

# Life between stores

The quality of public spaces in Dutch post-war shopping malls.



Fig. 1 & 2. The shopping street Leyweg in 1964 and 2022 (Stokvis, 1964; Mortensen, 2022).

## Research Plan

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## Abstract.

Shopping malls are increasingly becoming vacant, resulting in deserted public spaces. This is problematic due to unsafety, waste of space and waste of economic potential. Public spaces are important because they can be the catalyst for human life, places where all sorts of activities can take place. If these places are well designed, it will result in better use of the area and, eventually, a better life for the visitors of the mall, the residents in the neighbourhood, and people passing by. Public spaces in shopping malls are important because the number of visitors determines whether shops will profit. Visitors are attracted by the shops and drawn to seeing other people. One important factor for people visiting a place is determined by its quality. Ultimately, attention to the design of public spaces can prevent shopping malls from getting more vacancies. Therefore, this research aims to discover the qualities of existing shopping malls by analysing urban and architectural interventions. This is done to determine whether this quality is already present and the essential elements that define this quality. These objectives are achieved by answering the following research question: "How can the quality of public spaces in Dutch post-war shopping malls be improved by urban and architectural interventions, according to the urban quality criteria set by Jan Gehl?" First, architectural and urban design interventions in public spaces will be outlined from the building year to the current situation of existing shopping malls. The next step is to assess the quality of these interventions that correspond to the criteria of Gehl. To determine whether these interventions are good, the behaviour of people near the interventions will be analysed. Lastly, the interventions that appear to have high quality will be verified by comparison of the examples from Gehl to state which interventions have improved the quality and how they can be improved further. The results of high-quality interventions will be placed in a toolbox to enhance existing public spaces in the redesign.

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# Introduction

Shopping malls are increasingly becoming vacant, resulting in deserted outdoor areas, and closed indoor spaces (Van den Eerenbeemt, 2021) (fig. 3). This vacancy is problematic because this waste of space is not wanted regarding the current housing shortage. Besides this, the purpose of coming to a mall has disappeared, resulting in streets where no one is crossing and is watching, causing unsafety (Jacobs, 1961/1992; Petzet & Heilmeyer, 2012). Stores occupy the most significant part of shopping malls, generating human activity in public spaces (Beddington, 1991). This public domain is important because it can be the catalyst for human life, where people come to meet others, exchange ideas, trade, relax, and enjoy themselves. When the quality of the public space is improved through design, people's lives in cities will be improved and invite others to come here (Rogers, 2010).

## The emergence of shopping malls

Shopping malls are complexes or areas with a collection of retailing and entertainment functions. These malls have always promoted lively public spaces because the number of visitors determines whether shops will profit. After the Second World War, malls were built with the concept of being an indispensable ingredient for a thriving suburban residential community and promoting the cohesion of a neighbourhood. The focus is placed on pedestrians (fig. 4) (Galema & Van Hoogstraten, 2005). The role of public spaces is to serve the mall's function of letting visitors continuously move from one shop to another. It is the playground of people going about their daily human activity of running errands, where nearly every individual in civilised society takes part. The public spaces in malls focus primarily on the shopping experience which also includes eating, enjoying each other's company, or taking a rest on a bench (Beddington, 1991). Unfortunately, this life usually comes to a standstill when the shops are closed, and there is nothing left to do here (Ten Kate, 2018). One could argue whether this concept of monotonous complexes focusing on retail is successful, considering the liveliness of public spaces throughout the day (fig. 5).



3. Vacancy in de Bogaard (Nijhuis, 2018).
4. Lijnbaan after opening (Fototechnische Dienst Rotterdam, 1950-1959)

## Generating lively spaces

Danish architect and urban design consultant Jan Gehl (born 1936) stresses the importance of quality in public spaces. To obtain this quality, people need to experience other people by hearing and seeing them, which also applies to malls. Besides this, people should want to pursue optional activities, e.g., taking occasional walks or resting on a bench. The last condition is not always present in a mall. However, it is an essential guideline for making public spaces focussing on the human dimension and should therefore be included in urban planning and architectural design. In design, it is possible to create better conditions that influence patterns or activities of people, resulting in lively cities and, eventually, a better life for people (fig. 6) (Gehl, 1971).



