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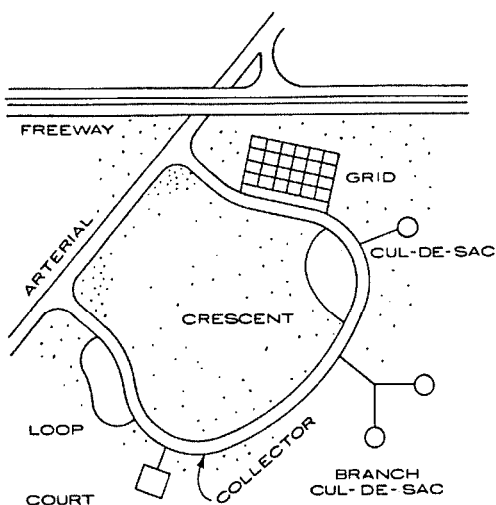
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Keynote: The Street, a Creature of Compromise Ken Greenberg



For decades, designers envisioned cities as perfectable mechanisms in which each functional need was attended to separately in its own place. From *Architectural Graphic Standards*, seventh edition.

In the 1920s LeCorbusier pronounced the street dead. Like many deaths, it was prematurely announced. But it has taken streets a long time to recover from the sustained attacks that city planners, engineers, architects and landscape architects have been launching for most of this century.

In the early part of the century, designers created a powerful polemic against the street. Modernists declared the street to be inefficient, unhealthy, unsafe and unfit as a fundamental building block of the city. Moreover, generations of designers have been enthralled by a vision of the city as a perfectible mechanical instrument in which every functional need is scientifically attended to separately, each in its proper place. They had no interest in regarding streets as complex urban elements that address many needs (transportation, services and utilities, subdivision of land, social and political interaction, commerce, symbolic representation) through an intricate layering.

There have been many disappointing attempts to disaggregate the street into specialized devices primarily intended for one function or another — arterials, collectors, malls, plazas, skyways and underground tunnels, for example — all in pursuit of such visions. But the empirically observed weaknesses of these oversimplified surrogates and the enduring strength and popularity of real streets — especially as chronicled by noted iconoclasts such as Jane Jacobs, Bernard Rudofsky and William H. Whyte — led to a gradual, persistent rehabilitation of the idea and the fact of the street.¹

Simultaneously, in many places and with important contributions from many quarters,

streets began to win a grudging new respect as one of the most deceptively simple but extraordinarily rich creations of urban civilization.² We began to remember that streets are the *sine qua non*, the core of what makes cities work.

The dismemberment of the street has been so complete and pervasive, however, that despite this newfound intellectual legitimacy, its rehabilitation still requires an enormous collective effort. Contemporary practice is still governed by a powerful invisible hand guided by regulations, manuals and assumptions that no longer have credence. This reductive template contains a debased and distorted vision of streets that is enormously resistant to change.

The stakes are very high. A by-product of the neglect of streets has been the weakening of the public realm, which is symptomatic of a larger societal loss of the commons. As more and more aspects of public life have retreated into private spaces, streets have become dysfunctional and frightening places.

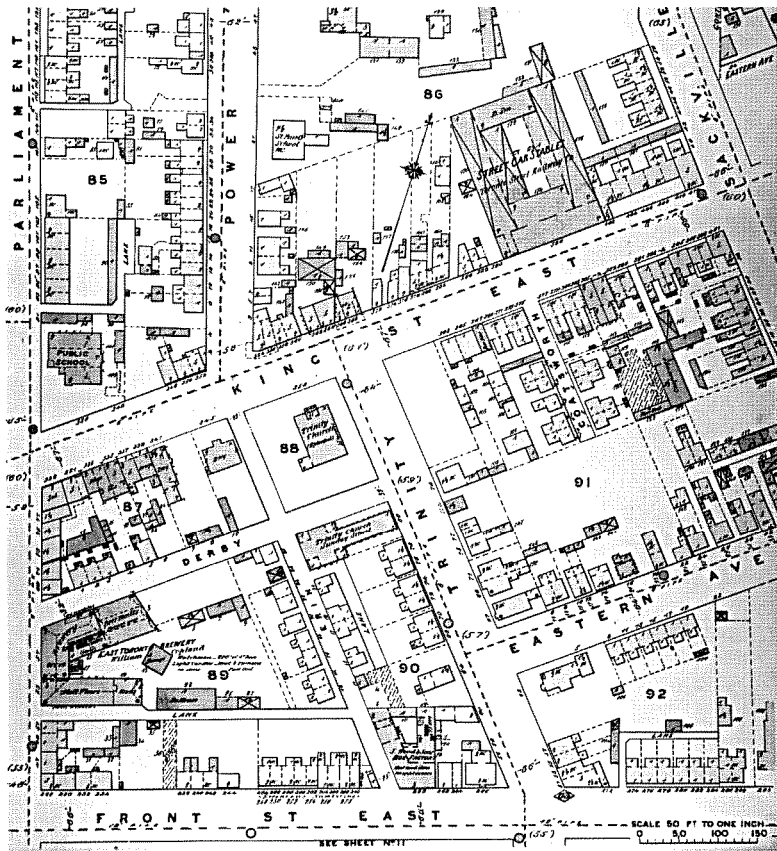
Still, as was evident at the *Places* streets conferences in Berkeley and New York, there has been considerable success in moving from an alternative status for a few isolated experiments to a position of fundamentally modifying mainstream practice in many areas. This process is being tackled simultaneously on many fronts.

