The Social Life of Privately-Owned Public Spaces

Investigating the history and social outcomes of POPS—one of the most powerful tools for creating public space in modern American cities.

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Abstract

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The following thesis focuses on a very specific area of cities: privately-owned public spaces (POPS). The tools that cities and real estate developers employ to build these spaces are some of the most effective for creating public spaces in urban environments. But while the quantity of POPS has grown significantly across the county, the quality of such spaces for public use and enjoyment remained an unsettled question. The goal of this thesis is to complete an in-depth public life study on the latest iteration of privately-owned public spaces in Seattle in order to determine whether such policies result in well-functioning, vibrant social spaces. Using the framework created by William Holly Whyte for assessing social space, it investigates the social life of three plazas in the South Lake Union neighborhood in order to reach its ultimate conclusions about what works, what doesn't, and how these spaces might be improved.

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This work could not be completed without the great support of a few folks:

To Christopher and Sofia—thank you for your guidance throughout both this process and my time at the University of Washington. Our Friday chats about cities were some of the most enjoyable I've had.

To my parents, Juliette, and all my family & friends—the support I've received over the past few years has been immeasurable. Thank you!

One felicity leads to another. Good places tend to be all of a piece—and the reason can almost always be traced to a human being.

William Holly Whyte
The Social Life of Small, Urban Places

Introduction—In Praise of Odds and Ends

The following thesis focuses on a very specific area of cities: privately-owned public spaces. Like the name suggests, privately-owned public spaces are oxymorons to some extent and can be difficult to define precisely. These places differ from traditional public space; they are typically not sweeping plazas, large city parks, or grand boulevards. Instead they are found in the nooks and crannies of downtowns and new developments, often doubling as building entrances, waiting areas, midblock corridors, and shopping atriums. These odds and ends can be subtle and vague, yet used by millions of city dwellers without ever knowing it. And for cities in the last century, they have become powerful and well-used tool for creating and maintaining public space in increasingly constrained urban centers.

Privately-owned public spaces—or POPS, for short—began to dot city maps in the United States over a century ago. As an increasingly dense array of buildings known as skyscrapers grew taller and wider, city officials sought to implement rules that governed the shapes of structures to preserve light, air, and space. These guidelines—the first iteration of modern-day zoning laws—focused not only on the space new buildings could occupy, but also on the space that must be left open to the street. Within these urban voids sprung POPS—areas owned and operated by the building owner yet required by law to be free and accessible to members of the general public.

As zoning laws transformed into nuanced toolkits for shaping urban form, so too did the nature of privately-owned public spaces. Instead of bare cavities of space filled with concrete, city planners and developers alike reimagined these places in a variety of ways. POPS were sunk below ground, elevated to high building floors, made into de facto shopping malls, and covered in elegant fountains and water features. Some worked better than others. Many went unused. For while the quantity of privately-owned public spaces exploded throughout American cities, the quality of such spaces for public use and enjoyment remained an unsettled question.

City planners had helped create hundreds of acres of public space in downtowns—but were they any good? If one cares to look, city dwellers naturally settle the question. Good public spaces are well-used and draw in visitors to enjoy them. Poorly conceived and maintained spaces, on the other hand, mainly sit unused and empty.

If you have spent any time in the downtown of a city, you have undoubtably passed through such places. You quite possibly sat and spent time in one, watching the activity of the city pass busily by. You may or may not have wondered: “Who owns this space?” or “Who cleans this plaza at night?” Most visitors probably do not. But what would have been inherently sensed is the quality of the space—the vibrancy, the number of others using it, the sounds and smells, available amenities and activities, cleanliness, etc.—and from these judgements arrived at an

overall assessment of the quality of the greater street, block, neighborhood, and entire city. Great cities have great public space. And if privately-owned public space is one of the main tools for creating such places, urban planners should have a clear understanding of how they work and if they indeed contribute value to the public good.

The goal of this thesis is to complete an in-depth public life study on the latest iteration of privately-owned public spaces in Seattle in order to determine whether such policies result in well-functioning, vibrant social spaces. While previous studies in Seattle have sought to catalogue and analyze the design and maintenance of POPS, there has been little investigation into how people use these spaces once they are built. There are, however, several urban planning luminaries—specifically the urbanist William Holly Whyte—who have produced studies of similar purpose in other American cities and from which this study draws from considerably. Like Whyte's work, the study draws on established methods of public space observation to reach its ultimate conclusions about what works, what doesn't, and how these spaces might be improved.

Toward this goal, this thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter details the development of zoning ordinances that produced POPS, which occurred in New York City and became a template for other American cities like Seattle, and the evolution of these POPS over the past century. The second chapter describes the adoption of similar policies by the City of Seattle in the 1960s and the city's unique political and philosophical experience with POPS in downtown. Much of this history relies on personal accounts from city planners and real estate interests who were directly involved in the creation of these spaces, and has been largely unrecorded until now. The third chapter briefly details the methodologies of this study, and recounts the history of the neighborhood of study—South Lake Union—and the current description and condition of the three specific plazas that were observed. Next, the fourth chapter narrates the various aspects of the social life of each plaza as inspired by the writings of William H. Whyte in his books *The Social Life of Small Urban Places* and *City: Rediscovering the Center*. It details how each plaza is typically used and by whom through various metrics such as visitor counts, dwell times, physical design statistics, and movement maps. The fifth and final chapter concludes with specific findings gleaned from results and presents ideas for future improvement and areas of study.

This thesis is not a comprehensive portrait of every privately-owned public space in Seattle, nor a definitive depiction of how all city dwellers may act in different types of public space. Rather, it hopes to build on the multitude of groundbreaking works based at the intersection of urban design and social behavior that have time and again have demonstrated that

good city planning is often rooted in the recognition of simple and elegant patterns. To name just a few: Jane Jacobs in the *Death and Life of American Cities*, Christopher Alexander in *A Pattern Language*, and William Whyte's various writings. These works remind us that the true connections in cities are not between streets and roads, but among the people who live, work, and play here. As Whyte wrote, "What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people." There is a timeless quality to these lessons that apply far beyond the border of any one place. It is a comfort, and I believe a truth, that the conditions and designs that produce vibrant public space in one city is not only possible in another. In fact, it is only waiting to happen.

History of Incentive Zoning

The Creation of Zoning Regulations

The history of privately owned public spaces in cities is inseparably related to the history of zoning laws in America. And, like much zoning history in this country, the story begins in New York City. By 1900, almost every inch of the island of Manhattan had been developed in some form or another, and the bustling city had begun its expansion into the five outer boroughs. Although not the political capital of the United States, New York was reinforcing its reputation as the cultural, economic, and population center of the country. The 1900 census recorded over 3.4 million residents in New York City—by far the most populous urban area in America. In fact, more people packed into the 22 square miles of Manhattan (1.8 million) than the entire city of Chicago, the next largest American city (1.6 million).[1]

In order to accommodate this rapid growth, developers employed novel technological breakthroughs in the construction and architectural fields—such as the I-beam, steel frames, and passenger elevators—that allowed new buildings to soar to record-setting heights. Between 1908 – 1931, New York City hosted the six tallest buildings in the world, each surpassing each other's height.[2] These super tall buildings, dubbed "skyscrapers," were almost entirely privately funded, and thus their design and construction were left largely up to the involved private interests.

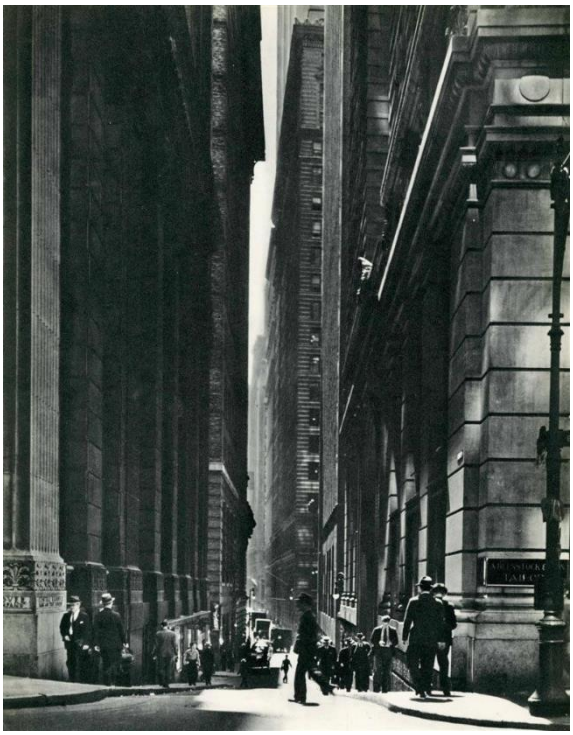

Figure 1. Unrestricted building regulations led to narrow canyons of urban streets with poor sanitary conditions. (Alexander Alland, Canyon, New York City, 1939.)

This laissez-faire approach resulted in skyscrapers being sited on "whatever size land parcels developers could assemble" in the biggest, bulkiest fashion possible in order to provide the greatest amount of rentable floor space to sell or rent.[3] One particularly egregious example of this style was the Equitable Building, which opened in 1915 in the Financial District of Manhattan. With no setbacks from the sidewalk, the building stood

[1] *Total Population: New York City & Boroughs, 1900 to 2010,* prepared by the New York City Department of City Planning, Bureau of the Census (New York City, 2010).

[2] Anthony Wood, ed. "100 of the world's tallest buildings." Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group, 2015.

[3] Jerold Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience* (New York: Wiley, 2000), 6.

as a monolith except for two shallow, vertical cuts in the middle above the seventh floor so that the building resembled a thick "H" from above. The bottom seven floors occupied the complete block. This layout provided 1.2 million square feet of rentable office space, which earned the building the distinction of the largest office building in the world by floor area.[4]

But while these supertall, bulky skyscrapers were popular with developers, they caused tremendous outcry from the general public. Of particular concern was the diminishing access to natural sunlight. The 41-story, 542-foot tall Equitable Building, for example, cast a dark shadow six-times its own lot area and stretched across four city blocks. Depending on the time of year, neighboring buildings to the north under twenty-one stories received no sunlight at all.[5] In turn, many surrounding property owners claimed a loss of rental income "because so much light and air had been deflected by the massive new building…" and they filed for a reduction in the assessed valuations of their properties.[6]

Figure 2. The Equitable Building. (King's View of New York)

By 1913, public sentiment had soured on these bulky skyscrapers enough for the Manhattan Borough President George McAneny to present a resolution to the City's governing body that stated, "…the time has come when an effort should be made to regulate the height, size, and arrangement of buildings …in order to arrest the seriously increasing evil of the shutting off of light and air…to prevent unwholesome and dangerous congestion...and to reduce the hazards of fire and peril to life."[7] The era of construction buildings in whatever form and style proved most economical was coming to a swift close in New York. Even when placing the ceremonial cornerstone for the Equitable Building, Mayor James Mitchel acknowledged that the building would most likely be the last of the massive skyscrapers to be built in Manhattan.[8]

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[4] "120 Broadway," ZoLa New York City's Zoning & Land Use Map, accessed March 12, 2022.
[5] "Shadows Cast by Skyscrapers," Buildings and Building Management, November 1918, 38..
[6] "Equitable Building," New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, June 25, 1996.
[7] "New Equitable Office Building May Be Last of Huge Skyscrapers -- Mayor Mitchel Hints at This Possibility at Cornerstone Laying," New York Times Archive, May 3, 1914.
[8] Ibid.

What ultimately emerged from the growing chorus of citizens' demands for tighter and clearer regulation of building was the 1916 Zoning Regulation. This zoning regulation—a complicated collection of maps, codes, and legalese—was the first citywide zoning laws passed in the United States. It was not easy to produce. Over the course of three years from 1913 to 1916, three zoning committees were formed, two entirely separate commissions produced reports on the subject, an amendment was introduced by the State of New York to the City's charter in order to grant the police power to control zoning, and—finally—the resolution was introduced, debated, and adopted by the City Board.[9]

This novel zoning regulation accomplished several important things. But perhaps the most meaningful change was the introduction of three separate categories of building regulation as defined by use, height, and area. Use districts dictated whether land could be used for residence, business, or unrestricted, mainly industrial uses; height districts controlled the shape of buildings erected on land; and area districts announced requirements for yards, courts, and other open space at ground level.[10]

Height restrictions, in particular, played a key role in determining the actual form of new skyscrapers. For these regulations determined not only the vertical height limit of a building, but also the shape and direction it took to get there. To allow natural sunlight and fresh air down to the street level, buildings required setbacks above certain heights in order to form an established angle between the middle of the street and top of the building. These angles and ratios were determined by the size of the lot, although the height of the setback rules differed from district-to-district. For example:

> ...in a two-and-one-half times district on a street of 100 feet in width, a building's street wall height on the street line could reach 250 feet, or roughly 25 stories. Any portion of the building above this height would have to be set back a specified number of feet from the street line to be allowed. If the portion of the building above 25 stories were set back 10 feet, then that portion could rise another 50 in height. The total building could us achieve a height of 300 feet, with 250 feet of that height located in a vertical plane sitting on the street line and the rest in a vertical plane rising from deeper within the lot.[11]

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[9] Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space,* 8.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

The required setbacks by a determined angle would come to produce the notorious "wedding-cake" style of buildings, which proliferated throughout New York City between the introduction of the 1916 Zoning Regulation and its eventual reform in 1961.

There remained, however, one important exception to this formula. Portions of the building that did not abut the street and covered less than a quarter of the buildable area—mean 25-percent of the lot—were not limited to height restriction of any kind. These portions of structure, the thinking went, were so small and thin compared to their lot area that they would "not interfere with light and air reaching the street and lower stories of surrounding buildings."[12]. The implications of this policy were illustrated by Hugh Ferriss' "Study for Maximum Mass Permitted by the 1916 New York Zoning Law" in 1922, which shows the familiar building typology that soon came to dominate the city's skyline. In fact, iconic skyscrapers such as the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building—standing at 1,454 and 1,046 feet respectively, each the tallest building in the world at the time of completion—were largely permitted only by use of this exception.[13]

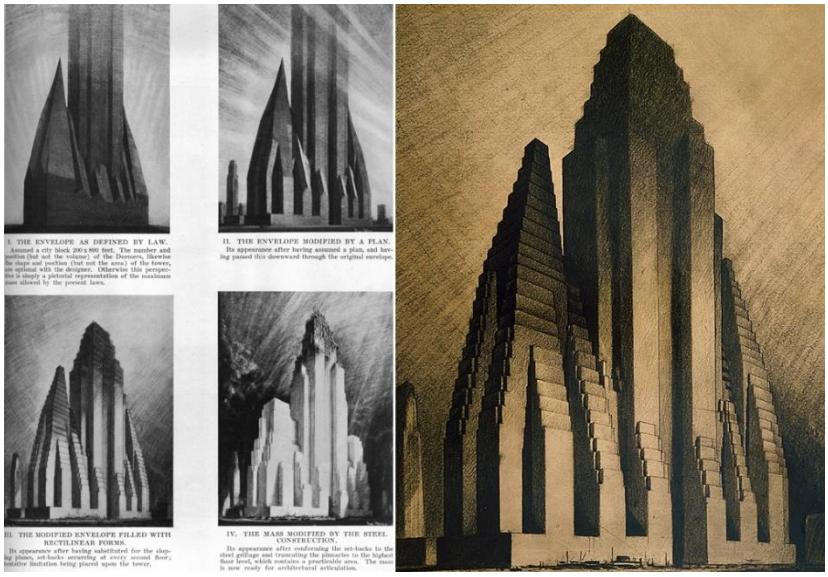

Figure 3. Hugh Ferriss' drawings entitled "The New Architecture" from 1922.

For passersby on the street level, however, the effect of the 1916 Zoning Regulation had a trivial effect on the pedestrian experience. While tall, skinny structures may have allowed more sunlight and fresh air to reach the street, the rest of the block was allowed to be filled in with the

[12] Ibid.

[13] Carol Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 90.

familiar bulky, flat development up to the permitted height. And in order to have acceptable floor space in these prominent towers for tenants, developers were required to assemble immensely large lots—a difficult thing to do in New York even by early 20th century standards. In reality, the promise of urban open space for the city pedestrian ultimately "capitulated to the reality of real estate economics."[14] It would take an enlightened design concept that, while working within the guidelines set forth in 1916, would prioritize open space in a commercial development and, quite by accident, create the first privately owned public plazas.

Changes to Zoning Regulation: Incentive Zoning

In 1952, a building unlike any other opened on Park Avenue. The Lever House, designed by the esteemed architecture firm Skidmore, Owing, and Merrell, eschewed all precedents of how an office tower could or should be built. Instead of employing the typical wedding-cake design, which maximized rentable floor area while adhering to the Zoning Regulation, the Lever House stretched across the lot with a single-story, horizontal rectangle block perched fourteen feet above the ground. From a relatively small slice of the northern portion, a vertical tower rose to the twenty-first floor without deviation or setback. This design was allowed only because the tower utilized less than 25-percent of the buildable lot; the rest was accessible to the public beneath the horizontal slab and partly open to the sky.

Figure 4. SOM's Lever House in 1952. (Ezra Stoller, *Lever House)*

[14] Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space*, 9.

The Seagram Building, completed six years later and kitty-corner to the Lever House, took this concept a step further. Designed by the celebrated architect Mies van der Rohe, the Seagram Building discarded the wide-spanning first floor altogether, leaving only a 38-story, thin tower recessed ninety feet from the street. The other 75-percent of the lot was dedicated to an elevated plaza, complete with sculptures, benches, fountains, and pools. The building and plaza were greeted with great public acclaim, and received the City Beauty Award for "making a notable contribution to the beauty of New York."[15] Architectural Forum aptly acknowledged the momentous departure from the wedding cake style, describing the Seagram Building as "a no-setback building but a building all set back."[16]

Figure 5. Mies' Seagram Building in 1958. (Ezra Stoller)

It was from these two buildings that New York city planners drew inspiration for the first major update to the Zoning Regulation in 1961. The idea of "the tower in a park," so neatly exemplified in the International Style of the Seagram and Lever Buildings, granted more sunlight and fresh air than could have possibly been hoped for by the established regulation. And it provided something even more valuable—pleasant and welcoming open space for pedestrians at the street level. The 1916 Zoning Regulation sought to address the problem of long, dark canyons of bulky skyscrapers robbing each other of sunlight, but with this dilemma largely addressed, the 1961 update would have a different goal altogether. Planners sought to "ensure that public streets and all portions of buildings fronting on streets have access to light and air, and to provide a general feeling of openness at street level."[17] The updated zoning code brought the focus from the building level to the street, and would introduce the concept of open, public spaces as integral aspect of new development design and approval.

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[15] Irving Spiegel, "'Salute to Fall' Honors Seagram," *New York Times Archive*. October 3, 1963.

[16] "Seagram's Plans Plaza Tower in New York," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 102, no. 4, April 1954. p. 9.

[17] Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space*, 10.

