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Technology Is Not Driving Us Apart After All

Video | The Not-So-Lonely City Super-8 footage shot of the northwest corner of Bryant Park by Project for Public Spaces in 1980.

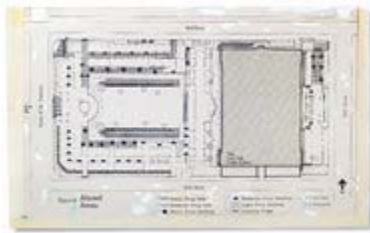
By MARK OPPENHEIMER
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In September 2008, two graduate students working for Keith Hampton, a professor at Rutgers, raised a camera atop a 16-foot tripod to film down into Bryant Park, the sprawling green space behind the main branch of the New York Public Library. They hit record, then milled about nearby pretending they had nothing to do with the rig, as it semi-surreptitiously filmed the comings and goings of hundreds of New Yorkers. The charade didn't last. After an hour, Lauren Sessions Goulet, the more senior of the pair, found herself talking to the park's private security force, which sent her to see their bosses, the Bryant Park Corporation. She was nervous.

Across the street and up 11 floors, in the corporation's Fifth Avenue office near the park, Goulet explained what Hampton had sent her there to do. "Look, we were just trying to refilm Whyte," she said, pleading with them. To her relief, the corporation offered to help.

In the late 1960s and '70s, working with the New York City Planning Commission, the sociologist William H. Whyte conducted groundbreaking granular studies of the city's public spaces, spending hours filming and photographing and taking notes about how people behave in public. Where do they like to sit? Where do they like to stand? When they bump into people they know, how long do their conversations last?

The Street Life Project, as it was called, was revolutionary in urban planning, changing not only the way we think about public spaces but also what can be learned in this kind of close observational research of human interaction. Whyte believed that if we knew how, say, the placement of benches, or a plaza's orientation to the sun, affected people's enjoyment of a public space, then we could go beyond mere observation into the realm of smarter policy. We could make people happier.



A map of Bryant Park from the Project for Public Spaces' 1981 study.
PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES

Whyte, like many American urban theorists before him, wanted to combat the alienating, atomizing effects of city life. Today's atomizing forces are brand new and far less tangible: ubiquitous Internet access, constant email and social-media updates, all distracting us from our surroundings, loved ones and other people around us. But sociologists' concerns remain the same. Are we really talking to one another? Is modernity making us lonely? These are the driving questions behind much contemporary sociology, popularized by books like Robert D. Putnam's "Bowling Alone," published in 2000, and more recently, Sherry Turkle's "Alone Together," in which the M.I.T. professor argues that technology is inhibiting human interaction.

About five years ago, Keith Hampton was thinking about how the old urban maladies might compare with the new ones, and he realized, while attending a seminar on Whyte, that he knew exactly where to start answering that question.

In 1975, one of Whyte's research assistants, Fred Kent, founded an organization called Project for Public Spaces, to further Whyte's work. Employing Whyte's methodology, P.P.S. took time-lapse films of four major urban nodes — Bryant Park; the front steps of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art; a corner of Chestnut Street in Center City Philadelphia; and Downtown Crossing in Boston — in order to better understand how people used the spaces and how they

might be improved. Hampton believed the footage could serve as baseline data for a comparative study. By refilming the same spots three decades later, Hampton thought he could answer major questions about our changing social lives, replacing vague theories with some hard data. Are we indeed socially hobbled by our little screens? If matters have gotten worse, how would we know? Worse than what? Using some old reels of film, Hampton decided that he could find out.

Tall and broad with a warm charm, unguarded in that Canadian way, Hampton has become a star in a subfield that lacks a proper name: He studies how digital technology changes our lives. Unlike many of his contemporaries in academia, Hampton is neither a reactionary about technology, innately skeptical of the new, nor a utopian, eager to trumpet every invention as revolutionary. He is instead a sanguine optimist — a position he says is backed up by his research.



Still from a video shot by Hampton in 2010 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He and his assistants carefully coded for “dyads” (pairs) and “triads” (groups of three) — circled in red — to compare the way people in groups and loners use devices. Phone use was found to be more prevalent among the loners, who also tended to loiter longer. In this frame, every person using a device — circled in blue — is alone. Of the 26 people in the area of the steps that Hampton examined (not the entire frame), 19 are in groups, 15 are female and just three are on their phones.

KEITH HAMPTON

For his dissertation at the University of Toronto, Hampton studied an extraordinary early experiment in wired living. In the mid-1990s, a consortium that included IBM and Apple helped raise more than \$100 million to turn a new suburban development in Newmarket, Ontario, a Toronto suburb, into the neighborhood of the future. As houses went up, more than half of them got high-speed Internet (this in the age of dial-up), advanced browser software for their computers, a tool for videoconferencing between houses and a Napster-like tool for music sharing. He treated the other homes as a control group. From October 1997 through August 1999, Hampton lived in a basement apartment in the new development, observing and interviewing his neighbors.