## Problem Statement and research questions

The main problem in this research is the possibility that public spaces in shopping malls are being overlooked in design because the focus lies primarily on the shopping function rather than the people. As a consequence, there is a reduction in the appeal to visit these malls which, in the long run, will lead to lower numbers of shopping visitors. This results in lower revenue for shops and an increased possibility of vacancies, further deteriorating the quality and attractiveness of the malls. In order to stop this vicious cycle this research aims to find the attributes that drive a high-quality public space and thereby increasing shopping traffic and reducing vacancies. Gehl offers tools such as urban quality criteria that existing public spaces in cities and neighbourhoods must meet. With this method, it is possible to determine whether public spaces have been improved or need improvement (Gehl, 2010). These criteria are valid for public spaces or urban areas, like a street or a park, but to what extent can they apply to

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5. Indoor shopping street Rotterdam Zuidplein (Souroosh, 2022).
  6. La Rambla, Barcelona (Gehl, 2011).

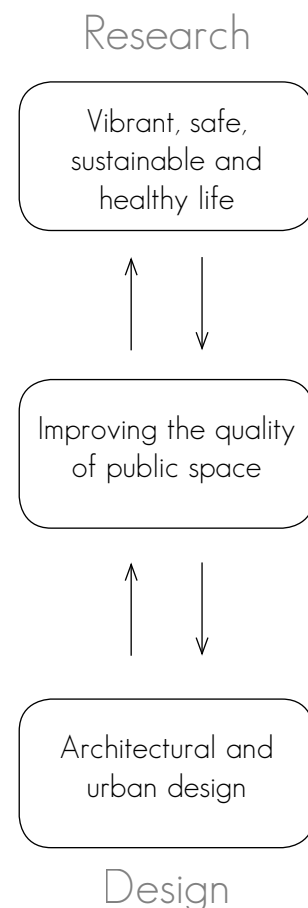
specific public spaces in shopping malls?

Therefore, this research will assess the quality of public spaces in shopping malls through the urban quality criteria set by Gehl to determine if they have improved by interventions. First, architectural and urban design interventions in public spaces will be outlined from the building year to the current situation of existing shopping malls. The next step is to assess the quality of these interventions that correspond to the criteria of Gehl. To determine whether these interventions are good, the behaviour of people near the interventions will be analysed. Lastly, the interventions that appear to have high quality will be verified by comparison of the examples from Gehl to state which interventions have improved the quality and how they can be improved further. The results of high-quality interventions will be placed in a toolbox to enhance existing public spaces in the redesign. The objectives of this research are achieved by answering the following question:

*How can the quality of public spaces in Dutch post-war shopping malls be improved by urban and architectural interventions, according to the urban quality criteria set by Jan Gehl?*

The following sub-questions will help to explore the main question fully:

1. *What are the urban and architectural and urban design interventions in different public spaces over time?*
2. *To what extent do the urban quality criteria of Gehl apply interventions?*
3. *How have interventions improved the quality of public spaces according to the behaviour of users?*
4. *How have the public spaces been improved, given the differences and similarities with comparable examples of high-quality public spaces, according to Gehl?*



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8. People choose to sit in public spaces (Johan, 2011).
  9. From research to design (Mortensen, 2022)

# Methodology

In this chapter, the explanation of the research methodology will be discussed in four parts centered around the research questions, respectively (fig. 10). In each section, the following subjects are addressed: data collection methods, analysis methods and the evaluation and justification of the methodological choices

## Interventions in public spaces

In the first part, the focus is placed on the interventions made in public spaces of shopping malls over the years (fig. x). For this research, two reference cases are chosen to study three locations of public spaces of a similar type. The cases are shopping center Leyweg in The Hague (built 1960) and De Bogaard in Rijswijk (built 1963). These cases were chosen because they were both constructed at a time when modernist ideas prevailed, and public spaces were given less attention (fig. 11 & 12). Besides this, each case has different typologies within the shopping area, resulting in various public spaces that have changed frequently over time. The most extensive urban and architectural interventions in the design of the different public spaces will be collected from the building year to the current situation. They vary from the street pavement and furniture placement to the edges of the façades that impact the quality (fig. 13).