The pleasant design of these two model buildings, however, was not easy to replicate. Their bold approach to navigating the zoning code was, in large part, made possible by their equally strong financial backing. Specifically, both buildings were financed by deep-pocked corporations—the Lever House was commissioned by the Unilever Corporation and the Seagram building by, well, Seagram—that allowed freedom from typical real estate pressures, and thus freedom to eschew typical design. These were buildings intended to "double as advertising monuments to their corporate identity" rather than merely turn a reliable profit.[18] Mies van der Rohe was allegedly given an unlimited budget to complete his vision, and the construction costs per square foot was reportedly twice that of comparable midtown buildings.[19] In order to produce the effects of Lever and Seagram in typical office developments, city planners would have to incentive developers in new, creative ways.

Figure 6. Socializing on the staircase. (William Holly Whyte from The Social Life of Small Urban Places (film))

The solution that emerged would come to be known as incentive zoning. Put simply, the scheme allowed developers to build beyond established limits set forth in the zoning code—typically in height or mass—in exchange for providing an amenity identified by the city. And what the city wanted was expressly clear: "In order to bring more light and air into streets surrounded by tall buildings…" the draft zoning resolution stated, "…as well as to create more useable open space, a bonus device has been established to encourage the setting back of buildings from the street line."[20]

This bonus device was Floor-to-Area Ratio (FAR), which measures the ratio between a buildings floor area compared to the lot size. In order for the economics to pencil out, developers

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[18] Ibid.

[19] "Why Green Architecture Hardly Ever Deserves the Name," *ArchDaily*, July 3, 2013.

[20] Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space*, 11.

would be granted bonus FAR to build taller and wider if they dedicated a portion of their lot to a public plaza. Specifically, if the developer included one square foot of plaza space, they were granted three additional square feet of rentable office space above a base threshold.[21] This concept, and the idea of incentive zoning as a whole, greatly changed the relationship between developers and zoning regulators. By encouraging—rather than mandating—compliance through incentives, the city could nudge developers to incorporate their vision of open space into properties without being accused of impossible undue economic hardship.

Developers, as it turned out, did not need much convincing. They appeared to express a similar level of excitement about the new policy as the city themselves, perhaps even more. It is easy to understand why this exchange was popular with developers. All new buildings had to be constructed pursuant to the Zoning Regulation anyhow, and including a simple plaza granted significant financial and design flexibility. And once constructed, these spaces required only modest upkeep and maintenance. Meanwhile, owners enjoyed bonus rentable floor space in perpetuity and consequently higher property values. This arrangement was often wildly lucrative for developers and building owners. One study, for example, found that the ratio of the value of the bonus floor area to the cost of a plaza at 48 to 1.[22] Furthermore, areas necessary for operations and management that would have been built regardless—such as loading docks and garages entries—could be included as public spaces, granting owners further additional FAR. In short, developers had "almost nothing to lose and almost everything to gain" by providing such spaces.[23]

The popularity of the incentive zoning in the real estate industry is best understood by its enthusiastic deployment post-1961: of the ninety-five office buildings that qualified for incentive zoning between 1966 and 1975, sixty-seven of them integrated public space into the project—a rate over 70-percent.[24] Particularly popular was the creation of plazas, which accounted for more than half of the public spaces built (other options included arcades, sidewalk widening, through-block connectors, etc.).[25] In the same way the 1916 zoning regulation resulted in the proliferation of wedding-cake style buildings, the 1961 update produced hundreds of privately owned public spaces across Manhattan.

But while these privately owned, publicly accessible spaces flourished throughout the city, what they were supposed to look like or do was hardly clear. After all, "usable space," the term used in the draft zoning report, could mean any number of things. The most basic interpretation of the

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[21] Ibid.

[22] William Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (Philadelphia: University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 233.

[23] Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space*, 12.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid, 44.

purpose of these plazas was—essentially— to be anything other than a building; a void in the urban landscape to allow sunlight and air to reach city dwellers. Given this definition, what they looked like or provided was of little consequence.

And, by all accounts, they were. Public spaces constructed under the 1961 Zoning Regulations were considered as-of-right, meaning developers could collect lucrative FAR incentives from bonus plazas "…without any meaningful design review or approval by city agencies."[26] Additionally, conventional public spaces amenities—tables, chairs, trees, lighting—were bewilderingly prohibited by language in the zoning regulation itself. Even signage identifying public spaces as such were forbidden, as it would have constituted an unpermitted obstruction in the plaza. Many of the spaces were often "lifeless and desolate plazas that were little more than forlorn expanses of paving hidden away from view."[27] While the outcomes of incentive zoning could be considered a runaway success when measured by quantity (503 such spaces were constructed between 1961 – 1999), the quality of the spaces remained considerably less clear.[28]

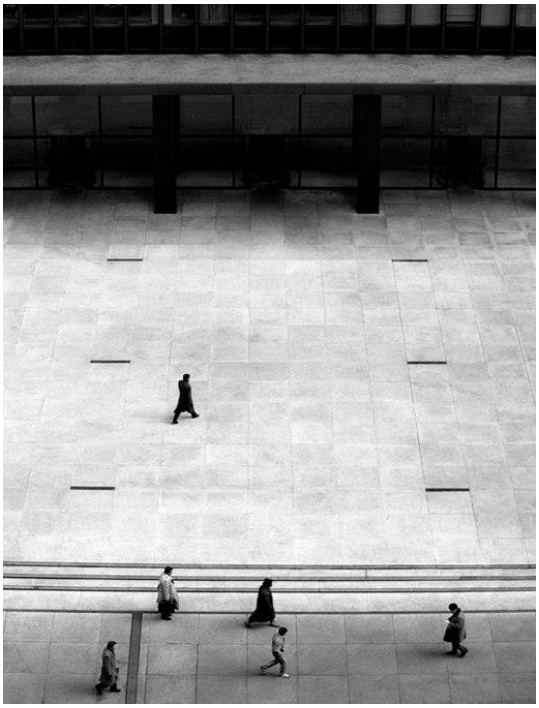

Figure 7. More common than not, Whyte found the plazas created by the 1961 Zoning Laws were bare and vacant. (William Whyte, The Social Life of Small Urban Places (film))

Privately Owned Public Spaces as Social Space

The question of quality was front of mind for William Holly Whyte. Founder of the Street Life Project in 1971, Whyte—an esteemed urban sociologist and journalist—was deeply curious about city spaces, specifically why "some [spaces] work for people, and some do not, and the practical reasons why."[29] An avowed people-watcher, Whyte and his small team of researchers sought to use simple—deceptively simple—techniques to better understand the social dynamics at play in everyday city scenes. They photographed, filmed, counted, and observed thousands of New

[26] Stephan Schmidt, Jeremy Nemeth, and Erik Botsford, "The Evolution of Privately Owned Public Spaces In New York City," Urban Design International Vol. 16, 4, (December 2011): 273.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space*, 44.
[29] William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (New York: Project for Public Spaces, 1980), 8.

Yorkers going about their day in streets, plazas, and parks. Recording and analyzing their observations, they hoped to unlock the key to creating successful social spaces in cities.

Of particular fascination to Whyte and the Street Life Project were privately-owned public spaces. Their motivations were straightforward: the Street Life Project largely focused on Midtown Manhattan—an area where deep concern about overcrowding was felt—and where incentive zoning had just recently carved out vast numbers of newly public spaces. By 1972, Whyte noted, new office buildings had provided "some 20 acres of the world's most expensive open space."[30] And like the authors of the 1961 zoning revisions, he was particularly enamored with the Seagram Building, an "austerely elegant area [that] had not been planned as a people's plaza, but that it is what it became. On a good day, there would be a hundred and fifty people sitting, sunbathing, picnicking, and schmoozing—idly gossiping, talking "nothing talk."[31] As he expanded the study's scope beyond these model plazas, however, Whyte discovered that the Seagram Building and its vibrant social plaza continued to prove the exception rather than the rule.

Figure 8. Holly Whyte at work. (Project for Public Spaces)

What Whyte most often found instead were great numbers of empty, unused spaces. The first finding that struck the team "was the *lack* of crowding in many of these areas. A few were jammed but more were nearer empty than full, often in neighborhoods that ranked very high in density of people"[32]. The new "usable open space" that urban planners had claimed were in such demand were now sitting perfectly empty. The Street Life Project documented many, if not most, of these recently developed plazas were of little value to pedestrians as social or leisure spaces. On the contrary, these "expanses of pavement hidden away" were hardly used except briskly walking through. Sheer space, Whyte noted, "obviously was not of itself attracting [people]…"[33].

Whyte believed these sorts of plazas were vitally important to city life and ought to work better. Why did plazas like Seagram's work so well, yet its replications so poorly? Much of the blame might lay with the developers who created the sub-par places, taking advantage of the cushy exchange of valuable

[30] William Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces,* 14.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid, 10.
[33] Ibid.

floor space while building cold, hostile, and hardly public space. Yet, fault might be equally shared with the authors of regulations that had allowed such outcomes to occur without deeper scrutiny. Whyte bluntly concluded, "The City was being had. For the millions of dollars of extra space it was handing out to builders, it had every right to demand much better plazas in return."[34] Whyte and his team sought to crack the code on behalf of the NYC Planning commission to show how Seagram and Lever's Plaza produced such great social space, and to bring it to the hundreds of plazas that they had inspired.

Their conclusions were ultimately as innovative and radical as they were simple and obvious. For example, Whyte noted that "what seems to attract people [to a place] is other people" or that "people tend to sit where there is seating."[35] When presented with the option, Whyte observed that people tend to sit near other people (though not too close) instead of evenly spreading themselves out across an available space. And specific seats, especially ones with their back to a wall and looking out onto the plaza, were certain to be taken first. Other findings proved especially thought-provoking: that cold, lifeless plazas attracted only men, while successful, social spaces like Seagram had a reliable majority of women users. Or that people in a windless plaza preferred to sit in the sun below 70 degrees but sought the relief of a shaded tree in anything warmer. Humorously, Whyte observed that people—when given the chance—will shift a movable chair before sitting down, even by only a few inches, every time.[36]

[34] Ibid, 15.
[35] Ibid, 28.
[36] Ibid, 35.

Figure 9. Bryant Park in midtown New York was redesigned in the 1980s following the recommendations of William Whyte. (Fund for Better Waterfront)

These findings would ultimately inspire the next and last significant update to New York City's Zoning Regulation regarding privately-owned public space. Simply no one had ever spent a comparable amount of time or energy observing the actual uses of public spaces in New York, and now Whyte had much to share. In working with the Street Life Team, the Department of City Planning did away with the "as-of-right" policy and instead specifically defined two types of new plazas that would be allowed—"residential" and "urban" plazas—and what each must contain. These plazas would be subject to review from the Department of City Planning and only approved if they met the enhanced criteria. For the first time, "…all POPS were required to have a minimum set of amenities including seating, lighting, plantings and signage identifying the plaza as public space. Size, orientation, elevation and configuration of plazas were also strictly prescribed to ensure they would maximize sunlight, visibility and accessibility."[37] After decades of neglect, the city aimed to make developers deliver quality public spaces if they were to earn the coveted FAR bonuses.

To many observers, however, the impacts of the 1970s reforms were underwhelming. While few would claim that the tighter, more comprehensive plaza regulations were not a vast improvement from previous iterations, it was also not nearly the panacea for New York's open

[37] Schmidt, Nemeth, and Botsford, "The Evolution of Privately Owned Public Spaces," 273.

spaces that some had hoped for. Most second-rate plazas remained second-rate even with the addition of chairs and tables. One study examined pre-reform verses post-reform plazas and found that although post-reform POPS "…tend to employ many features which encourage use…," there was no "significant difference in the degree and amount of spatial control in POPS over time, nor a major change in the sociability or use of POPS, a somewhat surprising result."[38] The study identified several potential causes for such results, including lack of sustained enforcement of design standards, encroaching privatization, and policing of certain uses and users.[39]

Jerold Kayden, a Professor of Urban Planning at Harvard's Graduate School of Design and expert on privately-owned public spaces, arrived at a similar conclusion. In a landmark study in 2000, Kayden researched the extensive history of POPS in New York City and documented each and every one of the 503 such spaces across the five boroughs. The work is, by far, the most comprehensive and empirical study of the subject, and greatly contributed to this author's own review. Kayden ultimately concluded that "the record is mixed" on the marriage of private ownership and public use:

> At their best, the spaces have furnished members of the public – residents, employees, and visitors – with public spaces for accidental and planned social, recreational, cultural, and utilitarian experiences otherwise obtainable only with the City's publicly owned parks and other facilities or within privately owned privately controlled domains. At their worst, by design and operation, the spaces have been hostile to public use.[40]

Of the 503 privately-owned public spaces, Kayden and his team classified 41-percent as marginal.[41] Kayden listed many of the same influences—operational practices, denial of public access, annexation for private uses—for the decline of quality despite "substantially higher initial quality of public space" post-1970s.[42] Additionally, he suggests that many building owners have allowed standards for the spaces to slip over the years, noting that more than half of all buildings with public spaces were out of compliance in a 1998 and 1999 study.[43]

Ultimately, the record of privately owned public spaces in New York is far from settled. While they provide a feeling of open space, light, and air planned for in the 1961 Zoning

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[38] Ibid, 279.
[39] Ibid, 280.
[40] Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space,* 1.
[41] Ibid, 301.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

Regulation, they have often failed to live up to the aspirations sought in the 1970s reforms as vibrant social spaces. By measure of quantity, they are unmistakably successful; by measure of quality, however, they remain of questionable value. And the impact of incentive zoning and POPS are not limited to New York. The policies crafted throughout the 20th century in New York City have spread and been adopted by several other noteworthy American cities, with results even more opaque and unstudied.

Privately-Owned Public Space in Seattle

The record of incentive zoning and privately-owned public spaces in Seattle closely resembles New York City. In fact, Seattle's experience with the evolution and trajectory of such policies matches that of New York's own pioneering example to an uncanny degree—that being incentive zoning laws are introduced for the purpose of providing vaguely defined open spaces in increasingly stifling urban districts, developers enthusiastically collect the bonuses while providing barren plazas, and city officials work to fine-tune the requirements as they notice the growing number of unsocial and unused spaces they expected to be filled with grateful pedestrians.

But in the case of Seattle, the history of these spaces is largely undocumented and little studied. Unlike New York, there have been no urbanists like William Whyte or Jerold Kayden that have explored the minute and exhaustive behaviors of people in privately-owned public spaces. And without these researchers and their work, the available resources for city officials to improve their legislation has been significantly limited.

Seattle began offering development bonuses in exchange for public amenities in 1966 through Title 24 of the Seattle Municipal Code.[44] The impetus for the policy was to create a downtown that was multi-dimensional beyond commercial office space and retail. The goal, as Diane Sugimura—the former Director of Planning and Development—recalled, was to "create a place where you could live, work, and enjoy. And so, in order to have that kind of a downtown, we felt we needed things like open space…and downtown was fairly much built and there is not a lot of opportunity to create park space."[45] The introduction of incentive zoning policies was accompanied by changes in zoning that allowed for greater residential development in the urban core; in order to attract and accommodate this growth—the city planners figured—the neighborhood must offer certain amenities to potential new residents.

The amenities that the city envisioned took many different forms. Initially, developers could only collect additional FAR in downtown zones in three ways: by providing public plazas or arcades, or by designing voluntary setbacks from the street.[46] The definitions of such spaces were clearly—if thinly—defined in the code regulation. A plaza, for example, was a "continuous uncovered area which is accessible to the public at all times" with a minimum depth of ten feet, a length of fifty feet, and a minimum square-footage of five hundred feet.[47] Any mention of basic

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[44] Office of City Auditor, *Review of Controls Over Selected Public Benefit Features in Downtown Seattle* (City of Seattle, 2000), 2.

[45] Diane Sugimura, Zoom interview with author, March 9, 2022.

[46] City Auditor, *Selected Public Benefit Features,* 2.

[47] Ibid, 16.

public amenities—tables, chairs, trees, etc.—is conspicuously missing from the definition. By 1976, the City had added "shopping plazas" and "shopping arcades" to the list, and would later add such amenities to include escalators, weather protection, and sculpted building tops as public benefit features under the 1985 Downtown Plan.[48]

One of the most iconic examples of this policy in practice is the Columbia Tower (701 Fifth Avenue), formerly known as the Bank of America Tower. The Columbia Tower remains Seattle's tallest building, in part due to lucrative FAR bonuses. Constructed in 1982-1985, the developers were able to add 18 FAR to the baseline of 10 FAR by providing a retail arcade, which was bonused by the city at a ratio of 14-to-1.[49] Another example is the tower at 1201 Third Avenue, a particularly chunky building formally known as the Washington Mutual Tower. The building earned an additional 295,000 square feet of rentable floor space by providing a medley of public benefit features, including a hill climb assist, childcare center, public atrium, rooftop garden, a sculptured building top, and a transit station access easement.[50]

Figure 10. Columbia Tower, the tallest building in Seattle, used incentive zoning to achieve its height. (Ivan Andreevich)

As these public amenities allowed buildings to soar to new heights in Seattle, two large issues arose. The first issue was largely political. The size of downtown buildings was growing while access to space, air, and light was shrinking, and—like New Yorkers before them—the citizens of Seattle had noticed. Reacting to this fervent development, a group gathered together to say enough. Seattle, they argued, had been a small, working-class town in the northwest hinterlands of the country, and they intended to not let the character of the city be swept away by urban development.

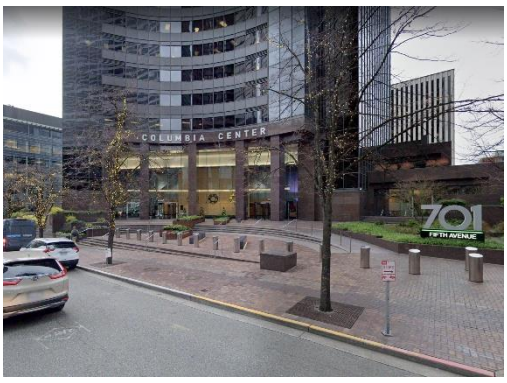

Figure 11. The plaza provided in order to increase the building's FAR. (Google Maps)

[48] Ibid, 2.
[49] Ibid, 3.
[50] Ibid, 7.

What emerged was the 1989 Citizen Alternative Plan, an initiative which sought to slow growth in Seattle by setting strict limits on development in the downtown neighborhoods. Amongst other things, the plan limited new building heights to 450-feet (roughly half that of Columbia Tower), limited new office space construction to 500,000 square feet annually, and—most relevantly—greatly reduced the maximum density that could be earned by PBF bonuses in the downtown zones.[51] For example, the initiative reduced the bonuses available in Downtown Zone 1 and 2 from a base of 5 FAR to 2. Despite this, the City Council would nullify much of the work of the Citizen Alternative Plan initiative only two years later when a developer offered—somewhat ironically—to build a public park in exchange for raising the height limit, yet many of the incentives remained diminished.[52]

The second issues facing Seattle's privately-owned public spaces in the 1980s were that many of them were simply poorly designed social spaces. A City Auditor report noted that prior to 1981, the city approved all public benefit features as long as the bonus calculations and the city's technical requirements were met.[53] There was no design review process whatsoever to evaluate the proposed plazas on a qualitative basis. The result, according to the report, was that: "In the absence of qualitative design review, several public spaces of questionable design were bonused under Title 24.".[54]

Figure 12. Privately-owned plaza at 4th and Madison, located on the 7th floor. (Michael Allen Smith)

Plazas were, in many places, built far below, above, or inside properties that defied any sense of public accessibility. A plaza built at 4th and Madison, for example, required one to navigate through two escalators, a hallway, and then a separate elevator to the 7th floor to access the bonused public space. The report singled out the Madison Hotel at 909

[51] O. Casey Corr, "Plan to Slow Growth Put Before Seattle Voters," The Washington Post, May 16, 1989.
[52] David Wilma and Walt Crowley, "Citizens' Alternative Plan, which sets growth limits for downtown Seattle, wins at the polls on May 16, 1989," HistoryLink, September 5, 2001.
[53] City Auditor, *Selected Public Benefit Features,* 11.
[54] Ibid.

