Those Books On Streets  Eran Ben-Joseph

I fancy, that the civic renaissance which must surely come, which indeed has already appeared in its operatic 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 meaningfully.

— Charles Mulford Robinson

In 1913, 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 planning, 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 designs should be an integral part of broader planning initiatives that addressed economic, racial and ethnic agendas. Such issues, the IAWS team felt, should be addressed by an all-inclusive 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 buildings themselves, are the key generators of context — remains a novelty in urban design practice.

Yet, On Street 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 IAU S group centered its work on the relationships between urban form and street spaces, 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 Faire 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 management. These studies led to the publication of Livable Streets in 1968.

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 desig nated 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 Street 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 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 1984, Anne Vernez Moudon initiated the “Streets as Public Property” conference in Seattle. The conference drew participants from all over the globe.
including Anderson, Appleyard, environmental
psychologist Amos Rapoport and several
pedestrian advocates from Europe. It concen-
trated 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 Elmbank-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 Unterwurms’ discussion on street standards
and regulations is striking because of its contempo-
rary relevance. The reality that most streets are
designed as traffic channels and that street stan-
dards are set to facilitate easy traffic movement can
still be seen in almost any contemporary subdivision
development. Unterwurms’ suggestions for modifi-
cation 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 real-
izing 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 impor-
tantly 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 address-
ing the issues of street networks and layouts, street
standards, guidelines and streetscape design.
Organizations like Institute 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.

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

References


Donald Appleyard, The Street Livability Study (San Francisco: Department of City Planning, 1976).