The data on past interventions will be collected from photos in (digital) archives and websites of individuals. Also, data from the municipality, (urban) architects will be obtained, such as descriptions in zoning plans in newspapers, drawings of site plans, floor plans, sections, visuals, and photographs. The current situation will be explored through observation by photography and taking notes to analyse the changes. The past situations will be compared with other time layers to analyse what interventions have been done. Prominent and visible interventions are selected because they could impact the behaviour.



11. Shopping centre Leyweg (JosPé, approx. 1965).
12. Shopping centre In de Bogaard (Unknown, approx. 1963).
13. Section of the studied area in public spaces (Mortensen, 2022).

## Activities of users

For the second part of this research, the interventions will be measured and listed according to Gehl's twelve urban quality criteria (fig. 14, appx. 1). First, conclusions can be drawn from this. When specific criteria aren't present, this could result in lower-quality public spaces. The criteria that are present could lead to higher quality. This method applies to public spaces in general and doesn't necessarily have to be for a shopping mall. The interventions with high quality from the previous step will therefore be assessed for their quality based on the behaviour and reviews of the users. The behaviour will be explored at the same periods as the interventions.

Qualitative methods are needed to retrieve data on the quality of the interventions by the users. The methods for the past situation will firstly consist of analysing the behaviour types on photos and through descriptions. Secondly, the users of the public spaces will be asked if they memorize the behaviour in a certain time period before interventions. The number of participants will depend on how much is remembered. The interviews will be recorded by phone. Participation in this research will be asked in advance through written consent, compliant with the TU Delft guide (TU Delft, n.d.). This data will be combined with other methods to compare and state the behaviour at a particular time relating to the interventions.

The data for the current situation will consist of more information because more methods can be applied to public spaces. Consequently, the data from different periods will be fragmented because the past data can only highlight brief moments on the behaviour of a select group of people at certain times of the day with a particular type of weather. The data for the current situation will be obtained through quantitative and qualitative observation methods derived from the tools provided by the Gehl Institute. Through these methods, an overview of the different behaviour types in a public space can

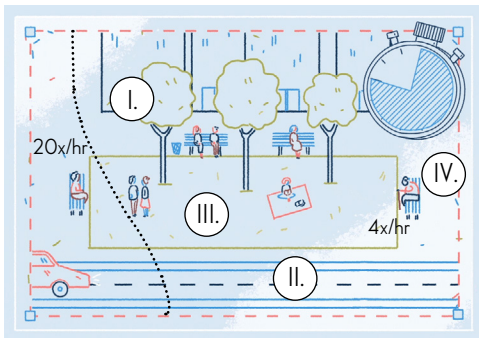
- ☺ = YES
- ☹ = IN BETWEEN
- ☹ = NO

**Options for mobility.**  
Is this space accessible? Are there physical elements that might limit or enhance personal mobility in the forms of walking, using a wheelchair, or pushing a stroller? Is it evident how to move through the space without having to take an illogical detour?