Sixth Avenue, and the plaza on the south side of the Crowne Plaza Hotel, 1113 Sixth Avenue, as being of particular questionable public benefit. In order for the public to know about these plazas, one would either have to hear about them from someone in the know, or glimpse them from a neighboring high rise and boldly investigate. William Whyte remarked on this quality of Seattle's plazas, writing that one in particular "…was well located and enjoyed lots of whatever sun Seattle got. It would likely have been very popular if people could have seen it from the street. They never could. It was tucked away on a mezzanine level."[55]

How public is a public space if hardly any members of the public know about it? And—perhaps more sinisterly—if the private managers actively attempt to dissuade the public from using it? The question of public accessibility to privately owned public spaces became a topic of concern for some city officials. Vince Lyon, an urban planner with the City of Seattle, took it upon himself to personally test this question. According to a colleague, Vince would often leave for his lunch break—brown paper bag in hand—with a list of the bonused public plazas in downtown Seattle, sit down to eat and wait. His colleague remembered, "He would do it just because sometimes people would ask him to leave. And he would say, 'No. This is a privately owned public space. And I'm entitled to be here.' He was doing a little friendly enforcement."[56]

Unfortunately for the public, this dedicated employee on his lunch break was essentially the full extent of the city's enforcement efforts and ability. This is partly because the Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI), the city agency which approves the building permits of which POPS are included, obtains the majority of its funding through permit fees, and such revenue can legally only be used for the review and enforcement of permits.[57] And since the POPS are not standalone permits but rather only one aspect of a project, SDCI is lawfully unable to proactively investigate or enforce plazas or security out of compliance with regulation. Instead, the agency must wait until a complaint is lodged about a specific space in order to inspect. The logical question of how the public would know to submit a complaint only further confuses the Catch-22-like situation.

In the early 2000s, City officials attempted to rectify this condition with basic signage that would announce these spaces as free and open to the public. New York City, after all, had long required the placement of placards detailing the nature of privately-owned public space, so why

[55] William Whyte, *City, 129.*
[56] Jack McCullough, Zoom interview with author, March 16, 2022.
[57] Brennon Staley, Zoom interview with author, March 17, 2022.

Figure 13. A custom plaque at Safeco Plaza delineates private space from public. (Martin McClellan)

not Seattle? Well, it turns out that they already had—albeit with a small problem. The 2000 City Auditor's report notes that "regulations require developers to identify each bonused public space with 'the City's public open space logo' and the hours it is open; however, the City does not have such a logo."[58] The city had required developers to install a logo in their plaza, but had failed to provide one. As a result, only four properties out of twenty-eight had installed signs that indicated the plazas were public spaces. This report drew the attention of councilman Nick Licata, who called for such a logo to be created and installed. When asked about his in an interview, councilman Licata said the main reason for the lack of logo was that:

> …they couldn't…or they didn't find someone to hire to draw up the logo. And there was a volunteer, a student but someone who was becoming a professional, that designed one. But the professionals in the city turned it down because they felt it was almost like a guild…[and this was] someone coming in and claiming turf that should be theirs. And as a result, they felt it wasn't sufficiently attractive enough.[59]

By 2008, a logo was created based off of New York City's signage yet only one additional property had installed it. A large part of the problem was many of the plazas had already been built, and the city could not force them to install the logo post-facto. One year later, Licata reported that:

> As of today, 12 properties have signage. For some properties, the owner is required to provide and erect the signs; it is the City's responsibility for others if the owners do not comply voluntarily. It is estimated that it will cost $30,000 to complete enforcement and outreach activities, including fabrication and installation of signage.[60]

The exact number of plazas with the approved signage today is not documented, but—by personal account—the number is significantly higher than in past reports, if not fully complete.

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[58] City Auditor, Selected Public Benefit Features, 6.
[59] Nick Licata, Zoom interview with author, March 3, 2022.
[60] Nick Licata, "Open Space Signage Initiative," Nick's Notes (newsletter) Issue No. 9, Winter 2009.

The nine-year saga of the POPS signage exemplifies the hot-and-cold approach that the City of Seattle has prioritized issues surrounding privately-owned public space. A report or incident might generate periods of heightened scrutiny, yet before long attention inevitably shifts to other pressing civic matters, and privately-owned public spaces may not be mentioned again for many years. By the turn of the century, according to one news report, the City had practically lost track of all records of where bonused plazas existed and what they should be providing.[61]

This inattention to POPS coincided with a period in which the policy of incentive zoning had largely fallen out of favor in the development community. The decline can be largely attributed to the reduced benefits for providing open spaces to new developments that the Citizen Action Committee had enacted in the 1990s . A 2000 citizen report concluded that, "…a limited range of public benefit features is being produced through the Bonus Program despite the long lists of bonusable items available to developers."[62] The City seemed to largely agree, citing the fact that six recent downtown developments had declined to earn additional FAR through open space and concluding that "that most non-housing PBFs are no longer attractive to developers."[63] Instead, most developers recouped similar bonuses from providing ground floor retail, sidewalk widening, and overhead weather protection. The era of the majority of privately-owned public spaces being developed through incentive zoning bonuses—roughly 1970s – mid-1990s—was seemingly coming to an end.

But though the products of incentive zoning were declining or changing away from open space, the pressures that had inspired such policies—namely, development and growth—were only increasing in Seattle. Between 2000 and 2010, the population of Seattle grew a respectable eight percent. According to the US Census Bureau, in the following decade the city added an astounding 130,000 new residents, which represented a twenty-one percent increase over ten years. Much of this growth was centered in the urban core, straining Seattle's ability to provide everything from affordable housing, practical transportation options, and adequate open spaces in the downtown.

Furthermore, Seattle's ability to modify the existing legislation regarding incentive zoning was limited by Washington State's legislation. Specifically Section 82.02.020 of the Revised Code of Washington, which reads:

> …no county, city, town, or other municipal corporation shall impose any tax, fee, or charge, either direct or indirect, on the construction or reconstruction of residential buildings, commercial buildings, industrial buildings, or on any other

[61]Josh Feit, "Seattle's Unknown Private Spaces...That Are Actually Public Spaces," SeattleMet, November 14, 2016.
[62] City Auditor, Selected Public Benefit Features, 2000, 3.
[63] Ibid, 4.

> building or building space or appurtenance thereto, or on the development, subdivision, classification, or reclassification of land.

Due to this somewhat unique section of code, incentive zoning as a policy in Washington State had always been a fairly legally tenuous tool for creating open space. Put simply, cities are prohibited from taxing development except under very specific conditions, for example impact fees or voluntary agreements. What this means in practice is that Seattle is limited in what can be demand from developers without running afoul of Section 82.02.020, and that much of the open space provided over the past forty years had—to some extent—been voluntarily provided by the developers themselves. In order to provide improved public spaces, the City had to evolve beyond simple incentive zoning policy.

This takes us to the latest approach of how Seattle provides privately-owned public spaces, namely street vacations, and open space ordinances. The use of both of these policies can clearly be seen in the development of the South Lake Union (SLU) neighborhood, which will be discussed in a later section.

In 2004, the City Council approved legislation that made substantial changes to zoning South Lake Union. Spurred on by huge demand for office space in the formerly light manufacturing zone, the goal of the legislation was "to increase development capacity and advance the community vision for development of the neighborhood. One [such] recommendation was that as property redevelops it contribute to a network of publicly and privately held open spaces throughout the neighborhood"[64] Among many changes introduced in the open space initiative, the City required that new commercial developments over 30,000 SF preserve or create fifteen-percent of the lot as publicly accessible open space. This differs from traditional incentive zoning only slightly by focusing on a whole area rather than a single building and is concerned with preservation rather than creation, yet still remains largely voluntary. According to a planner who helped author this zoning change, the fifteen percent requirement is "essentially a masking requirement that was meant to get to these things without us necessarily having the capacity to just require it outright." [65] The planner acknowledged that such a scheme would not be possible without a willing development partner, which in this case was almost entirely Vulcan Real Estate, who worked extremely closely with the city and came in with "extremely high design expectations" for their projects.[66] This policy has—by far—resulted in the greatest amount of open space preserved or built in South Lake Union.

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[64] Director's Report and Recommendation, "South Lake Union Open Space Incentive," *City of Seattle*, June 2019.
[65] Brennon Staley, Interview, March 17, 2022.
[66] Ibid.

On the other hand, street vacation, alley vacation, or vacation of public access is a type of easement in which the city transfers some sort of public space to the real estate developer in exchange for some other type of public benefit. Many of Seattle's urban blocks were originally built with a bisecting alleyway oriented north to south. While downtown developments have generally maintained these alleyways for access, several blocks in South Lake Union have worked with the city to remove the alleyways and swap the orientation to east-west. This serves several purposes, including creating more flexible development or architectural options for the developer and providing mid-block passages for the public pedestrians. From the City's perspective, planners have found that:

> For full block developments, those alleys aren't really useful anyway. And so, generally, it's a win-win when people remove the alleys and have a different mechanism for getting parking on their property. Then they have public open space…and that has been a super good deal for the area, and for the city.[67]

Like the open space initiative in South Lake Union, street and alley vacations provide the city and developer with more flexibility in forming what the finished product looks like. For one thing, the process requires the developer to work with the design commission, and—because the city has no obligation to grant the vacation—they typically have to convincingly show how their project will truly add value for the public. Rather than a binary definition for open spaces that developers either do or do not make, alley vacations are often prolonged, collaborative negotiations that attempt to serve a vision for the neighborhood.

The privately owned public plazas in South Lake Union have been created through a combination of these three methods. In 2018, the Office of Planning and Community Development undertook a Kayden-like survey of all of the POPS, Bonus, and Vacation open spaces in Seattle to determine the quality of each space, and four of five plazas in SLU scored in the top fifteen percent to qualify as "good."[68] This is particularly noteworthy as the report's conclusions, like Kayden's study in New York, were rather pessimistic about the program. Out of a total of forty-eight sites, forty-three percent of POPS were deemed "average"; only fifteen percent were "good." These results, however, speak more to the historically poor development of such spaces rather than the current approach, with the report noting that:

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Office of Planning and Community Development, "Plazas for People: Assessment of Privately Owned Public Spaces in Greater Downtown," City of Seattle, November 2018.

> Half of the sites ranked in the top ten are recent developments, built in the last two decades. Four of these five sites are in South Lake Union, where the neighborhood has an open space requirement for office buildings, stipulated through the Seattle Land Use Code. The code standards combine with the SDCI Design Review process to fine-tune the design and positive results of these private plazas.[69]

Indeed, one might read the report as a strong indication of success that the tinkering, iterative approach to plaza design in working and should continue. A quick analysis of the data shows that plaza design, at least by the metrics set forth by OPCD, is improving by 1.2 points per each decade.

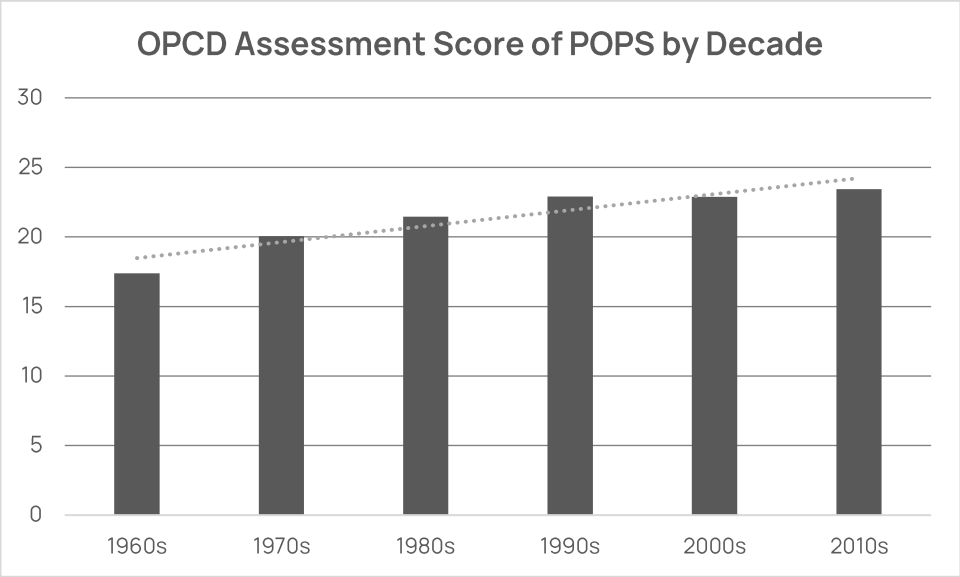


Figure 14. OPCD's plaza score, by decade. (Data from OPCD's "Plazas for People," graph by the author).

Additionally, the 2018 OPCD study of POPS noted that the study was a public space survey and not a public life survey. Therefore, data "…was not collected on behaviors or activities, although such a study would provide a more detailed understanding of how spaces are used over longer time periods and seasons. A public life survey is a recommended next step."[70] How people use these plazas—if at all—has remained an unstudied aspect of the overall assessment of privately owned public plazas in Seattle. Understanding this specific facet of plaza life is the ultimate goal of this project.

[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid, 7.

Methodology

The goal of this thesis is to complete an in-depth public life study on a sample of the latest iteration of privately-owned public space in Seattle in order to determine whether such policies result in well-functioning, vibrant social spaces. In order to complete a comprehensive public life survey, many different data collection and observations methods were employed. While a specific methodology is recommended by the 2018 OPCD survey—specifically the Public Life Tools as published by the Gehl Institute in 2017—other techniques inspired by the work of William Holly Whyte, in particular from his book *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces,* were used in order to achieve an all-encompassing narrative of the life of the plazas. Whyte's work was specifically influential on the codification of privately-owned public plazas in the 1970s, which was then replicated across the county, and the intent of this study was to use this framework for understanding social space in the context of present-day South Lake Union. Thus, the results from this study can and should be seen as but one particular style of public space assessment, and not than the definitive conclusion.

Like Whyte's own techniques for public space observation, by far the simplest yet most useful tool for the data gathered in this study was a watchful pair of eyes, a notepad, pencil, and a timer. As one of his students sufficiently put it, Whyte "taught all of us, more than anything, to look, to look hard, with a clean, clear mind, and then to look again—and to believe in what you see. That is the first of his lessons, and the one that informs all the others. Believe in what you see, and believe in the fact that the people who use cities are often way ahead of the people who design them."[71] While the below techniques are important to quantify certain uses and behavior, nothing can substitute for a sharp pair of eyes, curiosity, and quite a lot of time spent in public spaces.

Contextual Research

Before arriving at the plaza to observe, the first resource I turned to is online records and documentation. Meeting minutes and presentations from the Seattle Design Commission were used extensively in order to contextualize the plazas and better understand their formation. These resources are neatly organized and archived by the Seattle Design Commission on their website. The rollcall from each meeting is also particularly helpful, as it lists the involved parties by name and related organization. Many interviews conducted for this study originated from identifying a name or organization from the SDC's meeting minutes. Another helpful online resource that was used were the covenants signed by involved parties that established an alley or street vacation, and

[71] Martin Pedersen, "The Enduring Importance of William H. Whyte," CommonEdge, February 2, 2022.

which often lists in detail the amenities and maintenance required by the city to grant such a vacation. These are telling documents which illuminate what is important to each party and what is required of them, especially from real estate companies which are often cagey about their development arrangements. Such covenants are published by the city and the county, or may be accessed through relationships with the involved parties via informational interviews. Other information is available—free and open to the public—through city departments, most relevantly the Office of Planning and Community Development (OPCD) and Seattle Department of Construction and Inspection (SDCI).

Counts and Observation

When arriving at a plaza, one can begin to collect data from a wide range of sources. But since one does not know the outcome of the study, it is not always clear what will be the most helpful to focus on. I started by counting people, objects, and behaviors. The Public Life Tools from the Gehl Institute is a helpful framework to quickly understand best practices for counting people in public space.

Other important information that I catalogued includes hourly counts, dwell time counts, and movement maps. Hourly counts are just that—counting how many people are in a given plaza either at one time or during an interval. I used both techniques for the purposes of this study. The plaza usership counts (figure 22), for example, were derived from a sample survey I conducted by counting the total number of unique plaza users during a 15-minute period, and then multiplying by four. At least one 15-minute count was done for each hour included in the graph; if more than one count occurred during the same hour, the average was taken from the data set.

I measured dwell time by from choosing a plaza user as they enter the space, and then discretely timing how long they stay in the area before leaving. This is easily accomplished with the aid of a stopwatch, typically found on a cell phone. When I was most attentive, synchronous subjects can be measured at the same time. These counts were done after determining the most popular time of plaza use—lunchtime, or around 12pm-1pm—in order to measure a significant sample population.

Movement maps are a fairly intuitive process, as well. I traced plaza maps by hand or digitally from satellite images and blueprints found in the contextual research phase of the project. Armed with these drawings and a pencil, I sat in the plaza, watched people move through the space, and replicated their approximate paths on my map. This is not an exact science; the movement of plaza users, especially if they're in groups, can be difficult to trace with great accuracy. No matter—the main objective here was to find the popular routes through space, not the deviations. If one

spends a decent amount of time observing and tracing, the law of averages reveals the main pathways and thoroughfares that pedestrians prefer to use. The results were then replicated digitally for visual purposes.

