EXPLORING A NEW URBANISM

Two Decades of Urban/City Research at the Ax:son Johnson Foundation

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Essays by
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Interviews with
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Jan Gehl, Jane Jacobs, Fred Kent, Leon Krier*

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*"Ten Years of Urban/City Research, The Art of Placemaking and New Urbanism",
21st of March 2013, Engelsberg Manor. Photo Courtesy of Elahe Karimnia*

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Introduction

The origin of this volume dates back to the 21st of March 2013, when Sweden's Ax:son Johnson Foundation held a ten-year retrospective seminar, The Art of Placemaking and the Future of New Urbanism, at its historic Engelsberg Ironworks conference center near Stockholm. A number of chapters were contributed by participants in that seminar, along with chapters by other associates who have also made significant contributions to the Foundation's research, or to the related topics of new urbanism and placemaking.

The origin of that seminar in turn dates back to 2003, when the Foundation's program in Urban/City Research (UCR) was launched by its director Peter Elmlund, with the aim to explore urgent issues of human habitat by bringing together and facilitating leaders in research, scholarship, debate, practice and policy. The seminar occurred during a period of growing debate within the planning and design professions, amid raging controversies about new developments, highway construction, declining urban areas, sustainability, equity, and related challenges. Peter's goal was to re-focus research, scholarship and policy toward the positive characteristics that make a place livable, walkable, vibrant and enjoyable for all people — what Jan Gehl referred to as the "life between buildings." Peter had become especially interested in the movement known as "new urbanism" and its allied movement, "placemaking". He was particularly intrigued, he said, by the call from new urbanism for a necessary re-ordering of the built environment into the form of complete towns with well-connected public spaces, and the related shift with placemaking, "from objects to places."

The UCR Program had begun with a 2003 seminar aimed at introducing the ideas of new urbanism to a Swedish audience. The conference was itself very well received, exceeding expectations, and the topic began to attract increasing attention in Sweden. However, the enthusiasm soon gave way to vehement criticism coming from prominent actors in Swedish architecture and town planning. The reaction was however partially based on a misunderstanding of new urbanism as a set of ideas, not merely a set of (unevenly delivered) projects. At the time, very few in Sweden (or indeed America) were

aware of the extremely well-written "Charter of the New Urbanism", a document that later inspired charters and recommendations for planning all over the world (including the recent United Nations document, the New Urban Agenda). Very few knew of the nuanced discussion and vigorous debate that was going on between leading participants within the movement.

To celebrate this first activity, and to update a Swedish audience about developments within the new urbanism, Peter organised the retrospective seminar ten years later and brought together a number of leading proponents. Talks and panel sessions were conducted by a number of renowned urban design theorists and practitioners, including Victor Dover, Stefanos Polyzoides, Elizabeth Moule, Emily Talen, Charles Bohl and Ethan Kent. The moderator was Tigran Haas from KTH in Stockholm, one of this volume's editors.

The 2013 seminar was one of many international seminars and conferences on advanced topics hosted by the Foundation's Urban/City Research program under Peter's direction. The UCR has also financially supported research and education in several universities, including KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, the School of Architecture in Lund, JADS University in Den Bosch, and the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. Also notable is its longstanding collaboration with UN-Habitat and other partners in the Future of Places project, which included three international conferences about urbanization and public space as well as other side events. The partnership strongly influenced later international documents on the crucial role of public space, most notably The New Urban Agenda (the outcome document of Habitat III) and the Sustainable Development Goals, notably Goal 11 and Target 11.7.

Following the success of this collaboration, UCR launched the "Centre for the Future of Places," a new research centre at KTH with a focus on implementation of the New Urban Agenda and its principles of placemaking and new urbanism (whether so labeled or not).

This book carries on that work, and celebrates almost two decades of Urban/City Research under the leadership of Peter Elmlund and the patronage of Viveca Ax:son Johnson and Kurt Almqvist. The book brings together not only those present in March of 2013 but also all those that could not have been present then but were

part of Peter Elmlund's conferences, seminars, symposia, expert meetings and various writing projects in the last two decades. Here are contributions from some of the most influential urban thinkers of our time, including Christopher Alexander, Peter Calthorpe, Andres Duany, Jan Gehl, Jane Jacobs, and Leon Krier, among many others.

The book is organized into four sections: 1) Founders (the original organizers of the Congress for the New Urbanism, and co-authors of its charter); 2) Theories (debates about the need for a "new urbanism" and the merits and failings of what has resulted); 3) Thought Leaders (major influencers on new urbanism and placemaking) and 4) Frontiers (new directions at the UCR and the Centre, and in the field).

Tigran Haas and Michael W. Mehaffy

Contributor Biographies

Dr. Charles C. Bohl is a professor and the founding director of the Masters in Real Estate Development + Urbanism program (mredu. arc.miami.edu), New Urbanism Online (CNU-Accreditation), and the Knight Program in Community Building at the University of Miami's School of Architecture. Dr. Bohl's research has been supported by over $4 million from major foundations, and he has written extensively on placemaking, mixed-use development and community planning, including *Place Making,* from the Urban Land Institute.

Dr. David Brain is Professor of Sociology and Environmental Studies at the New College of Florida, and Research Associate at the Centre for the Future of Places, KTH, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. He has been an acknowledged scholar and theorist within the New Urbanism movement for many years.

