

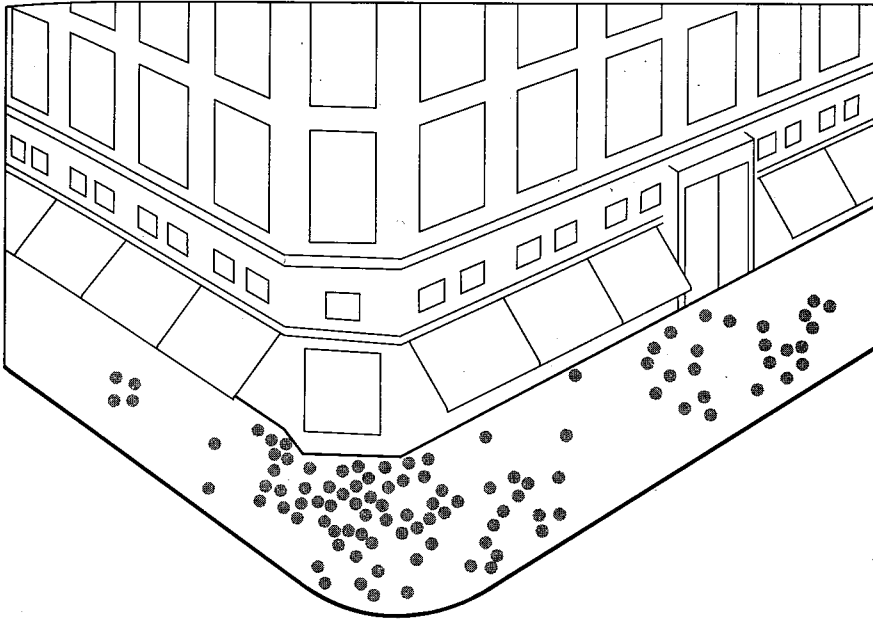
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THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE STREET

It was a dandy hypothesis. How far, I had wondered, would people move out of the pedestrian flow to have a conversation? My hypothesis was that they would gravitate to the unused foot or so of buffer space along the building walls. It was a matter of simple common sense.

We focused time-lapse cameras on several street corners and recorded the activity for two weeks. On maps of the corners we plotted the location of each conversation and how long it lasted. To screen out people who were only waiting for the light to change, we noted only those conversations lasting a minute or longer.

The activity was not as expected. To our surprise, the people who stopped to talk did not move out of the main pedestrian flow; and if they had been out of it, they moved into it. The great bulk of the conversations were smack in the middle of the pedestrian flow—the 100 percent location, to borrow the real estate term. In subsequent studies we were to find the same impulse to the center in traveling conversations—the kind in which two people move about a lot but don't go very far. There is much apparent motion, but if you plot the



Location of street conversations lasting two minutes or more at Saks Fifth Avenue and Fiftieth Street. Cumulative for five days in June. Note main concentration at corner, secondary one outside entrance.

orbits, you will find that they are centered around the 100 percent location.

Observers in other countries have also noted the tendency to self-congestion. In his study of pedestrians in Copenhagen, Jan Gehl mapped bunching patterns almost identical to those observable here. Matthew Ciolek studies an Australian shopping center with similar results. "Contrary to 'common sense' expectations," Ciolek notes, "the great majority of people were found to select their sites for social interaction right on or very close to the traffic lines intersecting the plaza. Relatively few people formed their gatherings away from the spaces used for navigation."

Just why people behave like this I have never been able to determine. It is understandable that conversations should originate in the main flow. Where there are the most people, the likelihood of a meeting or of a leave-taking is highest. What is less explainable is the inclination to remain in the main flow, blocking traffic, and being jostled by it. This seems to be a matter not of inertia but of choice—instinctive perhaps, but by no means illogical. In the center of the crowd, you have maximum choice—to break off, to switch, to continue. It is much like being in the middle of a crowded cocktail party, which is itself a moving conversation growing ever denser and denser, occasionally ending up with everyone squeezed into a corner. It is a behavior universally deplored and practiced.

