

## *An Introduction to Great Streets* \_\_\_\_\_

Some streets are better than others: to be on, to do what you came to do. Boulevard Saint-Michel, in Paris, lined with stores, book tables, and cafes in similarly sized buildings covered with dancing light, is a much more pleasant street to be on than is Market Street, in San Francisco, which is somehow uncomfortable as either a walking or a driving street. Princess Street, in Edinburgh, with buildings and stores on one side that look across to a park and to the old city and castle on the hill beyond, is more compelling than Regent Street, in London, regardless of the latter's unified architectural expression and dramatic crescent at Piccadilly Circus. Both were intended to be great streets. Roslyn Place, in Pittsburgh, a short cul-de-sac with large trees and red brick houses, with no pretensions to specialness, is better to be on and certainly to live on than are countless suburban residential streets the world over. The Merritt Parkway, in Connecticut, was always more pleasant to drive along than the Ohio Turnpike, but the old Ohio red brick, tree-lined country highways that crackled as tires moved over the loose but level bricks were better still.

You go back to some streets more often than to others, and not just because the things you do or have to do are more centered on one than another. Maybe you focus a part of your life more on one street for reasons 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 new; the possibility of an encounter. I would rather drive on local streets to reach my home from downtown than take the freeways. There is more to interest me, to catch my eyes, though the trip is longer. Fifth Avenue, in New York, from Rockefeller Center to Central Park, has more to commend it than does the Avenue of the Americas (Sixth Avenue) over the same distance. Fifth Avenue is not what it once was—the glitz and size of the Trump Tower cannot compare in elegance with the detailed, modest-scaled limestone buildings that once characterized it—but there is a better sense of enclosure and there are more interesting things to see than the set-back monoliths of the Avenue of the Americas and their unwelcoming forecourts. It is possible to recall some streets, what they feel like and look like and the things to do on them, and to anticipate how pleasant it might be to spend time along them.

This book is about great streets, some of the best streets in the world. More particularly, it is about the physical, designable characteristics of these best streets. The book is also about street patterns as the physical contexts for urban living and as the settings for streets, great and otherwise.

A major purpose of this book is to provide comparable information about the physical qualities of the best streets—plans, cross sections, dimensions, details, patterns, urban contexts—for designers and urban decision makers to refer to in their work. Some people will want to decide about the best streets for themselves, and not rely on the experienced judgment of others. What is needed regardless, beyond an understanding of what is likely to be necessary to make a great street, is information about many of them. That information will be more useful if it is in a form that permits comparisons of different streets in terms of their most important physical qualities. In considerable measure this book is directed to that objective, to providing that information so that people might decide for themselves. Beyond presentation and analysis of the best streets, plan and section drawings are provided for many other streets as well, always presented at the same scale to permit comparisons and to facilitate understanding. But the objectives of the book go beyond providing knowledge and understanding, important as these may be. With knowledge at hand, the overriding objective is to help make future great streets—streets where people will want to be.

#### *Roles of Streets in Urban Life*

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In exuberance, after an afternoon on Strøget in Copenhagen (or on the Ramblas in Barcelona, or Monument Avenue in Richmond, or any of a hundred others, preferably close to home), one might exclaim, "Oh, that was a great afternoon! Strøget is a great street!" It is in that sense that the best streets are called "great." Dictionary definitions such as "notably large in size, huge," or "large in number," or "aristocratic, grand," will be discarded here in favor of "eminent, long continued, distinguished, remarkable in . . . degree or effectiveness, remarkably skilled," or "used as a general term of approval." Most particularly, great streets are those that are "markedly superior in character or quality."<sup>1</sup>

Streets are more than public utilities, more than the equivalent of water lines and sewers and electric cables, which, interestingly enough, most often find their homes in streets; more than linear physical spaces that permit people and goods to get from here to there. These may be the primary or only reasons for a few public ways, toll roads, freeways, turnpikes, but only a very few, and we will not be concerned with them here. Communication remains a major purpose of streets, along with unfettered public access to property, and these roles have received abundant attention, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. Other roles have not.

