

## November 16, 2005: A Breakfast with Jan Gehl *Renowned Architect and Urban Designer*

By Sarah Troutt

Jan Gehl, Urban Design Consultant and Professor of Urban Design at the School of Architecture in Copenhagen, Denmark spoke at the NYU Wagner Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management on November 16, 2005. Gehl has served as consultant to City Councils and City planning departments across Europe, North America, Australia, and Asia. In addition to delivering lectures at universities around the world, he is a published author of many publications that describe his intensive research on the social uses of public space. His books include *Life Between Buildings*, *Improving Urban Spaces*, and *New City Spaces*. The event was one in a series of Visiting Scholars Seminars which brings scholars from around the United States to speak on key issues affecting and affected by transportation. Nearly 100 people from academe, public, government, and industry, as well as interested residents attended the event at the Puck Building.

Among the ideas he shared with the group was that “life is the greatest attraction of any city.” He emphasized the importance of designing public spaces that attract life and people. A common mistake made today, he said, is that architects and designers neglect the people for which they build public spaces. He noted examples of Brasilia, a city that was designed from 5,000 meters above ground, and Shanghai, where architects would fly in, design, and fly out the same day.

A departure from his training in “modernism,” which preached to never mix housing, recreation, transportation and communication together, Gehl now believes that “architecture and planning should fit man and man should not try to fit planning and architecture.”

Taking into account the human scale, Gehl said, is an imperative prerequisite for planning. He explained his idea of “5 km/h Architecture”: the ideal client in any city is slow, walking at only 5 km/h. Gehl believes small spaces, signals, and signs should be designed with this client in mind.

Gehl noted the evolution of city life since the 1900s, when people used public spaces for necessary activities such as going to work or to the market. Today, he said, “we have less and less reason to be in public space.” In order to improve the quality of life, the economic vitality of cities, and to promote democracy, architects and planners must design public spaces that attract people.

Following his lecture, Gehl opened the discussion to questions from attendees. A general sentiment among the attendees was the concern for safety. Gehl emphasized that niches and benches attract life, however one attendee worried that this would invite the homeless and perceived associated crime. Gehl responded that “putting in features to make people use areas more naturally would invite more people, and where there are more people there is more safety.”

The issue of how to rebuild Lower Manhattan with concerns to safety related to the September 11 terrorist attacks was also raised by an attendee, to which Gehl responded, “If we make our cities bulletproof, they would not be cities any more. We need open democracy to decrease fear in society.”