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PRESS RELEASE FROM GEHL INSTITUTE
October 20, 2017

DEMOCRATIZING DATA: GEHL INSTITUTE ANNOUNCES PUBLIC LIFE DATA PROTOCOL, NEW OPEN DATA STANDARD FOR PUBLIC SPACE

Gehl Institute, Gehl, the Municipality of Copenhagen, the City of San Francisco, and with support and input from Seattle Department of Transportation, have developed a new, open data standard for the collection and comparison of data about how people use public space.

NEW YORK, NY – Gehl Institute and its partners—Gehl, the practice, the Municipality of Copenhagen, the City of San Francisco, and with support and input from Seattle DOT—have launched the Public Life Data Protocol.

Based on four decades of research and application of data about public life to shape public policy, planning, and urban design, the Public Life Data Protocol (the Protocol) is an open data specification intended to improve the ability of everyone to share and compare information about public life activity in public space. Gehl Institute initiated the co-creation of the Public Life Data Protocol to make public life datasets more compatible, scalable, and comparable across departments, agencies, cities, and regions.

The Protocol describes a set of metrics that are important to the understanding of public life—people moving and staying in public space—and aims to establish a common format for the collection and storage of such data.

The expertise of the departments of urban planning (San Francisco), data (Copenhagen), transportation (Seattle), combined with the Gehl practice’s experience in over 250 cities, speaks to the diversity of possibilities to develop and use public life data. The range of expertise among the founding members also attests to the need for a standard protocol, so that all working in the public realm can more easily pool knowledge about people in public spaces and build on best practices from around the world.

“Information about people in public spaces is essential to good decision-making about the public realm,” said Shin-pei Tsay, Executive Director of Gehl Institute. “For too long, engineers would not include people in their calculations because there was little data; no longer can this reason be used. We are honored to have the opportunity to work with such esteemed partners to create a resource that...
will be available to all, and look forward to continuing to improve the Public Life Data Protocol with our partners.”

In recent years, practitioners and cities have incorporated people-centered metrics and public life data into their engineering models, investment decisions, and design choices. These methods, based on decades of research, have now been applied in hundreds of cities around the world.

“The Public Space and Public Life survey is a way to make people visible and make them heard. Our ultimate long-term goal is that more cities will value public life and the people in their city,” said Helle Søholt, Founding Partner & CEO, Gehl. “When we initiated Gehl Institute it was to encourage a new platform for training, capacity building, and knowledge sharing in how people understand and think about public life. We want to release the Gehl methodology to support and enable Institute’s mission in creating a public life movement.”

There is tremendous potential to make public life datasets more compatible, scalable, and comparable across different cities and regions.

"The Global Public Life Data Protocol comes from years of testing and refining place-based evaluations in cities around the world. The common standards will allow municipal governments and other organizations to scale up their evaluation agendas of projects large and small—for specific sites or while neighborhoods; share information, and learn from one another,” said Robin Abad Ocubillo, Urban Designer, San Francisco Planning Department. “This is a watershed achievement representing the most sophisticated thinking from contributing partners Gehl Institute, San Francisco Planning, and Municipality of Copenhagen.”

Steffen Svinth Thommesen, Head of Division, Urban Data Unit, Copenhagen Municipality, said, “Working with the standardization of data, that is the focus of the Public Life Protocol, is something we are already working hard on in the City of Copenhagen. This can help to strengthen data-driven decision-making and support cross-collaboration and greater transparency. Standardization of such data is also an important tool in the work of open data, so data can be better used by external partners so that we can jointly develop the world's best city”.

The protocol will be open for any and all to use, and will create a common language for cities to compare different spaces within their city limits, and to then compare their data with other cities. It ensures a high level of quality and accuracy while enabling more people to collect, share, and compare their data. Using public life data to create benchmarks and performance metrics for urban policies and programs is now a possibility, enabling cities to better serve people.
“Seattle wants to expand standard transportation performance metrics to go beyond mobility; we want to know how people enjoy the 27% of public space that is dedicated to our right-of-way. Qualitative data will support the future of our city and be a critical tool as we strive to create a vibrant and inclusive public realm,” said Benjamin de la Pena, City of Seattle, Department of Transportation.

Today, too much of our data infrastructure is unreliable, inaccessible, or available only to those who pay. Of all of the data collected around the world, only 1% is actually utilized, according to the Dell EMC Digital Universe Study. The use of open data standards enables a range of users to collectively make public information more useful, more accessible, and more democratic. The open Public Life Data Protocol produces modest amounts of data, yet this can be powerful. The ability to share research and compare outcomes is essential to making good planning and policy decisions affecting the places and spaces where citizens live their daily lives.

The founding partners hope to lower the barrier to entry for cities, agencies, practitioners, researchers, or students who seek to utilize public life data in their work. The founding partners also hope to open the door to innovation, by enabling a greater degree of technology integration and solutions for studying public life, from data collection and analysis to enabling civic action and improved policy and investment decision-making. The openness of the protocol allows for input from others and make collective improvements over time, a process which will be facilitated by Gehl Institute. City governments and organizations can also contribute by joining the consortium of partners or adopting the data protocol. All of this is an opportunity to foster stronger relationships and meaningful collaboration between the technology and open data communities on one side, and citizens and civil society on the other.

An open, common language brings us that much closer to achieving our goal of making people more visible to policymakers, designers, and planners in public space.

Gehl Institute invites anyone who cares about their public spaces—and not only design or planning professionals—to be empowered by the guidelines and contribute to the growing knowledge base.

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The founding partners of the Public Life Data Protocol will announce publication of the 1.0 version to the media and public on Friday, October 20, 2017 in Philadelphia, PA at Public x Design, a conference hosted by Gehl Institute. For more information, contact Jennifer Gardner at Gehl Institute or visit https://www.publicxdesign.org/.

The Public Life Data Protocol Version 1.0 will be available on October 20, 2017, along with a suite of open tools and methods for collecting public life data, on the Gehl Institute website. To download, visit: https://gehlinstitute.org/public-life-tools/.


Gehl Institute is a 501c3 non-profit organization. Gehl Institute's mission is to transform the way cities are shaped by making public life an intentional driver for design, policy, and governance. To demonstrate the value of public life we commission urban interventions, engage a diverse network of actors, and create new knowledge.