What attracts people most is other people. Many urban spaces are being designed as though the opposite were true and what people like best are places they stay away from.

What attracts people most, in sum, is other people. If I labor the point, it is because many urban spaces are being designed as though the opposite were true and as though what people like best are the places they stay away from. People themselves often talk along such lines, and that is why their responses to questionnaires can be so misleading. How many people would say they like to sit in the middle of a crowd? Instead, they speak of getting away from it all, and they use terms like "oasis," "retreat," and "escape." I am very glad my hypothesis blew up in my face. It has forced me to look at what people do.

*The greatest urban
spaces are street
corners.*

The best places to look are street corners. As a general rule, 100 percent conversations are spotted most often at the busiest crossroads locations. Fifth Avenue at Fiftieth Street is one such. The heaviest pedestrian flows are at the entrance to Saks department store and at the street corner. It is at these two places that the greatest number of conversations are clustered, with relatively few in the space between the corner and the entrance. Of 133 conversations we mapped over several days, 57 percent were concentrated in the highest-traffic locations. While there were no significant differences between men and women, men did tend to talk somewhat longer than women: 50 percent of male groups talked five minutes or longer, compared to 45 percent of female groups.

Lexington Avenue is more crowded yet—almost to the point of travesty between Fifty-seventh and Fifty-eighth streets. What with signs, floral displays, street vendors, its narrow, twelve-and-a-half-foot sidewalks are reduced to an effective walkway of five or six feet. At the peak of the lunchtime traffic, pedestrians have to walk single file. And it is then that the sidewalk is likely to be further blocked by conversation.

Pedestrians are surprisingly tolerant of the blockers. As an experiment, two of our researchers engaged in marathon conversation in the middle of the block. "Almost all of the pedestrians," one reported, "made an effort to avoid brushing against us even though this involved squeezing close to the displays or to the cars at the curbs. One woman did jostle me on purpose. A few made remarks under their breaths. But if the others felt resentful, they didn't show it. They were so polite that when they couldn't avoid brushing against us, they murmured apologies as they passed."

People waiting for people are interesting to observe, particularly so a few minutes after the hour. But most interesting of all are people who meet people they did not expect to. When I started observing street behavior, it was the high incidence of these chance meetings that struck me. But when you come to think of it, it is not chance at all. With about three thousand people an hour streaming past a spot, there is an actuarial probability that someone will see a friend, an acquaint-

tance, or the familiar stranger you can almost place but not quite. The probability may be higher yet when you take shifts into account.

The postlunch groups heading back to the office around one o'clock look like junior and middle management people. The people you see around two are older, more expensively dressed, and apparently not in a hurry.

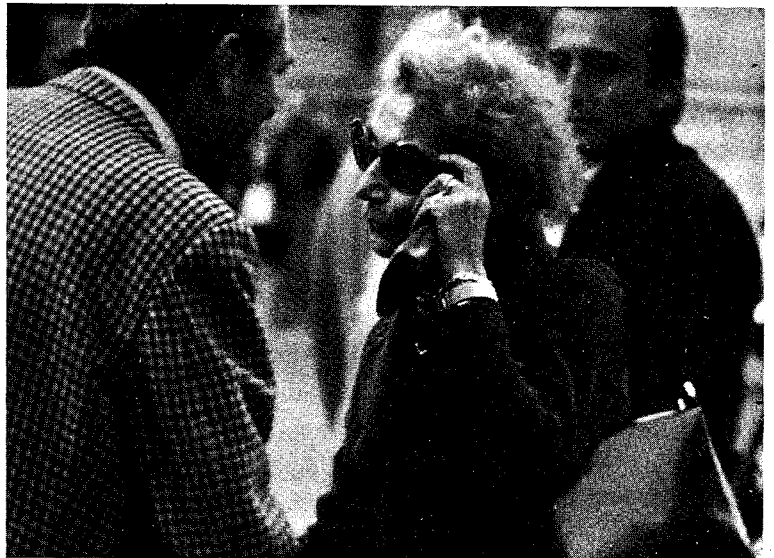
Of the street conversations we tracked, about 30 percent appear to have been unplanned. Some encounters were too brief to develop into a conversation—a quick hello and a wave of the hand. Some were awkwardly tentative, with neither party quite sure whether it would be right to pass on or stop. But many went on for three minutes or more. If one of the persons was with a group, the encounter sometimes involved a full round of introductions and handshakes.