Photographs

Photographs were also an important part of my methodology. Photos greatly assist in showcasing a point or phenomenon identified—as so profoundly done in Whyte's own work—as well as serving as reference points in which to return to for further analysis. For example, if there is not time to do a proper count during the lunchtime rush, simply snap a photo and count at a later date. Photographs also lend themselves to more objective analysis than when one is in the

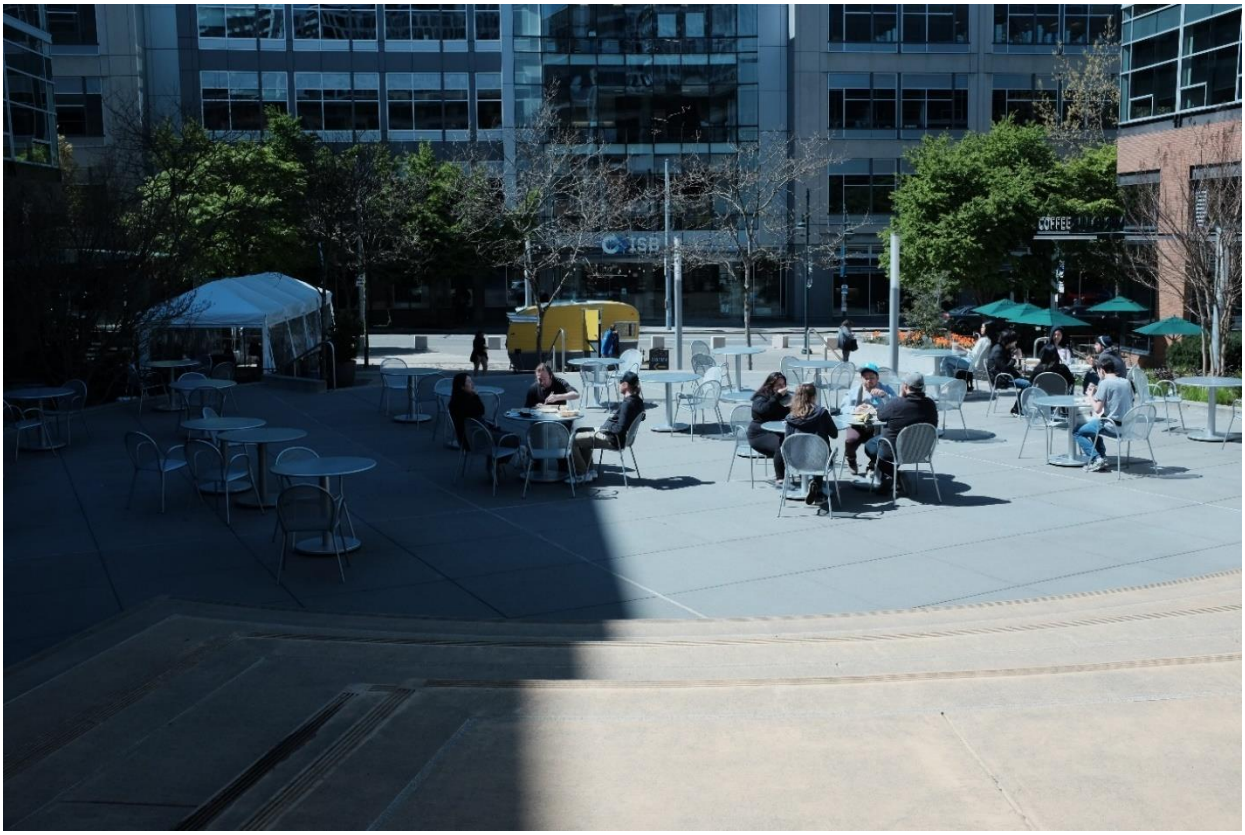


Figure 15. Van Vorst at lunchtime.

plaza, working in real-time. For example, the photo above (figure 15) I took of a post-lunchtime crowd at Van Vorst on a brisk afternoon. Only when I returned home and reviewed the picture did I notice that all of the plaza users had chosen seats in direct sunlight. This is a fascinating phenomenon identified by Whyte and it was wonderful to see that it applied here, too. Such a finding would have been missed without capturing the moment in time with a photograph.

Further Studies

Further studies of plaza life should consult the texts mentioned throughout this work for additional methods and techniques for assessing social space. In particular, Jerold Kayden's *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience* is a fantastic example of an exhaustive catalogue of POPS in New York City, and would easily lend itself to a similar study in other cities. Or, a close reading of Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Places* and *City: Rediscovering the Center* will provide countless strategies for studying social spaces in cities. Additionally, Appendix A in Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Places* meticulously describes his process of filming and producing timelapse photography for his accompanying film *The Social Life of the Street*. The use of film was strongly considered for this project, but ultimately found to be too impractical given the short timeframe. The end results, however, would have been a wonderful resource and provided a level of contextualization that written words and still-photography inherently fall short of. A film dedicated to studying the social life of privately owned plazas in Seattle would surely be a fascinating and entertaining next step for understanding the mechanics of such spaces.

Lastly, the realities and effects of COVID-19 on the presence of office workers in downtowns must be mentioned. While all attempts were made to capture the largest sample of plaza users possible, the number of such users in these spaces was significantly diminished due to COVID restrictions and novel trends such as work-from-home policies. Additionally, the spring of 2022 was one of the wettest and coldest in many years. The often-inclement weather most assuredly had some effect on the number of plaza users and the observed patterns of behavior. An empty plaza on a 55F day might be filled with great amounts of social activity on an 80F day in a pre-COVID world. In the context of this study, I cannot with great certainty conclude whether the results presented might expand beyond this exact place and time. Suffice to say that these observations were not conducted under normal circumstances, and the results should be seen in the context from which they were derived.

Site Contextualization

South Lake Union

All three plazas analyzed in this study are found in the South Lake Union neighborhood. The purpose for selecting this area is simple: South Lake Union is an active neighborhood where many people—especially urban office workers—spend their time and, as a result, where a large numbers of privately owned public spaces exist. Additionally, these plazas represent the latest iteration of POPS in Seattle, the majority of them built between 2008 – 2018 as the neighborhood boomed with residential and commercial development. Thus, these plazas are the best indication of how both the city and developers most recently approach designing such spaces, and how these design choices influence the social behavior of the visitors.

The history of public space in South Lake Union is a somewhat painful memory for urban planners and park enthusiasts in the city. Throughout the first half of 20th century, the neighborhood remained a light manufacturing area serving the shipping and military industry which in decline or moving elsewhere in the region. In comparison, the downtown area was growing rapidly as Seattle became a global technological and biomedical hub. The disparity between the two neighborhoods could be clearly seen on a stroll down Denny Way in the early 2000s—the area to the south was zoned for Downtown with high-reaching skyscrapers and increasing urban density while to the north lay small warehouses and manufacturing spaces.

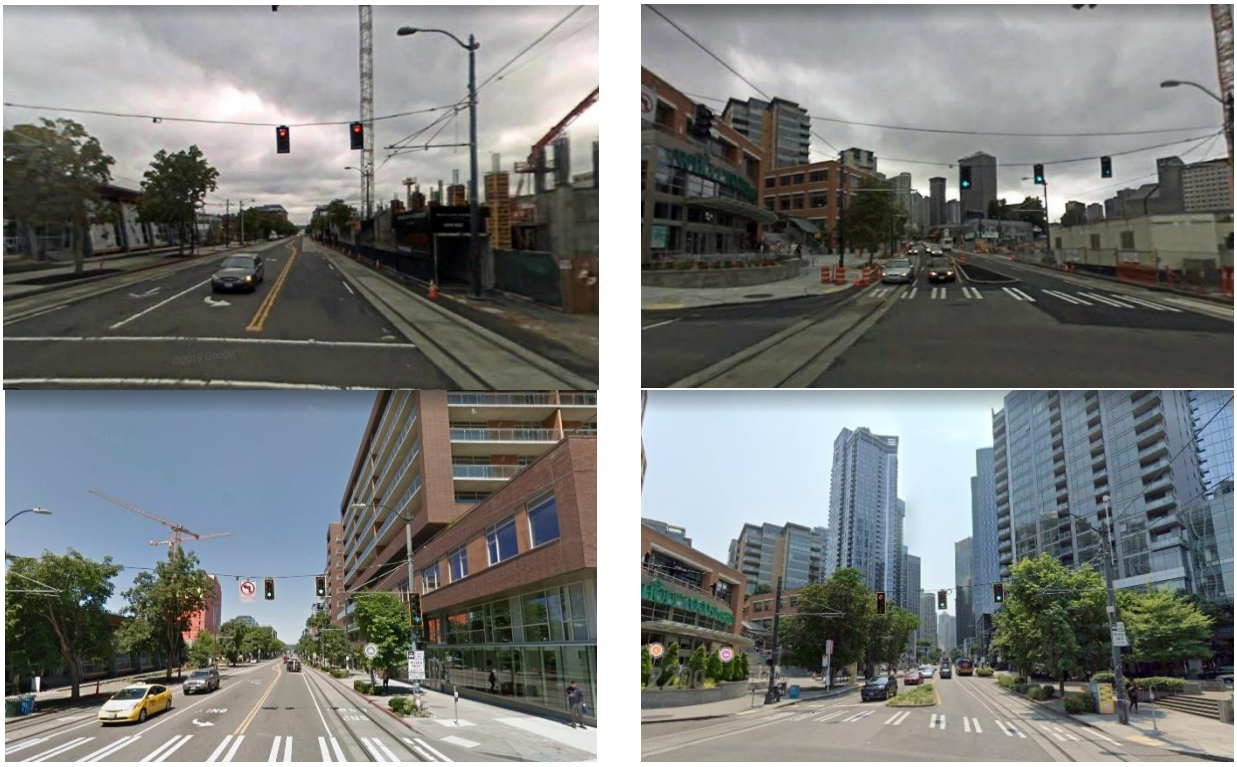


Figure 16. Westlake Avenue. Top: 2008, Bottom: 2021. (Google Maps)

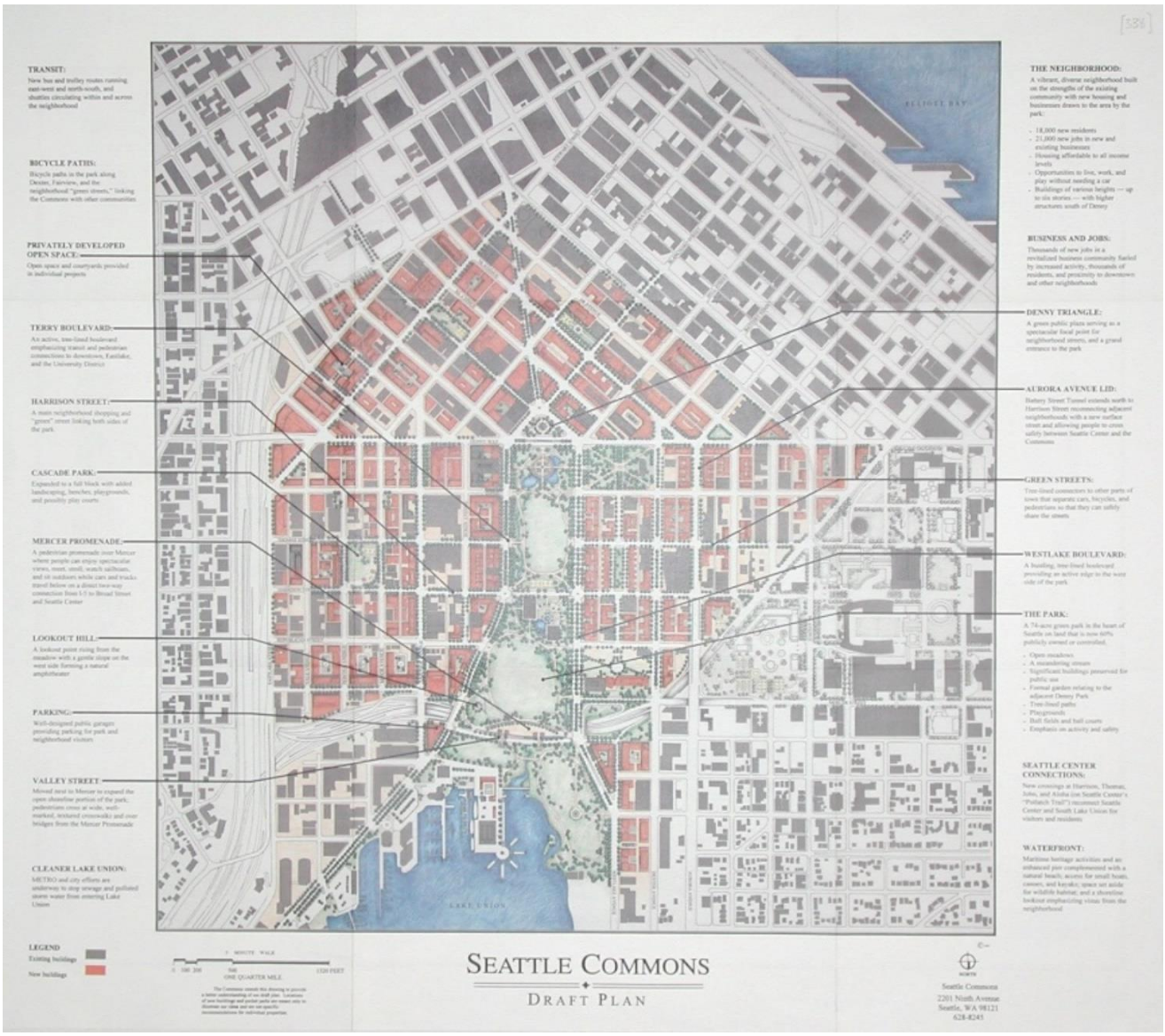


Figure 17. Draft plan of the proposed Seattle Commons. (Seattle Municipal Archives)

In 1991, however, Seattle Times columnist John Hinterberger and architect Fred Bassetti proposed a new vision for the space. Instead of warehouses and light industry, South Lake Union was reimagined as a 61-acre park called "Seattle Commons" connecting Downtown to Lake Union and providing the growing Seattle population with a grand Central Park-type space for recreation and leisure. High-tech development and corporate campuses would line the perimeter of the park, anchoring the growing technological business firmly in Seattle. Even better, they had a strong financial backer in Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen. Allen lent the campaign $25 million dollars, but required the Seattle taxpayers to fund the remaining $111 million. After a fierce campaign propelled in part by the anti-growth, populous movement that passed the Citizen Alternative Plan,

the vote for the public park failed twice at the polls. Seattle, the voters declared, did not need nor want a grand park, or at least to have to pay for it.[72]

Allen, not to be dissuaded, bought the land anyway and began to develop it with his private company Vulcan Inc. The city granted the area a rezone to allow taller height limits and in 2004, Vulcan built a streetcar line from downtown to the lakeshore. The same year, the Seattle City Council designated the South Lake Union Neighborhood as one of the City's six Urban Centers.[73] Large businesses and industry began to move into the new spaces, starting with the world-class Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. The neighborhood development was sent into overdrive when Amazon announced it would move its headquarters to the area beginning in 2007, .[74] Since Vulcan's takeover of the neighborhood, over 55,000 jobs have been created and over 6.8 million square feet of commercial space (and counting) constructed.[75]

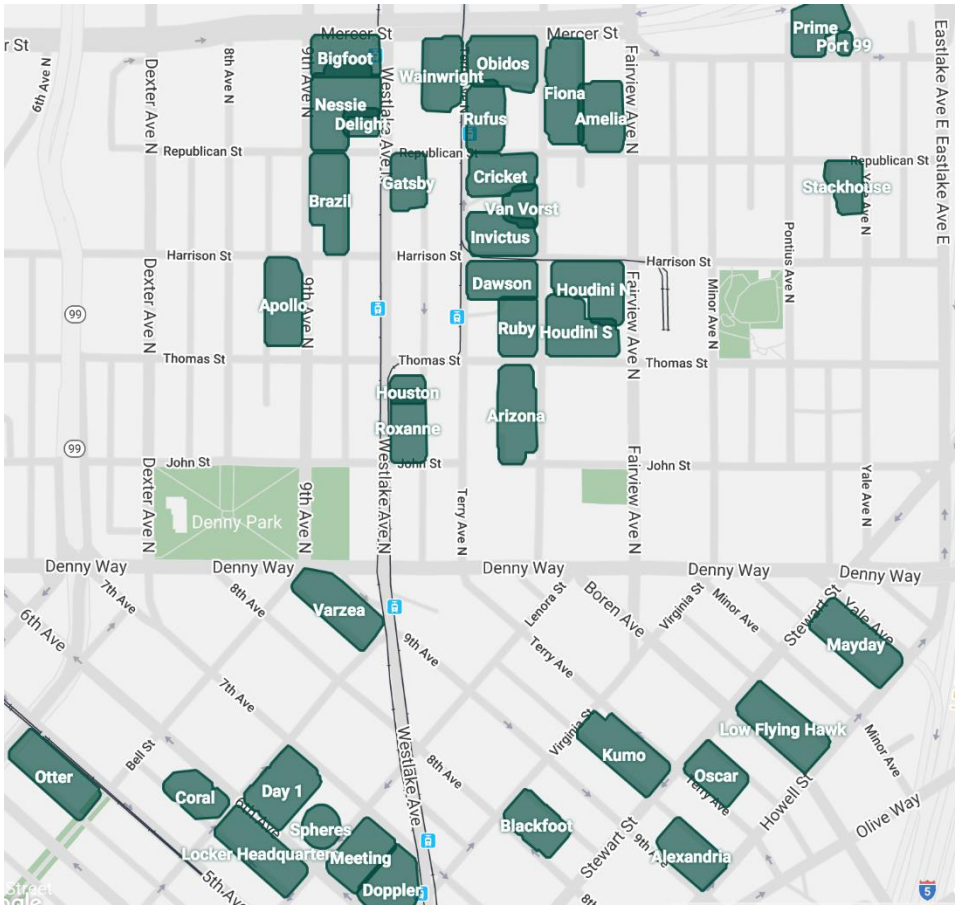
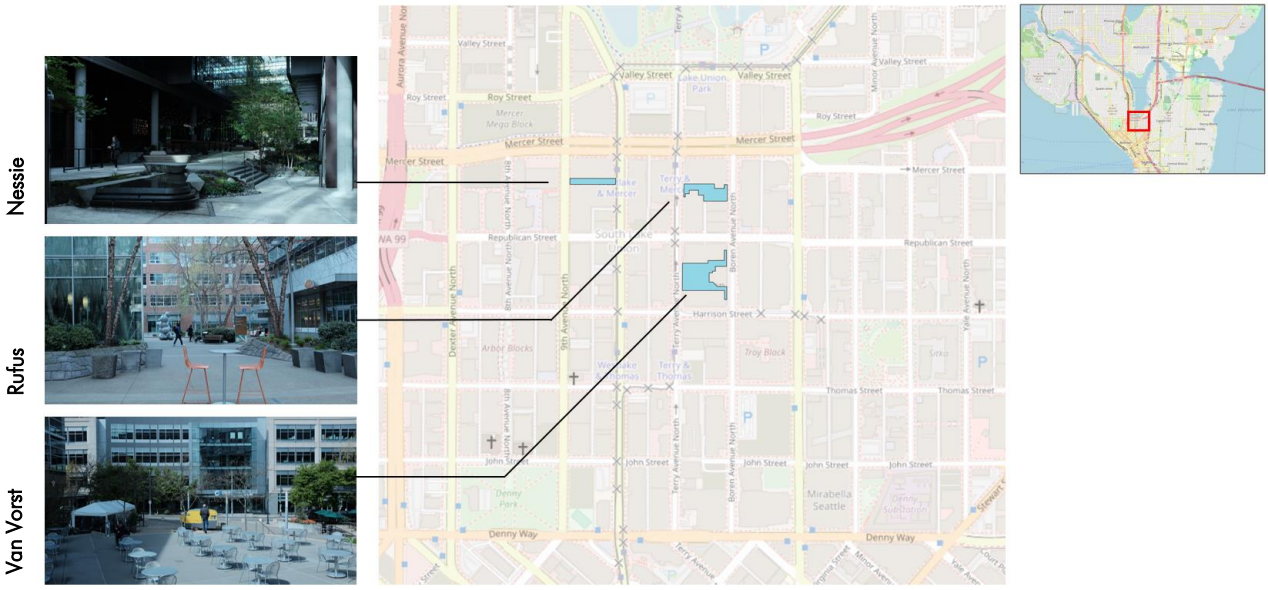


Figure 18. Amazon's commercial development in South Lake Union. (CampusBuilding.com)

[72] Eric Scigliano, "The Seattles That Might Have Been," The Seattle Times, June 7, 2018.
[73] Office of Planning and Community Development, "South Lake Union, Background," City of Seattle. Accessed March 21, 2022.
[74] Allen, Matthieu. "The Transformation of South Lake Union." Medium. December 7, 2019.
[75] Vulcan Real Estate. "South Lake Union." Accessed April 2, 2022.

