

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Keynote: Looking, Learning, Making [Streets: Old Paradigm, New Investment]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1wg0v57c>

Journal

Places, 11(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Jacobs, Allan B

Publication Date

1997-07-01

Peer reviewed

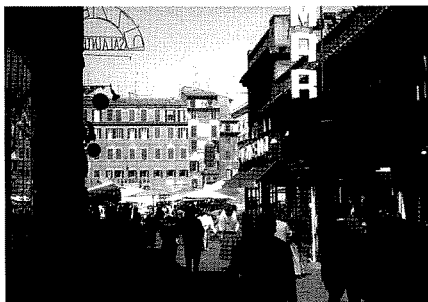
Keynote: Looking, Learning, Making Allan B. Jacobs

This article is adapted from a keynote speech given at "Streets: Old Paradigm, New Investment," a symposium at the University of California, Berkeley, November 19, 1995.

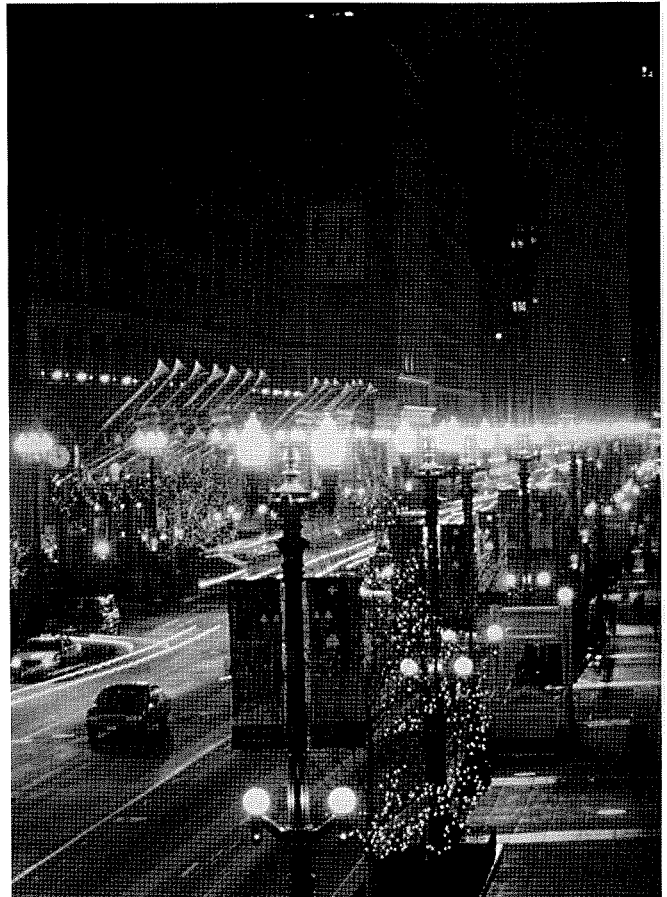
It is dangerous for a group of people of similar minds to come together and conclude that their experience and world views are representative, or at least broadly shared. One should be aware of the pitfalls of generalizing from limited experience. Nevertheless, I think it is not too dangerous, nor stretching reality too much, to observe that recently there has been a convergence of interest related to the design of streets of all types. More than a few professionals concerned with urban life and the physical arrangement of cities have found reasons to focus on streets and street and block patterns as among the most fundamental physical elements of cities.

This is a period in which the many roles that streets can play in people's daily lives are being re-examined — a period of restatement and reconsideration of the values associated with public life, those activities that can occur only in public places. This re-examination is, in part, a reaction to the excesses of the past, which have been generated by a simple view that streets are merely traffic conduits, or by design standards associated with streets that fundamentally serve a single purpose. In part, it is a reaction to and a questioning of the excesses generated by what has been called the "functional classification of streets."

This is a somewhat heady period of new research directed to many different aspects of streets, research that focuses on details of design, such as lane widths, turning radii and tree spacing, for example, rather than on generalities or systems alone. This is a time of wonderful experimentation and creativity focused on streets of every scale — short and long streets, residential and commercial ones, main streets, boulevards, park streets and minor streets.



Above: Via dei Giubbonari, Rome. Automobiles are permitted, but this is clearly a pedestrian street. Pedestrian volumes can reach seventeen persons per meter of width per minute, but it remains a comfortable street. Courtesy Allan B. Jacobs. Above right: Streets are always changing. Chicago's State Street was recently rebuilt to accommodate both transit and private vehicles and to improve the pedestrian realm. Photo by Dave Maenza, courtesy Skidmore, Owings, Merrill.



