What is it that makes some towns and cities nicer to visit and be in than others? And what makes them tourist destinations in their own right? Danish architect PROF JAN GEHL has spent his professional life transforming cities into places that welcome people. On a visit to South Africa he spoke to DELIVERY about how this can be achieved.

Traditionally, cities served as places for meeting, markets and moving, and there was a balance between these activities, as is the case today in this part of Venice, Italy.

In the streets of Westport, Ireland, traffic has ‘infracted’ the city centre, forcing people to the edges.

Many cities today have been ‘abandoned’ by people and city centres have become desolate car parks where there is no public life, as this view of Spokane in the United States shows.

You meet while you walked about and shopped. ‘Then came a number of developments which upset the balance and led to the second kind of city, the ‘infracted’ city.

‘In the invaded city, people were pushed out, the market was pushed underground and into the malls. The function of a meeting place for people was squeezed out.’

‘This led to the ‘abandoned’ city, common in the United States. ‘Here there is no life in the cities anymore, everything is done inside cars, and you go from one fortress to another in a sea of asphalt.’ Obesity is but one of the common problems in the ‘abandoned’ city.

The last type of city is the ‘reconquered’ city. This is where people have realised that we are losing out on something important in our culture — that is the city as a meeting place, where you have the ability to move around on your feet, and do what you have to do without getting in and out of cars all the time.’

Key to reconquering a city and making it a place for people rather than cars is leadership. ‘You need a firebrand to say, “hey, this is my city and we won’t accept this!” Across the world, mayors, councillors, city planners and political parties have played this role. ‘These are people who are aware that open spaces as a meeting place, or a moving place, is important. Because if you think about nice cities, they are cities where you can stroll around and use your senses. So we are seeing one city after another improving radically.’

Cities that have achieved this transformation include Copenhagen, Barcelona, Lyon and Straasburg in Europe. And Portland is one of the American cities that proves it is possible to create a pedestrian-friendly city in a country where the car is king, says Gehl. Here trams discarded in the 1950s in favour of cars were reinstated 30 years later.

Developing cities that stand out include Brazil’s Curitiba, Colombia’s Bogota and Cordoba in Argentina.

Many of the new city spaces that Jan Gehl champions have made special provisions for bicycles. ‘This is part of another important aspect of people friendly cities: This is about sustainability and about having less noise and also about health.’

In Copenhagen, his hometown, the number of bicycle users has doubled in the last 10 years. Every third person arrives at work by bicycle, and there are now four times as many people using the city centre as there were in 1884. The city has also steadily reduced the number of parking spaces available by two to three percent a year. While Copenhagen’s city centre has 2 100 parking places, Cape Town’s has 23 000.

In Bogota, a city that South Africans are looking to for inspiration, former Mayor Enrique Penalosa realised that the city was ‘investing in asphalt,’ and only serving the 20 percent of the population that owned cars. For his three-year term as Mayor he focused on the other 80 percent by introducing an effective public transport system.

‘His aim was to make sure that the poor could get around easily, so that they would have more time to spend with their families so that their quality of life would be much richer. He was also asked to make sure that when people spent their leisure time outdoors it would be as nice as possible in quality open space.’

In Barcelona the approach to public open spaces has mirrored aspects of political life. Under Bano’s dictatorship, people were not allowed to meet on the streets at all, similar to South Africa’s history, where gatherings in public spaces were seen as a threat.

In South Africa, things were different. ‘In the old cities all of these things were done in great harmony. The streets at all, similar to South Africa’s history, where gatherings in public spaces were seen as a threat.’

‘When I AM CONCERNED with is the human dimension in cities,’ says Jan Gehl, ‘making people visible in the city planning process.’

One of Gehl’s main contentions is that over time people have become less and less present in the way in which cities plan. He sees this as a significant gap in the planning world, which takes into account many things, particularly economics and transportation, but tends to neglect the human element.

Historically cities and towns in both the developed and developing world have had these important functions: they have been places for markets, meeting and moving.

Gehl identifies four types of cities, each of which has different relationships with people and these three functions.

‘In the old cities all of these things were done in great harmony. People used to be visible in the cities, and they used to be a part of the landscape, and to be part of the human element that makes a city an interesting place. But as cities start to grow and become more and more commercial, it becomes more and more important that we think about how we can reinvent these cities as places of community.’

Many progressive cities have been ‘reconquered’ with people and public spaces becoming more important than cars and commercial vehicles in quality public spaces. In Place Kleber in Strasbourg, France, where new tram lines quietly pass pedestrians.
Buildings create a sense of culture and heritage. Right: In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the design of the city is infused with rich tradition and modernity, reaping the investment rewards. In this city park, which is a testament to the city's commitment to green spaces, residents and visitors are seeing the benefits with economic growth, tourism and fewer traffic jams. Making cities which are people and pedestrian friendly. They are seeing the benefits with economic growth, tourism and fewer traffic jams. Making cities which are people and pedestrian friendly. They are seeing the benefits with economic growth, tourism and fewer traffic jams.