**Options for seeing.**  
Are seating options placed so there are interesting things to look at?

14. Example of two of the twelve quality criteria by Jan Gehl made in 2009 (Gehl Institute, n.d.).





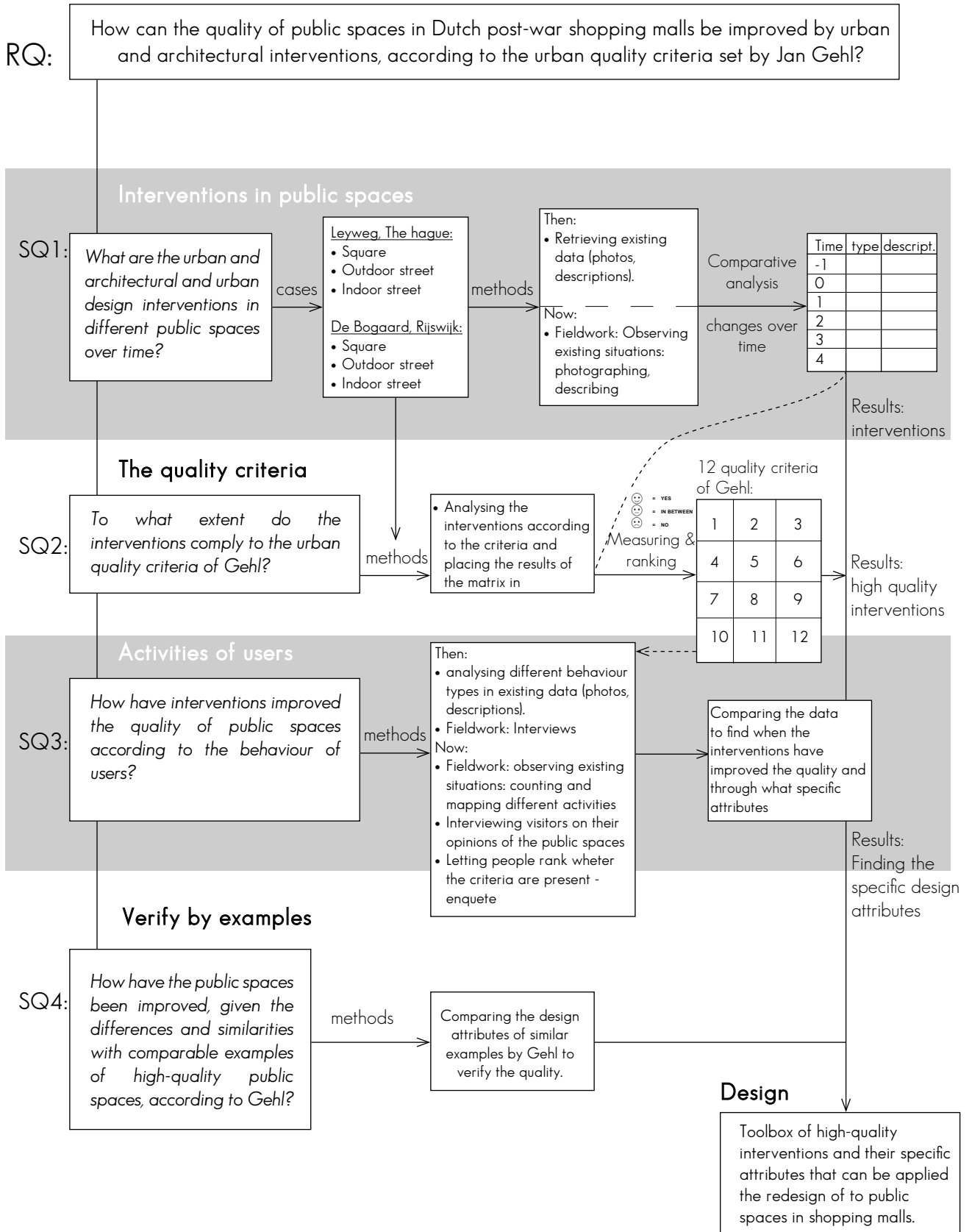
be visualised concerning the different interventions. The movements or stationary activities in a public space will be counted and traced on a map of the outlined area (fig. 15, appx. 2). This map will show the correspondence between the activity types and the interventions (fig. 16). The behaviour will be counted and recorded multiple times during the week within a specific time, at various times of the day, in different weather conditions to get a complete and concise overview of people's behaviour (Gehl Institute, n.d.). The visitors will be interviewed on their opinions of the public spaces. The participant's anonymity will be preserved by taking pictures from the back and using the photos for research purposes only.

The before and after situations of the interventions will be compared to determine when and where the quality was improved based on the user's behaviour and opinions. The behaviour is not always necessary in defining whether a criterion is present; this can be observed through other methods, such as municipality reports, taking notes, and making drawings of sounds, climate conditions, views, and smells (appx. 3; Gehl & Svarre, 2013).