Peter Calthorpe is one of the founders of the Congress for the New Urbanism, and one of the most prominent planners in the world today. Among many accolades, he has served on the USA President's Council for Sustainable Development and the UN High Commission on the New Urban Agenda. His concept of Transit Oriented Development is now the foundation of many regional policies and city plans around the world. He co-developed the UrbanFootprint software system that is now being used widely to measure the social, environmental and economic impacts of alternative development patterns.

Birgit Cold is a Danish-born Norwegian architect and educator, and a professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Her main areas of interest include the school environment and concern for well-being and health. She became a member of the university's research team which developed the Skiboli prototype, an experimental attempt at producing energy-saving low-cost housing with high flexibility. A modified version on the university campus is still in use today. She is the author of *Aesthetics, Well-being and Health: Essays within architecture and environmental aesthetics* (excerpted herein).

Victor Dover established Dover, Kohl & Associates, focusing on restoration of real neighborhoods as the basis of sound cities. A charter

member of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), founding chair of CNU's Florida Chapter, Dover was also instrumental in establishing the Form-Based Codes Institute and the National Charrette Institute, both leading think tanks. He was awarded the John Nolen Medal for Urbanism in 2010 and served as CNU's national chair for 2010-2012.

Andrés Duany, FAIA, is an American architect, urban planner, and co-founder of the Congress for the New Urbanism, together with his wife Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and four other architects. He is a fellow of the American Institute of Architects, an adjunct professor at the University of Miami, and a guest lecturer at hundreds of institutions. He and his firm DPZ CoDesign have completed over 300 master plans for seminal new urbanist projects, including Seaside, Florida. He has authored or co-authored seven books including *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream.*

Peter Elmlund is the director of Urban/City Research (UCR) at the Ax:son Johnson Foundation in Stockholm, Sweden. In that capacity he has directed numerous research projects on public space, urbanization, and city life. He is the co-founder of the Council for European Urbanism (CEU). He is also a Guest Researcher in Residence at the School of Architecture and the Built Environment at KTH — Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. He was responsible for establishing the Future of Places conference series in the lead up to Habitat III (2016), with a special emphasis on public space and placemaking.

Jan Gehl, Hon. FAIA is a Danish architect and urban design consultant based in Copenhagen whose career has focused on improving the quality of urban life by re-orienting city design towards the pedestrian and cyclist. He became a professor of urban planning at KADK, and a Visiting Professor in a number of international universities. He co-founded Gehl Architects in 2000 with Helle Søholt, held a Partner position until 2011, and remains a Senior Advisor. He participates in and advises many urban design and public projects around the world. He is the author of a number of books including *Life Between Buildings* and *Public Spaces, Public Life.*

Dr. Tigran Haas is the Associate Professor of Urban Planning + Design and Sustainable Urbanism at the School of Architecture and the Built Environment at KTH — Royal Institute of Technology. He

is the Director of Civitas Athenaeum Laboratory (CAL), an applied social science research platform. He is also a Guest Research Scholar at MIT, Centre for Advanced Urbanism. Among his noted works are *New Urbanism & Beyond* — Designing Cities for the Future, Rizzoli, New York (2008) and *Sustainable Urbanism & Beyond — Rethinking Cities for the Future*, New York (2012) Rizzoli (editor).

Jane Jacobs was an American-Canadian journalist, author, and activist who profoundly influenced urban studies, sociology, and economics. Her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) mounted an incisive attack on then-conventional concepts of planning and urban regeneration, and had a profound effect upon new urbanists. She studied at Columbia University, and later became a journalist for *Fortune* and *Architectural Record*, where she developed seminal ideas on urbanism, economics and governance. Her later books include *The Nature of Economies* and *The Economy of Cities.*

Doug Kelbaugh, FAIA FCNU, is an educator and practitioner, Professor, and Dean Emeritus at the University of Michigan, USA. He has authored and/or edited six books and many book chapters on livable, lovable and resilient architecture and cities, including *The Pedestrian Pocket Book* and *The Urban Fix*. He is winner of the 2016 Topaz Medallion for Excellence in Architectural Education, the highest award in the field. He has been a seminal contributor to new urbanism and sustainable urbanism, including early work with Peter Calthorpe on the foundational ideas of the Charter of the New Urbanism.

Ethan Kent works to support placemaking organizations, projects, and leadership around the world, to grow the global placemaking movement and build systemic change towards place-led urbanization. In 2019 he co-founded PlacemakingX to network and accelerate placemaking for global impact. Ethan builds on more than two decades of experience working on public spaces and placemaking campaigns with Project for Public Spaces, traveling to more than 1000 cities and towns, and 60 countries. He has been integral to the development of placemaking as a transformative approach to economic development, environmentalism, transportation planning, governance, resilience, social equity, design, digital space, and innovation.

Fred Kent is the founder of the Project for Public Spaces, a seminal organization dedicated to creating public places that foster communities. Most recently he is co-founder of PlacemakingX, dedicated to advancing placemaking practice internationally. He studied with Margaret Mead and worked with William H. Whyte on the "Street Life Project," assisting in observations and film analysis of corporate plazas, urban streets, parks, and other open spaces in New York City. The research resulted in the now classic *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, which laid out conclusions based on decades of meticulous observation and documentation of human behavior in the urban environment.

