

# LOCAL AND REGIONAL TIME AGENDA

Topic 4

URBAN  
NIGHTTIME  
POLICIES

## MANAGING TIME AS THE NEW URBAN FRONTIER

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As a referential notion of time and space, the night has traditionally been a boundary for governance and planning. It may represent half of the 24-hour cycle, but it has long been perceived as a time of mystery and intrigue, cloaked in darkness and uncertainty. In the 17th century, new uses of the night began to emerge in various parts of the world: coffee-houses, clubs, taverns and other places of entertainment meant that mealtimes and social functions were pushed into later hours. This gradual “nocturnalization”, or expansion of the social and symbolic uses of the night, facilitated the appearance of the public sphere in cities of early modern Europe<sup>1</sup>. As citizens became aware of the possibilities presented by the night, the dynamics between work and leisure were permanently redefined.

Another innovation that spread rapidly and helped change attitudes towards darkness was the rise of public street lighting. No European city had street lighting in 1660, but by 1694 it had been installed in Paris, Lille, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Turin, Berlin, Copenhagen and London. Until then, the night had marked a substantial limit on daily life, as chances of being robbed or attacked increased in the dark. In fact, street lighting became a strategy to govern and ensure safety at night. The brigade of approximately 1,500 policemen patrolling the streets of Paris after dark were gradually replaced by more than 3,000 street lights in the late 18th century. Responsible for lighting streetlamps and escorting people on their way home, lamplighters became the predecessors of the modern police<sup>2</sup>.

Perhaps due to its late introduction in public life and its strong links to poli-

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<sup>1</sup> Koslowsky, C. (2011). *Evening's empire: A history of the night in early modern Europe* (New studies in European history). Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ídem

cing and surveillance, the urban night has traditionally been a highly-restrictive and negative part of the day. It is often understood in opposition to the day: daylight signals order and transparency, while darkness is used as a synonym for chaos and antisocial behaviour. As a result, traditional approaches to urban governance have often overlooked the nuances of nighttime public life, focusing instead on daytime activities. But what is a city missing when it is not looking at the night?

That is the question that kicked off my research in my hometown of Caracas, Venezuela in 2008. A sociologist friend and I began observing how people behaved and used public space in Sabana Grande, one of the city's main commercial boulevards at night. Who stays? Who leaves? And, more importantly, who has the right to partake in public life at night in one of the most violent cities in the world? As we took note of these dynamics, we naively bumped into “night studies” – a growing interdisciplinary field specialized around themes such as light, governance, urban innovation and culture<sup>3</sup> that began to spread from the United Kingdom to other places around the world starting in the 1990s.

Simultaneously, an emerging field of “studies of time” was also growing in Europe, where a group of scholars, analysing the socio-economic and physical implications of expanding working hours, raised a new set of issues that lay outside the scope of urban governance and city management of the day<sup>4</sup>. Until then, urban planning was regarded as a spatial rather than a temporal discipline mainly focused on ‘the world of things and objects’ – land use schemes, architecture, construction, and, more recently, nature and ecology.

### **Time vs. Space**

In urban areas, time, like space, is now a commodified asset. We govern and enforce temporal agglomerations with costly licensing mechanisms focused on managing the impacts of alcohol consumption and traditional planning policies focused on segregating chronic nuisance. The planning orthodoxy of the previous century attempted to separate residential areas

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<sup>3</sup> Straw, W; Gwiazdzinski, L & Maggioli, M (2020) “The emerging field of ‘Night Studies’: Steps towards a genealogy”. *Night Studies: Regards croisés sur les nouveaux visages de la nuit*. Grenoble: Editions Elya.

<sup>4</sup> Bonfiglioli, S. (1997). Les politiques des temps urbains en Italie. *Les Annales de La Recherche Urbaine* 77: 22-29 and Boulin, J-Y. & Mückenberger, U. (1999). Times in the City and Quality of Life, *BEST European Studies on Time*, Vol 1.

from office, manufacturing, entertainment and retail. Creating specialized districts to live, work and play made sense at the height of the industrial era, when polluting urban industries posed health risks for the people living around them. These outdated single-use conventions and car-centric plans establish street width, parking minimums and other parameters that encourage unwalkable neighbourhoods with detached dwellings, large parking lots, big-box retail and isolated entertainment zones that increase congestion, sprawl and socio-economic segregation.

In the Americas, Murray Melbin was one of the first scholars to look at the intersection of spatial and temporal debates. By drawing from Frederick J. Turner's seminal notion of the "frontier" in American history<sup>5</sup>, Melbin illustrated how darkness –like the Western territories of the United States– was an isolated, sparsely settled and much romanticized terrain waiting to be colonized. This powerful metaphor fuelled an analogy between the shortage of land and the shortage of time. For Melbin, "time is a container, and we are filling it in a new way. We are putting more wakefulness into each twenty-four hours"<sup>6</sup>. A few years later, the term '24-hour city' emerged almost simultaneously in different parts of the world as a tool to rethink 9-to-5 planning in urban areas, a platform to improve nighttime safety, and a catalyst for economic regeneration<sup>7</sup>.