Hampton found that, rather than isolating people, technology made them more connected. “It turns out the wired folk — they recognized like three times as many of their neighbors when asked,” Hampton said. Not only that, he said, they spoke with neighbors on the phone five times as often and attended more community events. Altogether, they were much more successful at addressing local problems, like speeding cars and a small spate of burglaries. They also used their Listserv to coordinate offline events, even sign-ups for a bowling league. Hampton was one of the first scholars to marshal evidence that the web might make people less atomized rather than more. Not only were people not

opting out of bowling leagues — Robert Putnam’s famous metric for community engagement — for more screen time; they were also using their computers to opt in.

After a brief stint as an assistant professor at M.I.T., Hampton left in 2005 for the University of Pennsylvania, where he stayed until moving to Rutgers in 2012. During his time at Penn, his relatively sunny take on the web, wireless and mobile technology inserted him in the polarizing debate between techn-utopians and techno-skeptics. What was still missing from the research, he decided, was historical perspective.

“We’re really bad at looking back in time,” Hampton said, speaking of his fellow sociologists. “You overly idealize the past. It happens today when we talk about technology. We say: ‘Oh, technology, making us isolated. We’re disengaged.’ Compared to what? You know, this kind of idealized notion of what community and social interactions were like.” He crudely summarized his former M.I.T. colleague Sherry Turkle’s book “Alone Together.” “She said: ‘You know, today, people standing at a train station, they’re all talking on their cellphones. Public spaces aren’t communal anymore. No one interacts in public spaces.’ I’m like: ‘How do you know that? We don’t know that. Compared to what? Like, three years ago?’ ”

Turkle said that her decades of observation are pretty conclusive: “When you watch a mother texting as she pushes a stroller — and I follow that mother for blocks, I walk alongside — you know it. You know that the streetscape used to include mothers who spoke to their children.”

In 2007, Hampton and three of his students attended a “How to Turn a Place Around” session, offered by Project for Public Spaces. The two-day workshops aim to propagate Whyte’s work by offering planners, activists and academics a means of applying his methods and insights to any place in their own communities. (Whyte died in 1999.)

Based on visits to parks and plazas in New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Boston, Minneapolis, Montreal and Venice, Whyte and his acolytes formulated conclusions that were, for their time, counterintuitive. For example, he discovered that city people don’t actually like wide-open, uncluttered spaces. Despite the Modernist assumption that what harried urban people need are oases of nature in the city, if you bother to watch people, you see that they tend to prefer narrow streets, hustle and bustle, crowdedness. Build a high-rise with an acre of empty plaza around it, and the plaza may seem desolate, even dangerous. People will avoid it. If you want people to linger, he wrote, give them seating — but not just benches, which make it impossible for people to face one another. Movable chairs can be better. Also: Never cordon off a fountain. “It’s

not right to put water before people and then keep them away from it,” Whyte wrote in his 1980 book, “The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces.” People want to splash, dip their toes, throw coins. He believed that dense greenery can make places feel less safe, that people find the fishbowl effect of sunken plazas disconcerting and, presciently, that food trucks draw crowds. Whyte’s insights were incorporated into 1975 revisions of New York’s zoning code, and the Bryant Park Corporation — credited with turning around the once-squalid park — bases its work on many of his principles.

While at M.I.T., Hampton grew curious about mobile-phone use in public. Are we really all just walking around tapping and tweeting and texting and ignoring our fellow human beings? Was there a pre-smartphone Eden? At the workshop, Hampton immediately saw the potential of studying some of this raw footage from P.P.S. He said so aloud, and someone shot right back: The films were in a warehouse in New Jersey. “Are you interested?”

He was, and he had the films shipped to his office at Penn. Many of the reels had deteriorated, but Hampton was able to salvage, and convert to digital, 3,273 of them — way too many to study. Hampton thought of using Whyte’s Times Square films, but Times Square had changed too much for any meaningful comparison. He considered Whyte’s films of Jacob Riis Park in Queens, but discovered it was a nude beach. Besides, Whyte’s roving, chaotic camera work would have made refilming nearly impossible. Eventually Hampton zeroed in on P.P.S.’s stationary films, shot from on high, in New York, Philadelphia and Boston. He and his team could not get access to the same windows and rooftops from which those films were shot. But in each city his team was “able to reproduce a similar vantage point through the use of a 16-foot cine stand” — basically, a large tripod — according to a draft of the unpublished article Hampton and his team presented at a conference last summer.

Because Hampton’s cameras sat lower, his images captured a smaller area. To correct for that discrepancy, Hampton cropped the original film so the areas matched. His primary concern was that, because he was filming closer to people than P.P.S. had, the subjects would notice that they were being observed. But they didn’t. “Nobody cared,” Hampton said.

