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Streets are  
networked extensions  
of our brains;  
our use of them  
leaves traces  
of the social fabric  
woven through  
the impressions  
of daily life.

Streets not only provide access to sites we consider important, they also surround us with information. That information is limited and highly controlled in the case of high-speed roadways, richly layered in the centers of great cities. The information they carry is about us; about what we do, what we care for, who we are and what we profess to be.

In most cities only a few streets stand out as subject to conscious design and often they become landmarks in the city. Others may have achieved significant status in our mental place maps because of the concentrations of activities in buildings that form their edges or in the transitional spaces that link private properties to public domain of the city. The character of districts and their imprint on our consciousness results, in large part, from the nature of the transactions along a street.

The information we garner from streets is conditioned by countless details — by the frequency of entrances, the transparency of boundaries and systems for veiling privacies, the scale and style of graphic manipulation, the qualities of light, shade and illumination, the rhythms established by elements (such as street trees and lamp posts) that pace the public passages. They provide us with qualities of embracing enclosure or expansive outreach that are embodied in the section of a street — its width, horizontal surfaces and vertical boundaries. Their character is further elaborated by the evidence of craft and attention invested in the making of each of its parts, public or private, plain or embellished, controlling or suggestive.

On city streets the traces of many hands and minds are available to the most casual investigation and their consistency, counterpoint, radical disjunction and/or modulated harmonies set the underlying tone of our life in common, the mood for social encounters. The visible, touchable, smellable particulars of a given street combine in the substrate of our minds with the qualities of movement that its

surfaces are structured to afford; and they are entwined with our knowledge of the place and its history, with the stories and fabrications of city life.

Alas, the design of streets has all too often been assumed to be a moot issue, the province of faceless, if not soulless, engineers and subject to the dictates of civil engineering manuals and the mysteries of traffic flow. The mentality of “freeway” (with all its misleading implications of freedom of action and for free) has come to so dominate the building of roads that sections of city streets have been seen as compromised extensions of that free, unencumbered movement. They have been measured first by the capacity to move traffic and only very secondarily by their capacity to sustain the life of the city around them.

This issue of *Places* is dedicated to the knowledge that these attitudes are changing. It contains a body of good, solid work that is reclaiming city streets for a more expansive view of public life. What is remarkable is the degree to which the articles here investigate the many layers of information embedded in streets — from the placement of utilities underground and lighting above, from the agility of emergency vehicles to patterns of pedestrian movement. As Ken Greenberg writes in his introductory essay, the struggle now is to assemble as much of that information as possible “on the same page,” so that the many hands that shape and manage streets can work in consort.

Most important, the projects and research included in this issue claim for streets their rightful role as places of public good, places that serve many needs for a diverse people and are deliberately shaped to enhance the lives of local citizens. The streets projected here are ones that promise to offer to our consciousness the sense that we could, after all, share common aspirations and do, after all, use our senses.

— *Donlyn Lyndon*