Before progressing further, I would like to pay homage to the late Donald Appleyard, my friend and colleague, whose early work is a reason why many of us are presently concerned with the design of streets. Donald's research on street livability, most notably the study he did for the Urban Design Plan of San Francisco in 1970, provided hard evidence of the relationship between traffic volumes and speed and a sense of well being on city streets. Donald's studies gave substance to what most people intuitively knew and focused many of us on the subject. Those studies on street livability are classics, done over and over by students at Berkeley, where I teach, always with the same conclusions. They have provided a base for so many actions — traffic calming, through traffic diverters and more. We owe a lot to Donald.

Why are streets so important, and what are their roles?

We go back to some streets more often than others, not just because the things we have to do are more centered on one street than another. We may choose to focus a part of our lives on a street for reasons that are not necessarily economic or functional. Maybe a particular street unlocks memories, or offers expectations of something pleasant to be seen, or the possibility of meeting someone known, or someone new, the possibility of an encounter. It is possible to recall some streets, what they feel and look like, and the things to do on them, and to anticipate how pleasant it might be to spend time along them. Because some streets are more pleasant than others, we may go out of our way to be on them, even on a trip to somewhere else.

Streets are more than public utilities, more than linear physical spaces that permit people and goods to get from here to there. Communication is a major purpose of streets, along with providing unfettered public access to property. But streets also moderate the form, structure and comfort of urban communities. They can focus one's attention and activities on one or more centers, at the edges or along a line, or they simply may not direct one's attention to anything in particular.

Streets allow people to be outside; that sounds simple enough, but it is pretty important. They are places of social and commercial encounter and exchange. They are places where you meet people, which is a basic reason to have cities in the first place. Streets are political spaces, where citizens discuss issues and have celebrations, where people demonstrate. Try doing that in your local mall.

Streets are places for movement, watching and passing, especially the movement of people, of fleeting faces and forms, changing postures and changing dress. Knowing the rhythm of the street is to know who may be on it or at a place along it during a given period.

Streets represent 25 to 35 percent of all developed urban land. They constitute, in large measure, the public realm. The space set aside for parks and other public spaces, when added together, doesn't come close to equaling the space we use for streets.

And streets are ever changing. It isn't as if once they're done, they're done. Look at the budgets of municipalities and see how much is spent on streets — not just on building new ones, but on improving existing ones. Every time you repave a street, there is the chance to change it in significant ways. Changes to streets are normal activities. Over and over again, people vote significant sums to make a particular street better, to be a special place.

Let me review some basic elements of the best streets. Good streets have places to walk with leisure and safety. They are where you can meet people, they invite you to do that. On the Via del Giubonnari, in Rome, and on Stroget, in Copenhagen, pedestrian volumes reach 17 persons per meter (of width) per minute, over extended periods. At these volumes people may touch each other, it is not possible to walk fast, yet people may be seen strolling with small children in tow.

The best streets are comfortable. They are shady when it's hot; they offer sun when it's cold. They minimize the wind. There is a location on Market Street, in San Francisco, where people are literally blown off their feet by winds created by an unsensitively designed building, the Fox Plaza building, I believe.

The best streets have definition. When you are on one you are in a place. Definition can be



The Stroget, Copenhagen, a street to walk along in leisure and safety. Courtesy Allan B. Jacobs.

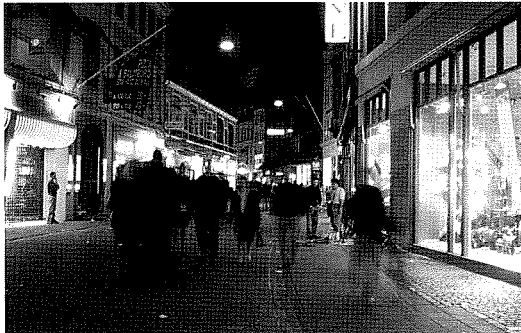
Right: Trees should be planted close together and well maintained. Foro Buonaparte, Milan. Courtesy Gregory Tung.

Below: Good streets have a sense of transparency, as does this street in central Copenhagen; one can sense what is beyond the surface of whatever defines the edge of the street space. Courtesy Jahn Gehl.

established by buildings or by trees, or by both. Definition can be a complicated subject. Suffice to say here that our research suggests that street definition is usually achieved when the defining buildings (or trees) have a height of at least one-half the width of the public right-of-way.