And though Seattle may not have opted for the grand vision of Seattle Commons, many public spaces were created in the process of development. This time around, however, Allen and Vulcan largely avoided the public process and worked instead to integrate privately-owned public spaces in the new building complexes. From 2005 – 2018, six out of the ten privately-owned public spaces were built in South Lake Union or Denny Triangle, an adjoining neighborhood which hosts many recent Vulcan developments. During the same period, not a single fully public park was built. Rather, incentive zoning and other tools like street vacations are how public spaces are created. The following plazas are the direct results.



Van Vorst Courtyard

The Van Vorst Courtyard is a 30,300-square foot plaza located at 426 Terry Ave N in the heart of the South Lake Union neighborhood. The plaza is oriented east-west; to the north and south of the plaza are two Amazon buildings colloquially known as Cricket and Invictus. Sharing the block to the east is the Van Vorst building, a historically landmarked industrial factory building dating from the early 1900s and from which the plaza derives its name. These buildings and associated courtyard are known as 'Block 102' of the South Lake Union plan, and represented the first major development of Vulcan Real Estate and Amazon in the neighborhood. The courtyard is classified by the city of Seattle as solely a "plaza," distinguishing it amongst the other two study areas which serve as both "plazas" and "mid-block connectors."

Before the development, the 102-block consisted of the Van Vorst building, another aging structure, and surface parking lots. An alleyway bisected the block running north-south,

mimicking the urban form of the adjacent properties. The site was previously zoned as Industrial but updated in 2004 to allow for commercial development.

The development of the Van Vorst Courtyard in 2008 employed all three techniques for creating public open spaces in their development—namely incentive zoning, open space initiative, and alleyway street vacation. In order to site two large buildings on the block and preserve the Van Vorst building, the developers applied for an alley vacation and proposed the courtyard in exchange for the loss of the alleyway, which also satisfied the 15% open space initiative required by the rezone.[76]

According to meeting minutes from the Seattle Design Commission, which approved the project, the proposal to vacate the alleyway was not met with immediate endorsement. One commission noted that she "…shares the project team's frustration with this lengthy review process and recognizes constraints at every level."[77] And while the alley vacation was ultimately approved, it is notable how uneasy the commission was about such an action, especially considering the feelings about the value of alleyways today. The meeting notes indicate great concern with what such a vacation would mean for the rest of the neighborhood:

> [A member] feels that these vacations do not preserve the historic character of the neighborhood grid of South Lake Union, and this leads to the perception that alleys are for sale in the city…[she] recognizes that, in other cities, there are no socioeconomic factors that are more important than preservation of the grid. [She] feels that, through each successive vacation, the city is starting to become more suburban.[78]

The meeting ended with members of the design commission recognizing that "…this is a first step in Vulcan's development in the South Lake Union Area. [I] hope that this does not send a message that alley vacations are encouraged."[79]

The Van Vorst Courtyard has remained a stable fixture of public space in a neighborhood rapidly changing. Since its completion in 2008, dozens of corporate buildings have risen around it, thousands of office workers commute and live in the neighborhood, and several other privately owned public plazas have been created. Interestingly, the Van Vorst Courtyard is the only POP solely classed as a "plaza" amenity; the others in the vicinity are classified by the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspection as serving a dual function of "mid-block connectors," as well as

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[76] OPCD, "South Lake Union, Background," City of Seattle. Accessed March 21, 2022.
[77] Seattle Design Commission, "Minutes of the Meeting," Meeting Notes from the Seattle Design Commission Meeting, March 7, 2002, 7.
[78] Seattle Design Commission, "Minutes of the Meeting," March 2002, 9.
[79] Ibid, 8.

plazas.[80] The plaza hosts many public programming events organized Discover South Lake Union, a Vulcan-sponsored neighborhood marketing agency, including a winter market, a craft show, and public art.[81] There is also the locally famous Community Banana Stand, a converted airstream staffed by "bananistas" which hand out free bananas to the public, courtesy of Amazon Corporation.

Rufus Plaza

A single block down the street from the Van Vorst Courtyard lies the Rufus Plaza. Rufus is an 18,000 square foot plaza built in 2008, sandwiched between two large Amazon developments known as Rufus and Obidos. The site is a midblock connector between Boren and Terry Ave North, between Republican and the very busy Mercer Street. Previously, the site was a single large warehouse building which was knocked down to allow the current development. Similar to the Van Vorst Courtyard, the plaza was created and maintained in exchange for a vacation of an alleyway that ran north-south. Despite the Design Commission members best hopes (or perhaps confirming their fears), it seems that alleyway vacations did indeed became en vogue for the neighborhood. The Rufus Plaza mirrors the Van Vorst, orienting east-west between the buildings and creating a pathway through the traditional urban grid.

The plaza consists of paving and planting islands throughout the 270-feet length of the plaza. Like all of the POPS studied, the plaza is flush to the adjacent sidewalks leaving no interruption between the two spaces and entry is accessible and open. Lush plantings and tree foliage—intended to recall the "lake shores that once existed on this site"—make large portions of the plaza less visually accessible, and one is just able to make out the one side of the space from the other.[82] The Design Commission noted in 2007 that, "The landscape concept…may be too uniform to entice the public into the space. There is no expectation of surprise or discovery with such a legible concept."[83] In response, the landscape architects countered that, "The other features of the courtyard (artwork, benches, signage, moveable furniture, etc.) as well as the human activities that will be layered over the physical construction (passing through, sitting, entering buildings, visiting retail establishments, meditating, vendor carts, etc.) will provide a level of overall diversity that will serve to entice and surprise."[84] A large part of human activities that developers hoped to inspire here was retail and commercial activity. The ground floor of the two Amazon buildings is leased for retail space, lining the plaza borders to the north and south with shops like Top Pot Doughnuts,

[80] Seattle Department of Construction and Inspection. "Privately Owned Public Spaces." City of Seattle.
[81] "Van Vorst Courtyard." Discover South Lake Union. Accessed April 21, 2022.
[82] LMN Architects, "Design Commission #3," Presentation to Seattle Design Commission, March 6, 2008, 21.
[83] Ibid, 13.
[84] Ibid.

Bartell Drugs, and a dog grooming facility. The entrances to Rufus and Obidos are interspersed between these retail spaces.

According to the 2018 OCPD study, the Rufus Plaza received a 28 out of 33 points, placing it in the assessment category "good." The survey noted the positive amounts of seating, accessibility, visibility, and landscaping as particular strong design elements. It noted that the foliage, while providing weather protection during the summer, is bare in the winter resulting in the opposite effect. The potential improvements recommended for the site were to add movable seating (which were pledged in the Design Commission Review), formalizing a smoking section, and diversifying the landscape.[85]

Nessie Connector and Plaza

One block to the west of Rufus and the Van Vorst Plaza is the Nessie Mid-Block Connector and Plaza. The plaza, like its surrounding neighbors, is named after the office development sited on block 93 in South Lake Union—Nessie—which is situated next to its sister building named Big Foot. Situated in between these two structures is a 11,200 square foot open space connecting the busy Westlake Avenue—a five lane thoroughfare with heavy bus and trolly traffic—to the quieter 9th Ave N. Similarly to the Rufus and Van Vorst, Nessie Plaza is the result of an alley vacation granted by the City of Seattle to Vulcan Inc. The previous block was laid out in the traditional north-south configuration, which was relinquished in favor of a pedestrian link and public space, a smaller L-shaped alleyway on the southeast portion of the block, and a smaller overall gross floor area.

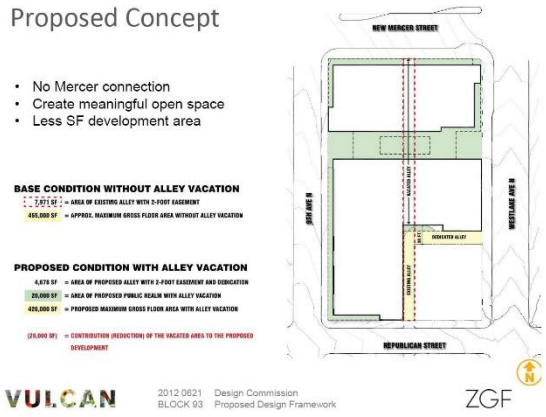

Figure 19. Street Vacation proposal for Nessie Plaza. (Seattle Design Commission)

The Nessie Plaza has several noteworthy design elements that make the space standout amongst its peers. The first is purely sensory. Welcoming signage declares: "This galleria is designed to give you the chance to recharge." The visitor is immediately greeted with an often-unfamiliar sound in a city: a babbling brook. A peaceful water feature runs the length of the downward sloped 200-foot plaza—emerging out of sculptured seats, disappearing under pathways,

[85] Office of Planning and Community Development, "Plazas for People: Assessment of Privately Owned Public Spaces in Greater Downtown," City of Seattle, November 2018.

reemerging, and cascading down a miniature aqueduct, and finally draining into a concealed cistern at the plaza edge. According to the signage posted nearby, the water is recycled from the rooftop runoff and later assists in irrigating the landscape. To this author's ear, the stream indeed seems to run harder during a rainstorm. The space is meticulously manicured with native plants, trees, and other horticulture, all which contributes to the LEED Certified Building award and aims to "lessen the demand a growing city has on both natural resources and city infastructure," according to nearby signage. Like Rufus and Van Vorst, the space offers retail opportunity in the form of food—a Vietnamese restaurant called 'Sizzle and Crunch' and the casual Mexican restaurant "La Palmera." During lunch and happy hour, both places are often packed with customers.

The most noteworthy aspect of the plaza is the canopy which lies some 70-feet above it, built with green and opaque glass that creates a molted light effect throughout the whole area. While still exposed to the elements, this canopy never allows direct sunlight into the plaza. A city planner described this feature as "unfortunate," elaborating that for "so much of the year, it actually is very gray and wet. I think people thought this would be a nice way to get out of the rain, but actually just feels very oppressive. You know, it's like four story walls with a partially opaque cover over top of it. It just feels like very dark."[86] The nearby signage explains that the canopy "mimics the natural light variations you might feel walking under a forest canopy. It also provides weather protection." The Nessie Plaza is the first and—by no coincidence—only plaza with a full weather protection canopy built recently in Seattle.

Despite the sentiment regarding the canopy, the city was quite pleased with the space in the 2018 POPS survey, giving the plaza a score of 28 out of 33 points and classifying it as "good." They were particularly happy with the maintenance, accessibility, seating availability, and general feelings of safety, which were all awarded perfect scores. They found fault in the number of "activities" the plaza presented, and—somewhat bafflingly—docked points on the amount of shade and shelter the space offers.

[86] Brennon Staley, Zoom interview with author, March 17, 2022.

Public Life Survey

Like all public spaces, the life of these plazas intricately reflects the local neighborhood in which it exists. It ebbs and flows with the other sphere of life here—mainly office work in private spaces—at routine cadences and in predictable conditions. The atmosphere of the spaces on a breezy, gloomy weekend is obviously different than a warm Friday afternoon. The use of the plazas and the value they bring to those in their vicinity change, too, throughout the day, the week, month, and the different seasons.

Of particular interest to this study was to how these spaces are habitually used and by whom. What do plaza users—by which I mean those who interact and spend time in these spaces—like to do, where, and for how long? Are there elements of these plazas that are continuously well-used and popular? And perhaps more interesting: what *don't* people like? What are the spaces that sit empty and unused? Often times such vacant places are those which urban designers and planners expect to be most popular, while instead people flock to spaces which never were intended for socialization and popularity. A better understanding of how space is used practically rather than as designed ought to lead to an improved public space in our cities. And the best way to begin to understand how space is used is to simply to observe.

Radius of Impact & Use

The visitors who spend time in these plazas are often a predictable bunch: typically, office workers who work in the nearby vicinity. The range people will travel to patronize the plazas is fairly small—usually two or three blocks at most. This was measured in a few different ways. First, the overwhelming majority of plaza users—meaning, those who interacted and spent time in the space—came out directly from buildings adjoining the space. Other than leaving their office, they didn't have to commute to the plaza whatsoever. For example, there are two entrances to the Amazon buildings Cricket and Invictus overlooking the Van Vorst Plaza building, and from here almost all of the users who eat lunch in the plaza often originate. By one lunchtime count, sixteen folks in various groups or alone were seated around the plaza, and—when finished eating—fourteen returned through these doors.

Another method of measurement is peaking at what people bring for lunch. While some budget-conscious visitors brought their Tupperware onto the plaza, a great majority ate from local establishments. At the Van Vorst Plaza, for example, the most frequent lunch wrappers counted were from the Local Public Eatery, Cactus, and Jimmy Johns—all restaurants within two blocks. Some intrepid visitors came from further. One man had hauled three bags of groceries from Whole Foods—almost a half-mile to the south—to sit in the plaza, but these visitors more often proved

the exception than the rule. At the Rufus Plaza, there are significantly fewer food options and—not uncoincidentally—fewer average lunchtime visitors. And at Nessie, the two restaurants in the plaza were the main attraction, often hosting many dozens of lunch-goers in a single hour. In this last case, whether one should categorize patrons of the restaurants as patrons of the greater plaza is an interesting question, and the role of retail in public social space will be discussed in a later section.

This observation that people will only travel short distances to public space aligns closely with previous studies of plaza use. William Whyte himself wrote that "commuter distances are usually short; for most plazas, the effective market radius is about three blocks."[87]. Differing from Whyte's findings, however, is the fact that many users came from adjacent buildings. "There may be relatively few patrons from the plaza's own buildings…" he remarked on his own results, "…as some secretaries confide, they'd just as soon put a little distance between themselves and the boss."[88] In New York, Whyte saw a social dance of sorts occurring as office workers swapped spaces in order to feel more comfortable to relax. Interestingly, this behavior was not observed in South Lake Union. There are several possible explanations for this that are worth considering.

First, as seen in figure 8, as Amazon owns and operates all of the privately owned public space in the neighborhood, it might be the feeling of the office worker that there simply is no practical way to "put a little distance" between them and their employer. Given that South Lake Union can at time seem like a corporate campus, there may be the same level of apprehension of being "caught" in leisure from one plaza to the next. Second, the fact remains that there are few public spaces in the South Lake Union neighborhood, and even fewer high-functioning social spaces at that. If one works at the Van Vorst Courtyard, there are no comparable large, welcoming plazas in which to eat lunch and feel comfortable in the three-block radius. Indeed, the only other preferable places might be large city parks, such as Denny Park to the south or Lake Union Park to the north, both of which are approximately a ten-minute walk. While some workers may make this trek, it is more reasonable that a twenty-minute round-trip would deter most considering such a thing, and this behavior was not observed in this study. Regardless of the exact reasons, the pressures that cause such "plaza switching" behavior and the lack of viable alternatives in South Lake Union might explain the low usership of many public plazas in the neighborhood.

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[87] William Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces*, 16.

[88] Ibid.

A Day in the Life

After spending several days observing the plazas, the cadence of activity becomes plainly predictable. All three follow a very similar pattern. The following is a narration of a day in the life of each of the plazas:

From 6am – 8am, these spaces sit empty. The movable furniture stays out through the night, though it receives few or no users during this time. During the period of observation the sun rose at approximately 6am, meaning that the plazas were lit but not in direct sunshine during these early morning hours due to interfering buildings and topography. Some building workers, nightshift security, and delivery workers wander through the space, but their presence is few and far between. Intermittently a SLU trolly will pass by each plaza, sounding the melodic bells to no one in particular. On occasion, a few seemingly homeless individuals were seen sleeping on the benches by the sidewalk—curiously, never in the plazas—but this encounter was similarly rare, a noteworthy point given the pervasiveness of such scenes in other Seattle neighborhoods.

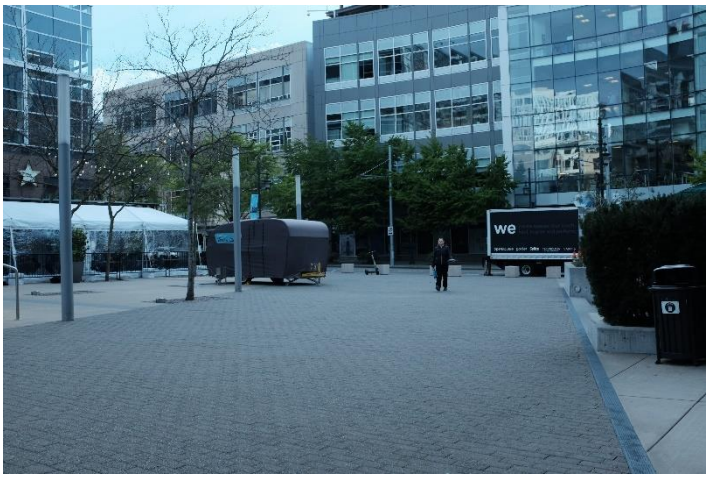

Figure 20. The quiet early hours at Van Vorst. (Author)

The plazas begin to awaken at 8am. This is the hour when employees arrive in the neighborhood to begin their workday, and people begin to appear from all directions. As many workers live in the neighborhood, some arrive on the sidewalks and pass into the plaza. Most enter through east entrances rather than the south. I found this curious until an analysis of a zoning map illustrated that almost all residences in South Lake Union are located on the east side, while the center and west are almost exclusively commercial. In the morning, pedestrians typically travel east to west; in the evening, the migration is more complicated.

Even more office workers arrive via car. These are easier to count as each plaza features underground parking lots which have pedestrian access onto the plazas, a feature of the alley vacations. Though most almost certainly enter directly into their buildings, many in the Van Vorst Courtyard walk across the plaza into if they are parked on the other side from their office. Very few arrive on the bus or streetcar, at least in viewing distance of the plazas. The banana stand at Van Vorst is uncovered at 8am sharp daily, and this period is a popular time for passersby to grab a breakfast snack. As workers are focused on arriving to their office on time, almost no plaza users were observed sitting, standing, or socializing during these hours.

From 12pm – 2pm, however, the social life of the plaza comes alive. These are the prime hours for any and all urban plazas across the world: lunchtime. Workers leave their buildings and head out to their local eatery of choice. Depending on the weather, many stop in the plazas to eat and relax. The Van Vorst Plaza is a particularly popular destination for the lunchtime break with its open air, sunshine, seating, and the comforting din of activity. The other plazas—Rufus and Nessie—are seemingly less appealing. Rufus Plaza receives an average of six lunchtime users over the course of two hours—meaning those who sit and stay to eat in the plaza - while Nessie Plaza receives an average of four users. On a beautiful day, Van Vorst Plaza saw up to twenty users eating lunch during this time.

