

William H. Whyte, b. 1917

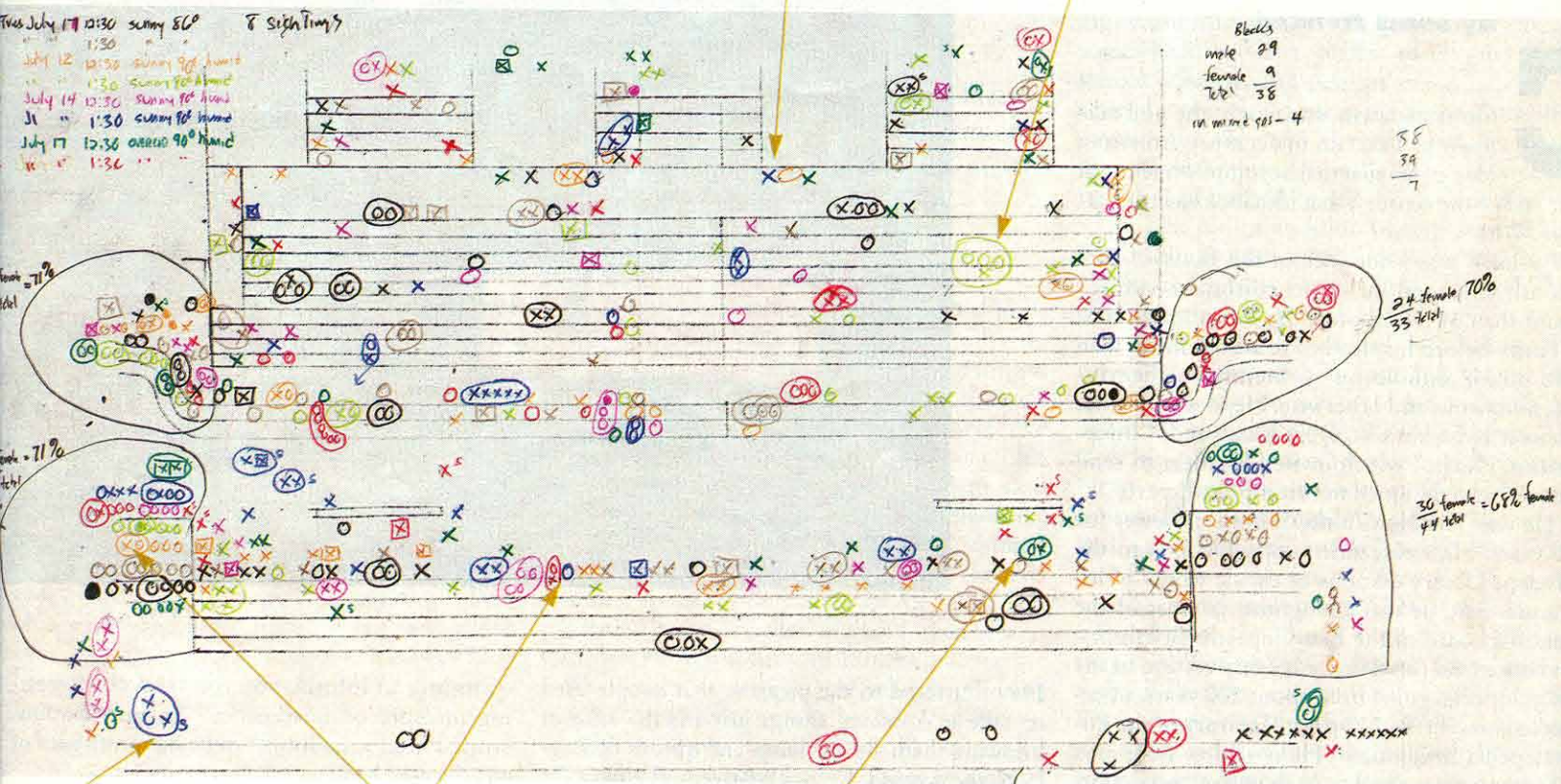
# The Observation Man

After writing 'The Organization Man,' his groundbreaking study of corporate culture, he applied his analytical skills to the urban center.

By John Cook

In his quest to understand why public spaces work (or don't work), William H. Whyte became, you might say, a streetwalker. He loitered in parks, plazas and subway stations, clipboard in hand, dutifully recording the physical and social landscape. His suggestions for making spaces more inviting and vibrant were applied to several city parks, most prominently Bryant Park, and published in "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces" and "City." Below is a typical Whyte research tool — what he called a cumulative sighting map. It depicts precisely where people were situated on the front steps of the New York Public Library at 12:30 p.m. and then at 1:30 p.m. during four days in July 1972.

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1. X's indicate men; O's women. Filled-in O's and X's with squares around them indicate that the individual was African-American. This map shows 321 men and 269 women. Whyte found that the higher the ratio of women in a park or plaza, the more likely it is to be popular. When this map was made, women averaged 42 percent of the steps' population, slightly higher than the percentage then employed in midtown Manhattan.

2. Circles around groups of X's and O's indicate that the people were part of a group. "Low percentages of people in groups," wrote Whyte, "is an indication that something is wrong." He theorized that the number of groups is an "index of selectivity" — people in groups are likely to have agreed on the destination ahead of time, an indication that the space's attractive qualities draw people from far and wide. At the time this survey was taken about one-third of the sitters on the Public Library steps were part of a group, whereas more lively plazas tend to be places where half the people are in groups. Whyte traced this trouble to the drug dealers who flanked the steps.

3. An "S" next to a symbol means the person, or people, were standing. Chances are this group is standing in the middle of pedestrian traffic flow. By studiously watching street corners and analyzing miles of time-lapse photography reels, Whyte discovered that New Yorkers who run into one another on the street consistently stop and conduct their conversation directly in the middle of traffic, rather than stand aside.

4. The predominance of men along the steps closest to Fifth Avenue conforms to a pattern that Whyte found everywhere he looked: men seek out the front row — and if a park has a sort of gate or entrance way, they will assert themselves as guardians of it. Women tend to congregate in more secluded places.

5. "Lovers are to be found on plazas," Whyte wrote in 1979. "But not where you'd expect them." Contrary to the repeated testimony of the park visitors he interviewed (who said couples seek secluded spaces), Whyte always found lovers in the most conspicuous locations. "The most fervent embracing we've recorded," he wrote, "has usually taken place in the most visible of locations, with the couple oblivious of the crowd."

6. Whyte's primary recommendation for stimulating use of the steps was that the library allow food kiosks in the area. Food vendors introduce a new figure to a space: what Whyte liked to call a "mayor," who spends all day there and keeps an eye on things, making visitors feel more comfortable and safe — and drug dealers and other "undesirables" less so. The library built concession kiosks in 1986; before long the drug sellers receded, and the portion of people in groups on the steps rose to the 50-to-60-percent range. ■