Leon Krier is a Luxembourgish architect, architectural theorist and urban planner, a prominent critic of architectural modernism, and advocate of new traditional architecture and new urbanism. Krier combines an international architecture and planning practice with writing and teaching. He is well-known for his master plan for Poundbury, in Dorset, England, and for his role in influencing Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk in creating Seaside, Florida. He is the author or co-author of many books including *Architecture: Choice or Fate, and The Architecture of Community.*

Dr. Suzanne Crowhurst Lennard was a researcher, consultant, and co-founder and Director of the International Making Cities Livable (IMCL) Conferences with her late husband Henry, a medical sociologist. After receiving her Ph.D. in architecture from the University of California, Berkeley, she held academic posts at UC Berkeley and at Brookes University, Oxford, England. She was also Visiting Professor at Harvard University, Washington University St. Louis, and City University New York. She was the author or co-author of many books including *Public Life in Urban Places, Livable Cities Observed, The Forgotten Child, and Genius of the European Square.*

Dr. Michael Mehaffy is a researcher, educator, urban designer, planner, and consultant with an international practice, and currently Senior Researcher with Ax:son Johnson Foundation and the Centre for the Future of Places at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. He has held appointments in architecture, planning and philosophy at seven graduate institutions in six countries, and he has played major roles in a number of new urbanism developments. He is the author or co-author of over thirty scientific papers and over

twenty books, most recently *A New Pattern Language for Growing Regions: Places, Networks, Processes.*

Elizabeth Moule is a co-founder of the Congress for the New Urbanism. She is a co-author of The Ahwanhee Principles, the 1991 state of California community-planning guidelines, the basis for the CNU Charter. She is also a co-author of the Canons for Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism. She is CEO of Meridian Properties and a partner of Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists. The work of Moule & Polyzoides has been published worldwide, showcased in museum exhibitions, and received numerous awards for excellence. She has taught at many universities in the US and abroad, most recently at Yale University as the RAMS Chair.

Stefanos Polyzoides' prominent career covers the areas of architectural and urban design education, design and execution, and theory. He was the Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Southern California and has been Visiting Professor at several prestigious schools of architecture. Polyzoides is a popular speaker on the subjects of new urbanism, transit-oriented development, mixed use development, housing and sustainability, and is a frequent guest at academic symposia. He is also a principal and co-founder of Moule & Polyzoides.

Daniel Solomon, FAIA, is Professor Emeritus of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, and an architect and urban designer whose 42-year career combines achievements in professional practice with academic pursuits of teaching and writing. His projects have been published in architectural journals worldwide and have been recognized with more than ninety awards. He is a co-founder of the Congress for the New Urbanism, and author of many articles and four books: *ReBuilding, Global City Blues, Cosmopolis,* and *Love and Hope.*

Galina Tachieva, FCNU, AICP, LEED is the managing partner at DPZ CoDesign, directing the work of the firm in the US and around the world. With more than 25 years of expertise in sustainable planning, urban redevelopment and form-based codes, she has led or participated in projects across the United States, Latin America, and Europe, including downtowns and urban revitalizations, regional plans, environmental conservation, new communities, and resort towns. She is the author of *The Sprawl Repair Manual,* focusing on

the retrofit of auto-centric suburban places into complete walkable communities.

Dr. Emily Talen is a Professor of Urbanism at the University of Chicago, Division of Social Science. Prior to that, she was a faculty in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana as well as a Professor in the School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning at School of Sustainability at Arizona State University. She has written extensively on the topics of urbanism, urban design, and social equity, publishing over 50 peer-reviewed journal articles on these topics, and has authored over 8 books.

An oral history: Two decades of Urban/City Research

Interview with Peter Elmlund, by Michael W. Mehaffy

In June of 2020 I sat down with Peter Elmlund, the Director of the Urban City Research Programme at the Ax:son Johnson Foundation in Stockholm, to interview him about the history of his work up to the present day, and thoughts about where the work might be headed next.

Michael Mehaffy: *Let's start with your background and your education, what got you interested in urbanism, and what brought you to the Foundation.*

Peter Elmlund: First of all, I grew up in a small city, in a traditional block with an enclosed courtyard. It was very nice, about 15 kids playing together. And we were living at the edge of the city — the last block before the forest. And suddenly they started to develop, they tore down all the forest and started to build new modernist tower-in-the-park things. I thought it would be terrible, and it was. Where do you think we got beaten up?

You know all those new structures, they were not good, because they didn't define the space. With open systems, you never know who belongs to what. I realized when I was a teenager that that was not a good environment. Not like we had it with our closed block. Because that was safe and we were, a group that belonged to that place.

MM: *So you knew intuitively what was good urbanism...*

PE: When I came to the university when I was 20, I claimed that we had forgotten to talk about the human environment in politics — everything is about money. You know, money, taxes, transfers, welfare state — no one talked about the human environment that we live in. That was something I argued about when I was 20.

MM: *Well, we have that in common, because I had this experience when I was in art school and I was looking at the development around me, and I realized that this is really a more urgent issue. As important as music is to*

me, it was way more important, it seemed like, to tackle the problems with the built environment. So you had that experience too, then?

PE: Yeah, and I'm extremely sensitive to surroundings and spaces.

MM: *Why didn't you go into urban studies? What brought you into economics and linguistics?*

PE: I had ever heard about such things. I started to study economics. But my secret plan was to be a writer! So I had one leg in business and one leg in some kind of, artistic or intellectual world. And I have always gone back and forth. I actually studied linguistics, after my bachelor in economics. Chomsky transformational grammar, and a lot of other stuff that belongs to that topic.

But my first job was in the computer business — we were importing Pet Commodore.