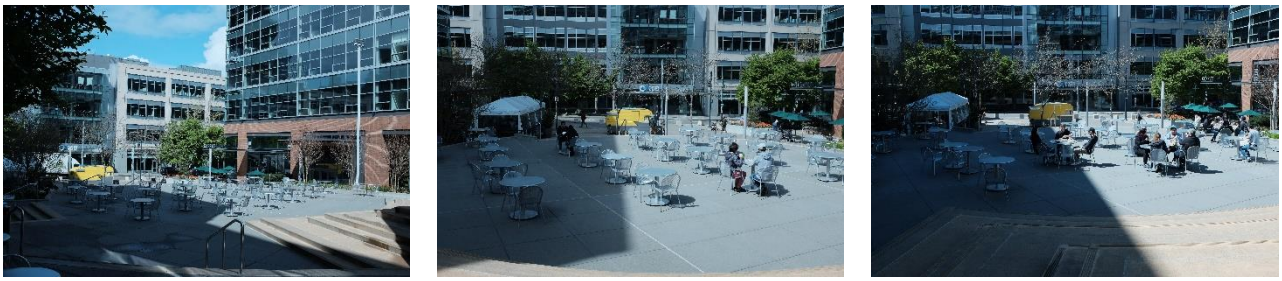

Figure 21. From left to right: plaza use at 11am, 12pm, and 1pm. (Author)

From 2pm – 6pm, the number of plaza users declines again after the lunch rush. The banana stand closes at 3:30pm, signaling the end of the major plaza activity for the day. Nevertheless, - more people use the plazas in these afternoon hours than in the morning. Some workers with open schedules will sit and read in the sunshine. Others will bring their laptops out and continue to work al fresco. And—during these hours—we see another type of user emerge: the tourist. Those touring the neighborhood are easy to spot for a number of reasons: they are usually older, travel in couples or groups, walk much slower than average, and spend time to curiously look around the spaces. Though tourists did not make up a significant portion of the usership, there were usually a few visiting each day—especially at Van Vorst and Nessie, the two most open plazas.

At around 5pm, the migration of office workers reverses, and workers stream out of the buildings. Like before, most head through the door labeled “P” for parking. Others stroll into the local bars and restaurants offering happy hour. Still others exit the plaza and onto the street and into the city. Interestingly, the evening commuters—unlike the morning—do not show a preference toward the east or west direction but rather leave in all different directions. The exception to this is at Nessie Plaza, in which almost every passerby left toward the busier Westlake Avenue rather than the barren 9th Avenue.

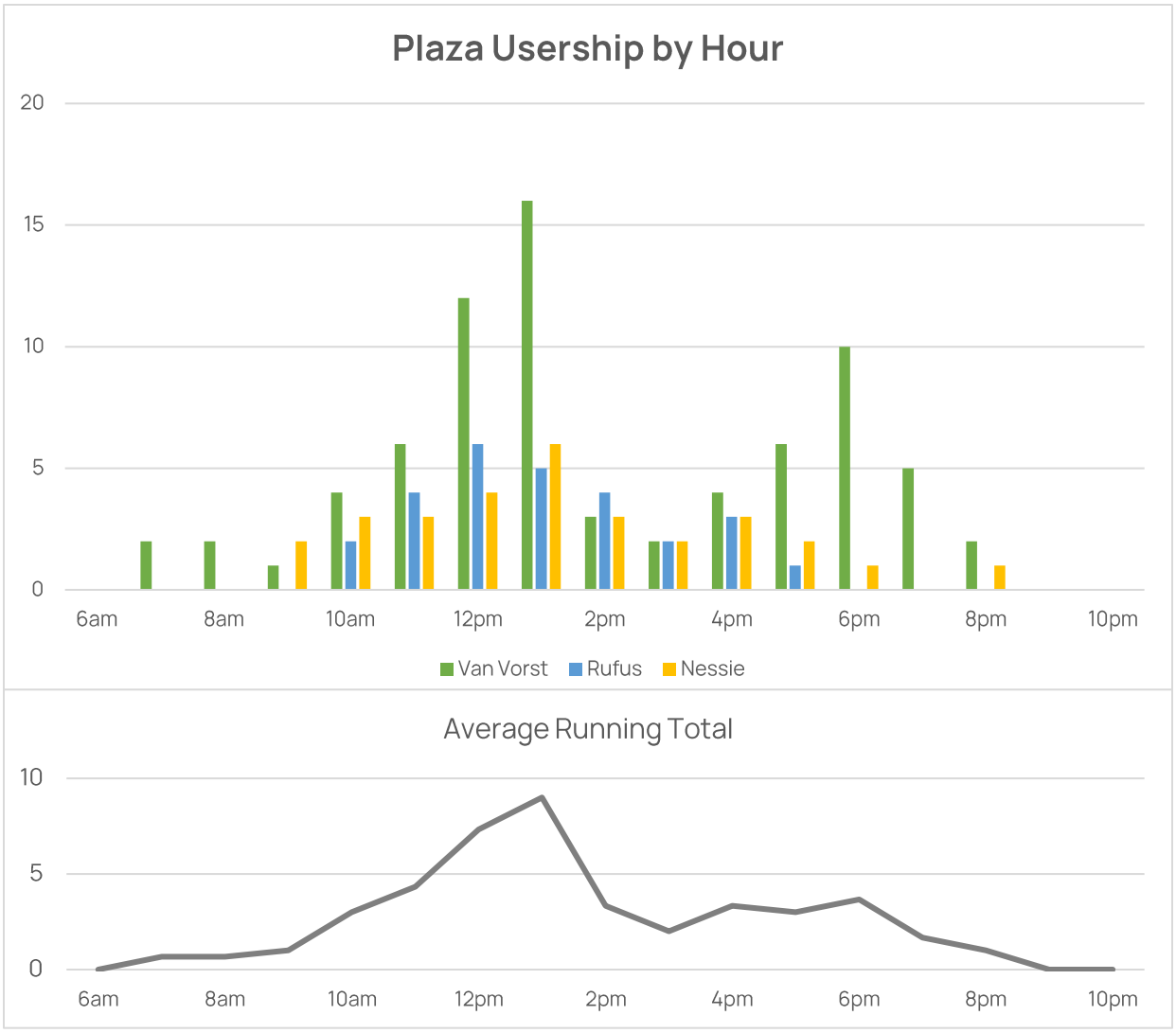

Figure 22. Visitor Counts during each hour of the day. Sample counts were taken for 15-minutes and then multiplied by four to estimate total visitation numbers over the whole hour. Multiple counts during the same hour were averaged. (Author)

From 6pm until 10pm, the plazas slowly begin to empty out. When the neighborhood workers leave, the plazas lose their social vibrancy. Van Vorst, the most popular plaza, holds onto its visitors for the longest amount of time. But by 7pm or 8pm, even Van Vorst begins to feel eerily quiet and spiritless. The neighboring Starbucks closes at 6pm and the adjacent bar—which does attract an after-work crowd—is too removed from the plaza to lend energy to the space. Rufus Plaza has more users during this time due to its adjacent retail—especially the Dog Day Lounge as owners pick up their animal companion (usually looking happily exhausted) after a day's work. One count saw thirteen dogs leave the shop into the plaza between 5:30pm – 6pm. Nessie Plaza—despite it's low lunchtime visitor count, shows some staying power as the bar located on the western edge is often packed reveling in the patio outside. While this crowd hardly changes the

character of Nessie Plaza, it does grant the space the familiar din of a vibrant social space. This is echoed off the glass canopy and reverberates into the street. The pedestrian and car traffic on Westlake Avenue, one of the main thoroughfares in the city, adds to the energy in ways that the sleepy Terry Street does not provide to Van Vorst or Rufus. As the day ends, however, this energy on the street seems to invite users to leave the plaza and join the bustle rather than stay in the dark oasis. From 7pm or 8pm onward, there are very few users of the plazas except those leaving it.

Activity & Dwell Time

The activity that occurs in each plaza is diverse and complex, yet discernable patterns emerge if one observes for a significant amount of time. Because of their different physical layout, retail options, and programming, each plaza has a unique blend of happenings throughout the day.

First, we'll look at Van Vorst Plaza—the most popular of the privately owned public spaces in South Lake Union. The uncovered open space makes Van Vorst the most appealing plaza of the bunch to lounge, relax, and spend time. If the weather is nice, this is the public outdoor lunch spot in the area. There is ample seating, and one never has to worry about finding a chair or bench. Simply the existence of open space with a few amenities is sufficient to attract people to the plaza. Whyte noticed this phenomenon in his own work, writing:

> Supply creates demand. A good new space builds a new constituency. It simulates people into new habits—al fresco lunches—and provides new paths to and from work, new places to pause. It does all this very quickly.[89]

This strength, however, is also a weakness. When people are finished eating, they quickly leave the plaza. Other than the enjoyment of being outside and in fresh air, there is very little reason to spend time in the space. And since, given the constituency, there is only so much time that people can be "off the clock," the total amount of time that the plaza is active is small. As seen in figure 22 it is lunchtime and a brief resurgence when work gets out.

But there were some other behaviors observed other than eating. Some employees in the adjacent Amazon buildings will bring their laptop onto the movable tables and work for a long period of time. These folks are often alone and deeply withdrawn into their work, so contribute little to the social life of the space. Another interesting phenomenon occurred during the installation of an art piece on the stairs. Two women had been commissioned to visually enliven

[89] William Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces*, 16.

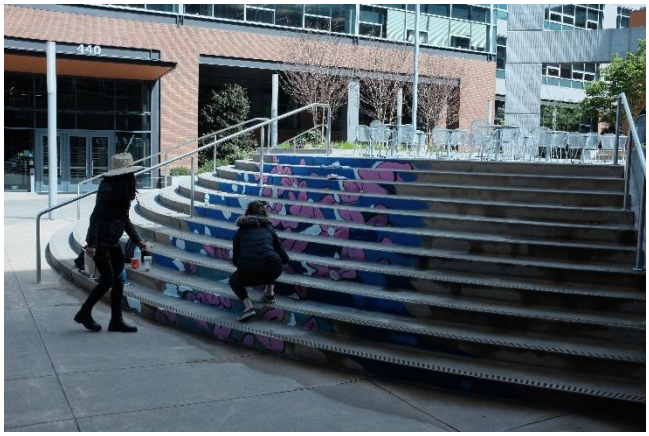

Figure 23. The creation of an art piece caused many visitors to stop and watch. (Author)

the space, and were hard at work painting a design into the central staircase. While the piece itself was hardly noteworthy, almost every passerby stopped to observe the work being done. They didn't pause for long—perhaps thirty seconds or so to consider the art or wager on the next paint stroke—but it drew visitors into the action. And though one could argue the art piece might have subconsciously enlivened the plaza, after the women had finished the job and left, no one stopped to admire their work. It seems that people found watching an art piece being created to be significantly more captivating than a completed one. Indeed, the two hours it took the two women to complete the work contributed more energy and interest in the plaza than anything else that day.

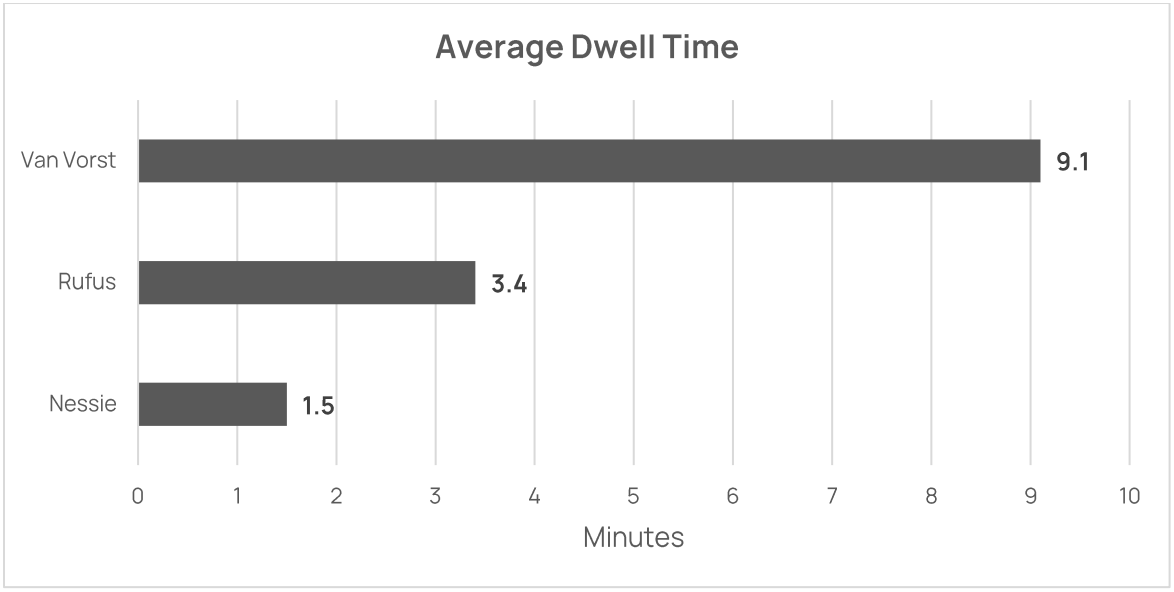

Figure 24. Dwell time was closely correlated with plaza size.

The average dwell time for visitors using Van Vorst Plaza—meaning sitting or engaging with elements of the plaza—was 9.1 minutes. Examples of users include a group eating lunch (16 minutes), a woman reading her book on the Adirondack chair (31 minutes), and a man sitting in a chair talking on the phone (3 minutes).

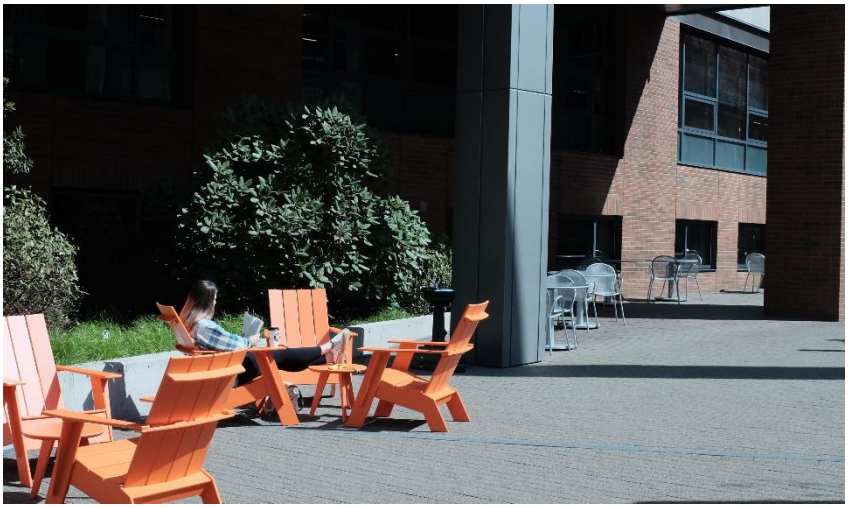

Figure 25. In no rush, this woman spent 31 minutes in the plaza, 21 minutes longer than the average at Van Vorst Courtyard. (Author)

At Rufus Plaza, the types of use are more constrained. This is partly due to design; because of the alley-like nature of the space with high walls on both sides, it is a less attractive space to spend time or lounge. There is very limited natural sun, and the plaza can act as a wind tunnel between the two buildings. Some people eat lunch here—often on the high tables and chairs—but it is an awkward and uncomfortable affair.

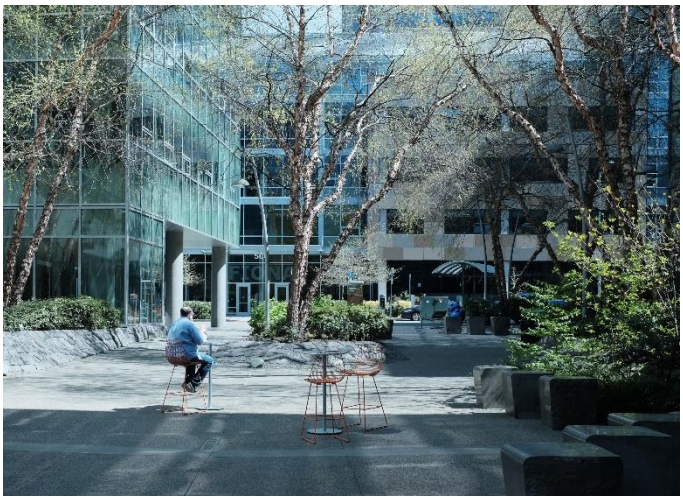

Figure 26. A man at lunch at Rufus Plaza. Seating options in this plaza results in awkward social space. (Author)

Most users who engaged with the space were either waiting next to a retail establishment or momentarily conversing with colleagues before departing in different directions. It was rare to find a group of people sitting and conversing together; single individuals were more common, but not as common as at Van Vorst. This finding aligns closely with Whyte's findings in New York, observing that, "The best-used plazas are sociable places, with a higher proportion of couples than you find in less-used places, more people in groups, more people meeting people, or exchanging goodbyes."[90] One can imagine that Whyte might consider Rufus Plaza to be less than a very sociable place.

[90] William Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces*, 17.

Nessie Plaza exhibits many of the same characteristics as Rufus Plaza. Given the physical characteristics of the space, there are simply very few uses or activities for a visitor to get up to. Of all the plazas in the study, Nessie functions the most like a mid-block connector rather than a sociable plaza. The dwell time here is the shortest of the group at a measly 1.5 minutes. It should be noted that this was calculated from very few data points (n=4), as it was difficult to find visitors interacting with the plaza during the course of observation.

In all cases of visitors interacting with Nessie Plaza space, they were seated on the sculpted benches deeply engaged with their phones. One man was downloading an app on his iPhone in order to get a better deal at a local restaurant. Another was waiting for a colleague still in the building. How the proliferation of cell phones has changed public behavior would be a fascinating study on its own. Whyte's work, of course, was pre-smartphone, so all plaza users were inherently somewhat "present" in their surroundings. People or street watching was an activity in and of itself. In his book *The Social Life of Small Urban Places,* Whyte devoted a section entirely to these "watchers" and how they behave. There are significant fewer dedicated street watchers today.

Now, people have entire worlds of entertainment in their front pocket. More often than not, this is more compelling than watching the street—especially if the activity on the street is dull. Case in point: every person observed interacting in the Nessie Plaza was engaged with their phones, and not with the surrounding environment.

