

# THE STREET

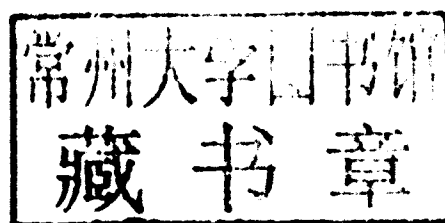
A Quintessential Social Public Space

Vikas Mehta

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*Vikas Mehta*



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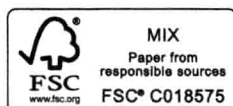
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*To Shilpa and Ayan*

# The Street

Good cities are places of social encounter. Creating public spaces that encourage social behavior in our cities and neighborhoods is an important goal of city design. One of the cardinal roles of the street, as public space, is to provide a setting for sociability.

How do we make sociable streets? This book shows us how these ordinary public spaces can be planned and designed to become settings that support an array of social behaviors. Through carefully crafted research, *The Street* systematically examines people's actions and perceptions, develops a comprehensive typology of social behaviors on the neighborhood commercial street and provides a thorough inquiry into the social dimensions of streets.

Vikas Mehta shows that sociability is not a result of the physical environment alone, but is achieved by the relationships between the physical environment, the land uses, their management, and the places to which people assign special meanings.

Scholars and students of urban design, planning, architecture, geography and sociology will find the book a stimulating resource. The material is also directly applicable to practice and should be widely read by professional urban designers, planners, architects, and others involved in the design, planning, and implementation of commercial streets.

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# Introduction

The street . . . the only valid field of experience.

—André Breton

We encounter streets every day. Our daily life depends on them. Most of us walk on them, drive on them, we access our places of living, work and shopping from a street, and many of us use the street for some type of leisure activity. Streets play a major role in structuring the form of settlements, particularly urban settlements. A considerable portion of land in cities—one-third to a half—is devoted to streets that serve as the prime infrastructure for movement, access and connectivity, and in carrying and delivering utilities and services. Streets bring light and air into buildings. But most importantly, streets of all types, in cities new and old, are the most immediate and ubiquitous public spaces that support myriad cultural, economic, political and social activities.

This book is about the sociability of streets. In making the case for streets, I will argue that one of the cardinal roles of the street, as public space, is to provide a setting for a range of active and passive social behaviors. Hence, at the same time, this book is as much about people as it is about place. Thus, it is simultaneously based in a social, psychological and spatial exploration of what makes streets good for people. Without places for active and passive socialization, with no opportunity for casual and formal interactions, our cities and towns would be no more than agglomerations of privatized spaces and buildings, devoid of the space for the individual to be a complete citizen: A landscape that affords a limited ability to explore, create, express and share; to encounter difference and learn; and to confront, tolerate and resolve conflict.

Over half of the world's population now lives in urban areas. This translates into a large number of people who encounter streets. And although uses and meanings of the street vary across cultures, as a typology, the street is a pan-cultural space, especially when we consider urban settlements. "More than any other element of the urban infrastructure, streets both record and determine the history of city form" (Moudon, 1987, 13). Streets are powerful tools of urban design and consequently of understanding and making the city legible. Looking at the street, then, is also looking at the city, perhaps in a non-traditional way, but from the viewpoint of the pedestrian. This view of the street is open-ended with multiple perspectives—both literally and metaphorically—of the physical and non-physical dimensions of the street as public space. It is so because the street is a pluralistic cultural, social, economic and political space—ambiguous, ever

changing, interactive, full of complexities and contradictions, and with diverse meanings for all. And within this ambivalence and pluralism lies the potential of the street. This book about the street, then, is at the same time a book about the city and about the quest to make the urban environment more sociable and livable, and consequently more sustainable.

Good cities are places of social encounter. Creating spaces that encourage social behavior in our neighborhoods and cities is an important goal of urban design, architecture and planning. Across cultures and over the history of civilization, the street has supported myriad levels of social engagement. As social spaces, streets have been places to congregate, to meet, to enjoy being a part of community, and also spaces for expression. Streets provide a platform for a range of social behaviors and experiences. Although not all are intimate or intense or exceptional, most are meaningful associations for us as social beings. Even being on one's own in the presence of others is a social behavior, and as a social space the street can also be a place to be alone, to relax and to reflect. But the street is also important because this is where we come into active or passive contact with strangers and "others," people unlike ourselves who may have a different view of the world, who may be more or less fortunate, even those who are down on their luck. Sharing the space with strangers is important. This is how we become tolerant, how we learn about new viewpoints and new ways of perceiving the world around us, and become innovative. This is how society in general becomes more complex but richer, and how it advances culture.

As a ubiquitous space, streets are present in all parts of cities, serving a multitude of functions: There are streets in residential, commercial and industrial areas, in large parks, and in sparsely populated suburbs. All these streets cannot and need not be sociable and lively. Certainly, in almost any city, there are bound to be several residential streets that support various neighboring behaviors and these would be classified as sociable streets. Considerable work has been done on sociable residential environments and I do not focus on residential streets. The subject of this book is the local retail street—the Main Street, High Street, neighborhood commercial street and the like—that serves the commercial, leisure and social needs of the people of the neighborhood and the city. Yet even though it is the local or neighborhood commercial street, I am interested in streets that are not parochial and are part of the network of public space of the city. In this book, when I use the term *street*, I am referring to such a public street and not to a parochial or a private street. I am interested in streets that are sociable and lively for most of the day and week, and not in those that are so only on special occasions such as farmers' markets or periodically planned events. In several cases, indoor shopping malls have replaced the commercial, leisure and social role of the local retail street. But for this book, I am not interested in indoor shopping malls, as these are most often controlled environments that are not truly public spaces open to all in the city.

