

Micro catalysts for urban engagement

Loneliness is a growing social problem and the living environment often depletes the potential to really mix with each other. On my recent US and Europe trip it was encouraging to see many smaller scale catalysts for urban change, and as Lane Cove village changes it is critical that we don't overlook similar chances to mix and socialise at the local level.

Places where we can pause and relax and talk person to person can occur with urban art, shops spilling onto pavements, pop-up bars or landscape elements that offer an informal place to rest. Casual 'bump' spaces can be low walls, public benches or pocket parks where impromptu meetings occur between people on two feet or wheels rather than in vehicles.

San Francisco showed a growing US social and economic divide and lack of affordable housing was evident with street camps and rough sleeping. A lot of effort seems to be going into making equitable and accessible public space, but there were often physical or psychological barriers that suggested otherwise.

In New York the 'stoops' connecting front doors to the footpath and street create excellent bridges between public, communal and private space for community interaction in neighbourhoods where people travel by means other than the car. In mixed-use precincts street life was enriched by the ground level shops and cultural uses that add to pedestrian experience and amenity – until gentrification occurs.

Public sculpture doesn't get much better than Anish Kapoor's Cloudgate, a magnet for tourists and locals in Millennium Park, Chicago. Along with Jaume Plensa's nearby Crown Fountain with its duelling faces, this is prime selfie territory but still had the right ingredients to attract casual personal engagement.

London showed a well healed public realm in spite of Brexit woes - at least in the inner urban areas - with urban art and generous concourse areas for the daily commute encouraging personal interaction, except on the Tube! Kings Cross station had spatial vibrancy with active edges offering many food and beverage outlets, and while projects like the Gasholders Apartments and Battersea Power Station showed obvious gentrification, they did have the right intentions to enrich their public domain.

Bike and pedestrian-friendly Hamburg and Copenhagen have smaller populations and were streets ahead of many larger cities. Shorter distances, shared roads and excellent public transport took pressure off the need to drive and created numerous fine grain experiences in both their old cities and new harbour districts woven around working harbours.

The Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, a new cultural venue with a public promenade around its podium perimeter, had wonderful views over the city and harbour, and the nearby Elbpromenade was a popular casual meeting place along the river edge. A fascinating tour of inner Copenhagen's bike paths included the Bjarke Ingel's Group Superkilen in the Norrebro district, and there were many innovative and inclusive small-scale interventions that could only be appreciated on two wheels or by foot.

At the completion of The Canopy project in mid-2020, it would be great to see similar results at the smaller scale. With a renewed Birdwood Lane and hopefully rejuvenation of various arcades linking to Longueville Road perhaps the Council might review the dominance of our local streets by vehicles, encourage more appreciation of the pedestrian and bicycle environment around our village, and the potential for more micro-scale places for us to meet.

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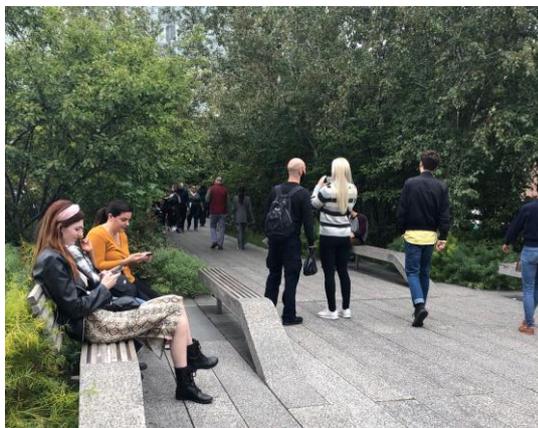
November 2019



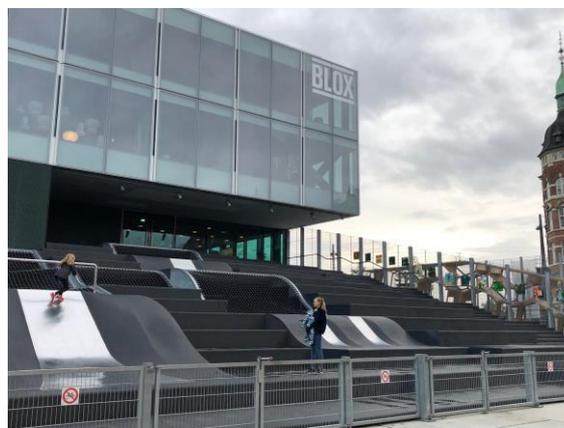
Battersea



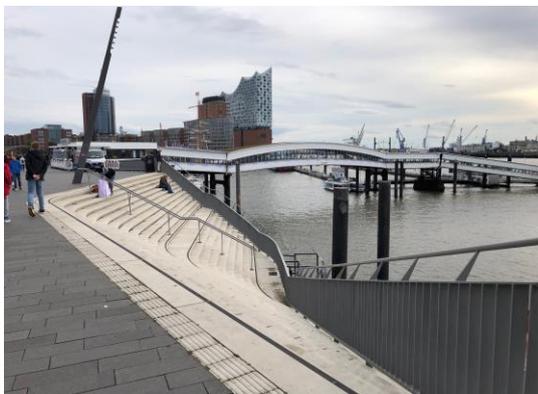
Chicago



High Line, NY



BLOX play pen, Copenhagen



Elbpromenade, Hamburg



Grosse Bergstrasse, Hamburg