It is difficult to gauge the value of chance encounters. Did the old friends meet for lunch as they said they would? Did the trade gossip turn out to be right? Possibly. But one thing is certain: it is at the crossroads that the chances are best. As we will see in the chapter on the outward move of corporate headquarters, chance is what they forfeit.

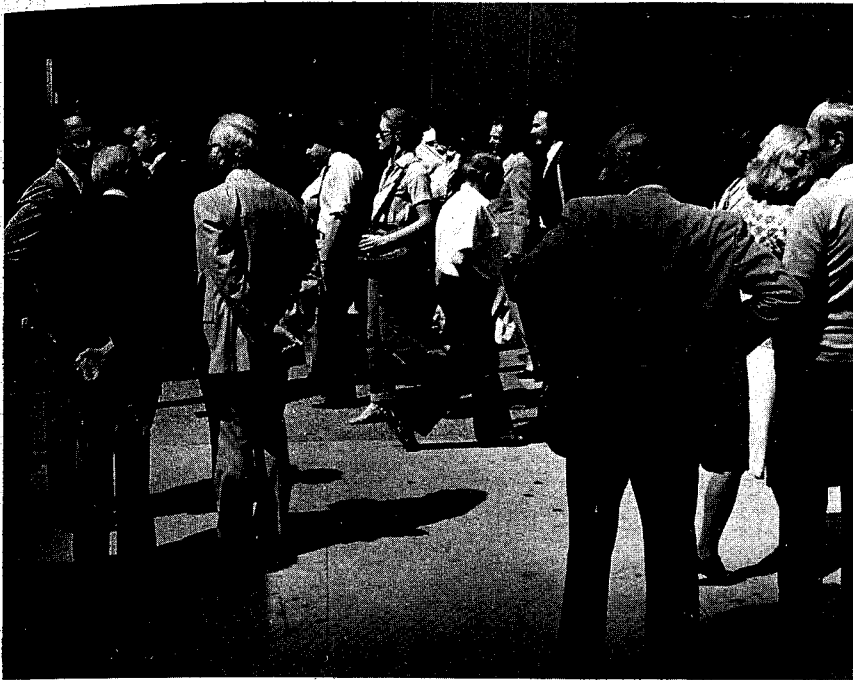
Most goodbyes are brief: a fast "ciao," "take care," a wave, and they're off. But a number are protracted, particularly so when they are an extension of a failed goodbye. It's a little like the people who hover in office doorways, forever on the verge of leaving, but never doing so. If people go through the motions of a goodbye and stop short at the point of consummation, a momentum is set up that can lead to progressively more emphatic goodbyes, up to the final resolving goodbye. It is fascinating to watch these three- and four-wave goodbyes and try to distinguish the real goodbye from the false ones. Don't be fooled by the glance at the watch. It is only premonitory. I have a wonderful film record of two men gripped in indecision in front of Saks Fifth Avenue. They just can't bring themselves to part. There are several rounds of goodbyes and looks at the watch, but it's not until a third party comes along that they finally break out of their impasse.

Best to watch are the postlunch goodbyes of the senior executives. Sometimes there is a note of irresolution about the leave-taking, as if the real business the lunch was supposed to have been about has not yet been broached. Finally, someone brings it up. The deal? The contract? Yes, yes, of course. How could they have forgotten? They now proceed to the business and as they do, their foot and arm movements tend to become reciprocal. This is an indication of people obliging one another, and soon the matter will be completed.

One of the most notable social rituals is schmoozing. In New York's garment district on Seventh Avenue, you will see groups of men lined up along the curb, facing inward. There are often so many of



Kiss, kiss.