## Why This Book?

The urban designers' interest in the street is not new. It has been half a century since Jane Jacobs's treatise on the significance of streets and sidewalks, Rudofsky's *Streets for People*, and Lynch's writings began to emphasize the social and



cultural roles of the street. What followed was a series of extensive empirical and theoretical work in the next decades in the fields of urban design, planning, landscape architecture and architecture, culminating in important works focused on the street. Anderson's *On Streets*, Appleyard's *Livable Streets*, Moudon's *Public Streets for Public Use* and Jacobs' *Great Streets* helped redefine the street as an important public space rather than as a mere channel for movement. Some more important work on various aspects of the street has continued in the past two decades. These include, for example, *Images of the Street* by Fyfe, *Streets and the Shaping of Towns and Cities* by Southworth and Ben-Joseph, *Streets* by Celik *et al.*, and most recently *Sidewalks* by Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht. However, even though one of the prime roles of urban design is to create environments that support social behavior, few books on urban design cover the subject of social behavior in detail. In addition, even fewer do so with reference to the street. A review of the literature reveals that there are only a handful of empirical studies that address social behavior in urban public open spaces. Even among those that do, most are studies of plazas.<sup>1</sup> Other books and articles on streets have focused predominantly on residential streets and spaces.<sup>2</sup> Several studies, including Rapoport's (1990) pan-cultural study of streets built in pre-literate times, focus on environmental aspects of streets that make them suitable for walking and not particularly for social behavior. But more noticeable is the fact that most of the existing works categorically separate the study of the physical aspects of the environment from the use and management of land uses and businesses and places that hold special meanings for people. At the same time, however, urban designers and planners realize that "it remains difficult to isolate physical features from social and economic activities that bring value to our experiences" (Jacobs, 1993, 270). Other valuable conceptual and theoretical literature on streets addresses myriad important but different dimensions of the street: Some focus on the history of urban form, others engage geographic literature, and some discuss the street as a political space.<sup>3</sup> Several authors—particularly those addressing an audience in architecture—provide anecdotal information about making good streets based on personal aesthetic criteria. Studies from the field of social sciences report pertinent and interesting findings but largely ignore the role of the physical environment. But none of the books categorically addresses the street as a setting for social behavior, covering in detail the typology of social behaviors, and none provides detailed tools to create sociable streets based on grounded empirical research.

Engaging the theories and ideas from urban design and planning, architecture, sociology, environmental psychology, philosophy, political science and geography, this book discusses the possibilities of the urban street as the quintessential social public space. *The Street* aims to provide its readers with the tools to create sociable streets. The book is organized in two parts. The first deals with a theoretical and historical understanding of the street as an urban public space followed by a discussion of the understanding of everyday social behavior as a basis of design. *How do we make sociable streets?* The second part of the book answers this question by providing its readers with the design and management tools to create sociable and lively streets. I focus on an empirical examination of three streets in detail, coupled with observations on several other streets, to develop a typology of social behaviors on the street. Next, I outline the various needs for sociable



streets, focusing in detail on the specific characteristics of the street that support social behavior. Engaging past research on streets along with the findings of the empirical research, the book concludes with a set of design, planning and management guidelines to make sociable streets.

In *The Street* I use methods based in the environment-behavior sciences involving extensive structured and unstructured observations, surveys and interviews to understand behavior and user perceptions regarding social behavior on streets. *The Street* urges urban designers, architects and planners, policy makers and managers to focus on the design and operation of the street to fulfill one of its fundamental functions—supporting social behavior.

## The Chapters to Follow

Chapter 1 introduces the street as an urban space, establishes the primacy of the street, and makes a case for continuing to espouse and endorse the street as a public space of easy access and immense meaning. But the street is a multidimensional and interpretive space: It is different things to different people. In the next section, I discuss the various images and meanings of the street, ranging from the street as a place for community life and interaction to the street as a space of political control and oppression. Considerable literature exists on public space, and this chapter engages this literature to discuss sociability as a primary role of public space. The chapter concludes by defining sociable streets in the context of this book. Here I clarify that all streets cannot and need not be sociable and lively and that this book will focus on streets where neighborhood residents, visitors, workers and people who call the street their home use the streets for myriad social activities, including everyday and special shopping, dining, lingering, promenading, celebration, protest and survival.

Chapter 2 briefly discusses the history of the street. We begin by tracing how the idea of the street is embedded in human movement even before the presence of any permanent settlements, followed by the evolution of the street in early towns and cities. Next, by using examples from various civilizations around the world and spanning several centuries, we discover how the street is established as an important and primary public space and how, in the history of the city, streets accomplished several motives for cities—spiritual, religious, social, economic, healthful and aesthetic. The following section examines the transformation of cities and their streets with the new ideas and models of modern city planning. We review the general demise of the street as an everyday social space to its changing role as a conduit for transportation. The chapter concludes with observations on the changing meanings and use of the street in present times and its resurgence in contemporary urban society.

Chapter 3 discusses an approach for design that is based on the understanding of everyday social behavior. I begin by examining the design of modern public space and discuss the visual-aesthetic tradition that trumps the design thinking in creating and evaluating public space. The next section discusses human behavior in non-privatized space as it is understood using environment-behavior research. Here I discuss some principal theories and ways to study social behavior in public spaces as a contrast to the tenets of modernist design thinking. Next, I focus on the psychology of the street, dealing with aspects of place, territoriality,