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Those Books On Streets Eran Ben-Joseph

If fancy, that the civic renaissance which must surely come, which indeed has already appeared in its sporadic beginnings, will never get very far until we have awakened to a realization of the dignity of the street, the common street, where the city's children play, through which the milk wagon drives, where the young men are educated, along which the currents of the city's life flow unceasingly.

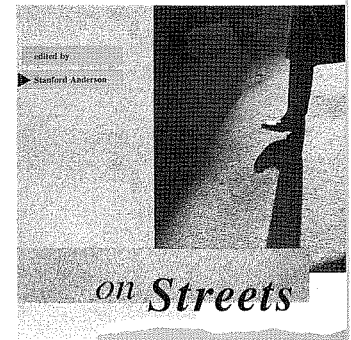
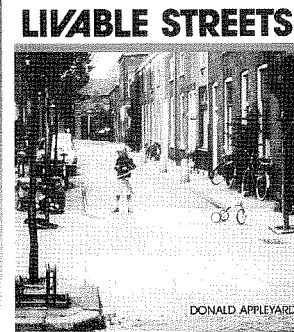
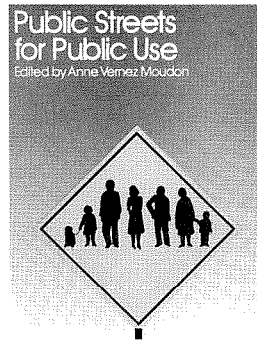
— Charles Mulford Robinson¹

In 1911, Charles Mulford Robinson published a treatise on how to design civic streets. In *The Width and Arrangement of Streets — A Study in Town Planning*, he discusses the full spectrum of city street design, from general platting, width and influence on land value to the construction of curbs and gutters.

Robinson stresses the economics of street construction; mentioning the burden that falls upon citizens when excessive and ill-platted streets are built.

Robinson's visions and practical solutions for street design were very progressive for his time and, in some ways, they parallel contemporary thinking. Unfortunately, this philosophy fell out of favor for much of the century. Only in the past few decades has the street been rediscovered as not only physical space but also a social and cultural entity.

This multidimensional interest in streets resurfaced in the 1960s, with books like Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* and Bernard Rudofsky's *Streets for People*. It was grounded in a renewed emphasis on the social function of streets, a conviction that streets should be designed for the benefit of the community, to serve a variety of functions not simply to move traffic. More recently, three books in particular have shaped thinking and



research on street design: *On Streets*, *Livable Streets* and *Public Streets for Public Use*.

On Streets and *Public Streets for Public Use* assemble essays by writers predominantly from the design disciplines. They reflect both the complexity of streets and the diversity of concerns surrounding them, and they offer both philosophical and pragmatic approaches to discussing and designing streets. Their common thread is a refusal to reduce the role of streets to a single purpose, as engineering literature often does.

On Streets traces its roots to a U.S. Department of Housing and Development research project in the early 1970s. The agency wanted to develop a handbook with formulas for street designs and asked the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies in New York to study the topic. At the time, urban renewal and major highway projects posed a great threat to the livability of many neighborhood streets. There was also a growing belief that street design should be an integral part of broader planning initiatives that addressed economic, racial and ethnic agendas. Such issues, the IAUS team felt, should be addressed by an all-encompassing analytical approach to studying streets, not prescriptive formulas.

The result was a collection of historical and theoretical articles, with one case study that explores new concepts of street space through a redesign of downtown Binghamton, New York. While the original project may have involved

interdisciplinary work, the book lacks transportation planning and engineering perspectives; consequently, it has not directly affected professional practice. Nor did the Binghamton case study provide a major breakthrough. Its principal concept — that the spaces between buildings, rather than the building themselves, are the key generators of context — remains a novelty in urban design practice.

Yet, *On Streets* paved the way for further scholarly and professional work, decisively moving beyond the single-purpose outlook on streets and deepening our understanding of the true role of streets. The design-theory essays by Anthony Vidler, Kenneth Frampton and Stanford Anderson are some of the best ever written on the history of street design, and Anderson's bibliography on streets remains one of the most comprehensive to be found.

While the IAUS group centered its work on the relationships between urban form and street design, Donald Appleyard and Kevin Lynch, based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, concentrated on how people experience streets. Appleyard's previous books, such as *The View from the Road* (co-authored with Lynch), and his knowledge of traffic mitigation measures in the United Kingdom landed him with a project to look at responses to neighborhood traffic annoyances.² These studies led to the publication of *Livable Streets* in 1981.

This book's tremendous success and appeal can be attributed to Appleyard's pragmatic approach, with detailed descriptions of why and how to improve residential street environments. The integration of social and technical concerns, clearly illustrated examples and suggested planning guidelines appeals to experts, politicians, developers and lay readers. It is common to find this book in the offices of road and traffic engineers, next to unlikely companions such as the American Association of State Highway

Officials' *Design Guide for Local Roads and Streets*.

Appleyard demonstrates how the process through which street projects are initiated, developed and approved often ignores a social perspective—and that the prevailing emphasis on traffic performance to the exclusion of concerns for community livability has denigrated urban streets. He starts by building a case against the intrusion of traffic into residential areas and uses surveys of residents' perceptions to show that traffic volumes are negatively correlated with socializing, the perception of safety and sense of community. The simple graphics and quotes from residents give life to the statistics and create vivid images of traffic-related effects on the community.

