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INFRASTRUCTURE

Public space and public values

Copenhagen-based architect Helle Søholt discusses why residents of cities are the center of her urban-planning projects.

Helle Søholt is a founding partner of Gehl Architects, which she launched in 2000 with Jan Gehl, a fellow architect who had been studying the sociology of cities since 1966. Based in Copenhagen and with offices in New York and San Francisco, Gehl Architects aims to help clients create what it calls “cities for people.” Søholt herself has worked on projects around the world, including Beijing, Cape Town, Copenhagen, Kuala Lumpur, London, Mexico City, São Paulo, Seattle, and Vancouver. Trained as an architect in Denmark and the United States, she emphasizes improving the quality of city life and making people the center of urban planning. Søholt spoke with McKinsey in May 2016.

McKinsey: *What makes a great public space? A poor one?*

Helle Sørholt: A great public space, first and foremost, is one that is used by people. Public spaces are defined by the activities that take place, the culture and identity of the communities they support, the social mix of people, the kinds of programming. On the physical side, a great public space needs to be well connected to its surroundings, easy to get to, and have “active edges,” meaning functions that help to bring people together and build community. It needs to feel safe and not be too noisy or windy or sunny or cold.

The opposite is a space that is derelict, disconnected from its surroundings, and not being used. People see it as unsafe; women, children, and the elderly would never dream of going there.

There can be too much focus on creating great event spaces with the idea of making places for tourists to enjoy. If we design spaces that are wonderful for residents, the city itself will be that much more interesting for visitors to visit.

McKinsey: *What do you do? And with whom do you do it?*

Helle Sørholt: We have developed some on-the-ground methods for mapping public life. And when we go out into the streets, so do the people we are working with. We want to get them out of the offices in order to experience and see the city in a new way. In working with communities, sometimes we make temporary interventions. We'll experiment with a redesign of a square or a street, perhaps rerouting a local bus to create a nicer ambience. By measuring foot traffic before, during, and after such an intervention, we can see how people are, in effect, voting with their feet.

We work with cities, developers, foundations, and nongovernmental organizations. We also identify local partners that have an interest in these projects; these could be community groups, philanthropies, health organizations, transport entities, or NGOs. We did a prototyping festival in the redesign of Market Street in San Francisco, where we invited the community to come out and do different installations and test different solutions—everything from spatial design to technology.

McKinsey: *Roughly two-thirds of the world's population will live in cities by 2050. What does that mean to you as an architect?*

Helle Sørholt: The social sustainability of cities is a challenging issue. The development of cities globally is also leading to pressures on mobility in terms of transport. There are a lot of problems—congestion, gridlock, and a lack of public investment in transportation.

This leads to poor environments. Congestion, for example, leads to poor air quality. We see our role as helping the cities we work in to innovate, to redesign their processes, to focus on what is important. Our ethos is to manage cities with an emphasis on improving the quality of people's lives.

McKinsey: *The population of Mumbai has more than doubled since the 1990s, to almost 22 million people. Are Gehl's principles appropriate for such fast-growing megacities?*

Helle Sørholt: Yes, I think our principles are applicable to any city. The public-space focus that we advocate—to me, this is a human right. And if there is any place where this is in danger of getting lost, it is in developing cities, where things are happening so fast. There is a desperate need to help these cities to manage urban growth. Of course, many of them are understaffed. They are short of resources and do not know how to manage or to work with planners. We are very aware, when we come into cities under such pressures, that our role is not only to develop a good plan or to implement a project. It is also to build capacity and provide support to the urban leaders, so they can make better decisions after we are gone.

McKinsey: *You have said that some cities are becoming too large. What do you mean by that? Why is this a problem? And what can be done?*

Helle Sørholt: It is super difficult to control the growth of cities because this is affected not only by urban factors but also by global ones and by conditions in rural areas. What I was thinking of was places like São Paulo and Mexico City. These are great cities, but because they have become so large, traffic in particular has become really bad. That influences people's lives in a way that is unheard of, and for the worse. People are spending three hours in traffic getting to and from work. That has a giant impact on people's health, their connection to their families, and general quality of life. In our own work, we try to retrofit existing urban centers, to make them more walkable and bikeable, with shops, parks, and public spaces.

McKinsey: *Is the car the enemy of the livable city?*

Helle Sørholt: I don't think the car is the problem in itself; in fact, I own a car. But too many cars is a problem, absolutely. The goal is to strike a balance. In too many cities, cars take up too much space. In the process, they squeeze people out of streets and squares and spaces and make the air dirty, too. Copenhagen is a good example of what this balance could be. About 30 percent of trips are made on public transit, 40 percent on bicycles, and 30 percent in cars. And this doesn't have to be expensive. Far from it. Big highways, for example, can be insanely expensive. Redesigning an existing road system to allow people to get around better by foot and bicycle is easy to do and relatively cheap.

McKinsey: *If there were an award for “most improved city” over the past 20 to 30 years, which city would win it?*

Helle Sørholt: Let me give a few examples. Vancouver and Toronto are both admirable. They have been working systematically to favor density and to support public life, including transit. The renewal of the Toronto waterfront is a great achievement. Melbourne may be even better. In the early 1990s, it was known as a “doughnut city” — there was an empty hole in the middle where almost no one lived. Since then, the inner city has become a thriving urban center, adding 20,000 people. The city’s “laneways” of old, narrow streets were scary then; now they have been transformed into vibrant urban networks for pedestrians, with art shops, cafés, and new boutiques. That has added a fine-grain walkable network to the entire downtown. The laneways were there the whole time. It was a matter of rediscovering, redesigning, and repurposing.

Singapore has also been transformed dramatically over the past 30 years. This city is very top-down managed; from a certain perspective, this is not the most engaged way of doing things. But city leaders were also superambitious in their investments in the public realm. Finally, there’s Seoul. It took down the elevated highway above the Cheonggyecheon River, then restored the river and created a fantastic public space along it right through the center of the city. Seoul is also rethinking how the government is engaged, creating ways to help communities to help each other.

McKinsey: *What are some examples of simple things cities can do to improve daily life for their residents?*

Helle Sørholt: Redesign streets to meet people’s needs for quality of life. Also, reconquer underutilized space to create small plazas, playgrounds, and parks. As cities get denser, people have less space at home, so it is important that the city itself should become an additional living room.

McKinsey: *If you could live in any city in history, from any time, what would it be and why?*

Helle Sørholt: I’m content with Copenhagen. Ever since I was born, in the 1970s, I feel like every single year it has improved.

I’ve always wondered about Paris in the 1850s and 1860s, when Baron Haussmann carved out those huge boulevards and parks and squares. Paris must have been superdirty and polluted and intense and dense. What Haussmann did was quite radical, and it would have been fascinating to be at his side. 🌐

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