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In Defense of Street Trees

Allan B. Jacobs

“Standards” will be a regular feature of Places. It will report on how methods and practices of design and building (particularly those that have evolved into regulations or standards) influence the character of places—consciously or unconsciously, inadvertently or for purpose, for good or for bad. It will also be concerned with the origins of and rationales for standards, and with finding ways of developing and expressing standards that allow individual places to flourish. We invite readers to submit ideas and materials that would be of interest for future “Standards” columns.

In too many American cities today, it would be close to impossible to design a really good street and have the design implemented. The design would run afoul of the city’s own standards and practices: impossibly wide lane widths, continuous turning lanes at intersections, required ill-designed light standards and fixture types, sign regulations, building set-back lines, tree planting standards and a lot more.

Take just one example, street trees, a favorite subject of mine these days. If, in an American city, you wanted to make a major positive impact on an existing street and had a limited budget, you might well recommend planting trees as the way to get the most impact for your money.

When you begin deciding where to put trees along a street, there are a lot of dimensions and planting characteristics you would want to know. For example, I have found, after measuring the distance between trees on innumerable streets, that they have the most positive impact where they are spaced from 15 feet to 25 feet apart. To be sure, there are some fine streets on which the trees are farther apart (but seldom more than 35 feet) and some where they are closer (sometimes as little as 10 feet).

Observations of streets have turned up other rules of thumb. On the best streets, trees come right up to the corners. The lines of trees are usually continuous; they do not stop because of building entrances, curb cuts, or bus

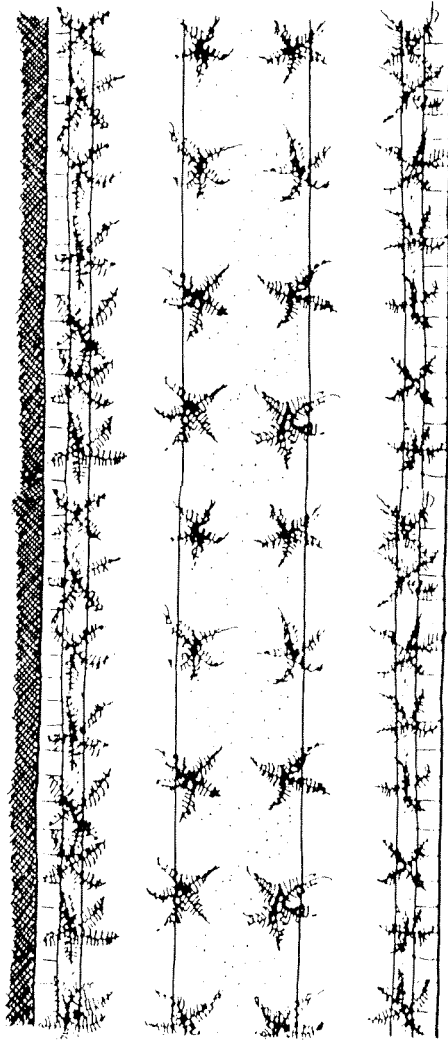
stops, or because someone thinks they have a special building that should stand out. The species are not random, determined by each property owner. More often than not the trees are close to a curb so that trunks become a line of columns between the cars and the walkway, creating a pedestrian precinct. Size is important; lollipops do not make good street trees.

Having come to these conclusions, or ones similar to them, just try to design them into a street.