### Verify by examples

In the last part, the results of the "high-quality" interventions will be compared to examples of high-quality public spaces, according to Gehl, to verify if the interventions indeed have improved the quality of the public spaces. Examples of similar public spaces and intervention types to those studied will be collected from Gehl's literature and the Gehl institute and urban and architectural design characteristics will be compared through descriptions and photos (fig. 17 & 18). The research on these public spaces will apply to these malls and does not have to count for other malls.

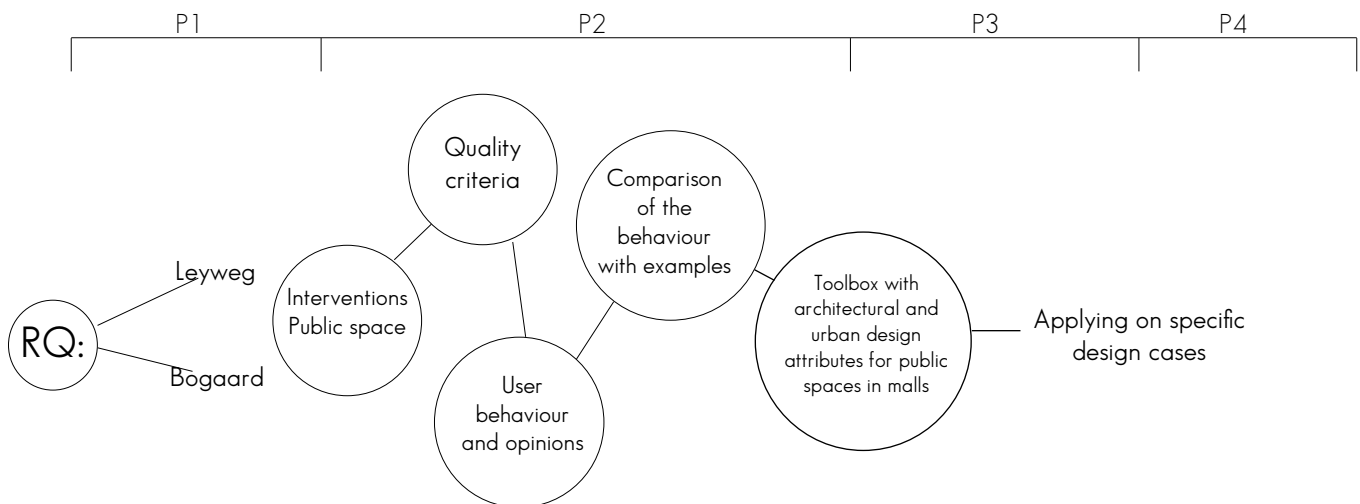
15. Observation method for different user activities (Gehl Institute, n.d).
16. Example of a site with different urban and architectural interventions and activities (Gehl Institute, n.d).
17. The square with an intervention at De Bogaard case study (Mortensen, 2022).
18. Example of a square with an intervention, Times square, NY (Gehl et al., 2009).



10. Structure of the research process (Mortensen, 2022).

## Research to design

Based on the research results - what are high-quality design interventions - design guidelines for improving public space in shopping malls can be generated. These guidelines can be considered for redesigning public spaces in shopping malls (fig. 19). A toolbox will consist of high-quality interventions with urban and architectural characteristics that meet Gehl's criteria (fig. 20).



# Frame of reference

## **Public space**

There has been much debate about definitions of public space - whether public or private, inside or outside, restrictive, free or otherwise. According to Gehl & Svarre, public space is understood as streets, alleys, buildings, and squares: everything is considered part of the built environment and is open and visible to all (2013). Where do you draw the line in shopping malls if it could be everything? Van de Wal et al. research states that malls are privately owned but still publicly accessible (2015). These public spaces also referred to as "pseudo-public spaces", will be different from the actual public spaces because the private ownership of different stakeholders influences the social control of the spaces, resulting in different behaviour of users than in "outside" public spaces (Djukic & Cvetkovic, n.d.). The limitation of this research is that this viewpoint will not be considered because by applying the criteria of Gehl, public spaces in malls are treated the same way as public spaces outside malls. That's why the behaviour of the users in the mall is important for assessing the quality.