Once Appleyard establishes the parameters of the problem, he proposes a framework for addressing it, including public action, local and regional traffic management approaches and mechanisms for public participation and education. Appleyard stresses the importance of residents' involvement in the planning process and of using cost-benefit analysis.

While *Livable Streets* offers general guidance, it stops short of providing detailed guidelines for traffic control or models of street design. Nevertheless, it provided a starting point for more technical research by various professionals. One of the most notable publications it inspired, the Institute of Transportation Engineers *Residential Street Design and Traffic Control*, addresses many of the missing issues.

The interest generated by the book, as well as ongoing scholarly endeavors at various universities (MIT, Princeton, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Washington, to name a few), prompted conferences, research and wider interest in European experiences. In 1982, Anne Vernez Moudon initiated the "Streets as Public Property" conference in Seattle. The conference drew participants from all over the globe,

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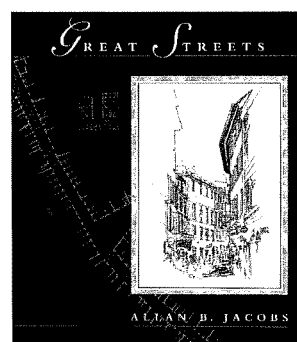
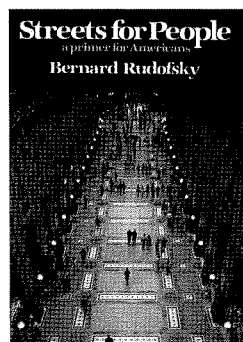
1. Charles Mulford Robinson, *The Width and Arrangement of Streets — A Study in Town Planning*.
2. This research produced a report, “Livable Urban Streets,” and a working paper published as part of the San Francisco urban design plan.
3. See for example: *Making Choices*, *Skinny Streets* and *Making Streets that Work* — projects profiled elsewhere in this issue.

including Anderson, Appleyard, environmental psychologist Amos Rapoport and several pedestrian advocates from Europe. It concentrated on the practical design implications of streets as public spaces, contending that street design is the essence of urban design.

The conference resulted in the publication of *Public Streets for Public Use* in 1987. Citizens, public officials and designers were targeted as the main audience for the book, whose essays and case studies stressed the importance of wresting control of street design from the sole control of traffic engineers. The examples by Mark Francis in “Democratic Streets,” where street design reflects public needs, the case studies of Robin Moore on children’s behavior in the street’s realm, and Eubank-Ahrens’ observations of community activities after street redesign, all delivered a clear argument for rethinking street planning. The message was that streets belong to the citizens and should be used more creatively.

This is particularly apparent in the last section of the book, “Considering the Future.” In it Richard Untermann’s discussion on street standards and regulations is striking because of its contemporary relevance. The reality that most streets are designed as traffic channels and that street standards are set to facilitate easy traffic movement can still be seen in almost any contemporary subdivision development. Untermann’s suggestions for modification and rethinking are yet to be answered.

The diversity of materials put forward by *Public Streets for Public Use* and the various issues raised by the essays rejuvenated work on street design. The book helped solidify ongoing research as well as generate new projects. Most



notably, *Public Streets for Public Use* helped in realizing that the quality of personal life depends on good public spaces, particularly our streets. Such a recognition is finally trickling from designers to other disciplines, and more importantly to community groups and policy makers.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in quality of life issues and a recognition that they depend heavily on good shared spaces. This renewed interest is due, in part, to the advocacy of groups like the Congress on the New Urbanism and has been reflected somewhat in federal transportation funding.

This surge of public and government interest has rekindled discussions on street design strategies in the planning and transportation fields. Papers and technical publications are once again addressing the issues of street networks and layouts, street standards, guidelines and streetscape design. Organizations like Insitute of Transportation Engineers are establishing new guidelines for street design, and many local jurisdictions are revising their codes. Local governments and citizens groups are issuing handbooks on how communities can advocate for changes in street design approaches.³

This revival has been fostered by the publication of new books on streets, such as Allan Jacobs’s *Great Streets* and *Streets and the Shaping of Towns and Cities*, which I co-authored with Michael Southworth. *Great Streets* advances a largely missed component in the study of streets — comparative

analysis — in the form of maps, plans, cross sections and numerical information. Jacobs's accumulation of more than twenty years of research and teaching on the subject have resulted in a unique topological survey of exemplary streets.

Yet, *Great Streets* is more than just a catalog. It is a vivid reminder of the danger in losing those qualities that make streets society's quintessential common space. Jacobs' book represents, in part, a nostalgia for a condition of urban life that was common before the institutionalization of street codes and standards, when street design was a truer reflection of a full range of the public's wants and needs.

The rigid framework of standards and regulations imposed on street design over the last sixty years have stifled innovation in urban and suburban environments. In *Streets and the Shaping of Towns and Cities*, we examine the history of these rigid criteria, explain who has been responsible for formulating them and explore the reasons why the design process has come to depend on them. We conclude by questioning whether existing spatial patterns justify adherence to street standardization, and arguing for a flexible design process that integrates social and technical needs and moves away from the expert approach to street design.

The underlying message of these books on streets is that the process through which we develop and approve street plans often excludes a social position and architectural design intentions. We need to re-examine not only the way the space of streets is allocated, but also way that responsibility for various aspects of street design are divided among different professionals, who may have different training and objectives. As we continue to uncover the complexity of the demands that are placed on streets, we must work harder to find a compromise between conflicting professional and bureaucratic approaches.

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