Streets moderate the form and structure and comfort of urban communities. Their sizes and arrangements afford or deny light and shade, as anyone who has experienced Phoenix and Philadelphia, Bologna and Barcelona, or Udaipur and Chandigarh will attest. They may have the effect of focusing attention and activities on one or many centers, at the edges, along a line, or they

may simply not direct one's attention to anything in particular. The three streets that lead from the Piazza del Popolo in Rome, Via del Corso in the center, give focus to that city as does nothing else. So do Market Street in San Francisco, a hundred Main Streets in small cities across the United States, and Nevsky Prospekt in St. Petersburg.

(In a very elemental way, streets allow people to be outside. Barring private gardens, which many urban people do not have or want, or immediate access to countryside or parks, streets are what constitute the outside for many urbanites; places to be when they are not indoors. And streets are places of social and commercial encounter and exchange. They are where you meet people—which is a basic reason to have cities in any case. People who really do not like other people, not even to see them in any numbers, have good reason not to live in cities or to live isolated from city streets. The street is movement: to watch, to pass, movement especially of people: of fleeting faces and forms, changing postures and dress. You see people ahead of you or over your shoulder or not at all, absorbed in whatever has taken hold of you for the moment, but aware and comforted by the presence of others all the same. It is possible to stand in one place or to sit and watch the show. The show is not always pleasant, not always smiles or greetings or lovers hand in hand. There are cripples and beggars and people with abnormalities, and, like the lovers, they can give pause: they are reasons for reflection and thought. Everyone can use the street. Being on the street and seeing people, it is possible to meet them, ones you know or new ones. Knowing the rhythm of a street is to know who may be on it or at a certain place along it during a given period; knowing who can be seen there or avoided. Or the meeting can be by chance and for a split second but immensely satisfying. To be walking on the Via Arenula in Rome, not a particularly fine street, and to hear "Hello, Allan" shouted from a passing bus and to recognize Maurizio and to wave in return to his window-constrained flapping forearm is to feel greeted and welcomed, to be part of something larger than oneself. As well as to see, the street is a place to be seen. Sociability is a large part of why cities exist and streets are a major if not the only *public* place for that sociability to develop. At the same time, the street is a place to be alone, to be private, to wonder what it was once like, or what it could be like. It is a place for the mind to wander, triggered by something there on the street or by something internal, more personal, a place to walk while whatever is inside unfolds, yet again.)

(Some streets are for exchange of services or goods; places to do business. They are public showcases, meant to exhibit what a society has to offer, and to entice. The entrepreneur offers the goods, displays them, comes out onto the street as much as will be allowed, with wares to be seen. The looker sees, compares, fingers, discusses with a companion, and ultimately decides whether to enter the selling environment or not, whether to leave the anonymity and protection of the public realm and enter into private exchange.

(The street is a political space.) It's on Elm Street that neighbors discuss zoning or impending national initiatives, and on Main Street, at the Fourth of July parade as well as the antinuclear march, that political celebrations take place. Marshall Berman, speaking of Nevsky Prospekt in his wonderful book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, observes, "The government could monitor but it could not generate the actions and interactions that took place here. Hence the Nevsky emerged as a kind of free zone in which social and political forces could spontaneously unfold. . . . For one fleeting moment, Petersburgers had a taste of political confrontation in the city streets. These streets had been political spaces." Later he considers the street as a place where personal and political life flow together.<sup>2</sup> Whether as a meeting ground for the development and exchange of ideas and hopes or as a stage for demonstration and mass expression, the public street is a special political space, most difficult to control, as important in the playing-out of people's most cherished ideals as the piazza or public square. No wonder, if intrigue stories are to be believed, that spies meet on streets (and in parks). It is not terribly easy to pass out nonmainstream ideas in a shopping mall, much less to have a demonstration in one. Lest we minimize the importance of the public street as a political place in favor of more up-to-date electronic methods of communication, recall where the demonstrations and actions and marches of the late 1980s took place in eastern Europe: in public places and most especially in streets.