MM: *So this was in the very early days of the personal computer industry?*

PE: Yes 1982, my first job was at the fastest growing company in Sweden at that time. We were selling Pet Commodore and also we produced our own software for that computer. I became the manager of advertising communication and later on, I became the CEO of a daughter company in the same concern. I quit after 14 days! Because I decided that I really wanted to be a writer, it didn't fit my identity at that time to be a CEO. That was probably the most stupid decision I ever have done!

MM: *But it led to everything else that has happened!*

PE: Anyhow, I started to write in computer magazines as a freelancer, because I did know something about microcomputers, as we said then. After a while one of the publishers contacted me and asked if I wanted to work there, instead of just selling my articles — so I became the chief editor of the largest microcomputer magazine, for three years. But that was so much technical stuff, I wanted to be a writer, so I also quit that job! And once again I became a freelancer, started a small business company in PR. And later on I actually sold everything I had, my apartment, and moved to New York in 1988 to finally write my novel. So I just took my money and went there.

Before I left, I had a meeting with some financial guys who wanted help to start a financial daily. I did a layout dummy for them, but I

said thanks but no thanks. I went to America and spent about four months there. However after three months or so, I got a fax from these guys, they wanted to have a meeting. We meet up at a restaurant called Aquavit in Manhattan, an expensive Swedish one. And after some schnapps, they offered me a high consultancy contract, and they lured me back to Sweden to start up that financial daily!

And I did that together with a very young clever guy, he was only 22 or 23 and he became the chief editor, and I was sort of responsible for building up the organization and the technical solutions. We became the first newspaper produced with desktop publishing. My plan was to go back to America and just cash in my consultancy fee. But during the process, we decided to have a page for arts and literature. And that was close to my heart, so I said if you want to employ me for real, OK — give me that job then. So I became the editor for the arts and literature section for 7 years. Around that time, we started to engage in a planned highway ring around Stockholm, and I opposed that heavily. So I became an activist in a way.

MM: *That was about that same time that was happening in Portland and other cities, that were opposing all the old freeway plans of Robert Moses and others — Jane Jacobs was their champion...*

PE: And around that time I had read Alvin Toffler *The Third Wave,* and other books about the third industrial revolution and I realized that classical Marxism didn't work anymore — the economic machinery was not about large-scale production anymore, it was about custom-made products, the opposite.

MM: *The labor theory of value doesn't really work when you have these new knowledge synergies... personal computing and so on...*

PE: No, it didn't work, and suddenly small firms started to grow, and all that. Around that time I stumbled on Lewis Mumford! He spoke about technological evolution from the beginning, so I really liked his writings. And I also found his book about cities. And slowly I realized that the reason why cities had become so ugly was not a natural result of economic development, which I had believed. It was the result of an ideology within the profession. And then I woke up because you can always fight an ideology!

MM: *It isn't just a natural phenomenon, it's a choice that someone has made based on an ideological valuation.*

PE: Exactly. And that was extreme.

MM: *Did you pick up Jane Jacobs at that point, who had been the protégé of Mumford's?*

PE: No, but I actually found through Gopher in the '90s some writings about New Urbanism. Before, the World Wide Web, we had Gopher. There I found an article with the title "Is New Urbanism a new kind of socialism?" It was a critique of New Urbanism and planning. But the word, the phrase was so catchy, New Urbanism, I couldn't resist. So, I started to follow that movement.

After seven years at the financial daily, I quit and decided to be a businessman, give up writing and all that, which led to the e-commerce company, Bluemarx, that I started and then took to the stock market.

The inspiration came from Kevin Kelly, and Nicholas Negroponte.

Their books gave me the idea of "co-shopping." So I started that firm, and it went well in the beginning. So, I was very rich in the year 2000! But then came the IT- crash the year after.

MM: *But how did you end up with the Ax:son Jonson Foundation*

PE: I knew them a little bit and they aware of my writings about cities. So when I quit Bluemarx (a little bit before the end) they asked me if I could do a conference about the future of cities, while I was thinking about my future.

I told them, after some thinking, that I would like to introduce New Urbanism to Sweden. I explained the concept to them with some help of a video by Jan Gehl called "Life between buildings." I planned for a small meeting for about 15-20 people, but from word to mouth it was suddenly 75 people! I invited Ellen Dunham Jones, Jeff Speck, and a guy from the UK, David Rudlin. I only had three speakers, so I gave them two lectures each. To be able to fill the day, I had a coffee break between every lecture. That was my first conference of many, but the best. I have never dared to repeat that coffee break formula, but that is the trick. Conferences are always too jam-packed.

MM: *Very in-depth!*

PE: Yeah. And it was a huge success, it was a "happening," almost. The participants really loved the message and the arrangement. So one thing led to another, and suddenly it was a three-year project.

And then I met you, I think in Bruges, or at the Prince's Foundation, or whatever.

MM: *I think we met in 2003, when I was Director of Education for the Prince of Wales' Foundation for the built environment in London. We organized an exhibition and conference on new traditional architecture and urbanism. And you were invited...*

PE: Yeah, exactly.

MM: *Weren't you involved in starting the Council for European Urbanism around that time?*

PE: Yes, I was the funder of the constitutive meeting in my position at Ax:son Johnson Foundation! But anyhow during that first year or something, a person called, "one of our speakers is canceling, can't you come and say something?" And I had never imagined that I could lecture about this topic. But I put something together, and I basically introduced New Urbanism, and it was really well received. So after that, my lecturing career started.

