

Great Streets

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Online info about Jacobs: <http://www.pps.org/info/placemakingtools/placemakers/ajacobs>

This paper consists of direct quotes from part four, the summary section of his book.

Part Four: “Making Great Streets”

Page 270, **Chapter One, “Requirements for Great Streets:”** *Certain physical qualities are required for a great street. All are required, not one or two: accessibility, bringing people together, publicness, livability, safety, comfort, participation, and responsibility. Here are the requirements, by characteristic:*

Places for People to Walk with Some Leisure: *Every fine street that has been identified in this book is one that invites leisurely, safe walking. It sounds simple and basically it is. There have to be walkways (wide enough) that permit people to walk at varying paces...and that are safe, primarily from vehicles. Curbs and sidewalks are the most common ways of separating and thereby protecting pedestrians from vehicles. They may physically separate but do not necessary offer a sense of safety or tranquility. Trees added at the curb line, if close enough to each other, create a pedestrian zone that feels safe. An auto parking lane at the curb also creates separations.*

Physical Comfort: *The best streets are comfortable, at least as comfortable as they can be in their settings. They offer warmth or sunlight when it is cool and shade and coolness when it is hot. People understand and respond to comfort. The best street designers have understood that. The trees on the Boulevard Saint-Michel bring shady relief on hot sunny days, making it a delightful place to be, and they provide some protection from rain, as do the shop awnings. Great streets have definition. Streets are defined in two ways: vertically, which has to do with the height of walls or trees along a street; and horizontally, which has to do with the length of and spacing between whatever is doing the defining. The wider a street gets, the more mass or height it takes to define it. A common proportion is two (street width) to three (building and/or tree height). Noticeably, many fine streets are lined with trees, and these may be as important as the buildings in creating street definition. There is another factor important to street definition: the spacing of buildings along a street. In the end, tighter spacing is more effective than looser in achieving street definition.*

Qualities That Engage the Eyes: *Great streets require physical characteristics that help the eyes do what they want to do, must do: move. Generally, it is many different surfaces over which light constantly moves that keeps the eyes engaged: separate buildings, many separate windows or doors, or surface changes. Visual complexity is what is required, but it must not be so complex as to become chaotic or disorienting. Beyond helping to*

define a street, separating the pedestrian realm from vehicles, and providing shade, what makes trees so special is their movement; the constant movement of their branches and leaves, and the ever-changing light that plays on, thorough, and around them. What of streets at night? They may almost cease to exist, like the Grand Canal, or they may exist only at night, because of the light and what it does to the eyes.

Transparency: *The best streets have about them a quality of transparency at their edges, where the public realm of the street and the less public, often private realm of property and buildings meet. Usually it is windows and doors that give transparency.*

Complementarity: *Overwhelmingly, the buildings on the best streets get along with each other. They are not the same but they express respect for each other, most particularly in height and the way they look. Every now and then there is a church or a corner tower that is significantly different from the norm, but these are exceptions.*

Maintenance: *Ask a pedestrian...what physical, buildable characteristics are most important to achieving a great street and the answers are likely to include words like "cleanliness" "smooth" and "no potholes." Care of trees, buildings, and all the parts that make up a street is essential. People would rather not shop in poorly maintained stores if they can help it. Individually, (shopkeepers) shine the windows of their own stores. It makes a difference, not unrelated to eye-engaging light and reflection. Physical maintenance is as important as any of the other requirements for great streets.*

Quality of Construction and Design: *Mostly, it has to do with workmanship and materials and how they are used. All the best maintenance in the world will not make a wobbly line straight, or a skewed line vertical. Nor will it cure a sloppy putty seal, make a muddy color come to life, nor make right a wrong tree. Quality is often associated with money, and the implication may be that only communities that can afford them can have great streets. We reject that line of reasoning. Roslyn Place (Pittsburgh) is not a wealthy man's street, nor was it ever. Stroget (Copenhagen) is not lined with palaces or paved with gold.*

Page 292 **Chapter two, "Qualities that Contribute:"** *Many of the best streets have trees, but not all of them. Many of the best streets have special public places to sit or stop along the way. Gateways, fountains, obelisks, and streetlights are among the physical, designable characteristics on great streets, but not always. Some physical qualities, then, contribute mightily to making great streets but are not required.*