What is public open space?
Public open space is a public authority-owned land or space that all residents and visitors are invited to make use of. It characterizes the vibrancy and quality of the space making the difference between space that is used by many people, or by a few only.

In some cities public life is disappearing as aspects of daily life are privatized. In a number of private homes, work spaces and communication technologies, like cell phones, many people rely on private vehicles rather than public transport to get around and use their own, private, controlled shopping malls, in contrast to the traditional high street, have become the norm for shopping.

In contrast to this trend, which is very evident in South Africa too, many cities internationally, with European cities leading, are urbanizing city life and public space. They are seeing the benefits with economic growth, tourism and fewer traffic jams. Making cities which are people and pedestrian friendly. They are seeing the benefits with economic growth, tourism and fewer traffic jams. Making cities which are people and pedestrian friendly. They are seeing the benefits with economic growth, tourism and fewer traffic jams.

Good ideas
So what can our cities learn?
Cape Town is developing a Public Spaces for Public Life programme looking at how to make its inner-city more people-friendly. And, says Prof Gehi, some townships already offer communities opportunities to meet, and move and shop. Planners must build on this, ensuring that when streets are developed, they have broad pavements, places to sit and rest, squares and plazas where people can meet and a pedestrian network that links public open space to play parks, transport nodes and facilities like clinics, libraries and community centres.

Ideally, there should be physical separations between pedestrian areas and roads, in the form of concrete bollards, and people should take priority over vehicles.

Traffic calming measures, such as raised pedestrian crossings, similar to the ones along the De Kock Street frontage in the inner city of Johannesburg, can still benefit from the growth in the film industry. It is not clear if broad economic benefit: that the national government is trying to capture for South Africa through promoting both the local film industry and developing incentives for international productions. Corporate steps that government has taken include the establishment of the National Film and Video Corporation (NFVC) that provides funding to local film productions and promoting initiatives like no tax disadvantages, as well as the creation of a tax incentive scheme for local and international films. It is still early days for the South African film industry but it seems that government enforcement, complemented by support from the private sector, are starting to pay off. The number of local film productions are increasing and recent releases, such as Yesterday's Drom, Zuul Love-Letters and Fingervreuses are gaining accolades outside South Africa. International productions in South Africa are also on the rise.

The government’s commitment to the production of South African cinema, through the National Film and Video Foundation, is most heartening. There is still an understanding that for South Africa should not become a more shopping basket for foreign filmmakers, that for this industry to become sustainable, both financially and artistically, a strong local cinema must emerge too.

Some provinces and larger municipalities have been responding to the growth in the film industry for some time. Cape Town has set itself up as a premier destination, and the Cape Film Commission has played a pivotal role in both promoting the city as a location and facilitating film shoots in the city. Gqeberha has a film office, as does Durban, and the efforts has had marked results. The Cape Town and eThekwini municipalities are also spearheading projects to establish film studios within their municipalities. The studios will provide film infrastructure required by some productions and should also stimulate the development of the local film skills base that is required to service productions. While smaller municipalities are unlikely to have the number of productions that the big cities may be able to attract, they can still benefit from the growth in the industry as the number of required local skills grows.

For municipalities to capitalise on the growing film industry it is essential to have a clear understanding that filmmaking becomes a pleasant experience. A key factor is a simple permutations process. Filming is invariably required in public places and a permit is required from the local authority for this type of activity. Local authorities need to understand the unique nature of the industry and know the versus the needs of filmmakers when providing permits, so having a simple process does imply agnosticism to any. However, a quick decision and good communication with filmmakers will be important in helping them feel welcome and wanted.

Municipalities can also facilitate filmmaking by assisting in the procurement of goods and services and providing up to date information on businesses in the area and by helping filmmakers when they have unusual needs.

For instance, accommodation needs of film productions in small towns may often be larger than the capacity of formal establishments. Filmmakers might need help in identifying local residents who are willing to let out accommodation on a temporary basis. This kind of support should be easy for a tourist information office or perhaps a local economic development official to provide.

Municipalities like the Cape Town and the Durban Film Office offers some advice for smaller municipalities. Firstly, this business is not about glamour and glitz. It is a lot of hard work as we are working behind the scenes. A good transport infrastructure (air and ground), communication systems and logistics are key to this industry. Secondly, good restaurants, accommodation, talent, availability of skilled crew and casts, support businesses and excellent services are very important. Flexibility in terms of the municipal by-laws and quick turn-around time in service delivery is vital. Lastly, you need to have the full commitment of government, business, and community and a strong political buy-in to make it work.

By NASHEN MOODLEY

International filmmakers are choosing SA as a location for commercial production.