MM: *Well, you discovered that the architects are actually just making it up as they go along, so you can easily compete!*

PE: I realized, after a while, because I had plenty of time at the foundation to study, that I know much more about urbanism than 99 percent of the architects!

MM: *Unfortunately that is not surprising!*

PE: And over the next decade or so, I gave about 400 lectures, sometimes in smaller seminars, and sometimes bigger occasions — but I was really in demand.

MM: *So how did you get involved in the research side, and working with Tigran and other scholars who are doing the research?*

PE: After doing 25 seminars, 4 international conferences, etcetera, and all that lecturing for let's say 5-6 years, I realized that I cannot win this debate against the modernist structures. At that time I was a

very controversial figure within the profession, lecturing and writing opinion articles was not enough. I realized that I have to do something with the academic and political structures, not at least the education of architects. That is how it started.

I started to talk with Tigran Haas about financing a Master's. But KTH said no to money from us, because at that time they didn't like me and what I was representing.

So they said no to the money, and I was lamenting that to a guy from Lund's school of architecture, Peter Sjöström, and he suggested a Master's at Lunds School of Architecture. We developed a Master's in sustainable urban design in 2007, a two-year Master's, with the help of Ellen Dunham Jones by the way. She was the first guest professor - and later on Harrison Fraker.

And they are still doing this Master's and we are financing this still — this year is the last year. So that was my entry to the academic world in this topic.

MM: *So how did you get involved with Tigran at KTH?*

PE: He attended my first conference and he continued to come to my conferences and seminars.

MM: *Well I remember the conference in 2004, I believe it was, that Tigran held — was that one that you co-organized with him? The big New Urbanism conference that resulted in the book "New Urbanism and Beyond".*

PE: Yes, I gave him 100,000 kroner as funding.

MM: *Aha, because that was an amazing gathering of people, Jan Gehl was there, basically all the founders of New Urbanism. And the mother of all panels! With 12 panelists I think, I was on it too!*

PE: Yeah, I remember that still, and this strange sociologist that was so critical.

MM: *One critic, yeah, I guess we had to have at least one dissenting perspective...*

PE: Anyhow, the next big step was actually the Future of Places.

MM: *Right, and that was 2013, right?*

PE: 2012 I think it started.

MM: *Right, you started it, and then the first conference was 2013 if I'm not mistaken.*

PE: Yes. I continued to lecture and do my own seminars, between 2007 and 2012, but at some point, I was a little bit curious about one thing. Why was there no collaboration between the IMCL [International Making Cities Livable], the New Urbanism people, and Project for Public Spaces? Because they all seem to be heading in the same direction.

And I asked Chuck Bohl, why is that, why don't you talk to each other? And he said, "well, I don't know, I..." I didn't really get any good answers. So I decided to go to New York and talk to Fred Kent, or at least go — I took a course. I didn't tell anyone there that I was from the Ax:son Johnson Foundation, or what I was doing, I just took a crash course in placemaking.

It was a small group of 20 people, and during the coffee break, I talked to Ethan Kent. And he realized that I actually knew something about urbanism. So he introduced me to his father Fred. We had a chat and he became enthusiastic and invited me to a private dinner in his home. During the dinner, he suggested that I should meet the director for the UN-Habitat in New York, Cecilia Martinez.

We had lunch the day after, at Union Square. So Cathy, Fred, Cecilia and me — were talking about how bad things were. I summarized the whole thing over two glasses of wine, and said, "we need to shift focus from objects to places! We should stop talking to these strange architects, let's talk directly to the mayors!" I offered them to do a conference on that topic — that's how it started.

MM: *At what point did The Future of Places start to focus on the New Urban Agenda and the language about public space?*

PE: From the beginning. I went to UN-Habitat headquarters in Africa, Nairobi, and they had a Swedish guy who was responsible for international relations, Thomas Melin. And he said, "I don't want to have one conference, I want to have three!" And I said, why? "Because we need to make sure that we have a public space perspective in the New Urban Agenda." That was his idea. I must say, without doubt, it was his idea, and I said, "OK fine, let's do it!"

MM: *And how did you come to see public space as a sort of — you were talking about shifting from objects to places but what I find marvelous about the work that we all have been doing is that public space is now a sort of a framework for looking at all the other aspects of cities and urban form.*

PE: Yes, but I was never into architecture, I never talk about architecture when I lecture. I didn't care about architecture, to be honest. I care for streets, parks, and measurements you know, the width of streets, the height of the buildings, the width of parks and enclosures and all that.

MM: *But that is a key point — you did have this key idea that buildings define the public space?*

PE: Yes exactly, that was from the beginning what I liked with the whole thing.

You know, outdoor rooms, when outside is almost like inside. In Venice the Piazza San Marco, Napoleon called it the largest living room in the world, or something like that, so he also understood that, by the way!

MM: *And this whole continuous network between the public spaces and private ones — the "place networks" as we've come to call them.*

PE: I didn't have the language for it in the beginning, but that was the driving force for me, the spaces between the buildings. And I saw Ray Gindroz's presentation at the Prince's Foundation, and how he changed bad modernist planning by defining spaces around multifamily buildings in an open landscape. He showed a project where they actually added fences at the bottom, so they subdivided the land into specific places for families.

MM: *Those "outdoor rooms," yes.*

PE: Yes and also, this is my land, this is your land, this is public space and this is private space et cetera. So that was for me extremely interesting.