Schmoozing on Seventh Avenue.

them that you have to go out into the street along with the handcart pushers if you want to make any headway. Sometimes the vehicular traffic slows to a near halt for all the gabbing.

"Schmoozing" is a Yiddish term for which there is no precise definition. But basically it means "nothing talk"—idle gossip, political opinions, sports talk, but not, so they say, business talk. But groups do tend to form up along occupational lines; salesmen, for example, tend to schmooze with other salesmen, and patternmakers, with other patternmakers. Some of the schmoozers are retirees who like to come back around midday to keep in touch. Almost all garment district schmoozers are men.

Physically, it's an awful place. It is without trees or graces, it is noisy and fume-ridden, and the traffic is so bad even cyclists try to give the place a wide berth. If you ask the schmoozers if they wouldn't prefer the plazas and open spaces further uptown, they will look at you as though you are crazy. Those other places: people don't *work* there. Kid stuff. This is the center of things.

In one respect, it most certainly is: in few places will you see such a clear demonstration of the relation between centrality and word of mouth communication. The schmoozing groups are anything but static. Some will last only ten minutes or so, dissolve, and then be



replaced by a new group. Other groups will constantly renew themselves, with newcomers joining as others leave. Then there are the people who roam. These are often senior men, to judge by the deference paid them. They work the block, stopping friends to chat for a moment or so, checking in briefly with the standing group. One man that we tracked talked with eighteen separate groups. He accosted them with a look of urgency, and they listened with interest. Whatever it was he was communicating, it was multiplied almost geometrically—and it wasn't "nothing talk" either.

Another great place for schmoozing is the diamond district, the single block on Forty-seventh Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues. Here Hasidic Jews play a large role. Schmoozing here is very much business, and many key transactions are carried out on the street. But there is a great deal of social schmoozing as well, and it carries on throughout the winter months.

Here there are ethnic factors to consider. You see a rich vocabulary of gestures rooted in the culture of the Orthodox Jews. In his remarkable study of gestures, David Efron compared those of the Eastern Jews in New York with southern Italians. The Italian gestures, Efron found, had a very specific meaning, and have had for generations. Reading old books on gestures (such as Andrea di Jorio's 1832 work on Neapolitan gestures), Efron found that gestures were the same as they were a century ago, for, indeed, in ancient Rome and Greece. Then as now, the gestures so well portrayed a particular



meaning that one could tell a story with them that others could follow and understand.

But this was not the case with the European Jews. When Efron compared their gestures with what they were saying, he found that the gestures emphasized and punctuated what was being said but had no symbolic meaning in themselves. Writes Efron, "To use an analogy, the Jew very rarely employs his arm in the guise of a pencil to depict the things he is referring to, but uses it often as a pointer to link one proposition to another, or to trace the itinerary of a logical journey; or else as a baton to beat the tempo of his mental locomotion." Efron found it to be especially characteristic of the Yeshiva type of Jew, who was accustomed to argumentation and syllogistic reasoning.

This is very observable on Forty-seventh Street. If you watch two

men in a colloquy, you won't know what they are saying, but you will get a very clear impression of the *process* they are going through. It is the exercise of logic by reasonable, fair-minded men. The gestures sometimes indicate a dismay at the weak argument of the other, but generally these exchanges end up on an obviously friendly, or at least resolving, note.

Schmoozing is now to be seen all over, uptown and downtown, and while the intensity cannot match that of the garment district, the basic patterns are similar. Banks and corporations with large clerical staffs tend to have lots of schmoozers. These are also the kind of places that provide in-house cafeterias, recreation facilities, TV rooms, hobby clubs, and the like. But schmoozers want to get outside. They won't do much when they get there; generally they will form up abreast in a line. This is the most functional way to watch people go by. The schmoozers will sometimes exchange remarks on the passersby, but sometimes simply watch, bound in an amiable silence.

Schmoozers are fairly consistent in choosing locations. They show a liking for well-defined places—the edge of the curb, for example, or a ledge. They are also very pillar-tropic, obeying perhaps a primeval instinct for something at their backs. Rarely will they stand for long in the middle of large spaces.