## **Quality of public space**

Gehl uses a model to explain the quality of the physical environment and public spaces based on the frequency of certain activities of people. Gehl distinguishes three types of outdoor activities that can take place in public spaces. The first is necessary activities that happen under all conditions throughout the year and are independent of the exterior environment. The second one is optional activities that only happen under favourable exterior conditions if there is a wish to do so and if time, place, and weather conditions make it possible. The last category is social activities which consist of all activities that depend on the presence of others. When in urban spaces, the quality is poor, and only strictly necessary activities occur.

	Quality of the physical environment	
	Poor	Good
Necessary activities	●	●
Optional activities	●	●●●
"Resultant" activities (Social activities)	●	●

Unlike spaces of good quality, a broad spectrum of human activities is possible (fig. 21).

Architects and planners can affect the possibilities and opportunities of people interacting with each other and facilitate the possibility for optional activities through design (Gehl, 1971). To do so, they must run by a checklist of criteria made by Gehl. These criteria mention what should be done, e.g., opportunities to sit, but do not always mention the specific design attributes on how to realise this, such as a bench, which is also a limitation of this approach. Besides this, the specific architectural and urban elements that determine this quality are not mentioned here, like the evenness of paving stones or the width of the sidewalk to go here by wheelchair. That is why these criteria will also be supplemented by researching how the quality can be improved in design by comparing these elements with examples that Gehl finds essential (fig. 22).

