



### ***Conversations on Future Lifestyles:***

Talk it through. Make it happen.

**Putting a value on the public realm** – June 2007

Introduced by Rob Cowan Hosted by Andrew Stuck, Rethinking Cities Ltd.

<http://www.rethinkingcities.net/conversations>

## Putting a value on the public realm

### Thirty propositions

**public realm** The parts of a village, town or city (whether publicly or privately owned) that are available, without charge, for everyone to see, use and enjoy, including streets, squares and parks; all land to which everyone has ready, free and legal access 24 hours a day. There are many alternative ways of classifying what is or is not public realm, and assessing its quality. Criteria include whether or when people are charged for being there; whether it is publicly or privately owned; whether there are restrictions on when or how it is used (whether photography is allowed or whether people are welcome who are not engaged in the space's primary function, for example, such as in the case of shopping malls or exclusive housing developments); and whether it is privately or publicly managed.

From *The Dictionary of Urbanism*

#### **Does the public realm have a value?**

1. People may not value the public realm if their social life is based on car-borne or IT-facilitated networks, rather than on proximity.
2. Public space was what was needed to facilitate social and economic interaction before the invention of the modem, mobile phone and internet shopping (and the evolution of white van man). Is it now obsolete? The only conversations that take place in the public realm (and on public transport) are those conducted by mobile phone).
3. Close your eyes. Imagine a world with no public realm.

#### **What is the basis of the value of the public realm?**

4. Most of the contemporary public realm is used for movement. That which is not is used for shopping (96.5 per cent); children's play (one per cent); recreation (0.5 per cent); hanging about (one per cent); activities considered anti-social (taking drugs, crime, smoking, drinking – one per cent). These statistics have been invented (which does not mean that they are not true).
5. A house that is near a good park is worth more than one that is not. That is either because people value proximity to parks, or because estate agents and their customers think that proximity to a park raises property values.
6. We value some urban spaces even though we can not use them: a stretch of water or a private garden, for example.
7. Public realm may be more or less public: a congestion charge zone, a National Trust garden, a housing development, a shopping mall, a theme park, a business park, for example.



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### **Children in the public realm**

8. The fear of 'stranger danger' is one reason why people discourage their children from using streets and public spaces. Yet most child abuse and attacks happen in the home, inflicted by relatives. Children would be safer if we encouraged them to wander the streets in search of strangers.
9. Children have been robbed of their independence. Fear of the public realm leads parents to keep their children at home, obese and myopic.

### **How do we currently put a value on the public realm?**

10. If you can't measure it, you can't manage it, management consultants tell us. That is why we need to find a way of putting a value on public space.

**We have come from an era that has developed systems for placing a value on movement, but neglecting to value place. It is better to travel than to arrive, at least in terms of economic valuation systems.**

11. Current methods of assessing public space: COBA; New Approach to Assessment; CABE Spaceshaper; DMRB Chapter 11; TfL PERS. Are these any better than meaningless abstractions?
12. Managing public space (or terrorism, for that matter) is a matter of balancing freedom, on the one hand, against freedom from risk, on the other.
13. It is understandable that organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents favour policies that require people to be prevented from taking risks. Their function is to prevent accidents and that is one way of doing so. They do not have to consider the cost, not only in money but also in deprivation of liberty, which such restrictions entail.
14. The courts will naturally respect the technical expertise of such organisations in drawing attention to what can be done to prevent accidents. But the balance between risk on the one hand and individual autonomy on the other is not a matter of expert opinion. It is a judgment that the courts must make and which in England reflects the individualist values of the common law.
15. It is not, and should never be, the role of the law to require the protection of the foolhardy or reckless few to deprive, or interfere with, the enjoyment by the remainder of society of the liberties and amenities to which they are rightly entitled.
16. Does the law require that all trees be cut down because some youths may climb them and fall? Does the law require the coastline and other beauty spots to be lined with warning notices? Does the law require that waterside picnic spots be destroyed because a few foolhardy individuals choose to indulge in activities dangerous only to themselves? The answer to all these questions is no.



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17. The pursuit of an unrestrained culture of blame and compensation has many evil consequences. One is the interference with the liberty of the citizen.
18. Public space is a human right, like the right to shelter, the right to an education and the right to freedom of speech.
19. Successful public space reflects the lives of the people to whom it belongs, and who valued it in the past.

### **How should we value the public realm?**

20. To value public space properly we must place a value on human experience. Can we put a monetary value on our time? On our lives? What about the main principle of sustainable development, intergenerational equity? Is a life now worth more than a life in the future?
21. The value of the public realm relates to the value of the public in the public realm. Life in cities = the number of people x the time spent (Jan Gehl).
22. The presence of children on our streets is a mark of the civilisation of our cities.

### **What makes for valuable public realm?**

23. Public space is usable space. The test of public space is how it is used.
24. Streets are public spaces. Most public space is street space. Motorised traffic has caused a massive loss of human habitat.
25. If it is not private space, it is public space.
26. The development or adaptation of almost any building or structure has an impact on the quality of public space.
27. Successful public space is part of the network of routes for people on foot.
28. Successful public space is where incomers feel welcome.
29. Successful public space feels safe.
30. The better the quality of the public space, the more people you find there using it as a place, not just as a movement corridor (Jan Gehl).