Schmoozers are also consistent in the duration of their sessions, which will be either fairly brief or fairly long—fifteen minutes or even more. Some groups, as on Seventh Avenue, are of the semipermanent floating kind, and many last the whole lunch hour. The stayers dominate. If you add up the minutes spent by each schmoozer over an hour's time, you will find that the great majority of the total schmoozing minutes will be accounted for by the long-term schmoozers.

The most common form that street conversation takes is that of straight man and principal. For a while, one man dominates, while the other cooperates by remaining still and listening. Then there will be a shift—the onlooker can sense it coming—and the active man becomes the passive one.

Or should. Sometimes people will violate the tacit compact and keep on talking and gesturing beyond their time. Conversely, the straight man may fail to respect the pause during the principal's turn and jump in prematurely. When there are such failures of accommodation, there is a lack of symmetry in their movements. I have a film sequence of a long conversation on Fifty-seventh Street that is a catalog of discords. A cigar-smoking man has been long overextending his turn. This begins to be reflected in the gestures of the listener. He begins to look this way and that, as if for help and brushes lint off his lapels. He rocks up and down on his heels and then stops abruptly. He

wheels to leave. The other man, still talking, grabs him by the sleeve and then finally releases him.

Soapboxers display cooperative antagonism in heightened form. About 1 P.M. they gather at Broad and Wall streets. Most are regulars; some are Henry George single-tax people, some specialize in world affairs, many concentrate on religion, interpretation of the Bible in particular. The proceedings will be highly adversarial, and that is why the soapboxers come—to dispute and be disputed. Some structure their discourse to be heckled and may be discomfited if they are not.

The classic form of their encounters is thrust and counterthrust. With a jabbing finger punctuating each point, one man advances on his adversary, who gives way at the same pace. After a climactic flourish, the first man stops, and his hands go limp. What more could possibly be said? The other man jabs out his finger. How could that be squared with Genesis? He advances on the other man, who gives way. The whole preceding scene is now acted out in reverse. Other soapboxers may egg them on. A man who is known as the Logician, a man with a spade beard and an incongruous tweed hat, may top off the session. Both men have missed the point.

The back-and-forth movements of street encounters have their parallel in speech. The pause is the crucial element. Professor Frieda Goldman-Eisler of the University College of London has found that in spontaneous speech 40 percent to 50 percent is silence and that the speed of speech is almost entirely a function of *not* speaking. Pauses have meaning: frequent ones indicate new thoughts, and few pauses, standard expression. When two people are talking, they show a tendency to match the rhythms of each other's pauses.

In their book *Rhythms of Dialogue*, Joseph Jaffe and Stanley Feldstein note the same phenomenon. Speakers tend to match the duration of each other's pauses and to space them at the same intervals. In his study of conversation, James M. Dabbs, Jr., of Georgia State University notes that each "turn" contained a number of pauses. These were of a continuation variety, not for interruption. The pause that concludes a turn, however, is a "switching" pause and is a clear signal to the other that he can take over. Distinguishing one kind of pause from the other takes art, and if one lingers on a continuation pause a half second or so too long, the other man is likely to grab the silence and run off with the conversation.

Gestures reinforce the speech and the pauses. A person may pause for effect and then add an "uh" or an "um" to signal that he's going to go on again. As he does he may signal the same message with a move of the hand. Gestures are especially important when one speaker does not play the game, jumping a pause, for example, or



Corner of Wall and Water streets: noon.

talking well beyond his turn. At such times, gestures are apt to be touching gestures—a hand on the other's sleeve, for example, as if to say, "I'm not finished yet."

