

# CREATING CLASSIC GREAT STREETS IN MODERN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

By James A. Moore, Ph.D., AIA, AICP

James A. Moore, Ph.D., AIA, AICP, is HDR's National Director for Community Planning & Urban Design and Editorial Director of Community Connection. He can be reached at james.moore@hdrinc.com.

WELCOME TO THE LATEST ISSUE OF *Community Connection*. This issue explores one of the most quixotic aspects of contemporary community planning and urban design—the desire to create truly “great” streets in one’s community. This is particularly relevant for those communities that have matured in the automobile-oriented decades that followed the end of World War II and are, only now, discovering that after 50 years of impressive growth and expansion, there is little that is memorable or truly great about them. Recently, Albuquerque, N.M., set out to rectify this situation. This publication highlights Albuquerque’s efforts at creating a program for defining and then developing great streets within the city.

The issue of what, in fact, constitutes a great street is open for debate. Even recognized planning experts such as Allen Jacobs, author of the seminal text, “Great Streets,” acknowledge that there is no simple definition of a great street, and that the constituent elements may vary considerably from one example to another.

It is indisputable, however, that streets are generally listed among the most memorable places in some of the most memorable cities in the world. Where would Paris be without its *grandes boulevards*, including the Champs Elysees, Boulevard St. Michel, Rue du Rivoli and many others? Barcelona seems unimaginable without Las Ramblas; Rome without Via dei Giubbonari, Berlin without Kufurstendam.

North American cities are generally younger than their European forbears, but are still notable for a range and breadth of great urban streets. Manhattan includes not only Broadway Boulevard with all its diverse character, but also Madison Avenue, Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue, each with its own distinct identity and feel.

Great streets like Las Ramblas in Barcelona allow pedestrians to be both audience and actor.



“Truly great streets are not isolated elements..”

Shopping and commerce are key components of many notable streets. Boston has Newbury Street, a diverse and delightful shopping and dining district and place to stroll; Chicago has Michigan Avenue, also known as the Magnificent Mile, which still serves as one of the preeminent shopping districts in the country; one of its West Coast counterparts is Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills.

Great streets both define a city’s character and create a context for that character to emerge. Bourbon Street is New Orleans, but so is St. Charles Street. Columbus Avenue is iconic San Francisco, just as King Street embodies the character of Charleston, S.C.

Great streets also enhance the geography and setting of a community. Miami has Ocean Boulevard, unique in its pulsating 24-hours urbanity on one side of the street, and the open expanses of sand and ocean on the other side. Tampa’s Bayshore Boulevard

similarly offers a wide range of development on one side and a continuity of water on the other as it hugs the edge of Hillsborough Bay for nearly five miles before terminating in the city's downtown.

Despite the wide diversity expressed by the list of places described above and the myriad other examples from across the country and world, most great streets do have certain characteristics in common.

Most great streets are never mono-dimensional. They serve multiple functional purposes, including mobility, not simply for cars, but also for pedestrians, bicyclists and, quite often, mass transit. They also serve civic, social and cultural functions. Great streets are places to gather, places to shop, places to see and be seen.

In general, great streets are wonderful places for people to walk, or even better, to stroll. Often,  
*(continued on page 3)*



Berlin's Kurfürstendamm, or "Kudam," is equally friendly to pedestrians, bus riders and motorists. *Photo courtesy of Stephan Naumann.*



The Embarcadero, which runs along the shore of San Francisco Bay, has been revitalized in the past decade with new restaurants, a farmer's market and classic-style trolleys.

particularly in older situations, these are streets that were built to a pedestrian scale and designed to highlight the pleasures of participating in the urban context while on foot. Sidewalks are wide enough to accommodate the amount of people using them. Pedestrians are protected from vehicles on adjacent roadways such as to never fear for their safety. Walkways are designed to be pleasant places with street trees, landscaping, kiosks and a full assortment of “street furniture.” Adjacent buildings serve as destinations and create energy and activity on the street. Building facades include large amounts of glass so that pedestrians can see what’s going on inside and those inside can see what’s happening outside. In the best examples, the separation between inside and outside disappears—the doors and windows open and activity pours out into the street and vice versa. This, in part, is why on-street dining continues to delight and attract people.

Great streets are active places, with people moving about, either purposefully or at a more leisurely pace, stopping to shop, dine or simply browse. As such, they provide an ideal setting for a time-honored urban pastime—people watching. The best streets have been designed and developed so as

to enable people to be both at the center of activity and, at the same time, to find places where they are removed from the hustle and bustle; great streets allow people to be both audience and actor, often simultaneously.

Truly great streets are not isolated elements; instead, they are embedded into a local and immediate physical context, generally, but not always, strong stable urban neighborhoods. Walk half-a-block north of Newbury Street and you are thoroughly immersed in the Back Bay neighborhood of Boston. Walk half-a-block in either direction from Madison Avenue and you are in one of New York’s wonderful East Side neighborhoods.

The commercial street used to be the center of activity, be it within a neighborhood, a downtown, a district or even a city as a whole. This is where the best stores and restaurants located (or, as close to it as possible); this is where people came to shop and dine and to find entertainment. In the period since World War II, the street as the center of a community has gradually been replaced by special venues developed for specific communal purposes—the shopping center, the mall, the community center. In each of these types, the



demands of automobiles dominate the physical organization of space. Driveways and parking lots generally cover the majority of the land area. As a result, the connection between activity (shopping, dining, playing, movie-watching) and context (the neighborhood or downtown) has been attenuated if not lost.

The “lifestyle” center is a clever attempt at getting the best of both worlds: the core of these themed shopping centers is designed as an ersatz “street” with slow-moving traffic, on-street parking, wide, landscaped sidewalks, surrounded on either side by a variety of retail, commercial and restaurant uses, all designed to emulate a “traditional” Main Street. Parking is carefully located to the rear of the stores, although this displacement does little to mitigate the enormous amount of land area given over to surface parking or to hide the disconnection between the “activity center” and its surrounding context. Cleverly designed as they may be, these modern development types rarely match up to the characteristics of great places or great streets.

What then, is the contemporary city to do, in looking to create truly great streets? Cities like New York or Boston, are hundreds of years old

and hearken back to a time when the majority of people walked to and from their daily activities. But the cities that emerged in the post-War period were planned around automobile travel; dispersal, not concentration, is the norm. Streets, in recent decades, have been spaces to move through, not places to purposefully come to.

Albuquerque’s attempt to devise a program for developing a series of great streets is one example of how contemporary cities are creating places where people can truly experience their communities. The city recognizes that, in most instances, it is starting with streets that are decidedly not great in their current configuration. Traffic lanes are oversized, cars move too quickly and intersections are too wide to easily cross on foot. Some streets don’t even include sidewalks and often, when they do, adjacent buildings are set too far back to create any sense of enclosure.

This issue discusses the myriad and multiple ways in which the City of Albuquerque is trying to rectify these issues and create pleasant, safe, distinguished thoroughfares. ◀



Walkways along great streets are designed to be pleasant places with street trees, landscaping, kiosks and a full assortment of “street furniture.”