Documenting What Works and What Doesn't

Many useful prototypes have been retrieved from the dustbin of rejected ideas. For example, despite skepticism about the ability of North Americans to negotiate them, the roundabout and traffic circle are being reinstated as effective means of distributing traffic in complex situations. They calm traffic in certain instances and can form significant places in the public realm.

Similarly, there is a new appreciation for the urban boulevard. With parallel channels of through

This article is adapted from a keynote speech given at "Streets: Old Paradigm, New Investment," a symposium at Pratt Institute's School of Architecture, April 29, 1996.



Early fire insurance maps included many details about the design of streets and the buildings along them. Courtesy Insurers Advisory Organization, Inc.

and local traffic, landscaped pedestrian medians and generous provisions for on-street parking, the boulevard neatly reconciles what has been regarded as completely incompatible — high volumes of traffic and pedestrian-friendly urban street edges.

The historic narrow urban street and alley combination, which can be observed in the older sections of most major cities, is making a comeback, even in newly developing areas. Alleys offer an effective way of dealing with servicing and parking on narrow lots where there is an intention to promote the pedestrian qualities of the residential or commercial streetscape.

A prime example of a negative practice which is being held up to new scrutiny is the reliance on one way pairs. In many cities, existing one-way networks are being “reverted” to two-way operation. For example, Buffalo reverted one pair of streets downtown in the early 1980s; the business improvements along them were recently described by the director of traffic engineering as “tremendous” and the city is considering reverting even more downtown streets.

We are beginning to look at retrofitting existing streets as well. This might be a simple matter of filling gaps in the streetwall, finding new and active tenancies for existing ground floor spaces, renewing paving, improving lighting or planting street trees. Rarely, however, does a street go back precisely to what it was. There is inevitably a recalibration of the space, a change in use and character, a shift in the balance of traffic, parking, pedestrians, and cyclists.

Many existing streets have been so seriously tilted to the automobile that it is not possible to realistically propose traditional moves that will revive them. New approaches are often necessary to deal with new realities, such as the arrival of big box retail in the city. A new repertory of elements and new ways of defining the street space may lead to new and previously unimagined hybrid forms.

Interdisciplinary Street Design

When the street was orphaned by city planners and architects in the early part of the century, street design was largely given over to the new

Notes

1. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961); Bernard Rudofsky, *Streets for People, A Primer for America* (New York: Doubleday, 1969); William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington D.C.: The Conservation Foundation, 1980).
2. See, for example, Edmund Bacon, *The Design of Cities* (New York: Publisher, 1980) and the work of New York City's Urban Design Group in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

and highly specialized profession of traffic engineers. Design issues were reduced to the geometrics of the roadbed and the spacing of services and utilities. All concern for the social dimension of streets, their contribution to the urban landscape and their three-dimensional qualities, space defined by architecture, was lost.

There has been a corresponding loss in the ability to depict the street. We have devolved from the wonderfully comprehensive turn-of-the-century insurance atlases to a physical engineering graphic conventions with different horizontal and vertical scales and no edges. We are still struggling to get everything back on the same page; it is an enormous challenge to grasp the complex layering that goes into the making of streets, let alone to describe it.

As designers have gained a renewed sense of the importance of street design as placemaking, they have deliberately expanded the range of participants. Now combinations of urban designers, engineers, architects, landscape architects, industrial designers, and artists work on street designs. Critical to this cross-disciplinary approach is the acknowledgement that the street is, a priori, a creature of compromises. No single design parameter, such as the unimpeded flow of traffic, can be given unquestioned priority. Each must be weighed and tested against all others to achieve a balanced and coherent result.

