

# Building Thoroughfare

*People hardly ever feel free to linger in public places, especially if these public places are indoors or off the street.*

Public places are meant to invite free loitering. The public places in community buildings (city halls, community centers, public libraries) especially need this quality — because when people feel free to hang around they will necessarily get acquainted with what goes on in the building, and may begin to use it.

But people rarely feel free to stay in these places without an Official Reason. Goffman describes this situation as follows: "...Being present in a public place without an orientation to apparent goals outside the situation is sometimes called lolling, when position is fixed, and loitering, when some movement is entailed. Either can be deemed sufficiently improper to merit legal action. On many of our city streets, especially at certain hours, the police will question anyone who appears to be doing nothing and ask him to 'move along'. (In London, a recent court ruling established that an individual has a right to walk on the street but no legal right merely to stand on it.) In

Chicago, an individual in the uniform of a hobo can loll on 'the stem', but once off this preserve he is required to look as if he were intent on getting to some business destination. Similarly, some mental patients owe their commitment to the fact that the police found them wandering on the streets at off hours without any apparent destination or purpose in mind." (Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, Free Press, New York: 1963, p. 56.)

If a public space is to be really useful it must somehow help to counter the anti-loitering tendency in modern society. Specifically, we have observed these problems:

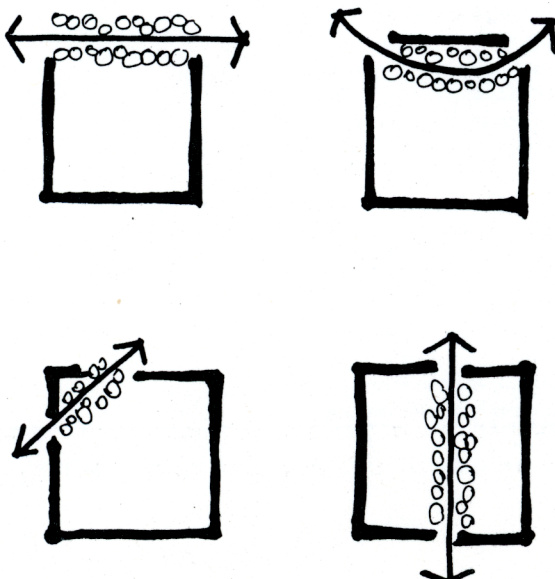
1. A person will not use a public place if he has to make a special motion towards it, a motion which indicates the intention to use the facility "officially".
2. If people are asked to state their reason for being in a place (e.g. by a receptionist or clerk) they won't use it freely.
3. Entering a public space through doors, corridors, changes of level,

and so on, tends to keep away people who are not entering with a specific goal in mind.

Places which overcome these problems, like the Galleria in Milan, all



have a common characteristic: they all have public thoroughfares which slice through them, lined with places to stop and loiter, and watch the scene. (continued over)



*Therefore: Place a natural pedestrian thoroughfare through the public places in buildings where it is hoped people will linger. Make the thoroughfare a shortcut, with respect to paths around the facility; make it continuous with these paths — no steps, same material. Line the thoroughfare with opportunities for involvement — views, displays, places to sit and lean — and make any entrances along it wide, at least 15'.*

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## Problem (continued)

We continue the quote from Goffman: "An illustration of these street regulations is found in Samuel Beckett's description of the plight of his fictional crippled hero Molloy, who tries to manage his bicycle, his crutches, and his tiredness all at the same time:

"Thus we cleared these difficult straits, my bicycle and I, together. But a little further on I heard myself hailed. I raised my head and saw a policeman. Elliptically speaking, for it was only later, by way of induction, or deduction, I forget which, that I knew what it was. What are you doing there? he said. I'm used to that question, I understood it immediately. Resting, I said. Resting, he said. Resting, I said. Will you answer my question? he cried. So it always is when I'm reduced to confabulation, I honestly believe I have answered the question I am asked and in reality I do nothing of the kind. I won't reconstruct the conversation in all its meanderings. It ended in my understanding that my way of resting, my attitude when at rest, astride my bicycle, my arms on the handlebars, my head on my arms, was a violation of I don't know what, public order, public decency.

(Molloy is then taken to jail, questioned, and released.)

"What is certain is this, that I never rested in that way again, my feet obscenely resting on the earth, my arms on the handlebars and on my arms my head, rocking and abandoned. It is indeed a deplorable sight, a deplorable example, for the people, who so need to be encouraged, in their bitter toil, and to have before their eyes manifestations of strength only, of courage and joy, without which they might collapse, at the end of the day, and roll on the ground.