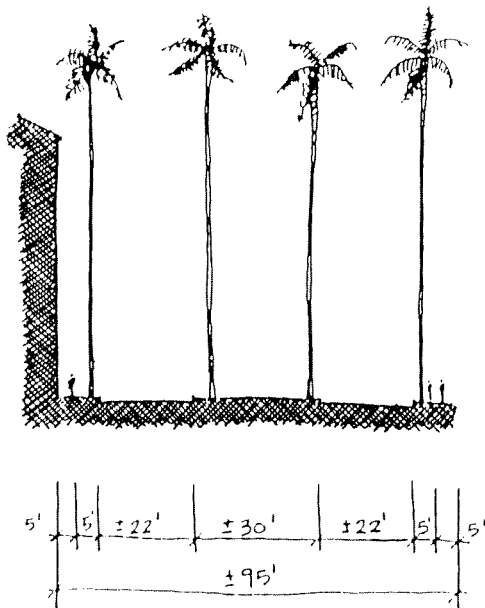
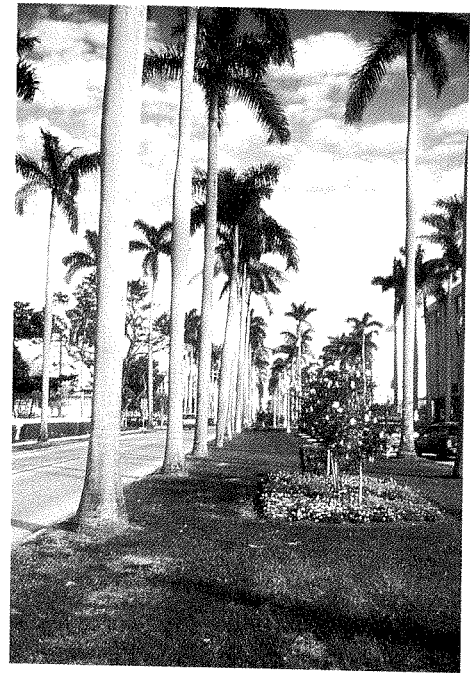
Consider the “distance from the corner” standard. Simply, trees will not be permitted within 40 or 50 feet of an intersection, presumably because of safety concerns having to do with sight distances for drivers. On a 300- or 400- foot block, that 100-foot prohibition (50 feet on each end) is a lot.

But how much sense does that standard make? Are trees near corners really dangerous and, if so, how dangerous? How come there are so many examples of street trees (planted before this standard came along) that come right up to the corner, without anyone tearing them out? Or, if trees are dangerous, then why is a light pole or traffic signal pole with a diameter larger than a redwood and with a large electronic box attached to it permitted at the corner? Or what, God forbid, if people stand at the corner?

Turn to spacing. For impact, street trees should be close together. There are exceptions, of course, but generally speaking, I will stick to my 15-foot to 25-foot spacing. Yet someone, usually an engineer in a public works department, but often an urban forester or a landscape architect, will say trees should be 40 to 60 feet apart. There are strange reasons, one being health, the health of trees that is. If I give examples of streets where trees are closer together, such as Viale Manilo Gelsomini in Rome where the London

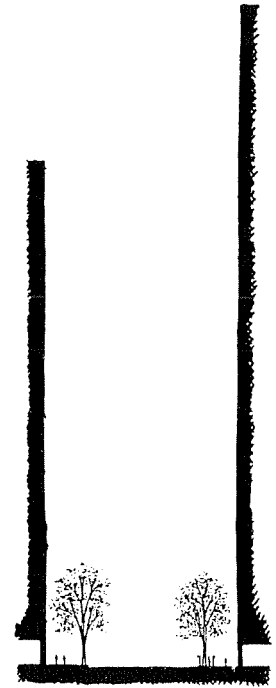
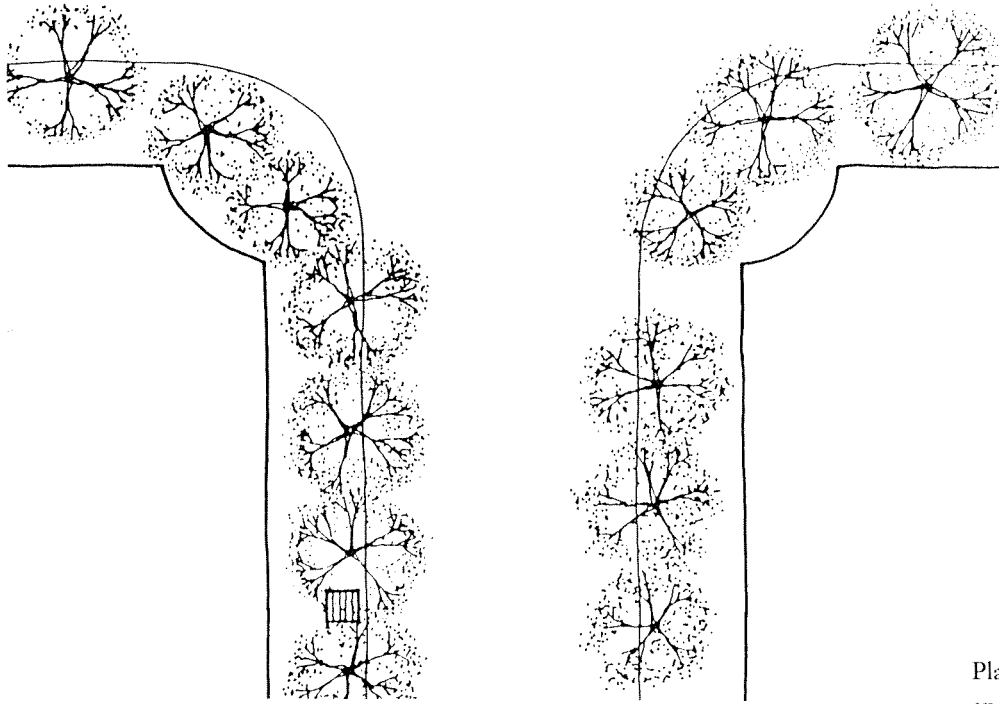


Royal Palm Way, West Palm Beach, Florida.