New Street Networks

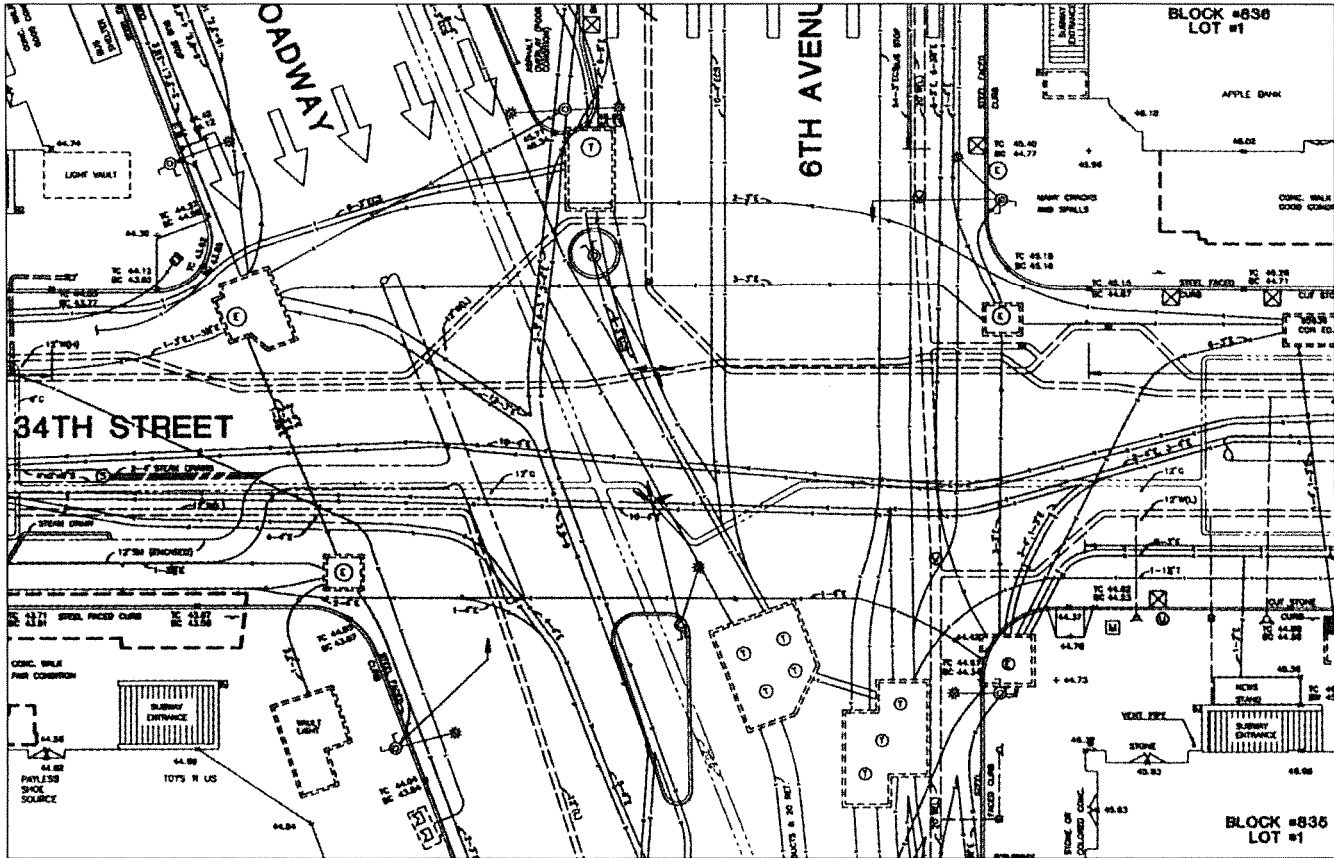
Under the banner of new (or renewed) urbanism, there is an increasing number of new neighborhoods (mostly suburban but also some urban) that have been laid out along traditional lines with a fine-grained network of local streets. Within these communities, there has been a complete re-engineering of streets — short, interconnected blocks, urban lanes, on-street parking, reduced curb radii, narrowed pavement widths, continu-

ous street tree planting, pedestrian-scale lighting and front porches. While generally successful and well received by consumers, these innovations are still by and large internal; the next challenge is to apply the same logic beyond project boundaries.

Each successful precedent reduces resistance to the next. But it is prohibitively time consuming and expensive to treat each project as an innovation. Fortunately, a systematic reform of the superstructure that directs street design has begun. The standard hierarchies of street types are being redefined in light of new concerns in a number of jurisdictions. The primary characteristics of these new street types reflect not only traffic operations, but also adjacent land uses, green medians, transit facilities and bicycle lanes. The professional associations of traffic engineers are also deeply involved in a re-examination of the assumptions which have shaped design standards.

The key to all these efforts to reform the system is the need to deal with the whole network, not just an individual street or an isolated set of streets. The most effective way to respond to increasing travel demand, for example, may be altering land-use patterns rather than adding lanes of traffic. When street grids are platted over large areas, they provide greater connectivity and require more frequent crossings and turning movements, thereby allows improving access while reducing road widths and eliminating unmanageable arterials.

The street is a living organism, the lifeline of the city. Its form and use, which involve fundamental issues of societal choice and urban values, are too important to remain the exclusive purview of technical experts. The re-emergence of street design as an integral component of city design is a positive step toward re-establishing streets as emblems of the civility and pleasure of urban life.



Increasingly, designers are trying to get all the dimensions of the street on one page. This survey of the intersection of 34th Street and Sixth Avenue in Manhattan documents surface and subsurface features, as well as the characteristics of buildings. Courtesy Vollmer Associates.