Title: Overlap Zones in the Street Section [Streets: Old Paradigm, New Investment]

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Overlap Zones in the Street Section
In cities abroad or in our own countryside, we often encounter a more casual use of street space than we do in urban America. In these cheerfully promiscuous streets, cars in motion, pedestrians, parked vehicles, people sitting and street vendors mix and occupy varying portions of the street and sidewalk throughout the day, apparently in peaceable coexistence.

In the last generation, however, some of us might find this integration difficult. The human scale and character of streets used in our American cities have changed through the encroachment of commercial activity and the attendant vehicle use. Streets are no longer the public spaces they once were.

The promiscuous street, a commercial street in downtown Mountain View, Calif., the overlap zone is between the sidewalk and the traffic lanes. It can be used for curbside, street vendors or diagonal parking (see following pages).

The promiscuous street: Pedestrians, parking and traffic achieve a peaceful coexistence on Milbrae's Bonny Doon Plaza. Photos courtesy Gregory Sung.
city districts. An early example of this was a retrofit of University Avenue in downtown Palo Alto where new London Plane trees were located in the parking lane in curbed islands, spaced every 48 feet along both sides of this traditional main street. This reduced the visual width of the street (trees on opposite sides of the street are 45 feet apart), without changing the widths of sidewalks or vehicle lanes or moving curbs and drainage lines (curb to curb distance at 52 feet).

Motorists appeared to sense the constraint of a seemingly narrower street corridor and slowed down, perhaps even beginning to notice merchandise in shop windows. Pedestrians sensed a broader walking corridor between the buildings and the trees, even though the sidewalk width remained the same. At the street corners, sidewalk "bouquets" expanded into the parking lanes, creating a real increase in pedestrian territory where people actually had to confront drivers to cross the street.

In 1989, urban designer Michael Freedman and I took this a step further in the redesign of Castro Street in the downtown of neighboring Mountain View. One travel lane was eliminated, traded off for the expansion and conversion of two parking lanes into flexible zones: highly designed multi-use spaces between the dedicated pedestrian sidewalk space and the moving traffic stream. The flexible zones would permit either convenience parking or pedestrian uses like sidewalk cafes at will, without any street reconstruction (at the time, we thought this would help Castro Street's sole healthy economic sector, the restaurant trade). Storefront businesses now apply for a use permit and their sidewalk cafe plans are regulated by the city.

The flexible zones were configured with a suite of design features intended to be seen and enjoyed at walking speed. These included: material use, such as pigmented pattern-stamped concrete for pedestrian - auto spaces that read primarily as pedestrian paving; spatial definition, by using rows of Fiddle Locus trees in flash tree wells centered in the zone or bordering objects (fixed precast concrete benches / planters, stair curbs) studied with streetlights, portable planters for edges of sidewalk cafes, body imagery and geometric ordering principles like bilateral symmetry, capital-shaft base articulation, serial repetition and linear alignment. Wherever possible, every element and relationship was imbued with pedestrian speed, scale and texture, while maintaining conventions of use by motorists and pedestrians alike.

Castro Street's flexible zone created a full overlap between pedestrian and auto use and territorial boundaries. Architects have traditionally developed similar gradients and interpenetrations of public and private space in the front yard of buildings, what architect Daniel Solomon calls the "encroachment zone." In streetscape design, the gradients have to happen inside conventional and existing entities: a row of parked cars becomes a multi-use space, or a curb becomes a stair and sometimes a bleacher.

With a public mandate to radically improve the pedestrian friendliness of streets in downtown Phoenix, we recently explored a range of manipulations of the overlap zone on three major street corridors. While the activity overlaps were not as pronounced as in Mountain View, the different use of edge-defining vertical elements illustrates...
the potential for creating different place experiences within a gridiron of one-way downtown streets in an archetypical Sunbelt city.

Borrowing from the colonnaded Via della Conciliazione in Rome and Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco, we added flanking rows of 30-foot-tall freestanding light columns to existing parking lanes on three blocks of Second Street, creating 1:2 Renaissance proportions for what had been an irregularly contained corridor space. With the Phoenix Suns’ home arena on the street’s south terminus and the new streetscape treatment, Second Street has become a true processionall way (and a setting for future victory celebrations).

Intersecting east-west Adams and Monroe Streets were planted with blue Palo Verde trees or Monumental Date palm trees in curbed wells in parking lanes. With a restoration of two-way travel on these streets, the width of one lane was traded off for new diagonal parking to support storefront businesses.

Capital improvements were focused on vertical elements instead of areas of flatwork for maximum impact. Dramatic uplighting of columns and trees and high-level area lighting were essential to recreating downtown as a new public nighttime environment. Along with exciting new museums and other municipal projects, the streetscape improvements are part of setting the public stage for downtown Phoenix’s rapidly expanding civic life.

How do we introduce these unconventional or unfamiliar street design concepts to curious public audiences, distracted public officials and skeptical engineers (the adjectives are all interchangeable, of course).
course? In all of these
projects, we have
referred to existing
models, demonstrating
with visual explana-
tions — slides, draw-
ings and in-person
walk-through tours. If a favorite urban design
feature is from abroad, we should show it together
with an American counterpart, with as many of
the latter as possible. We’ve stressed that all
of these seemingly new ensembles are made of
familiar small components; the delight of urban
design comes in telling the story of how it’s
happening right here, in your very own town.

When architects and engineers were first asked
to design Skylab and other spacecraft environ-
ments, they quickly brought to their task an under-
standing of how small spaces had to play many
perceptual roles and functions, to help preserve
the sanity of the inhabitants as well as provide
functional habitat. We hope that more attention
to public realm design can bring a similar attention
to the street, after a century or so of often uneasy
coexistence between pedestrians and cars.
Notes
1. Street space as architecturally designed and sequentially urban space was first championed in the U.S.
by Walter Gropius and Elbert Peets in 1912. See "Architectural Street Design," chapter four in
Architectural Press, 1980), a reprint of the 1922 original.
2. Designed in 1975 by HRMIA, San Francisco, and
Johnson, Lehigh & Associates Landscape Architects,
San Francisco.
4. The 1994 "Downtown Visions Process," con-
ducted in Phoenix, Arizona,
by Moore Johnson Galli-
man and the Downtown
Phoenix Partnership.
5. We used five footcandles, 300-degree K warm white
solar halide area lighting,
with sharp cutoff distributions.