Between 2008 and 2010, his team accrued enough footage to begin a comparison with the P.P.S. films — together the two collections totaled more than 38 hours. “Films were sampled at 15-second intervals for a total of 9,173 observation periods,” he writes in his article, which reads like a study in scholarly masochism. Hampton and a team of 11 graduate and undergraduate students from Penn spent a total of 2,000 hours looking at the films, coding the individuals they observed for four characteristics: sex, group size, “loitering” and phone use.

Such observation can never be an exact science, but Hampton was determined that his work come as close as possible. If a coder was uncertain if an individual was in a group, he or she “reviewed the video immediately before and after a sampled frame to verify that the individuals represented a collective unit,” Hampton writes. The coders identified groups by “physical touching, apparent talking and collective locomotion.” Multiple coders would periodically look at the same sections to make sure their perceptions matched.

“It was incredibly tedious,” said Lauren Sessions Goulet, Hampton’s graduate assistant and co-author of the paper, who supervised his undergraduate coders and now works for Facebook. “It was as much of a beast as we thought it would be.” But once the coding was done and collected in a spreadsheet, the computations were simple. It took only a week or two of arithmetic for Hampton to find what he was looking for.

First off, mobile-phone use, which Hampton defined to include texting and using apps, was much lower than he expected. On the steps of the Met, only 3 percent of adults captured in all the samples were on their phones. It was highest at the northwest corner of Bryant Park, where the figure was 10 percent. More important, according to Hampton, was the fact that mobile-phone users tended to be alone, not in groups. People on the phone were not ignoring lunch partners or interrupting strolls with their lovers; rather, phone use seemed to be a way to pass the time while waiting to meet up with someone, or unwinding during a solo lunch break. Of course, there’s still the psychic toll, which we all know, of feeling tethered to your phone — even while relaxing at the park. But that’s a personal cost. From what Hampton could tell, the phones weren’t nearly as hard on our relationships as many suspect.

When I met Hampton, he proved this point by gesturing around us, at our fellow diners at the Bryant Park Grill, where we were eating on a beautiful summer day, and at the hundreds of others beyond us in the park, enjoying the sun at tables, in chairs and on the lawn beyond us. “In the busiest public spaces, where there are a lot of groups, like this kind of public space, it’s like 3 percent,” he said. “Three percent. I can’t even see someone on a cellphone right now, but yet how many times have you seen a story that says, ‘People on cellphones in public spaces is rude, it’s creating all sorts of problems, people are walking into traffic.’ I mean, we really have a strong sense that it’s everywhere.”

Hampton’s project offers an explanation for that misperception. It turns out that people like hanging out in public more than they used to, and those who most like hanging out are people using their phones. On the steps of the Met, “loiterers” — those present in at least two consecutive film samples, inhabiting the same area for 15 seconds or more — constituted 7 percent of the total (that is to say, the other 93 percent were just passing through). That was a 57 percent

increase from 30 years earlier. And those using mobile phones there were five times as likely to “loiter” as other people. In other words, not that many people are talking, or reading, texting or playing Candy Crush on the phone, but those who do stick around longer. (In the case of Bryant Park, it doesn’t hurt that the area is no longer an open-air drug market — a major problem that P.P.S. was trying to root out in the ‘80s.)

According to Hampton, our tendency to interact with others in public has, if anything, improved since the ‘70s. The P.P.S. films showed that in 1979 about 32 percent of those visited the steps of the Met were alone; in 2010, only 24 percent were alone in the same spot. When I mentioned these results to Sherry Turkle, she said that Hampton could be right about these specific public spaces, but that technology may still have corrosive effects in the home: what it does to families at the dinner table, or in the den. Rich Ling, a mobile-phone researcher in Denmark, also noted the limitations of Hampton’s sample. “He was capturing the middle of the business day,” said Ling, who generally admires Hampton’s work. For businesspeople, “there might be a quick check, do I have an email or a text message, then get on with life.” Fourteen-year-olds might be an entirely different story.

Philadelphia was the only location of the four where Hampton found more people by themselves than the P.P.S. films did. But Hampton claims the effect was offset by something more profound: The apparent uptick could be explained in part by an increase in the number of women on the street, many of them alone.

In fact, this was Hampton’s most surprising finding: Today there are just a lot more women in public, proportional to men. It’s not just on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. On the steps of the Met, the proportion of women increased by 33 percent, and in Bryant Park by 18 percent. The only place women decreased proportionally was in Boston’s Downtown Crossing — a major shopping area. “The decline of women within this setting could be interpreted as a shift in gender roles,” Hampton writes. Men seem to be “taking on an activity that was traditionally regarded as feminine.”

Across the board, Hampton found that the story of public spaces in the last 30 years has not been aloneness, or digital distraction, but gender equity. “I mean, who would’ve thought that, in America, 30 years ago, women were not in public the same way they are now?” Hampton said. “We don’t *think* about that.”

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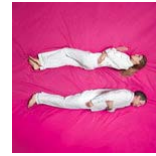
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