The people of cities understand the symbolic, ceremonial, social, and political roles of streets, not just those of movement and access. Regularly, if they are aware of what is being planned, they protest widenings as well as new streets, particularly if those improvements will mean dislocation of people or more traffic in their neighborhoods. (They object to high volumes of fast traffic on their streets.) On the other hand, proposals to improve existing streets, to make them special, "great" places, are common and are regularly approved by voters who tax themselves to achieve this end. Over two-thirds of the voters of San Francisco agreed, in 1967, to spend \$24.5 million—a lot of money then—to make Market Street into a great street. (It was not to buy or tear down properties or to build buildings, but to make the street beautiful.) And it was to be designed to accommodate parades. Time and again, the city has asserted that Market Street should be a great street. Other cities do the same. Chicago, Denver, Minneapolis, Santa Cruz, Sacramento, Toledo, Iowa City are but a few of hundreds of large and small cities that have only recently been concerned with the design of important streets.

There have been times when streets were a primary focus of city building—streets rather than individual buildings. There was an array of reasons for creating the arcaded walks along the streets of Bologna. Over time they have become a hallmark of that city, much beloved and understood to add immensely to its livability. On such streets the facades of most structures are hardly seen, so it is the street, not individual buildings, that prevails. The French preoccupation with making streets the focus of city design during the

late nineteenth century, and the rigid building requirements they instituted to insure urban complementarity, are still in evidence. Though the making of those streets may have been achieved in large part by dislocating the poor (this was not always the case), many of the best streets derive from that period. These designers did what they set out to do. By contrast, the last half of the twentieth century has been more concerned with the preciousness or "preciousness" of individual properties, unique signature buildings of their designers and owners, and that, too, shows.

It is not surprising that, given their multiple roles in urban life, streets require and use vast amounts of land. (In the United States, from 25 to 35 percent of a city's developed land is likely to be in public rights-of-way, mostly in streets.) The percentages may be more varied in European cities, but the amounts are always significant. Streets are almost always public: owned by the public, and when we speak of the public realm we are speaking in large measure of streets. What is more, streets change. They are tinkered with constantly: curbs are changed to make sidewalks narrower or (in fewer cases) wider, they are repaved, lights are changed, the streets are torn up to replace water and sewer lines or cables and again repaved. The buildings along them change and in doing so change the streets. Every change brings with it the opportunity for improvement. (If we can develop and design streets so that they are wonderful, fulfilling places to be, community-building places, attractive public places for all people of cities and neighborhoods, then we will have successfully designed about one-third of the city directly and will have had an immense impact on the rest.

#### *A Focus on Physical, Designable Qualities*

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Immediately, when searching for the best or most important physical street arrangements in an urban setting, one must contend with the frequent assumption that what is being asserted is that physical design, either alone or primarily, makes the street the great or fine place that it is, and with the reality that such an assertion can hardly be proved. Indeed, some will argue that the physical design of the street, or of almost anything in the urban environment, has little to do with its goodness, and that social and economic characteristics are the crucial variables. That may well be so, but it begs the question. Streets still have to be laid out and designed, and nondesigners at least as much as designers are concerned with their physical as well as their socioeconomic development.

The interplay of human activity with the physical place has an enormous amount to do with the greatness of a street. It is difficult or impossible to separate the two, and few try. Fewer still give descriptions of the actual physical nature of the street upon which human activities—from the most ordinary to the most spectacular—unfold. As Berman promises, Gogol, in "Nevsky Prospekt," magnificently describes the rhythms, activities, illusions,



saying that the best—"good food, good service, good company"—includes a component of "good space." It is the good space components, whatever the circumstances, that are of primary interest in this inquiry.

Even assuming that the physical characteristics of the street are not an important criterion for deciding what makes one street better than another, one presumably wants to do one's best to design and arrange the pieces in ways that will be better, that are more likely to please, uplift, attract, or achieve a desired set of values than some other arrangement. It does no good for someone faced with determining the width of a street, the sizes of walks, whether or not there should be trees or benches and where they should be placed, and a host of other possible considerations, to demur and to say that these considerations don't much matter. Even if they didn't much matter, the possibility that they might matter at all raises the question for better or for worse. And how, in the end, does one decide where to put the trees or if there should be any at all? Of course it matters. People frequent and enjoy some streets more than others, for physical reasons as well as for the activities or calm to be found there. We come back to the design of streets.