The notion of the 24-hour city has thus been defined in terms of consumption, and gained prominence alongside other leisure-based concepts such as the creative city. As a result, it is often considered a by-product of capitalism and criticized in light of its biological implications, particularly, on the disruptive effects of nighttime activity on sleep and human circadian rhythms. In this context, a more socially- and environmentally-conscious approach is needed to take advantage of time as a springboard for better urban living.

### **Life (at night) between buildings**

In our increasingly digitized world, data has emerged as a powerful tool to understand and shape urban environments. Real-time streams of information offer unprecedented insight into the dynamic rhythms of city life, enabling us to anticipate trends, identify hotspots, and optimize resour-

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<sup>5</sup> Turner, F. J. (1893). *The Frontier in American History*. Chicago, IL: American Historical Association.

<sup>6</sup> Melbin (1987) *Night as Frontier: Colonizing the World After Dark*. Boston, MA: Free Press.

<sup>7</sup> Heath, T. (1997). The Twenty-Four Hour City Concept—a Review of Initiatives in British Cities. *Journal of Urban Design*. 2(2): 193–204.

ce allocation. Our cities have become 24-hour competitive machines that are constantly producing and sharing data about their performance. But to truly harness the transformative potential of data, we must complement quantitative analysis with qualitative observations that capture the human dimension of the urban experience.

In the 1980s, Danish architect Jan Gehl began advocating for human-centred urbanism, an approach that involved designing urban public space with the fundamental desires of people as guiding principles<sup>8</sup>. Building on a legacy of more than 40 years of evidence-based design and projects in 300-plus cities, our firm's work prioritizes the needs, behaviours, and experiences of people to create more liveable streets and public spaces<sup>9</sup>. At Gehl we are currently expanding our methods to help us understand what kinds of conditions, policies, and environments are conducive to vibrant streets at night. This ongoing exploration has helped us unpack three main misconceptions about urban life at night:

**1. Life at night is not a synonym of leisure:** While nightlife and entertainment are powerful drivers of tourism and revenue in cities around the world, the night is also a space of production: nurses, caregivers, construction, logistics and call centre workers, among many others, make a living during the night. Most urban policies reduce the task of managing life at night to how cities can better regulate leisure. In doing so, these policies overlook the needs of night-shift workers and fail to take advantage of temporal agglomerations from a perspective of sustainability. For instance, cities like New York encourage goods delivery during off-peak hours (7.00pm to 6.00am) in an effort to decrease congestion and truck emissions<sup>10</sup>.

**2. Life at night is not a monolithic experience:** As part of our work with cities around the world, Gehl conducts studies that allow us to map and characterize the way public spaces are used throughout the day. These studies provide detailed inventories revealing how place attributes such as the distribution of urban furniture, lighting, traffic and wayfinding can influence social experiences, and how these experiences, and how these experiences can also vary based on de-

<sup>8</sup> Gehl, J. (1987). *Life between buildings* (6th ed.). Island Press.

<sup>9</sup> More information available in: <https://www.gehlpeople.com/about-us/>

<sup>10</sup> More information available in <https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/motorist/deliveries.shtml>

mographic characteristics like age, gender, race, income, and neurodiversity. When gathered and analysed systematically, the unique ways in which people and places shape one another become opportunities to enhance urban life after dark.

### **3. Life at night is both a cause and consequence of climate change.**

Increased nighttime activity is often associated with light and sound pollution and other environmental impacts. However, it is also an indicator of rising temperatures. Countries like Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Spain have banned outdoor occupational activities, such as street cleaning and agriculture, during daytime conditions of extreme heat<sup>11</sup>. Worldwide, the International Labour Organization projects that heat stress will reduce total working hours by 2.2% and GDP by \$2,400 billion by 2030. Consequently, individual companies and organizations will need to adapt their working patterns and invest in improving their infrastructure, potentially by increasing their use of streets and public spaces at night, when temperatures are lower than during the day.

In short, cities' role in enabling a just, inclusive and sustainable coexistence of round-the-clock activities is fundamental. A key piece of this are time-based policies born from a combination of data-driven and human-centred insight informing the way that the public realm in streets and districts is currently used. The invitation, then, is to consider new ways in which public, private and community actors can facilitate the gathering of these insights to positively shape and enhance the experiences of our cities not only during the day, but also during the night.



Dr. Andreina Seijas is a Venezuelan researcher and international consultant with more than 15 years of experience in urban development and policy in Latin America, Europe and the USA. Through her doctoral studies at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, she specialized in nighttime governance and planning, a novel field of research and practice. She is responsible for Urban Activation projects in EMEA at Gehl.

<sup>11</sup> World Economic Forum (2023) Extreme heat is forcing Spain's outside workers to shift their hours. Available online in: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/08/climate-crisis-extreme-heat-work-hours/>

<sup>12</sup> International Labour Organization (2019) Working on a warmer planet: The impact of heat stress on labour productivity and decent work. Available online in: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_711919.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_711919.pdf)