

Stop, Look, Loiter

by Dave Stauffer

Use of the word ‘loitering’ is usually pejorative. The Merriam-Webster dictionary says loitering is “to remain in an area for no obvious reason.” Wikipedia says it means “to stand idly, to stop numerous times, or to delay and procrastinate.”

So it would seem that the person who loiters isn’t industrious, nor accomplishing anything of benefit to him or herself, let alone contributing to the common good.

I contend that the pejorative sense of loitering isn’t always accurate; that, in fact, loitering done in a way I describe below – by planning commissioners, no less – can benefit the person doing the loitering *and* the community. This can happen when loitering is defined as careful observation, specifically, of people interacting with the built environment.

The modern pioneer of this activity was William H. (Holly) Whyte, who from 1969 till his death in 1999 used detailed visual analysis to learn how people actually use public spaces. His studies revealed, for example, that people will create their own paths between two points, if the constructed path is found wanting in any way. They’ll find their own ways to follow the sun in winter and avoid it in summer. They’ll find ways to be observed when they seek attention and be inconspicuous when they don’t.¹

For newly appointed commissioners, loitering can be a revelation and a great introduction to serving on the commission. For veteran commissioners, loitering offers a way to stay (literally) grounded. For all commissioners, there are benefits to taking the time to slow down and observe for yourself whether people living and working in your community are enjoying or having problems with their surroundings.

What might be learned by loitering? A good many observations can be classified under a few broad headings:

1. *Weather and climate.* How people cope – or, more importantly, are unable to cope – with the weather and sun can beneficially inform such code requirements as those dealing with maximum permitted building height and setbacks, landscaping, and the composition and design of streets.

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But the loiterer need not be concerned immediately with these matters. He or she does better by simply observing – noting, for example, that those walking on a winter’s morning on the east side of north-south streets are having trouble with icy patches. Or that a gutter along the exposed side of a corner building with zero side setback can’t handle runoff during a downpour.

2. *Getting around.* If you regularly read the *PCJ*, you need no introduction to the intensifying conflicts between those driving cars versus those riding bicycles, or between almost any two other means of conveyance. The observant loiterer who locates at a busy intersection during rush hour or at midday will get a good education (and possibly learn some new four-letter words).

Less dramatically, but likely more productively, the loiterer may have an experience that prompts the thought – as happened in my town – to change traffic patterns at a high-conflict location. This insight by one of our planning commissioners ultimately led to the city taking steps to change an awkward half-block long diagonal street bisecting our arts district from two-way vehicle traffic to one-

way traffic on one lane with new diagonal parking where the other lane had been.

3. *The stroller’s experience.* Seemingly minor details can be important. By taking the time, for example, to observe how people use the sidewalks downtown, you may gain a better feel for the dynamics of how people experience and interact with their immediate environment.

Are sidewalks wide enough that pedestrians aren’t running into each other like Dr. Suess’s north and south-going Zax? Obstructions such as benches, bike racks, merchandise display racks, planters, and street lights can be a good thing – if they’re used, provide visual variety, and aren’t continually being run into by passersby. The goal for planners is a street scene that imparts a feeling of energy but stops short of being chaotic.

The practical value of loitering for commissioners consists largely of helping us to see daily outdoor life in new ways. And although this activity won’t often spur new law or regulation, such an outcome isn’t out of the question.

In my city, for example, it was a commissioner’s mid-winter loitering that contributed to an amended rule requiring merchants to keep sidewalks clear of snow, not just for the length of their street frontage, but also extending to cross streets for shops on corner lots.

Results like these could give loitering a good name. ♦

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¹ More on William H. Whyte, including a short video from his “The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces” video, is posted on the PlannersWeb at: www.plannersweb.com/whyte.html.