"Lolling and loitering are often, but not always, prohibited. In societies in which cafe life in institutionalized, much permitted lolling seems to exist. Even in our

own society, some toleration is given to 'lolling groups', in which participants open themselves up to any passing momentary focus of attention and decline to maintain a running conversation unless disposed to do so. These clusters of persons passing the time of day may be found on slum corners, outside small-town stores and barber shops, on the streets during clement weather in some metropolitan wholesale clothing districts, and, paradoxically, on the courthouse lawns of some small towns.

"The rule against 'having no purpose', or being disengaged, is evident in the exploitation of untaxing involvements to rationalize or mask desired lolling — a way of covering one's physical presence in a situation with a veneer of acceptable visible activity. Thus, when individuals want a 'break' in their work routine, they may remove themselves to a place where it is acceptable to smoke and there smoke in a pointed fashion. Certain minimal 'recreational' activities are also used as covers for disengagement, as in the case of 'fishing' off river banks where it is guaranteed that no fish will disturb one's reverie, or 'getting a tan' on the beach — activity that shields reverie or sleep, although, as with the hobo's lolling, a special uniform may have to be worn, which proclaims and institutionalizes this relative inactivity. As might be expected, when the context firmly provides a dominant involvement that is outside the situation, as when riding in a train or airplane, then gazing out the window, or reverie, or sleeping may be quite permissible. In short, the more the setting guarantees that the participant has not withdrawn from what he ought to be involved in, the more liberty it seems he will have to manifest what would otherwise be considered withdrawal in the situation.

"Here it is useful to reintroduce a consideration of subordinate involvements such as reading newspapers and looking in shop windows. Because these involvements

in our society represent legitimate momentary diversions from the legitimate object of going about one's business, they tend to be employed as covers when one's objective is not legitimate, as the arts of 'tailing' suspects have made famous. When Sam Spade affects to be examining a suit in a store window, his deeper purpose is not to try to suggest that he is interested in suits but that he has the same set of purposes as a person in a public street who diverts himself for a moment in going about his business to gaze in a window. Similarly, as an ex-bum tells us, when one's appearance and real purpose put one outside of the current behavior setting, then a pointedly correct subordinate involvement is of the kind that is associated with these subordinate involvements.

"One idiosyncrasy that he (a friend) has discovered but cannot account for is the attitude of station policemen toward book readers. After seven-thirty in the evening, in order to read a book in Grand Central or Penn Station, a person either has to wear horn-rimmed glasses or look exceptionally prosperous. Anyone else is apt to come under surveillance. On the other hand, newspaper readers never seem to attract attention and even the seediest vagrant can sit in Grand Central all night without being molested if he continues to read a paper. (Goffman, *ibid.*, pp 56-59.)

In order to provide an opportunity for "lolling", the area which is to be public must be a direct continuation of the public sidewalk. There must be no breaks in continuity which might suggest that this space is private, regulated territory. If there is any change in level, it should be a continuous ramp.

Further, if the space is a dead end, people will feel inhibited from exploring it, since a venture into it marks them clearly as "interested persons". To overcome this difficulty, the space must have at least two openings, one at each end, so that it can be used as

a thoroughfare by people who are curious. It will then give them the opportunity to explore it, while seeming to take a walk for some other purpose.

This effect will be enhanced if the area is so placed that it provides people with a natural shortcut. They will then go through it for pure convenience, and will need no excuse whatever for being there.

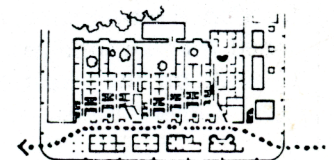
## Context

This pattern may be applied to areas in public buildings where people are meant to be free to loiter without a "reason" (e.g., the kind of space described in the pattern, *Community Territory*).

Furthermore, the pattern presumes that this is a very important kind of space for cities; and as such it may be taken as a recommendation that certain buildings which would not ordinarily build such space, consider doing so (e.g., department stores, markets, libraries, hotels).

## Example

The plan illustrated below shows an arena thoroughfare designed by Eric Adlercreutz for a Multi-Service Center in Oakland, California.



By: Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein.

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This pattern is tentative. If you have any evidence to support or refute its current formulation, please send it to the Center for Environmental Structure, P.O. Box 5156, Berkeley, California 94705; we will add your comments to the next edition.