

Community Based Street Design

By Gary Toth, Senior Director, Transportation Initiatives & Renee Espiau, Senior Associate; Project for Public Spaces, Inc.

“The desire to go ‘through’ a place must be balanced with the desire to go ‘to’ a place.”

– Pennsylvania and New Jersey DOTs, 2008

Streets account for as much as a third of the land in a city, and historically, they served as public spaces for social and economic exchanges. Under the planning policies and practices of the past 70 years, however, people have for all intents and purposes given up their rights to this public property. While streets were once a place where we stopped for conversation and children played, they are now more the domain of cars than people. Even where sidewalks are present along highways and high-speed streets, they feel inhospitable and out of place.

This shift has occurred because during the 20th century transportation planning focused almost solely on accommodating the automobile and was done in isolation from community planning. While early streets were designed to be sensitive to their context and to serve the communities in which they were located, post-World War II street planning and design shifted focus to serving our desire for speed. Street design standards were developed that classified streets only according to their functionality for the automobile. The effect that roads have on communities became a secondary consideration.

Fortunately, there is a new and growing movement to look at streets in their broader community context. Increasingly, guidelines for street design are emerging that acknowledge the role of transportation in shaping communities and dictate that streets should not serve only as conduits for vehicles. In the United States, Portland, Oregon first led the way, and now cities such as Charlotte, North Carolina, and San Francisco have guidelines that balance automobile functionality with service to the community. A true landmark in the evolution towards community-based transportation planning was the recent publication of the “Smart Transportation Guidebook,” developed collectively by the Pennsylvania and New Jersey state departments of transportation. This document explicitly acknowledges the need for new approaches to transportation planning and calls on the two state DOTs to lower vehicular speeds in certain community contexts.

Over the last decade, stakeholders in the US have pushed for more balanced approach to street design that accommodates more than mobility for cars. Among other things, this outcry has led to the highly successful “Complete Streets” movement, which has engendered legislation in a number of states and municipalities and has national legislation pending. Further expanding upon the goals of the Complete Streets movement,

[Project for Public Spaces](#) (PPS) has launched a “[Streets as Places](#)” initiative. The program encourages both holistic street design and consideration of other elements that help redefine streets as places for people, including a variety of uses and activities as well as buildings and amenities that encourage beauty, comfort and sociability. Creating great places will truly complete the streets, giving people interesting destinations to return to again and again. This approach can also benefit physical and mental health, the natural environment, local economies, historic resources and the social equity and civic engagement of our communities.

AARP is another major stakeholder that has jumped into transportation reform. AARP recognizes that many of its members are no longer able to drive, and even more are seeking walkable and compact environments in which to retire. “Incomplete” streets that are wide, fast and inhospitable to pedestrians can effectively trap seniors in their homes. The absence of good places to walk to for dining, errands or socializing further adds to their isolation. To help prevent this situation, PPS is now working with AARP on a program to recruit and educate volunteers on how to advocating for walkable communities and great streets.

In order for a community’s streets to become places for people, thereby fulfilling the critical function that is missing in most communities today, they need to be planned and designed appropriately using the guidelines described below. Using this visionary transportation planning philosophy, downtown streets can become destinations worth visiting, instead of just thruways; neighborhood streets can be places where parents feel safe letting their children play; and commercial strips can be designed as grand boulevards, safe for walking and cycling and allowing for both through and local traffic.

Rule One: Design for Appropriate Speeds

Streets need to be designed in a way that induces traffic speeds appropriate for particular contexts. Freeways can remain high-speed to accommodate regional mobility, but speeds on other roads need to reflect that they are valuable public space. Desired speeds can be attained with a number of design tools, including changes in roadway widths, curvature, and intersection design. Roadside strategies, like building setbacks and sidewalk activity, will also impact the speed at which motorist comfortably drive.

Speed kills sense of place. Cities and town centers are destinations, not raceways, and commerce needs traffic—foot traffic. Even foot traffic speeds up in the presence of fast-moving vehicles. Access, not automobiles, should be the priority in city and town centers.

Rule Two: Plan for Community Outcomes

To create a great community, the vision of the community must be the priority. The transportation network should be laid out to support that vision. Otherwise, communities

will all too frequently be relegated to “hammering back” the existing roadway footprint, or retrofitting existing streets with traffic calming measures to lessen their negative impacts. The street network needs to be laid out to serve the community and create an efficient and livable pattern of development. This will increase developable land, create open space, and reconnect communities to their neighbors, a waterfront, or park. They can reduce household dependency on the automobile, allowing children to walk to school, connecting commercial districts to downtowns, and helping build healthier lifestyles by increasing the potential to walk or cycle.

Land use and community planning also needs to support transportation. This includes creating more attractive places that people will want to visit and live in. Great places—popular spots with a good mix of people and activities that can be comfortably reached by foot, bike and perhaps transit as well as cars—put little strain on the transportation system. Poor land use planning, by contrast, generates thousands of unnecessary vehicle trips, leading to both dysfunctional roads and places. Transportation professionals can no longer pretend that land use is not their business.

Rule Three: Think of Streets as Public Spaces

Not so long ago, this idea was considered preposterous in many communities. "Public space" meant parks and little else. Transit stops were simply places to wait. Streets had been surrendered to traffic for so long that we hardly considered them to be public spaces at all. Both people and the buildings that serve them have retreated from the streets. This needs to change... Streets are places, too!

Sidewalks are the urban arterials of cities—make them wide, well lit, stylish and accommodating with benches, outdoor cafes and public art. Even auto-oriented Los Angeles now has a vibrant “Streets as Art” program. Roads can be shared spaces with pedestrian refuges, bike lanes, and on-street parking (a group in LA has actually started planting tomatoes in street medians!). Parking lots can be transformed into public markets on weekends.

Qualities of a Great Street

PPS has identified ten qualities that, in conjunction with the principles described above, contribute to the success of great streets.

- **Attractions & Destinations.** Having something to do gives people a reason to come to a place—and to return again and again.
- **Identity & Image.** Whether a space has a good image and identity is key to its success.
- **Active Edge Uses.** Buildings should be built to the street, and the street level of buildings should be human-scaled and allow for interaction between indoors and out.
- **Amenities.** Successful streets provide amenities to support a variety of activities.
- **Management.** Great places are managed to keep them clean and safe, and are programmed to generate daily activity.
- **Seasonal Strategies.** Utilize seasonal strategies, like holiday markets, parades and recreational activities to activate the street during all times of the year and make weather less of a factor.
- **Diverse User Groups.** Mixing people of different race, gender, age, and income level ensures that no one group makes others feel unwelcome and out of place.
- **Traffic, Transit & the Pedestrian.** A successful street is easy to get to and get through; it is visible and accessible from both from a distance and up close.
- **Blending of Uses and Modes.** Ground floor uses and retail activities should spill out into the sidewalks and streets to blur the distinction between public and private space.
- **Protects Neighborhoods.** There should be clear transitions from commercial streets to nearby residential neighborhoods.