The best streets have a sense of transparency; one knows, or one thinks one knows what is beyond the surface of whatever it is that defines the street along its sides. And so, one's eye or one's mind's eye moves beyond the surface and into the space beyond. Among other things, one gains a sense of the presence of other people and a sense of safety, a sense of place.

Glass does not necessarily mean transparency. Witness any number of black-glass-clad buildings, such as the ones on Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena, certainly the Darth Vaders of all buildings. On the other hand, a blank wall can be transparent if there is a little bit of a tree or green that comes over the wall and takes you inside with it. Transparency is not as simple as it might seem.



The best streets have things on them to engage the eyes. Eyes have to move. On the Cours Mirabeau, in Aix en Provence, the sun, always moving, passes through branches and leaves that move as well.

It is a glorious street upon which to stroll, under what must be the tallest London Plane trees ever grown. One is in and out of the dappled light and the eyes cannot help but respond. You walk to one end and invent a reason to walk back. Three times are better than two, but this time, maybe, we will walk along the other side, the eyes always engaged.

The Boulevard St. Michel, in Paris, is an equally exciting street. The trees, although not as



great as those on the Cours Mirabeau, still do their magic, but here there is more; many stores and intricately detailed buildings over which the sun constantly plays, with ever changing shadows to delight the eyes and keep them moving.

To be sure, some of the best streets in the world are without trees. But if you have very little money, and if trees are appropriate in the first place, then that's probably the best single place to spend your money. That's where the biggest bang for the buck will come. But if you're going to do it, do it right. Don't plant them and let them die; they have to be planted correctly and they have to be maintained. Trees should come right to the corners, they should never stop shy of the corners, and they should always be close together. On the best streets the trees are rarely more than 35 feet apart and are often 15 feet apart.

On the best streets, clear beginnings and endings are important, if not absolutely critical. Ceremonial gates, fountains, sculptures, columns and obelisks, and parks are age-old beginnings and endings that can be delightful in their own rights, and all of them can work. If a street is long enough, then open places along the way small or large ones, can be important. They are breathing places, pausing places, places at which to focus activity. The mini-park on 24th Street in San Francisco has been such a place.

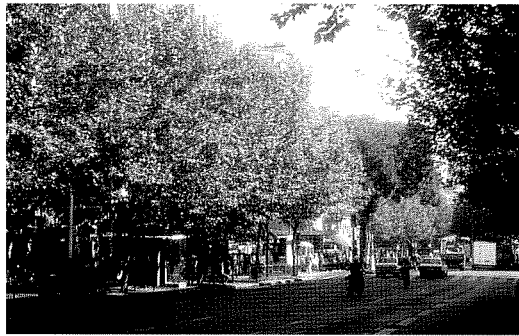
In one way or another, the projects in this issue are geared to the kinds of qualities that I have described, however briefly. In helping *Places* assemble these articles, and in the conferences that preceded the preparation of this issue, two thoughts came to me. First, there is a need for more of the empirical research that undergirds so many of the projects presented here — Ontario's alternative street guidelines, Portland's cheap and skinny streets project and the guidelines for boulevard design presented in this issue are but three of many examples.

Related to that is the importance of understanding that our experience is our research. Often, maybe too often, designers simply do not record their experiences or the bases of their design conclusions in ways that are held as constituting methodological rigor, at least in terms that are acceptable to academia. But our experience is research, nonetheless, and it is a way of doing professional work that needs recognition. Many, if not most, of the geometric standards and norms associated with street design are, in fact, based upon the professional judgement of those who created them, not on empirical research. The research and experience of urban designers may be as valid, and even better informed. The Appleyard research on street livability was immensely influential. We must look to universities, city agencies, developers and to individual designers to do this research. We must be rigorous about recognizing our experience and recording it.

Second, there is a need for communication. The importance of a wide distribution of new research into the professional and lay communities cannot be underestimated. Professional organizations and universities have to do that. *Places* is only one piece of the answer. Articles in other journals are also important. Today, perhaps, the most important people to reach are

those most powerful in setting the standards that we all have to live with.

The opportunity to design streets in ways that meet public objectives, including the making of community itself, is as exciting as it is challenging. If we do right by our streets we can in large measure, I believe, do right by the city as a whole, and therefore, and most impor-



Boulevard St. Michel, Paris. The trees cast shade over intricately detailed buildings, creating delightful, constantly changing patterns of light and shadow. Courtesy Allan B. Jacobs.

tantly, do right by its people. The best new streets need not be the same as the old. But the streets we have studied have much to teach. Delightful, purposeful streets and places and cities will surely follow.