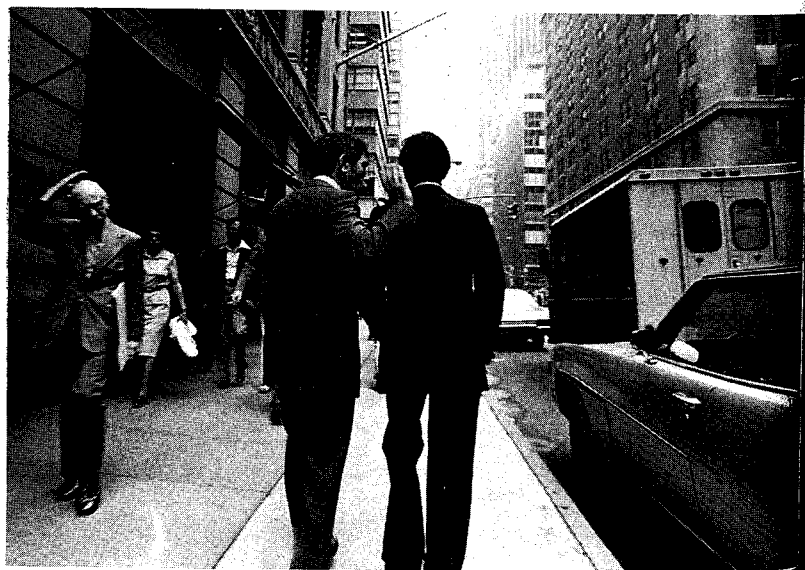
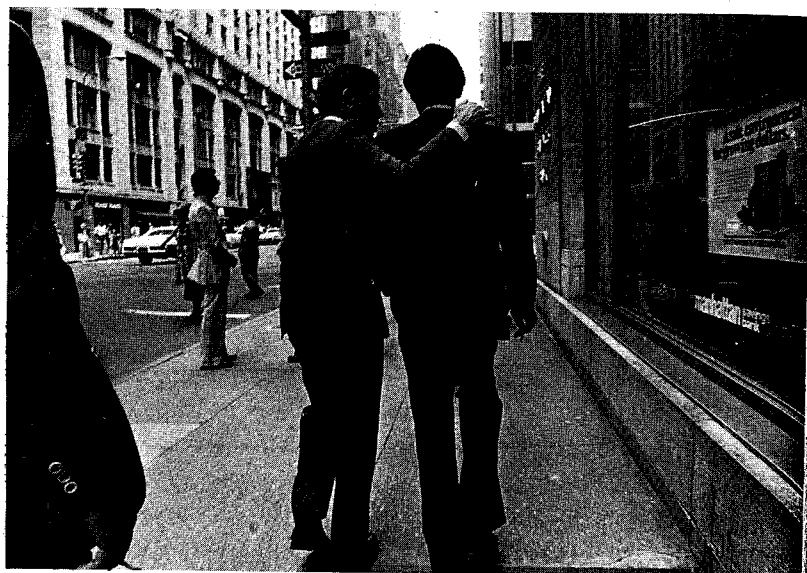
Most touching gestures are friendly; the arm around another's shoulders is one of the more-common ones. But the purpose is often a measure of control. The one who does the touching is dominant—at that particular moment, at least—or seeking to be. When a man who is talking reaches out and touches another's arm, he is giving a command: Don't start talking again now, because I'm not finished yet. A more-open coercion is the grasping of another's arm to stay a departure.