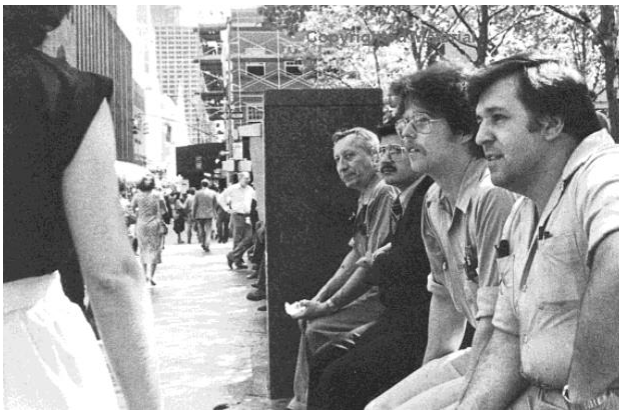

Figure 27. Whyte's "Street Watchers." Typically, these watchers are men. (Whyte, Social Life of Urban Places, 19)

Figure 28. Engrossed in the phone while waiting at Nessie Plaza. (Author)

In addition to dwell time, another interesting indication of the sociability of public space is the ratio between men and women users. Like many methods used in this study, this approach was pioneered by Whyte in his study of New York plazas. He writes:

> The most-used places also tend to have a higher-than-average proportion of women…Women are more discriminating than men as to where they will sit, more sensitive to annoyances, and women spend more time casting the various

> possibilities. If a plaza has a markedly lower than average proportion of women, something is wrong. Where there is a higher-than-average proportion of women, the plaza is probably a good one and has been chosen as such.[91]

Though this analysis might seem somewhat passé by current standards, the method of assessing the success of social space by gender is widely used by many organizations from New York's Bryant Park and the Highline to Seattle's Waterfront Park.

Such an analysis was undertaken for the Van Vorst Courtyard over the course of a day, and produced an interesting result. At the beginning and end of the day, when extended attendance in the plaza is very low (say, around 2 or 3 people), it is populated entirely with men. As the day progresses, however, the area fills up and more women join the life of the plaza. Lunchtime, in particular, is especially welcoming as the plaza was populated by 67% women. Later, as the neighborhood becomes quieter and emptier, the space becomes male-dominated once again. One can conclude from this that—for a brief period of time in the middle of the day—the Van Vorst Courtyard is a "good one," to use Whyte's term, and the plaza succeeds as a social space. It is interesting to note that the highest female to male ratio peaked at 2pm, a full hour after the total visitor count peaked (figure 29). This might be explained because once established in the space and seated, many women felt comfortable staying around longer. On the peripheral hours of the day, however, the space might be understood as less welcoming, hostile, or discouraging to many female visitors.

[91] William Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces*, 18.

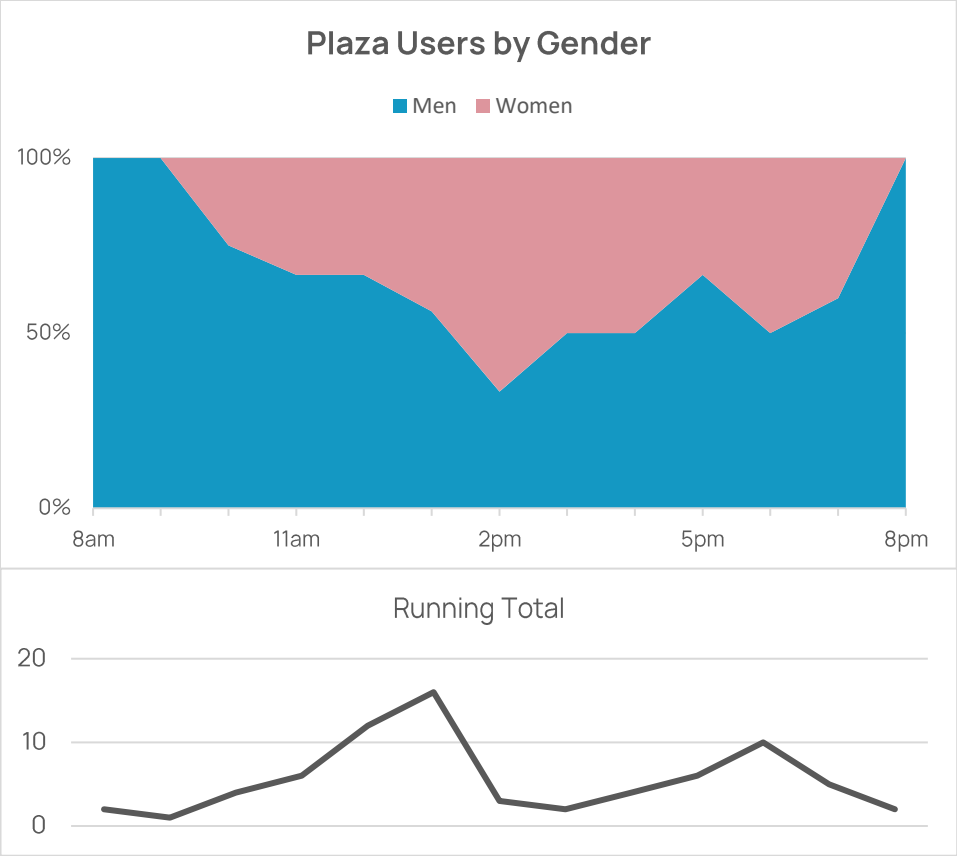

Figure 29. Popular times saw Whyte's ideal ratio of men-to-women at Van Vorst; off-peak periods were male-dominated. (Author)

Having spent many hours in this space, these findings line up fairly neatly with my own experiences and intuition. Even as a male user of the space, while the lunchtime crowd drew me in and felt warm and welcoming, the early morning and late nights felt—at times—uneasy and strange. After seeing these results, I found—during my time spent walking the neighborhood and observing public space—the following thing to be more often true than not: if there is only a single person sitting alone in a public space, it is almost certainly a man.

Seating

Seating in public spaces is a topic discussed at great length by Whyte in *The Social Life of Small Urban Places*. Types of seating, location, seating heights, and amounts are all essential ingredients to attract and keep people in social space. Whyte observed that certain locations attract hundreds of daily sitters while similar places would remain empty throughout the day. Why? After much study, he arrived at the simplest of conclusions: "People tend to sit most where there are

places to sit."[92]. While such a claim might not strike the reader as groundbreaking, it is remarkable how many public spaces are that do not adhere by this straightforward principle. Fearing property loss, attracting an undesirable cliental, or simply not truly wanting a plaza to actually be used, many public spaces in cities are beautifully designed spaces with nowhere to sit. The plazas are more ornamental than functional. Instead of basic seating options, great amounts of money are spent on more aesthetic features. But, Whyte writes, the "most attractive fountains, the most striking designs, cannot induce people to come and sit if there are no places to sit."[93]. Though these elements are important and serve to show a space is well-cared for by the managers, they are ultimately superfluous if there is no place to sit and enjoy them.

Specifically, Whyte found a correlation between the amount of sitting space in a plaza and the average number of people sitting during lunchtime hours. In order to replicate the study, the amount of space devoted to seating in all three plazas in South Lake Union was measured and compared with average visitor counts during the most popular time of day.

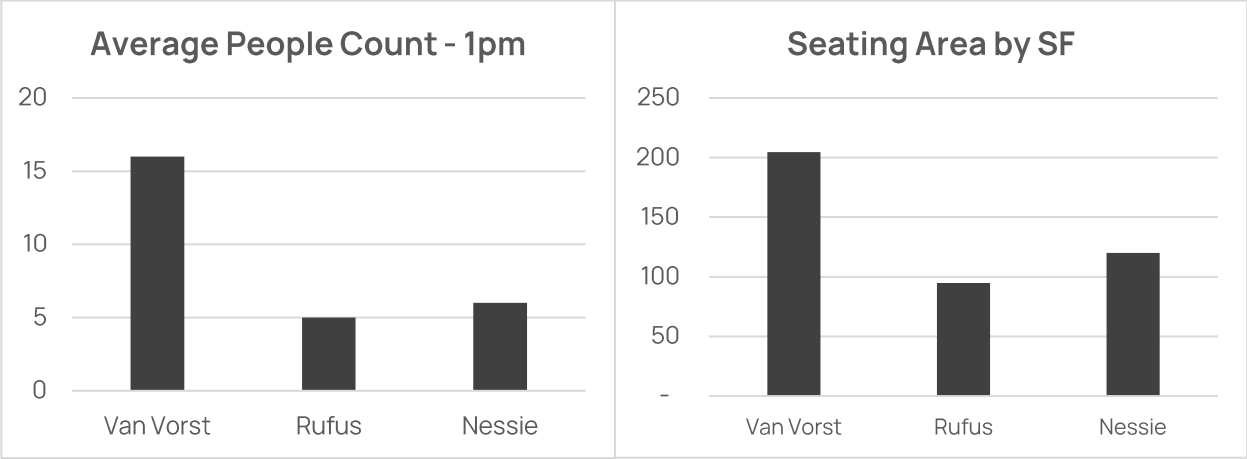

Figure 30. Visitor counts closely correlated with amount of available seating per plaza. (Author)

As one can clearly see in figure 30, the two graphs seem to match up neatly. Thus, the trends in South Lake Union plazas follow a similar pattern to those observed by Whyte fifty years prior. When seating space is provided, people tend to sit there. The amount of seating is a better determinant of plaza use than almost any other factor, including open space (figure 31).

[92] William Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces*, 28.
[93] William Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces*, 27.

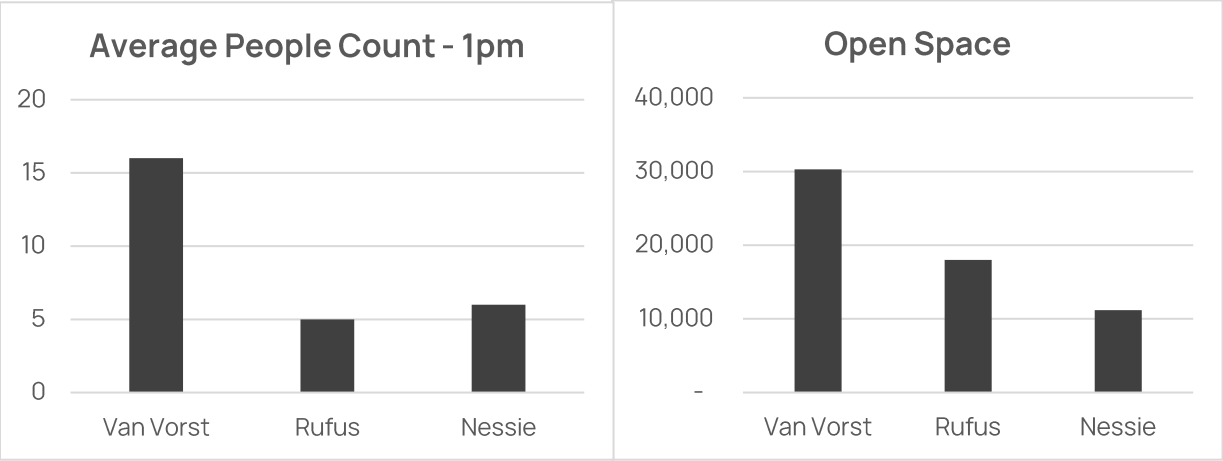

Figure 31. Visitor counts did not line up as closely with other factors, such as amount of open space. (Author)

Still, all three plazas could most likely benefit from additional seating, according to Whyte. The plaza with the most seating—the Van Vorst Courtyard—has approximately 205 square feet of sitting space in 30,300 square feet of plaza space. This means that Van Vorst has a plaza to seating ratio of 148:1 or about .05% of seating area to plaza area. This is probably a positive outlier for a Seattle public space. But Whyte found that the most successful plazas typically had between six and ten percent of total plaza area as available sitting space. After some discussions with the city, he arrived at a compromise of one linear foot of sitting space for every thirty square feet of plaza. This requirement, in fact, went into effect after the mid-1970s plaza reforms and is still used today.[94]

All three plazas are obviously very much short of New York's expectations for privately owned public space. If Van Vorst were to adhere to this rule, it would need to add nearly 800 additional square feet of seating—nearly five times the current amount. Rufus would add five-times as much seating as well, and Nessie would add over twice. The managers of the space might balk at these numbers, but one should consider such a reaction. Is the skepticism based in the fear that the seating space may never be filled? Or, rather, a fear that it will be?

Pedestrian Flow and Movement

Another point that plaza managers might invoke when objecting to more seating is the importance of passageway and movement throughout these plazas. This is a fair concern. Nessie and Rufus Plazas, after all, are intended as midblock connections and should be porous enough to allow the nimble pedestrian to move through the city grid easily. If the plazas are impassible with activity and seating, then a significant portion of their purpose is defeated. Many plazas and parks

[94] William Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces*, 39.

deal with this concern by separating seating and walking into distinct programmatic sections of seating and walking. As if a plaza were a roadway, there is a place for fast movers, slow movers, and those not moving at all.

But this seemingly intuitive approach to social space does not , and fails to appreciate what people actually desire in both their sitting and walking space. When one actually observes people's behavior in plazas, it becomes clear that people like to sit near paths and nodes of action. Beyond seating type, comfort, or peacefulness, people want to sit in a place that is interesting, or where interesting things can be seen easily. And—other than mobile phones—the most interesting things in public plazas are often other people. People's movements, Whyte wrote, are "one of the great spectacles of the plaza."[95]

Whyte called this being "in the mainstream." He noticed that people in plazas want to feel part of the life of the plaza instead of outside it, and make their seating choices accordingly. Not only do walkers walk in the main thoroughfares, but "people also sit in the mainstream. At the Seagram Plaza, [for example], the main pedestrian paths are on diagonals from the building entrance to the corners of the steps. These are natural junction and transfer points and there is usually a lot of activity at them. They are also a favored place for sitting and picnicking."[96] Such a phenomenon can be easily seen in crowded parks, like New York's Bryant Park. The classical French design features a wide, central lawn surrounded tree-lined allées, or pathways between large ivy patches. And where are the most sought-after seats? It is the tables and chair along the pathways, and not those in the quieter sections along the flowerbeds or on the lawn. Here in the mainstream, visitors can people watch, strike up a conversation, or generally be entertained with the everyday bustle along these walking paths. Contrary to 'common sense' expectations, Whyte writes, "the great majority of people were found to select their sites for social interaction

Figure 32. Bryant Park's walkways are also the most popular place to sit. (The OLIN Studio)

[95] William Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces*, 22.
[96] Ibid, 21.

right on or very close to the traffic lines intersecting the plaza. Relatively few people formed their gathering away from the spaces used for navigation."[97]

So where are the "mainstream" pathways in Van Vorst, Rufus, and Nessie Plazas? A simple path map tracking movement of pedestrians in the space neatly illustrates the hot spots in each plaza. They're not always intuitive. For example, the northern pathway at Van Vorst receives almost twice as much traffic on a normal afternoon than the southern path. Or, the quiet seating section in the southeast of Rufus Plaza—a place that the Seattle Design Commission insisted on incorporating into the space—receives extremely few visitors (none, by this count) despite being envisioned as an "oasis" from the walkway.[98] Cut off from the action of the plaza, walkers do not naturally pass through, and sitters do not want to be far from the walkers. Lastly at Nessie Plaza, the main action is a narrow corridor between the Amazon entrance on the southwest corner and Westlake Plaza. Whether by design or accident, this almost exactly corresponds with the cascading water feature which nicely accompanies the plaza user until meeting the busy sidewalk.

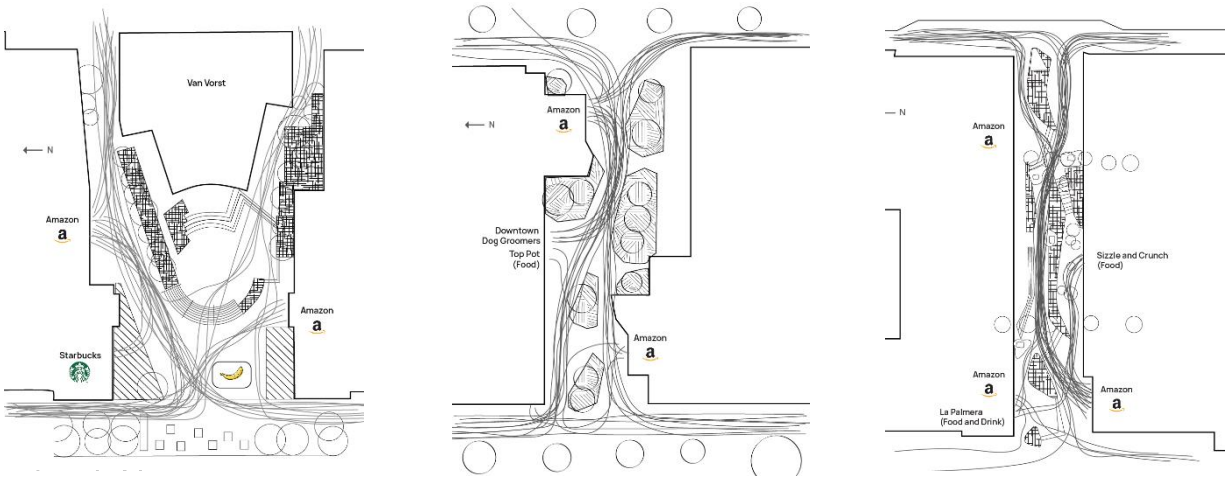

Figure 33. Tracking movements of plaza visitors reveals common corridors of use. (Author)

These corridors of action or the "mainstream" of the plaza corresponds with where people tend to sit. At Nessie and Rufus, the few sitters or lingerers sit on the edges of these corridors. The other popular spot is at the intersections between the plaza and the street, where any action on the sidewalk can be observed, as well.

The Van Vorst is a particular curious case study in seating preference. While most of the action is on the northern pathway and sidewalk intersection, almost all of the provided seating is located in the center of the plaza. This central feature resembles a stage, elevated eleven steps from

[97] Ibid, 23.

[98] LMN Architects, "Design Commission #3," March 6, 2008, 17.

the rest of the plaza, and is where the plaza managers place the seventy-some movable chairs for visitors. Whether intentional or not, this serves to confine the seating away from the street and the desire paths, requiring more effort and intentionality for the average passerby to decide to take a seat. Being central and elevated, it also gives the user a feeling of being on display or put on a pedestal for the rest of the plaza, not exactly the most comfortable feeling.

This results in different types of users using different seating spaces. After some time observing the plaza, it became clear that single users almost never prefer to sit in the central point of the plaza, but rather select the less conspicuous seats on the side. Groups, on the other hand, almost always choose sitting on the central stage. After noticing this quirky phenomenon, I would return time and time again to the space and the same would hold true—single people on the sides, groups in the middle!

Figure 34. A solitary lunch-goer at Rufus Plaza. (Author)

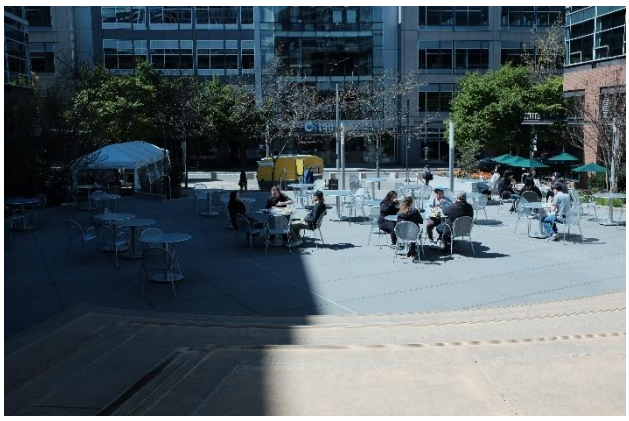

Figure 35. At Van Vorst Courtyard, single users sat on the borders of the space; groups had no qualms sitting "on stage" in the middle.