#### *Criteria for Great Streets*

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Given the difficulty of pinpointing the physical qualities that make certain streets stand out over others, and the fact that different people might come to the question differently, it seems important to be reasonably clear as to what the practical criteria for such streets might be. What is it that a great street should *do*?

(First and foremost, a great street should help make community: should facilitate people acting and interacting to achieve in concert what they might not achieve alone.) Accordingly, streets that are accessible to all, easy to find and easy to get to, would be better than those that are not. (The best streets will be those where it is possible to see other people and to meet them;) all kinds of people, not just of one class or color or age. The criterion would work at many geographic scales, from citywide to neighborhood, which opens the possibility of *types* of great streets. Great neighborhood streets would be the foci for people of a smaller geographic area than of a city, conceivably an area as small as the street itself. A great street should be a most desirable place to be, to spend time, to live, to play, to work, at the same time that it markedly contributes to what a city should be. Streets are settings for activities that bring people together.)

(A great street is physically comfortable and safe. A great street might be cooler, more shady than another street on a hot summer day and therefore more pleasant to be on. There would be no sudden, unexpected gusts of wind off buildings. If there are many people there should not be so many as to make it difficult or uncomfortable to walk; it should not provoke a sense

of confinement. Physical safety is another matter, and it can mean many things; but the general concern is relatively straightforward. One shouldn't have to worry about being hit by a car or truck or about tripping on the pavement or about some other physical thing built into the street being unsafe. Lurking human threats to safety? Robbers and muggers? No, that is not the subject here: no recommendations for doing away with trees or permitting only small trees to discourage molesters, no prohibition of set-back entryways that can hide thieves. Light, by all means, to see the way and to see others, and ramps rather than steps where helpful for the comfort and safety of the handicapped and elderly, but no sanitizing of streets to avoid societal misfits.

(The best streets encourage participation. People stop to talk or maybe they sit and watch, as passive participants, taking in what the street has to offer. Demonstrations are possible. For over 15 years on the main street of Curitiba, Brazil, a long, long strip of paper has been laid on the pavement every Saturday morning, held down by wooden sticks every meter or so, thereby creating hundreds of individual white paper surfaces. Children that come are offered a brush and paint, and they do pictures as parents and friends watch. Social or economic status is not a requirement for joining in, only desire. Participation in the life of a street involves the ability of people who occupy buildings (including houses and stores) to add something to the street, individually or collectively, to be part of it. That contribution can take the form of signs or flowers or awnings or color, or in altering the buildings themselves. Responsibility, including maintenance, comes with participation.

(The best streets are those that can be remembered. They leave strong, long-continuing positive impressions. Thinking of a city, including one's own, one might well think of a particular street and have a desire to be there; such a street is memorable.

(Finally, the truly great street is one that is representative; it is the epitome of a type; it can stand for others; it is the best. To have achieved that status, it will have been put together well, artfully.

Determining criteria for the best streets is one thing. Knowing when they are present may be another. Elements of comfort can be objectified more readily than others, although even that task is often difficult. The query, however, is worthwhile. The answer requires a constant search for objectivity, both in the criteria and in the qualities that meet them. It means relying on the judgments and opinions of others, experts and people who use streets, and it includes comparisons of streets, made as objectively as possible. Ultimately, large doses of experience and judgment are involved, and an understanding that the best of the best are likely to involve some magic as well.