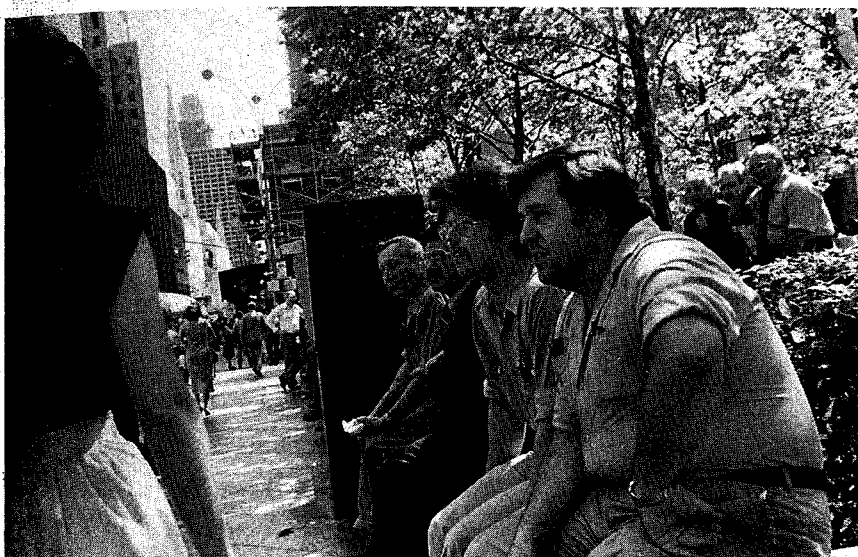
Who touches whom? Men usually assume that women touch people more than men do. I assumed this and was rather pleased with some excellent examples I filmed of women picking lint from each other's coats and other forms of touching rituals. One of our researchers, a woman, took issue with my assumption, holding that typical male thinking was involved and that some systematic observation might be in order. She was right. In the street encounters we subsequently studied, we found that men did more touching than women. And the kind most frequent was men touching men.

Other studies have arrived at similar findings. Psychologist Nancy Henley found that touching correlates rather strongly with power and status. In the incidents observed, males did the most touching; males touched females more frequently than vice versa; and older people touched younger people more frequently than vice versa. Her analysis of touching in comics and TV movies showed men way in the lead. In fiction, as in life, the boss did the touching.

It is obvious enough that gestures help one person communicate with another. But there is a second function, and it may be the more-important. When one man is saying something to another, he may emphasize his points by gesturing with his hands. But the second man will be looking at his face, not at his hands. The gestures are as much for self as for the other person.

Some of the most interesting gestures are unseen by the other party. The man who's doing the gesturing often does it with his hands behind his back, out of the sight of the person for whom they're presumably intended. If you follow a traveling conversation, you will note that very often one of the group will have his hands joined behind his back and will show all sorts of finger and thumb movement, sometimes at variance with the placid mien he's showing his companion. (Occupationally I see a lot of these hidden gestures; when filming traveling conversations on the street, I find it much easier to film them from behind than from the front, and as a result, I've had to pay much more attention to these kinds of gestures than I otherwise might.)





Whatever the function of the gestures and movements, the street is a congenial place for the expression of them. They tend to be more expansive there than in internal spaces. You may see orbiting conversations in a building lobby, but out on the street they may cover far more space. Is there more room on the street? Not really; the highest incidence of encounters is in the most-crowded locations.

The street is a stage, and the sense that an audience is watching pervades the gestures and movements of the players on it. For example, are "girl-watchers" really looking at girls? They are putting on a show of girl-watchers looking at girls. The hard hats appear first and sit on the sidewalk with their backs propped up against the building wall. They are quite demonstrative, much given to whistles and direct salutation to the "girls." If there are several older men among them, the others may josh them, as though they were out of contention. They are a bit cruel: if a bag lady passes, they will hoot at her. White-collar girl-watchers stand or sit on ledges and are quieter. These are connoisseurs, amused and somewhat disdainful. They exchange comments on passersby and snicker and smirk. But it is machismo. I have never seen a girl-watcher make a direct pass at a woman. As our cameras have recorded, when a *really* good-looking woman goes by, they will be confounded, and they betray it with involuntary tugs on the earlobe and nervous stroking of their hair.

Attractive women can scare them. In an experiment to see how much room strangers would give each other as they passed, James Dabbs and Neil Stokes of Georgia State University recorded passing encounters. Among other things, they found that individual pedestri-

Girl watchers put on a show of girl watchers looking at girls. But it is all machismo. We have never seen a girl watcher make a real pass at a girl.