MM: *You know, that was one of the things that also happened with the project that Christopher Alexander did in Mexicali, Mexico, where he had had a sort of open area that people were supposed to share. And actually,*

the owners came in and they created their own private yards. So there is a strong natural desire for people to claim territory, even though it's open to the other spaces, it's still clearly defined...

PE: Yes, and as I told you, I grew up in a closed yard. It had this small opening to the street but it was closed. We didn't have any strangers there. And that this was safe and nice, and when I saw the new type of arrangement, the new city, I didn't like it because it was so open and undefined. So that has been my thing all the time!

MM: *Yeah, that is very interesting. And yes, the idea that spaces are articulated, you know, there is a sense of who can go in and go out to each kind of space in this "place network," as we are talking about in our book that we have been working on.*

MM: *So there are a number of people that you have been working with who I think are doing very interesting work along these lines. One of them is of course our friend Sergio Porta, who also talks about scale. And the importance of the relationships of scales, and how there have been some pretty drastic "alterations in scale" in urban morphology, to be put right. Where do you see his work going, what do you think of the frontier as you see it?*

PE: The thing they have developed now, the "momepy" system for measuring urban morphology on a large scale and at a high level of detail, in a cost-efficient way. Suddenly we can do evidence-based research, because there are so many things that have an impact on a place. You have the physical structure, but you have the regional economy, the culture, you have so many parameters that influence a place, so we cannot sort out, what is the meaning of the morphological situation. But suddenly when we can do this on a large scale, we can compare exactly the same morphological components, same type of neighborhoods in different cities and different countries.

MM: *You can really see the commonality and the differences.*

PE: The common denominator. So this is extremely exciting, and I think this will be extremely influential in the long run.

MM: *The other dimension of that is the need to have measurements for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 11 about cities. If you can't measure*

it, how do you know what direction to go? And that's another thing, we have the partnership now with UN- Habitat to follow up on that implementation, it seems like Sergio's tools are very important for that, to be able to measure.

PE: Yeah. But we are measuring today, proxies, x percent green space and x percent dwellings or whatever. What I like to measure is the design, the width of streets, the building heights, the sizes of the rooms, all those measurements that have social impact.

MM: *And the characteristics of public space, right.*

PE: Yes, we are measuring the wrong things. So in Swedish I talk about social measures, I don't know if it works in English, social measurement I mean. You have numbers that have strong effects on you — not only the golden section, but a lot of design elements that are important. For example: the length, height and width of a bar desk are extremely important for the social function of the bar. If you mess up with those numbers, you will not have a bar as we know it.

MM: *Right, some numbers tend to show up again and again naturally, like the golden section that's based on the Fibonacci series, 1,1,2,3,5,8,13 and so on, that occurs naturally in many plants for example. And similarly in psychology, numbers are important in terms of grouping, and what a person can perceive, for example "the magical number 7 plus or minus 2," as George A. Miller's famous paper pointed out, you know.*

PE: Yes, and building height and street width, for example, very important relation, yes.

MM: *All those different factors, psychological and biological and ultimately physical, you know, that shape how a place works or doesn't, and what kind of impact it has on people.*

PE: Yes, and just the height of the wall — can I sit on it or not? Measurements that make the physical world usable for us.

MM: *This is a point that Jan Gehl makes a lot, that you have to start with the human scale, you can't just take a machine scale, like, you know, the speed of an automobile or something like that, and base everything around that. Because we are still human beings, we still move about the same speed, we still have the same dimensions, and so on. And we still have to pay attention to that.*

PE: So for me of course, Jan Gehl, William White, Jane Jacobs, Louis Mumford — that was a very good starting point.

MM: *Yeah, it's fascinating. And then of course my friend Chris Alexander, who Sergio was certainly very influenced by also.*

PE: I read him too, Chris was one of the first classics I read to be honest.

MM: *And he had a very sort of structuralist approach also looking at environments as being structural. You know there is this old false debate, we've talked about it a lot, of environmental determinism. And of course the environment doesn't determine behavior, or other things — but it certainly does shape them, and limit them! It limits social contact and limits interaction and well-being, and all the rest. Or promotes it, you know.*

PE: For sure it can limit, there is no doubt about that! We could also talk about design potential. The critique of physical determinism is just rhetoric from angry modernists.

MM: *There are some other projects that you've gotten involved in recently that are very interesting too. Maybe we don't have time to touch on them all, but your work for example with Richard Sennett, which seems so exciting — and his work also on urban form and the New Urban Agenda, and the sociological aspects of that.*

PE: Yes he came to the Future of Places, I'm supporting Theatrum Mundi his NGO.

MM: *What do you see as the future of that work?*

PE: They are really good, because they are not in an academic organization, they are "free spirit" researchers, so they work much faster.

MM: *Right. So you're talking to Richard about working with MIT, and possibly working with Sergio as well, on some of the work on the New Urban Agenda?*

PE: Well I ́m trying to help Sergio to spread the word about his technique, the *momepy* system. Yeah, we're working with that, and...

MM: *You're also working with some of the regional data science, regional science people, on defining urban morphology and relationships? The OECD, Peter Nijkamp and others?*

PE: My crusade is about making the case for urban form, so all projects that I have been funding — and there are quite a few — have this as a component. So when we work with OECD — like this big conference that we are doing with them about small firms — I told them that we can do a conference, we can support a conference, if we connect it with urban form. So that three-conference project is about small firms and urban form. And we ask, what can small firms do for the city, and what can the city do for small firms? So we tried to merge two different camps. The economists who don't understand what is going on on the ground, and the urbanists who don't really understand economics!

