

Master's Blog

Milo Lecture 2023: Professor Jan Gehl



On the 3rd April 2023, the Architects' Company held its 35th Milo Lecture, an annual event in honour of the sword bearer and first WCCA Clerk, Lt. Col. Peter Milo (1985-1986).

The speaker was Professor Jan Gehl, a man who has dedicated his life to making cities more enjoyable and human. The title of his talk was 'Liveable Cities for the 21st Century', and it was attended by Sheriff Alderman Alastair King, Masters and many distinguished guests.

Professor Gehl is not your typical architect. He is not interested in designing flashy skyscrapers or imposing monuments, his work is far more down-to-earth – quite literally. He is interested in making cities better for the people who live in them, by focusing on the human dimension of urban design. Rather than proposing buildings that look good, his interest is in making the fabric of cities feel good. Jan is married to a psychologist and is the first to admit this lifelong partnership has provided him with great insight into the psychology of urban spaces and places.

He cited examples in Italy as his main source of inspiration for active streets and frontages and talked us through a process in which we have the knowledge, but not always the political will or power to put it into practice. Some cities are more receptive than others – he used the example

of Monocle's Liveable Cities Index*. Interestingly, no UK city features, and London was not on the table! Clearly, we have a lot to do to empower our politicians to enact change. Although Professor Gehl was positive about the realisation of his ideas in Mayfair, there is much for him and his associates to do within the City of London. This is the secret ingredient that makes the city attractive to everyone – the elixir of life!

Gehl's work is truly inspiring. He has been a pioneer in the movement to create more people-centred cities, where pedestrians and cyclists have as much priority as cars, where public spaces are inviting and inclusive, and where people can connect with each other in meaningful ways. As he discussed, in around 1960, the paradigms for city planning radically changed. Modernism became dominant, the focus moved from the city of spaces to the city of objects/buildings, which were surrounded by leftover space. Around the same time, we saw the invasion of motor cars. In this process, any care for the people using cities – looked after for centuries by tradition and experience – was completely left behind. In Gehl's book, *Cities for People*, he explores how people became an overlooked and forgotten dimension, and why protecting the human experience is crucial for liveability, sustainability and health.

Professor Jan Gehl is a true visionary and champion of human-scale cities, 'from experience, and being in the right place at the right time,' as he put it. He has worked all over the world, from Copenhagen to Melbourne, and his ideas have transformed the way urban designers approach their work. He also has a great sense of humour and a knack for making his ideas accessible and entertaining; he is like the Jon Stewart of urban design – as he says, "a good city is like a good party – people stay there longer than really necessary, because they are enjoying themselves." We were delighted that he was able to give the Milo Lecture. It was attended by a full and diverse pan-livery audience and met with rapturous applause and many questions.

*The top 25 list of best cities for Quality of Life in 2022, according to Monocle: Copenhagen (1st in 2021), Zürich (2nd in 2021), Lisbon (7 in 2021), Helsinki (3rd in 2021), Stockholm (4 in 2021), Tokyo (5 in 2021), Vienna (6 in 2021), Sydney (10 in 2021).

Following his talk Jan said that he had forgotten to include in it an open invitation to visit Copenhagen and in particular the UIA conference there 2-6th July

<https://uia2023cph.org>