Trees: *Given a limited budget, the most effective expenditure of funds to improve a street would probably be on trees. Trees can transform a street more easily than any other physical improvement. Trees can do many things for a street and city, not the least of which is the provision of oxygen, and of shade for comfort. Green is a psychologically restful, agreeable color. Trees move and modulate the light. They can effectively*

separate pedestrians from machines. Even a few trees along the curb of a busy traffic street can have an impact if they are close enough together. Moreover, for many people trees are the most important single characteristic of a good street. To be effective, street trees need to be reasonably close together. In practice, the most effective tree spacing is from 15 to 25 feet apart. It is possible to find all kinds of reasons to plant them further than 25 feet apart...but they don't seem to hold up in practice when spacing along the best streets is measured. If there is a rule of thumb to be learned from the best streets, it would be that closer is better. We come across other admonitions in regard to street trees, notably to avoid street corners by 40 or 50 feet, for reasons of sight lines and therefore of auto safety. Nonetheless, tree planting along the best streets either preceded or has otherwise managed to avoid such dictums; it comes as close as possible to street corners. In fact, one reason why street trees are often not effective is a combination of imposed spacing and corner distance rules. The spacing of trees along a street, once started, should not be stopped. The argument usually involves not wanting trees to block the entrance to a major public or private building. That doesn't work. Street trees are a high-priority item on which to spend funds that could have a major environmental impact. Done well and maintained well, street trees are grand.

Beginnings and Endings: *It could be argued that, since (streets) have to start and stop somewhere, these points should be well designed. There is every reason why the beginnings and endings of streets should be well marked, as part of the street, to introduce us to them and to take us elsewhere. Entrances can always be open and inviting.*

Many Buildings Rather Than Few; Diversity: *Generally, more buildings along a given length of street contribute more than do fewer buildings. With more buildings there are likely to be more architects, and they will not all design alike. There are more contributors to the street, more and different participants, all of whom add interest. The different buildings can...be designed for a mix of uses and destinations that attract mixes of people from all over a city or neighborhood, which therefore helps build community: movies, different-sized stores, libraries.*

Special Design Features, Details: *Details contribute mightily to the best streets: gates, fountains, benches, kiosks, paving, lights, signs and canopies can all be important, at times crucially so. At the same time, some contribute less than might be thought. The most important of them deserve special attention. About **streetlights**: a lamp that is placed too high up will project light further but will not give adequate light to the immediate area around it. By reducing the height of streetlamps and the distance between them, and decreasing the intensity of...each lamp, we (are) able to light the city's streets better. Extremely bright lights are useless; they blind people more than they light their way. **Special paving** can cost a lot of money; in very few instances does it make a significant difference. **Benches** help people stay on the street; they invite our*

presence. A remarkable number of the very best streets have benches. Alone, great fountains, or gates, or paving, or lights, are not enough. Details are the special seasonings of a great street.

Places: *Somewhere along the path of a fine street, particularly if it is long, there is likely to be a break. More than just intersection, breaks are small plazas or parks, widening, or open spaces.*

Accessibility: *People must be able to get to the street with ease. Great streets seem to be accessible by public transit. Accessibility is also a matter of public access at places along the street, by intersecting or crossing streets or public ways...streets with one entry for every 300 feet. Still another type of access to be considered is for handicapped people.*

Density, Diversity, Length, Slope: *Whether or not they are directly designable and buildable, **density** and land use matters are important to streets. Void of human activity, streets soon cry out for people. **Diverse** uses enliven the area and the street, bringing different people for different purposes, help to keep it going. Great streets come in all **lengths**. More often than not, the best streets have noticeable changes in elevation (**slope**), albeit none very steep.*

Parking: *Prepare a plan for an individual street, and parking is certain to be a major subject – a bone of contention. Put all of the parking behind the stores, then those stores will reorient to the rear, deadening the street. Garages on streets have a hard time fitting in, but can be made to do so. On-street auto parking is permitted and provided for along many of the best streets...but almost certainly in amounts that are far below demand or what any contemporary standard would require. At best, drivers seem to have a long shot at finding a place in the block they are destined for. That may be enough: a chance. Though present on more streets than not, auto parking in great amounts, to any contemporary standard, is not characteristic of great streets. They seem to do well without “enough.”*