MM: *That's a theme that I see throughout your work. that it's interdisciplinary, that you're bringing different disciplines together around urbanism, but really getting them out of their silos and working together.*

PE: Yes, exactly. If you think about it, who has the power in city making? It is definitely not the architects! Who is it? Traffic planners, economists, real estate guys, politicians — there is no profession that really is in charge of this. So it's a system that sort of creates cities, but, not really in a... everyone does their part, following their manuals and...

MM: *Right, in a very sort of technocratic way, rather than a responsive, evolutionary kind of way. Well, that reminds me of your other big project, which is the public space database, which is also very much about bringing the different disciplines together, right?*

PE: Yeah. Here at the end I started to ask a fundamental question, what is a city? For example, in statistics, that led to the project in the Netherlands. And what do we know about public space? We talk about it all the time, but what — what do we know?

MM: *Right, and what do we need to know more about?*

PE: After 15, 16 years, I realised that since the knowledge about cities is so scattered, and so many disciplines are involved, and so many fluffy definitions are involved, we don't have any precise knowledge

about anything. So you can more or less claim anything and get away with it!

MM: *It's quite remarkable how — and Jane Jacobs made this point, that there is so much pseudo-science around city planning...*

PE: Yeah!

MM: *...and ideology, and sort of ex-cathedra pronouncements, as opposed to real evidence and real, you know, rigorous science...*

PE: Yeah, so I decided I had to go back to the basic definitions: what is a city? And then I discovered how flawed the statistics about cities is. So I wanted to reform official statistics about cities, and that's how I started the project with Peter Nijkamp and Karima Kourtit. We need to question the official statistics. It doesn't capture what a city and city life is.

MM: *There is such an over-focus upon the cores of cities, as if that's all that cities are, the other parts of cities are not cities somehow. Which is crazy, of course they are, you've got some suburban environments, you've got small towns that are part of conurbations, and so on...*

PE: Yeah, but where do you draw the line?

MM: *Where do you draw the line indeed?*

PE: And that has implications for, what is density? If you don't know where to draw the line, you don't know how to measure density. So we have so many different versions of density, that's just ridiculous. And what is mixed use, and what is public space? So that is the final game for me, what are all these things? How can we define them?

MM: *And especially now with the COVID-19 pandemic, we are getting a lot of confusion about density. Because if people don't define it precisely, and then they say that density is bad, then people say, "oh you mean that cities are bad," no — certain* kinds *of density are bad. But we have to tease out what that is exactly, that certain forms of contacts are bad, in terms of virus transmission and so on. But not other forms. So all that has to be teased out, I think.*

PE: Yes, how much public space do you have, for example? Because we are measuring the other stuff, what's inside the buildings? We don't measure the space. So

I think we need to sort out, what is good mixed use? What is good density, for the purpose we are studying? And yes, I'm in the definition game now!

MM: *It seems to me that the first order of business is to define clearly what you want to ask and what you want to know about. If we haven't done that, we are going to continue to make a hash of things, it seems to me.*

PE: So after 20 years in this business, I know less than I did from the beginning! When I started I was 100 percent sure about everything.

MM: *That sounds like a sign of wisdom to me. So at least you know the questions to ask, right?*

PE: Yes exactly.

MM: *What is a city? What is density? What are the things that we can do that we can try, and evaluate, and then correct, and try again, and, you know, create better cities and better settlements.*

PE: And I have been thinking also, how come things that are so obvious for many urbanists, for you and me and for our friends, are not obvious for a lot of other people? And I think it has to do with, the image of a skull that also could be an image of a beautiful woman at the same time. It depends on what you look at.

MM: *A sort of a gestalt that you get in your mind looking at it.*

PE: And I think that you can look at things from a symbolic perspective. If you don't know anything about cities, and you like new shiny things that symbolize the future or high tech or whatever, you say, "Oh, that's really nice" — glass and steel and all that, it symbolizes progress. And maybe you like that. And other people are very sensitive to their environments. They don't care about the symbols, they have their perception, and their feelings.

And if I go to, let's say, a new square, surrounded by houses. The first thing a child would think is, what can I do here? I can sit, I can watch, I can do a lot of stuff here. But the architect will probably start with the building material, "Ah it's concrete, in combination with steel, very interesting!" Materials. He doesn't see the environment, because he has a trained eye for the buildings. So we don't see things in the same way.

MM: *To a carpenter with a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.*

PE: We see things differently. I would like to sort that out sometime, you know the symbolic meaning of buildings that seems to overrule the perception.

MM: *It seems to me that it goes back to what you said before about objects versus places. If you are only looking at one aspect, and it may be a physical aspect like the object, or it may be a mental aspect like the symbol, or the semiotics or other characteristics of the structure that you are looking at, then you see that. It dominates your perception. And it makes it very hard for people to form a practical collaboration in improving the built environment when they are seeing completely different things.*

PE: By the way I remember at a conference I had, Chuck Bohl gave a presentation on some case study, and Jan Gehl was there, and he liked a lot of the stuff that Chuck was presenting. But since Chuck was showing a new building in traditional architecture — it was a larger house, some kind of ceremonial house — Jan Gehl stood up and said, "Why do you show us this oppressive architecture?" Because it was Classical, it wasn't modern, and therefore it was oppressive. And then Chuck answered, well you know, in America, style is not as important as it seems to be in Europe.

