as part of zoning negotiations. Whyte's article "How to Make Midtown Livable" from *New York Magazine* in 1981 talked of the "canyon-like" and "physically menacing" effects of the density increase in Manhattan by 1981, where floor area ratio bonuses of the late 1960s and 70s, led to the loss of "the most important amenity available to the public: light and air."<sup>13</sup> In the same article, Whyte also recounts the peculiar "fright plan" that developers

used to work around the discretionary zoning system, where they would deliberately present the worst design for the plot and then negotiate improvements in return for better incentives.

## Conclusion

William H. Whyte remains an important figure for any research that attempts to trace the history of public space in New York City in the mid-twentieth century. Whyte's research shaped public spaces in New York City and other cities in the United States and around the world. His use of the camera as a research tool made film and photography critical aspects of research for planners, urban designers, and architects. Whyte's later books, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1981) and *City: Rediscovering the Center* (1988) were hugely successful in bringing attention back to the joys of the city, urbanity, and urban life.

I would like to conclude with Whyte's words on the merits of observation in the design of urban space that appeared in his letter to Snedkoff. Whyte argued that observation was not merely a dry tool that led to new formulae on how many square feet make good usable space. Instead, for Whyte, observation helped in finding the "recreational aspects of non- recreational spaces."<sup>14</sup> Whyte was alluding in this statement to a simple fact: people tend to get the greatest amount of recreation in spaces not designated for it. By highlighting this observation, Whyte reinforced an important notion that changed the way planners and designers thought about the design of public space: urban space needs to be judged in its own terms, not in comparison to suburbia.

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<sup>1</sup> This dissertation relied on several sources to get a grasp on the urban crisis, Wendall Pritchett, "Which Urban Crisis? Regionalism, Race, and Urban Policy, 1960–1974," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 34 No. 2, January 2008 266–286; Alice O'Connor, "The Privatized City The Manhattan Institute, the Urban Crisis, and the Conservative Counterrevolution in New York," *Journal of Urban History* 34, no. 2 (2008): 333–53; David R Jones, "Urban Crisis and the Federal Government's Retreat: Catalyzing Public Policy Choices to Save Our Cities," *Fordham Urb. LJ* 19 (1991): 665.

<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis and Durkheim's notion of social imaginaries have informed this understanding. The two texts that have informed my understanding of imaginaries: Cornelius Castoriadis and David Ames Curtis. *Cornelius Castoriadis, Political and Social Writings*.



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Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988; and John F. Rundell, *Imaginariness of Modernity: Politics, Cultures, Tensions*, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Brenner and Theodore Nikolas, "Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe," (Blackwell, 2002); Harvey Lusk Molotch, Portland State University, and Institute for Policy Studies, *The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place: A Summary of a Paper and Presentation*, Portland, Or: Institute for Policy Studies, Portland State University, 1980; David Harvey, *From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism*, 1989; Sharon Zukin. *The Cultures of Cities*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011), 11

<sup>5</sup> Managerialism was an organizational solution that migrated out of corporate environments into governments, with the formation of a managerial elite. It worked through a notional depoliticization of decision-making by a system of managers. Political theorist James Burnham and sociologist C. Wright Mills each critiqued the managerial elite that pervaded political and economic systems, public and private sectors in the United States in the years after the New Deal. C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics, and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills* (publisher information: 1963). James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution; What Is Happening in the World*, (New York: John Day Co., 1941).

<sup>6</sup> William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Organization Man*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> William Hollingsworth Whyte, and Project for Public Spaces. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, New York: Project for Public Spaces, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> The Bryant Park Study, April 23, 1930, Folder 22, Box 1, Series 1, FA272, William H. Whyte Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>9</sup> Correspondence between William H. Whyte and John E. Zuccotti, January 3, 1974, Folder 22, Box 1, Series 1, FA272, William H. Whyte Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "The Center is the Center is the Center," April 22, 1976, Folder 2, Box 1, FA272, William H. Whyte Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>12</sup> "The Open City, Potential in Urban Space," May 16, 1977, Folder 488, Box 28, FA272, William H. Whyte Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>13</sup> William Hollingsworth Whyte, "How to Make New York Livable," *New York Magazine*, March 9, 1981.

<sup>14</sup> The Street Life Project, Letter from William Whyte to Harold Snedkoff, Rockefeller Family Fund, December 29, 1972, Folder 399, Box 22, FA272, William H. Whyte Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.