Arbitrariness is everywhere in endeavors such as these. People will differ, not only in interpreting hard-to-define criteria, but in setting these criteria from the start and in their personal experiences of any given street. Why should streets rather than plazas or squares be the most important focus of making community? Or, "I was mugged on the Ramblas—why is it great?" Great for what? Great for where? Great when? These are all questions that can make our conclusions somewhat blurred. "Greatest or best for what?" is a frequent response to a question I often ask, "What, for you, is the greatest (or best) street in the world?" One may understand the question however one likes, but it is important to remember that the concern here is with cities and their best streets. Within cities, there are different kinds of streets: for living, for shopping, for working, for walking or driving, for leisure, or for any number of other activities or combinations. It remains to be seen whether or not the physical characteristics that make a great residential street are significantly different from those of a shopping street. As to "when?" exit a concert at the Cancellaria in Rome on a dark, cold, rainy spring Saturday night and proceed along the Via dei Giubbonari, past cars that shouldn't be parked there, through puddles, dodging moving cars that aren't normally encountered on that street, past darkened, grilled-over store windows, and the street is not particularly pleasant and hardly one to be emulated. Please, won't you try it almost any other time, when its shape and its changing directions, its beginnings and endings, and its buildings with their various uses have a chance to work their ways with you, overcoming even darkness and rain?

"But have you ever seen such and such a street?" is the most difficult question, because no one, try as one might, has seen them all. To read Marshall Berman on Nevsky Prospekt and to go back to some of his sources is to want to see it in person. How could someone write so beautifully about a street unless it was great? Knowing friends tell me it is a great street. But getting to it and to all of the others is never really possible. Great streets that I have not yet explored are not in this book.

In the end, some arbitrariness has to be accepted. Long surveys of professionals and of ordinary people on streets, as much field research as possible to test hypotheses, literature examinations, collegial advice, and the assembling of as much information as possible through maps and field visits and measurements all help diminish arbitrariness, but judgment remains.

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*Settings for Great Streets*

All streets have settings, in street patterns and blocks and, at a finer scale, amidst buildings and spaces. Maybe it is the contrast of one street with surrounding ones, in size or direction or shape, or in the nature and size of the buildings that are found on it, that sets the one street apart and makes it



special. Perhaps a unique location is the critical ingredient to some best streets. It is well, then, to be familiar with the settings of the streets that are of interest. We will find, as well, that these settings are important in themselves. They are enormously different one from another, in their patterns, the sizes and shapes of their blocks, the amount of space that they consume, and in their relative complexity. Like individual streets, these settings change, too, over time. Boston's downtown street pattern in the late 1900s is strikingly different from what it was in the late 1800s. The changed pattern of buildings and spaces over the area is equally dramatic. Urban settings, both at the scale of streets and blocks and of buildings and spaces, are also the settings of people's lives. As much as individual streets, they contribute to the making or nonmaking of community, to the relative ease with which people may have contact with each other, to accessibility and focus. So discussion of urban physical settings makes up a significant part of this book. As with individual streets, street and block patterns are more or less measurable urban makers and changers; designers and tinkerers should know them, as the settings for great streets and in their relations to each other.

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There is magic to great streets. We are attracted to the best of them not because we have to go there but because we want to be there. The best are as joyful as they are utilitarian. (They are entertaining and they are open to all. They permit anonymity at the same time as individual recognition.) They are symbols of a community and of its history; they represent a public memory. They are places for escape and for romance, places to act and to dream. On a great street we are allowed to dream; to remember things that may never have happened and to look forward to things that, maybe, never will.

The search here is for those physical elements most likely to make urban streets places where the magic can happen. In that search, we will look first, in Part One, at some particularly great streets, the finest of their types, and will try to understand what it is that makes them so. Along the way we will digress to consider some no-longer-great streets and to explore why their status has changed. Next, understanding that a handful of streets cannot in themselves embody all the information that students and professionals or lay designers want at their fingertips when they make or change streets, a compendium of streets will be presented and discussed in Part Two. The plans and cross sections of all these streets are drawn at the same scale, to enable visual comparisons. Field notes and as much comparable data as possible for these streets are included. Part Three presents street and block patterns in the form of square mile maps as well as plans of urban buildings and space arrangements, each at scales that permit comparisons. In Part Four we will see that some answers are possible: from the study of both great and not-so-great streets and from the street and block patterns, what can we say about physical, designable things that are most likely to produce great streets? Finally, a designer will know and understand that there is an open end: magic.