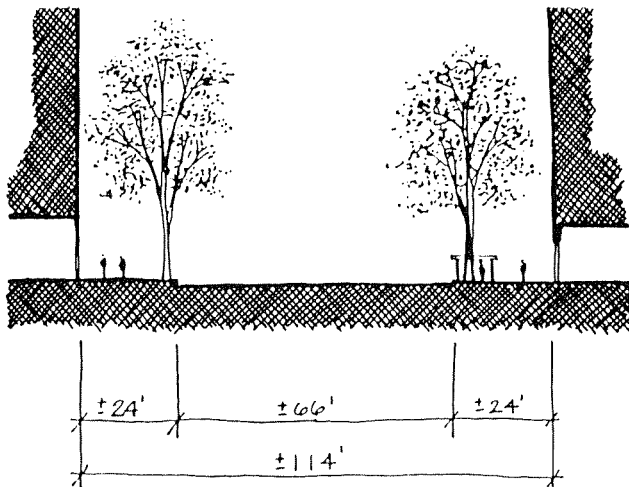


Photos by Allan B. Jacobs.

Graphics by Rick Williams, from field notes by Allan B. Jacobs.



**Avenue Rio Branco,
Rio de Janeiro.**



Planes can have three-foot diameters and are on 18-foot centers; or Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., where trees are 15 to 18 feet apart; or on any number of streets in San Diego, where the palms are 10 feet apart; I am likely to be told those are unhealthy trees. Someone should tell the trees.

The most puzzling rationale for distance has to do with parking. Take Oakland, California, but only as an example. Oakland is not so much different from other cities. Consider one of the rationales for spacing trees found in *Greenstreets*, a report written for the city in 1981 by the Urban Design Trees Group:

Trees should be located in sidewalks at the painted space marks on the street. This will prevent car doors from hitting trees and will usually be three feet away from parking meters. Since parking spaces are 22 feet long, the resulting tree spacing will either be 44 feet (every two parking spaces) or 66 feet (every three spaces).¹

My God! Why should parking spaces have anything to do with it? Why is it important for the tree to



Two views of Via Terme di Caracalla, Rome.

avoid the car door? Why not the other way around? What lasts longer and is more meaningful to the design of the street, parking meters, parking spaces, or trees? Why 44 feet or 66 feet instead of 22 feet? What tail is wagging what dog? What dog is letting its tail be wagged? It is the closeness of many trees in a line that makes the impact, that gives the cover, the provides the movement to engage the eyes, that creates a pedestrian precinct.

If we want to design good streets (and remember that streets account for from one-fourth to one-third of all urban land) then we might do well to focus on the streets themselves, not so much the buildings on them, and not traffic and parking concerns. Trees are only one element of street design but they can be terribly important, and they last a lot longer than cars, curb cuts and, these days, many buildings. On many streets their positive impact could be stronger, but not if good proposals are watered down to meet imagined imperatives of traffic engineers.

And, finally, it is worth remembering that people and activities can and do adapt. It is not very hard to adapt to the existence of a well chosen and placed tree, but difficult to adapt the tree to serve changing phenomena like curb cuts, building entrances, or parking meters.

At this moment, street trees and how to locate them are a favorite concern of mine in the design of streets and cities. There are a host of other concerns that one cannot help but get involved in: building lines, street enclosure, transparency at ground level, entrances, the sizes of buildings, turning lanes, lane widths, open space standards, side yard and lot coverage standards, to name a few.

My fear is that most of the city standards and current practices actually run counter to notions of “urban” design (as opposed to suburban or non-urban) and that the major reason is the publicly required bigness of most things, making them larger than they need be with the impact of distancing and spreading rather than joining people in communities. It is in that larger context that street tree standards are most important.

Note

1. Urban Trees Design Group, *Greenstreets: The Street Tree Plan for Oakland* (Oakland, CA: City of Oakland, 1981).