It doesn't take much to draw a crowd in New York.

ans would get farther out of the way for an oncoming pair than for a single and would give more room to an oncoming male than a female. But most interesting was the effect of beauty. Would people pass nearer to an attractive woman than to a plain one? Both roles, by the way, were played by the same woman. For one, she was wearing tight-fitting clothes and attractive makeup. For the other, she used no makeup, pulled her hair back, and wore sloppy clothes. Pedestrians gave her a wider berth when she was attractive. It didn't make any difference whether the pedestrians were male or female. They walked noticeably closer to the unattractive girl, and in several cases, male pedestrians made overtures to her. None did when she was attractive. Dabbs and Stokes believe this behavior is best understood in terms of social power, with a deference given to those further up the scale.

There are many other performers. The Three Jolly Fellows recur so frequently that you would almost think they were an act put on by street entertainers. Lovers are another example, fervently embracing in the most heavily trafficked spots, oblivious of the crowd. But are they so oblivious? I doubt it. Their display of affection may be quite genuine, but it is a display. And they enjoy it very much.

Because I live in New York City, most of my initial research was done there. I have been scolded about this, the city being deemed too unique, too skewed, too much of a distorting mirror. There is some truth to this. New York is a place that exaggerates things, no mistake. But it is not necessarily any less informative for that. There one sees in bolder relief patterns of behavior more muted in other places.

Our working assumption was that behavior in other cities would be basically the same, and subsequent comparisons have proved our assumption correct. The important variable is city size. As I will discuss in more detail, in smaller cities densities tend to be lower, pedestrians move at a slower pace, and there is less of the social activity in high-traffic areas. But the basic patterns are there. People are not all that different. Given the elements of a center—high pedestrian volumes, concentration, and mixture of activities—people in one city tend to respond like people in another.

One of the hardest tasks in observing a place is to find out what normal is. We spent a lot of time doing this in several small universes, among them a sleazy stretch of Lexington Avenue. As time went on and we got a better understanding of recurrent patterns, we broadened our field. We did comparative studies in other U.S. cities—in recent years, smaller cities in particular. We also did some observing in a number of major cities abroad. We were glad we did, for they provided more confirmation of basic patterns than did many in the United States.

Pedestrians in the great metropolitan centers act more like one another than pedestrians in smaller cities in their respective countries. Tokyo and New York are examples. The linear development characteristic of Japanese cities is quite unlike the grid pattern of American cities, and the cultural differences are enormous. But when you get people out on the street, the pedestrians of the two cities behave very much the same. They walk fast and aggressively, and cluster in the middle of the way. At Shinjuku Station, the busiest in the world, you will be struck by how much of the congestion is self-congestion. I prize a film record I have of two junior executives solemnly practicing golf swings at a Wall Street corner. But a better one is of three Japanese junior executives going through the same motions in Shinjuku Station in the very middle of the crowd.

In London you see the same recurrent patterns. In the City the financial people use their narrow sidewalks in the same ways New Yorkers do theirs. They block them. Alongside the Bank of England the sidewalk narrows at one point to about four feet, and that spot is favored for conversations. In other respects, people in the City behave very much like those in Wall Street, including the Three Jolly Fellows.

Schmoozers in Milan's Galleria tend to cluster in late afternoon rather than at midday, as in New York. But the basic rhythms are the same, with the schmoozing groups being constantly replenished as new people join and others drop out. Foot motions are as complex and indecipherable as in New York.

That the people of great cities should act alike is not surprising. They are responding to high-density situations and to a range of stim-

Pedestrians in great metropolitan cities of the world act more like each other than like their compatriots in smaller cities.

uli not found in smaller cities. It is at once the boon and the bane of smaller cities that they are not crowded. People in smaller cities do walk more slowly; they are not as aggressive and pushy because there is not much to be pushy about. Sidewalks are uncrowded, and there are fewer people blocking the flow.

But similarities of behavior between cities, large or small, are more significant than the differences. And this probably goes back in time. In the streets of the souk in the Old City of Jerusalem you see pedestrian behavior that probably differs very little from what it was centuries before. There are lessons in these old places. In considering plans for new civic spaces people often fret themselves into inaction over the thought of obsolescence. If we design for today's people, they ask, how do we know it will work a generation or so hence? You can't know, of course. But the fact is that spaces designed to work very well for their initial constituency usually work very well for later ones and, indeed, help define them.