Whyte observed something similar in his studies. He noted that people, especially those by themselves, tend to gravitate toward edges and intersection of plaza features. Especially when sitting or talking, plaza users "show an inclination to station themselves near objects such as a flagpole or a statue. They like well-defined places, such as steps, or the border of a pool. What they rarely choose is the middle of a large space."[99] The exception is during periods of high plaza use, where single people can blend in within the sea of visitors without feeling too seen and vulnerable. In these situations—rare but not unheard of during nice summer days in South Lake Union—people sit where there is a seat. Whyte writes: "Off-peak use often gives the best clues to people's preferences. When a place is jammed, a person sits where he can. This may or may not be where he most wants to. After the main crowd has left, the choices can be significant. Some parts of the plaza become quite empty; others continue to be used."[100]

Figure 36. A single user of Van Vorst sits with plaza borders on three sides, facing the action of the space. (Author)

Single visitors to Van Vorst Plaza, especially during these off-peak periods, gravitate toward the northern pathway along the wall. In this small nook are cozy Adirondack chairs where they can loiter and see all of people passing by in the plaza. Yet, they are still in the mainstream, the most trafficked part of the plaza. To prove the point—users always chose a seat facing the plaza either to the west or to the north, with their back against the plant bed and the plaza spreading out in front of them. Even when they were occupied in work or a book, they naturally choose such a vantage point. Not once was someone observed with their back to the plaza. The action, or potential for future action, is simply too good to be missed.

The last point regarding pedestrian movement in these plazas involves those only passing through the plaza. While such passersby were not considered to have engaged with the space for the purpose of this study, they are certainly still users in some capacity of the plazas. If the managers of the space are concerned that more seating would make the plazas impassable to pedestrians using them as midblock connectors, they need not worry. As observed in this study, there simply aren't that many of them. This fact became apparent when creating the pedestrian path maps, above. Most visitors of the plaza were either entering the space in order to use it—to sit, lie, look, etc.—or accessing a building entrance adjacent to the plaza. Very few users were using them as midblock connectors in order to bypass the traditional urban grid.

[99] Ibid, 22.
[100] Ibid.

Rufus Plaza, for example, only saw five pedestrians passing through Boren Ave to Terry Ave or vice versa during two 15-minute observation sessions Nessie Plaza only saw three pedestrians passing through from Westlake Avenue to 9th Avenue during two similar sessions (figure 37). Despite their intended purpose, these plazas are simply not often used as midblock connectors. One such explanation for the lack of use might be that there is little demand for east-west passage compared to north-south. To test this theory, the number of pedestrians walking on Mercer Street and Republican Street—the east-west streets on either side of Nessie Plaza—were counted during similar times. On Mercer Street, eight pedestrians were counted over a 15-minute span. On Republican Street, sixty-three pedestrians were counted moving east-west. Clearly, there is a great need for pedestrian paths moving east and west, but these pedestrians are curiously not choosing the midblock connectors to do so.

Figure 37. The rare visitors using Nessie Plaza as a mid-block connector. (Author)

Average Plaza Use
(15 minutes at 1pm)

	Amazon	Retail	Pass By	Other	Total
Van Vorst	31	3	13	9	56
%	*55%*	*5%*	*23%*	*16%*	*100%*
Rufus	18	16	5	1	40
%	*45%*	*40%*	*13%*	*3%*	*100%*
Nessie	20	26	3	0	49
%	*41%*	*53%*	*6%*	*0%*	*100%*
Total Avg.	47%	33%	14%	6%	*100%*

Figure 38. Beginning or End of Trips for Plaza Users

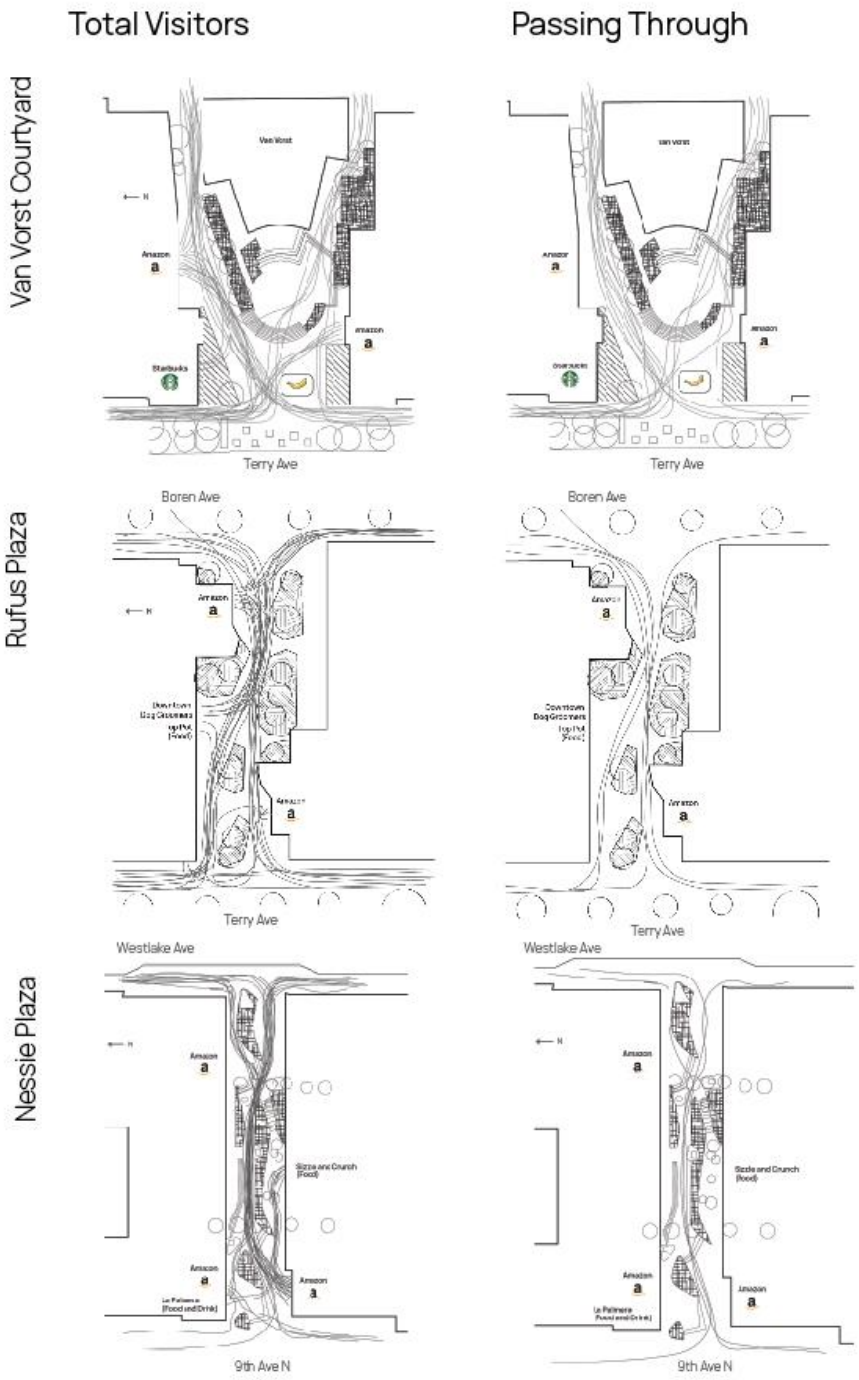

Figure 39. Few of the plaza users utilize the space for mid-block connection.

Conclusion

When the Nessie Plaza opened in 2012, it represented the forty-first privately-owned public space created in Seattle. As of 2018, there are forty-eight such POPS in the city, located almost entirely in the downtown core and expanding commercial zones. This is a notable achievement considering how difficult and rare it is for traditional public space to be created in dense urban areas. But incentive zoning and other policies that help create POPS has succeeded in doing just that. Since the first privately-owned public space was built in 1963 at 2033 6th Avenue, the Seattle has added over 500,000 square feet of public space to the urban fabric of downtown.

But, as the example of New York has shown, quantity of space created is only one unit of measurement. How can the data and observations taken in this survey inform the overall conclusions about the plazas built in South Lake Union? More broadly—if POPS are one of the main methods for creating public space in Seattle, do they result in good public space?

What must be said about these spaces—as I hope to have illustrated throughout this work—is that they are extremely complex. While a news article or city report or—perhaps even—a student thesis might distill these spaces to a catchy phrase or a clear-cut solution, the reality is that the formation and operation of privately-owned public spaces is the end-result of a long history of zoning regulations, sophisticated municipal legislation, negotiations between real estate, corporate, and public interests, and countless design decisions informed by all of the aforementioned. On top of it all, no two plazas are exactly alike. Even the three plazas studied here operate and perform differently—despite being practically in the same location, produced by roughly identical city and real estate interests, and with similar time frames and intent. Yet in many cases (if not all), each party involved in the creation of the space had different goals and intentions, and were working with legal or political tools that are often not up to the task. While I believe researchers can and have made valuable conclusions about these spaces as a whole, it is often too simplistic to make broad generalities about POPS without acknowledging the individual complexities of their formation.

Different Metrics of Success

Given this complexity, how one defines success greatly influences an overall assessment of the policies that create privately-owned public space. Beyond the blurring of private and public spheres that inherently arises when considering privately-owned public space, what exactly POPS are supposed to be and how they should function is left largely up for interpretation by city officials and real estate developers alike. The City of Seattle simply describes them as "…[space] open to the public, and includes plazas, arcades, atriums, hill-climbs, and green streets. These spaces are

allowed or required by rules in the Seattle Land Use Code that have been in place for several decades, and are generally located in Seattle's Center City."[101] And as a result of the opaque nature of the goals and intent for POPS, many people have different interpretations of the success of the policies that created the Van Vorst, Rufus, and Nessie Plaza.

In an interview, Diane Sugimura, former Director of Seattle's Planning and Development Department, described her interpretation of the goals for POPS as creating "a plaza that is comfortable and accessible, and would feel like a place for both the tenants as well as the general public to use." From her perspective, it is of less concern how many people use them as that they are able to be used. She says "it is more important that [POPS] are there, and that they have a welcoming feeling. It was not necessarily that we want to have them full of with people at all times, because, you know, it's not going to be. But rather to feel like you could stop and have your lunch there and not feel like you're intruding on somebody else's private property."

Another Seattle planner described the goal of POPS as creating a fourth space for city dwellers between traditional parks and the workplace. Thus, the POPS in South Lake Union were intended to be something "that is between a formal park and something like a sidewalk cafe, which has a very clear purpose. It was meant to feel very public. It was meant to allow spaces for gathering, get light to the street, allow for some more landscaping." These understandings of the objectives of POPS focus mainly on the physical form and design of such spaces, and is somewhat reminiscent of the stated goals of New York's 1961 zoning updates to formalize and beautify the pedestrian spaces left by building setbacks.

Judging by this metric, the three plazas studied—Van Vorst, Rufus, and Nessie—are great achievements. Each plaza, in its own way, is exceptionally designed, landscaped, and maintained. By OPCD own survey, they all score as "good" for privately-owned public plazas, the top category shared by only four other plazas out of forty-eight. They are clean, safe, and—for the most part—welcoming for public use. Many POPS built in previous decades, in contrast, are bare, uninteresting, and often inaccessible to the average passerby. From a purely design perspective, the city's ability to shape these spaces into well-built pedestrian plazas has continuously improved throughout the lifetime of the policy, and these three plazas—the latest iterations of the work—are some of the finest in the city.

[101] SDCI. "Privately Owned Public Spaces." City of Seattle.

Public Life Takeaways

But this analysis is devoid of the very thing that the plazas are serving: people! How do these plazas fare as spaces that allow for and encourage sociability, leisure, and culture? Like previous studies into the design and sociability of privately-owned public spaces in the cities concluded, the results are mixed. The overwhelming conclusion from Whyte's own study was the lack of crowding found in these spaces, writing "A few were jammed, but more were nearer empty than full, often in neighborhoods that ranked very high in density of people."[102] Such a conclusion can reasonably be shared by this study. For a neighborhood with thousands of residents and tens of thousands of commuters, the data collected from the three main POPS in the area demonstrate, on average, paltry use of this public space. Yet notwithstanding the fairly low usership, there are several noteworthy takeaways to be concluded from this study.

First, pedestrians in South Lake Union show a clear preference and desire for open public space. Despite beautifully manicured landscapes and well-designed walkways, everyday users are more drawn to large, open space than those with restrictive, narrow space. The most popular plaza, by far, was the Van Vorst Courtyard, and by no coincidence, this plaza features the most square space. But it is not simply the size of the plaza that encourages use; it is also the shape. Van Vorst is formed from a large square that fronts the sidewalk and Terry Street. It is open to the sky and receives substantial natural sunlight throughout the day. In contrast, Rufus Plaza—which is just one block north and has similar retail and office space fronting the plaza—receives a fraction of users as compared to Van Vorst. Not only does the data show that fewer people sit and stay at Rufus, but fewer people choose to walk through it as well. This finding demonstrates that even if one does not plan to engage with the plaza space, most pedestrians opt to walk through larger and more open plazas than those closely constrained by neighboring buildings.

Midblock corridors are shown to be generally poor social space. Moreover, they are rarely used as midblock corridors. This is a significant finding since that is what developers argued for and the city agreed. Such restricted plazas, like Rufus and Nellie, are designed specifically to function more as block passthroughs than open, social space. Thus, they purposefully trade design elements that would encourage positive engagement and dwell time for permeability. But the findings from this study show that less than 5% of the plaza visitors use the space for this purpose. Instead, the vast majority of the users are simply arriving or leaving the buildings that surround the plazas, or visiting the ground floor retail. This lack of use is not due to a small demand for east-west travel in the neighborhood. The streets running parallel to these plazas show significant use

[102] Ibid, 10.

by pedestrians while the midblock connectors sit largely empty. Whether these plazas are seen as unwelcoming or simply unviable alternatives to the traditional street layouts, pedestrians in South Lake Union show little enthusiasm for midblock connectors.

Nearby street activity is another important aspect of plaza life. Van Vorst is an open and welcoming space, but it is located between two rather sleepy streets and thus there are few pedestrians that it can entice into the space. On the other hand, Nessie Plaza—a constrained, narrow, not-very-welcoming space—overperforms in usership and dwell time based on the data available in large part due to the energy from Westlake Avenue. A significant higher number of pedestrians pass by Nessie Plaza than Rufus Plaza, notice the landscaping and retail options, and get drawn into the space. Rufus Plaza—which is designed primarily as a midblock connector, features few engaging retail options, and sees little foot traffic on Terry and Boren Avenue—suffers the most from these factors in terms of usership. Given this, one can imagine how many more visitors Van Vorst Courtyard might see if it was not located on such a sleepy street. If usership is one goal of POPS, the city should consider what type of plaza is most appropiate for the level of street activity they bisect.

Additionally, the types of plaza users recorded in this survey is particularly noteworthy. While these POPS are certainly open and available to all members of the public, the reality is a very narrow swath of the city's population actually use them. By one survey (figure 38 and 39), over half of the plaza visitors during the lunchtime hour ended or began their trip in an Amazon building. In the Van Vorst Courtyard, which features little retail other than Starbucks, 66% of the observed users ended in or began their trips from an Amazon building. These public plazas function practically as extensions of the office space that built and surrounds them, and can be seen to double "as advertising monuments to their corporate identity" similar to the Lever House and Seagram Buildings that ultimately inspired them.[103]

This finding, by itself, is not entirely problematic. As many studies have shown before, the users of public space are most often those that live or work within a small radius. Given the tenants and owners of the office space in the neighborhood, it should come as no great surprise that the majority of users are related to Amazon or other related industries. It some ways, the conglomeration of these employees in a relatively confined space allows "supply [to] create demand,"[104] as Whyte believed, and for new spaces to easily create new constituencies.

But the monoculture of the neighborhood also creates challenges for the surrounding public spaces. Chiefly, the life of the plazas is inherently linked to the culture of the company, and

[103] Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space*, 10.
[104] William Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces*, 16.

only enjoy vibrant public use during limited windows of time. For example, during lunch and briefly as workers leave the office, the plazas are extremely pleasant and well-used. But, when these workers are occupied inside or leave the neighborhood for the day, the plazas sit empty. Without other amenities or constituents, the vibrancy of the spaces is entirely dependent on the Amazon workday schedule. This is a trend experienced in one way or another by all urban social spaces, but there is a greater diversity of uses in downtown plazas when there is greater diversity of users, too. By attracting mainly a single type of office worker to the POPS in South Lake Union, there is typically only a narrow range of uses for the public space.

Limitations and Applications of the Study

Before making any grand inferences about the social life of South Lake Union public spaces, however, some caveats regarding the information gathered during this survey should be mentioned. As mentioned, much of the constituency of these spaces are associated to the nearby employers and office spaces. It is important to mention, however, that this public life survey was conducted during the on-going effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. While specific employers like Amazon does not publicly release occupancy numbers, the Downtown Association of Seattle estimates that office occupancy are approximately 33 percent recovered as compared to equivalent week in 2019.[105] This would obviously have tremendous effects on the validity of results gathered during this study and the applicability of the conclusions to a pre-pandemic urban landscape. A public life survey conducted when office occupancies have increased closer to pre-pandemic levels and comparing results to this study would be an interesting undertaking for future research. On the other hand, there are indications that office occupancy might never return to pre-pandemic levels, and thus this survey would be the latest and most accurate snapshot of how public spaces will be used in downtown neighborhoods moving forward.

Ultimately, the goal of this study was to capture how these spaces are habitually used and by whom. By producing a snapshot of the social life of privately-owned public spaces in South Lake Union, I hope this work can help to inform the city and developers involved in the creation of such spaces to produce more vibrant, welcoming, and well-used social spaces in Seattle. As cities like Seattle grow and develop in the twenty-first century, there will be a greater need for great public spaces that are increasingly more difficult to build. In this context, privately-owned public spaces will continue to be an important tool for creating public spaces in urban neighborhoods. These spaces should be as useful, vibrant, pleasant, and welcoming as possible

[105] Downtown Seattle Association, "Economic Recovery: Tracking the downtown recovery," Accessed May 2, 2022.

for the thousands of city dwellers who live and work nearby. By better understanding the types of users and uses of public space, Seattle can continue to make these spaces catalysts of social life and culture in our cities. To conclude, I'll give the last word to William Whyte:

> I end, then, in praise of small spaces. The multiplier effect is tremendous. It is not just the number of people using them, but the larger number who pass by and enjoy them vicariously, or even the larger number who feel better about the city center for knowledge of them. For a city, such places are priceless, wherever the cost. They are built of a set of basics and they are right in front of our noses. If we look.[106]

[106] Ibid, 101.

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