MM: *Again, the semiotics and the symbolism...*

PE: Yes, a different perception.

MM: *Actually, architectural character has been quite fluid over historic periods, but people tend to get so obsessed by the "style" of any given moment in time, and what it is supposed to mean. And I think it clouds their judgement. Because you might have a really good solution, that just happens to look like some traditional design somewhere. And if you are constantly associating that with terrible historic events — well, you can always find plenty of*

oppressive historic events to associate with! And therefore, you are not ever going to be able to re-use perfectly good solutions, unless they're just radically novel, crazy off-the-wall things. Unfortunately, that is what a lot of our buildings are like now.

One thing is that you mentioned before was the International Making Cities Livable or IMCL conference organization, and you had been wondering why they weren't working more collaboratively with the CNU and with Project for Public Spaces. Well, I guess we have something to say about that now that we have been asked to play a major role in the IMCL?...

PE: Actually you and I have combined all three, that's quite remarkable, yes?

MM: *Well, we can now perhaps build a more unified platform, or be part of a unified platform with those other organizations. I think there was a lot of overlap, there were some real differences, and there still are. And there are always differences, and that's what good debate and, you know, good discourse is all about. But I think there were also some professional rivalries and frankly jealousies of, you know, branding and so on, that maybe wasn't so healthy in the long run — maybe understandable on a human level, but not so healthy. So maybe we can do something about that with the IMCL, and maybe with the KTH Centre, Tigran's platform, and other nodes in this remarkable network of people that you have been working with for all these years now.*

PE: I must mention also that I learned a lot from the Pro-urb [professional listserv] list. I never participated so much but I was reading it. So I'm still a member, and that has been for me very, very useful. And I strongly remember a tough debate between John Massengale and a guy called Michael Mehaffy.

MM: *Hah!*

PE: About fractals! And it was a fascinating debate, because I was always agreeing with the latest comment — whoever wrote it!

MM: *Yes, I must say that there have been some really good discussions and debates on that platform. I think a lot of us at that time were just discovering the web and listservs — you know, this was not that long into the world wide web, it was the first decade I guess, talking about 2000, 2001, 2002. And yeah, it was quite interesting.*

PE: By the way, I have another perspective, I was very interested in the counterculture. And a very formative book that I have read many times is *The American Genesis*, by Thomas P. Hughes, a historian of technology. It's about the second discovery of America. The first discovery was when the Europeans discovered America, and conquered the Native Americans. The second discovery was when the Europeans discovered the new industrial technology in America. And that book describes what happened, the whole large-scale thinking, Fordism and Taylorism, and the implications of that.

MM: *Actually, even going before that during the Revolutionary War, the creation of standardized rifle stocks and mass production.*

PE: Yes, and your slaughterhouses. Henry Ford actually discovered the assembly line method from studying slaughterhouses in Chicago. They did the other way, they disassembled. Anyhow, the resistance against, the bureaucratic large-scale life in the 60's that we summarize as the "counter-culture" — mentally I belong there.

MM: *Right, the opposition to the failures of modernity, in a way, is which is really what traditional movements have been about going back to Leon Krier and Andrés Duany and Christopher Alexander and others, who have really critiqued that aspect of modernity and modern settlements, which are obviously showing signs of crisis, I think it's fair to say. And of course the computer people, you're part of the same generation that I was, that was really seeing this as another revolution that could have counter-cultural aspects.*

PE: That was my point, when I was working with microcomputers, in 1982-82 I was aware of the counter-culture, because we were representing it. The big companies had big computers, we had small computers, a small company, alternative life. So for me, when I saw New Urbanism, I saw that as an expression of counter-culture. Seaside, the founder of Seaside, Robert Davis, was a dropout, hippie-type of person, and he was sort of reinventing old stuff, like counter-culture, go back to alternative medicine, organic farming, wind power, small computers instead of big ones, and everything you know that was rediscovering things.

MM: *We are also, you and I, both of the cohort of Steve Jobs, and he was part of that sort of Whole Earth Catalogue era, Stewart Brand and so on.*

And, Steve Jobs studied calligraphy at Reed college in Portland, and was trying to reconnect to ancient cultures and ancient wisdom.

PE: Yeah, exactly. So another reason for me being interested in New Urbanism was because I saw it as some kind of counter-culture.

MM: *Yeah right, that's quite interesting. And yet you don't want it to just be another sort of ex-cathedra ideology, right? You want it to be grounded in evidence and in, you know, a real understanding of the dynamics of the world and of cities. So again, that's where somebody like Jane Jacobs, it seems to me, fits perfectly into that intersection. And also somebody like, I mentioned before, Stewart Brand, who wrote the wonderful book* How Buildings Learn. *And this idea that we can embrace the changes that happen in the environment around us, and not try to force our own sort of preconceived straitjackets on them. And that means also that changes that happen 100 years ago or 1,000 years ago, those are part of the mix, we should embrace those, we shouldn't say, "oh no, we are only modern," which is a very bizarre sort of mechanistic idea. So anyway, it's a fascinating milieu, isn't it?*

PE: Yes, there's a kind of "iron curtain" between the past and the future that modernists have created, that has been terrible destructive. It's still destructive, but slowly we are reconnecting.

MM: *Right, we could get into a lot of other things we've worked on, you know, Alexander's work,* Functionalism Revisited, *and so many other aspects. But, you know, there's only so much time too. But thank you, I've learned all kinds of things that I didn't know!*

PE: You're welcome, Michael!