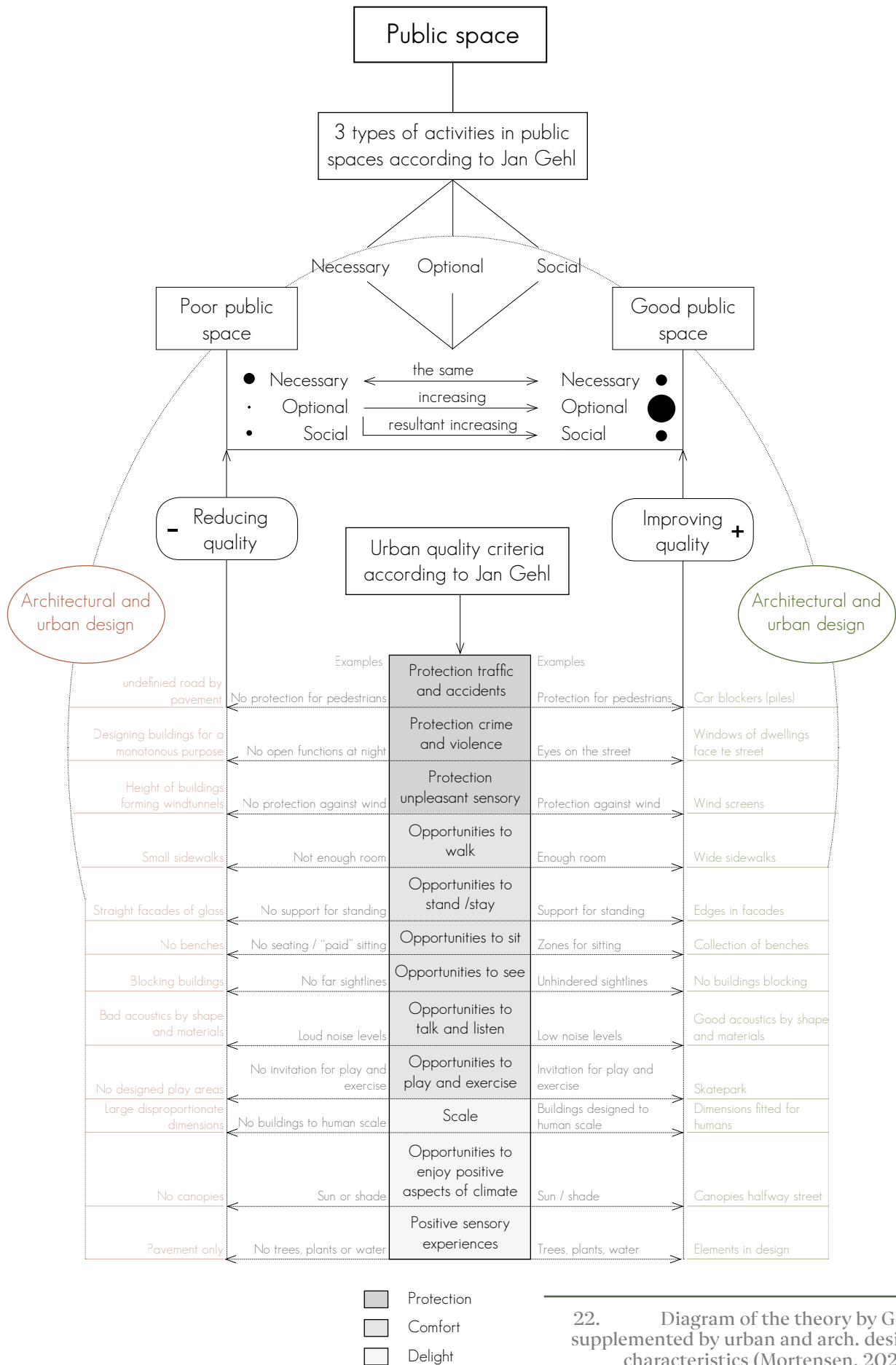
## Relevance

Generating lively public spaces focusing on people will influence people's lives and transform wasted abandoned spaces into thriving, inviting spaces where people will come. Successful spaces attract people and therefore have power (Burden, 2014). It will benefit economic growth, help build a sense of community through placemaking and create an identity (fig. 23; Yang, 2015). This can also be relevant for the mall by transforming it into a place that is more than shopping.

Public spaces can create value (Burden, 2014). Also, in the heritage debate, public spaces are recognised as important as a quality for urban living. Public spaces as places for people and nature can be an equaliser for people and benefit a more inclusive society. Abandoned structures can have new value by focusing on public spaces (O'Donnell, 2016) (fig. 24); this could also be the case for vacant shopping malls. By highlighting the qualities of the existing public spaces in this research, they could be included in the value assessment that can impact the redesign of these structures.



21. Quality determined by the presence of different activity types (Gehl, 2011).
23. Pedestrian only street, Montreal (Yang, 2015).
24. Project The Highline, NY, adding public spaces to former transportation structures (Jbrowning286, 2009).



22. Diagram of the theory by Gehl supplemented by urban and arch. design characteristics (Mortensen, 2022).

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# Appendix

1.

## TWELVE URBAN QUALITY CRITERIA

LOCATION:

-  = YES
-  = IN BETWEEN
-  = NO

<b>Protection</b>	<p><b>Protection against traffic and accidents.</b> Do groups across age and ability experience traffic safety in the public space? Can one safely bike and walk without fear of being hit by a driver?</p>	<p><b>Protection against harm by others.</b> Is the public space perceived to be safe both day and night? Are there people and activities at all hours of the day because the area has, for example, both residents and offices? Does the lighting provide safety at night as well as a good atmosphere?</p>	<p><b>Protection against unpleasant sensory experience.</b> Are there noises, dust, smells, or other pollution? Does the public space function well when it's windy? Is there shelter from strong sun, rain, or minor flooding?</p>
	<p><b>Options for mobility.</b> Is this space accessible? Are there physical elements that might limit or enhance personal mobility in the forms of walking, using a wheelchair, or pushing a stroller? Is it evident how to move through the space without having to take an illogical detour?</p>	<p><b>Options to stand and linger.</b> Does the place have features you can stay and lean on, like a façade that invites one to spend time next to it, a bus stop, a bench, a tree, or a small ledge or niche?</p>	<p><b>Options for sitting.</b> Are there good primary seating options such as benches or chairs? Or is there only secondary seating such as a stair, seat wall, or the edge of a fountain? Are there adequate non-commercial seating options so that sitting does not require spending money?</p>
	<p><b>Options for seeing.</b> Are seating options placed so there are interesting things to look at?</p>	<p><b>Options for talking and listening/hearing.</b> Is it possible to have a conversation here? Is it evident that you have the option to sit together and have a conversation?</p>	<p><b>Options for play, exercise, and activities.</b> Are there options to be active at multiple times of the day and year?</p>
<b>Comfort</b>	<p><b>Scale.</b> Is the public space and the building that surrounds it at a human scale? If people are at the edges of the space, can we still relate to them as people or are they lost in their surroundings?</p>	<p><b>Opportunities to enjoy the positive aspects of climate.</b> Are local climatic aspects such as wind and sun taken into account? Are there varied conditions for spending time in public spaces at different times of year? With this in mind, where are the seating options placed? Are they located entirely in the shadows or the sun? And how are they oriented/placed in relation to wind? Are they protected?</p>	<p><b>Experience of aesthetic qualities and positive sensory experiences.</b> Is the public space beautiful? Is it evident that there is good design both in terms of how things are shaped, as well as their durability?</p>
	<b>Enjoyment</b>		

25. Twelve Urban Quality criteria (Gehl Institute, n.d.).

2.

### People Moving Count

10 MINUTES

CATEGORY		COUNT--TALLY EVERYONE	
PEDESTRIANS	WALKING		TOTAL
	RUNNING/ JOGGING		TOTAL
	SUPPORTED (e.g., wheel- chair)		TOTAL
	CARRIED (e.g., stroller)		TOTAL
	ROLLING (e.g., skate- board)		TOTAL
PEOPLE ON BICYCLES			TOTAL

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_ WEATHER \_\_\_\_\_  
 LOCATION \_\_\_\_\_ TIME \_\_\_\_\_

MAP

ADD MAP HERE

INSTRUCTIONS: Count people moving across the indicated line for 10 minutes. Adjust the location of your line as necessary to maintain a clear sightline from end to end.

### Stationary Activities Mapping

POSTURE	TALLY choose one per person	ACTIVITIES choose as many as apply				
		WAITING TRANSPORT	CONSUMING FOOD/BEV.	COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY	CULTURAL ACTIVITY	RECREATION PLAY/EXERCISE
STANDING ●						
SITTING PUBLIC □						
SITTING PRIVATE △						
SITTING COMMERCIAL ○						
SITTING INFORMAL ☒						
LYING DOWN —						
MULTIPLE/MOUMENT X						

- 26. People Moving Count (Gehl Institute, n.d.)
- 27. Stationary Activities Mapping (Gehl Institute, n.d.)

# 8 INVESTIGATE TOOLS

[ FROM 'HOW TO STUDY PUBLIC LIFE' by Jan Gehl & Birgitte Svarre ]



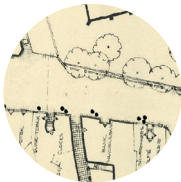
## Counting

Counting is a widely used tool in public life studies. In principle, everything can be counted, which provides numbers for making before-and-after comparisons, between different geographic areas over time.



## Looking for traces

Human activity often leaves traces, which can give the observer information about city life. Traces can be counted, photographed or drawn on a map.



## Plotting

Activities, people, places for staying and much more can be plotted in, i.e. drawn as symbols on a plan of an area being studied to mark the number and type of activities and where they take place. This is also called behavioral mapping.



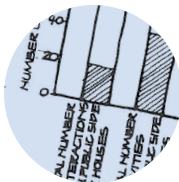
## Photographing

Photographing is an essential part of public life studies as it helps to document situations where urban life and form either interact or don't after changes have been made.



## Tracing

People's movements inside or crossing limited spaces can be drawn as lines of movement on the plan of the study area.



## Keeping a diary

Keeping a diary can register details and nuances about the interaction between public life and space. Noting observations can later be categorized and/or quantified.



## Tracking

In order to observe people's movements over a large area or for a longer time, observers can discreetly follow people without their knowing it or follow someone who knows and agrees to be followed and observed. This is also called shadowing.



## Test walks

Taking a walk while observing is underway can be made more or less systematic, so that the observer sees problems and potentials for himself on any given route.