What is your favorite street?

In spring, 1994, Seattle residents had a chance to answer that question. The Seattle Design Commission sponsored a unusual design awards program, seeking nominations for “Streets that Work”—streets that have a good balance among various transportation modes and that enhance the character and vitality of the communities they serve. Hundreds of posters went up throughout the city, even in its famous coffee bars.

The awards were a continuation of the commission’s “Designs That Work” project, which recognizes both quality design in the everyday environment and the efforts of individuals and organizations to improve their neighborhoods. Our goal for these awards was to show how streets can be tools in planning neighborhoods and building communities; in previous years, award programs focused on housing, neighborhood commercial projects and downtown buildings.

The commission convened a workshop to help identify the criteria that make “streets that work,”
involving people from public agencies, designers and neighborhood advocates. We brainstormed characteristics of good streets (vegetation, comfortable for residents and users, low traffic speeds, variation in streetscape materials, mixed uses were mentioned most). And we thought of categories we might seek out, such as “best play street,” “best alley,” “best sociable street,” “best community involvement in street design.” Ultimately the commission gave awards to 15 streets that represented a cross-section of types and uses; profiles of some of those streets accompany this article.

Streets and Neighborhood Planning
Seattle’s comprehensive plan predicts solid population and employment growth for the city and directs it to urban villages and centers. This plan

Obliterated Boulevards
Frederick Law Olmsted believed that urban residents deserved a little country in the city, for Seattle, a city possessing “extravagant landscape advantages,” the Olmsted brothers envisioned a system of green pathways, boulevards linking parks and bodies of water. That vision became reality between 1890 to 1899. Today Seattle has one of the largest and best preserved Olmsted boulevard systems in the United States, a legacy of beautiful and elegant boulevards.

is linked to a neighborhood planning initiative, which gives neighborhood residents some power to chart their own future. In 1995, the city established a Neighborhood Planning Office, providing neighborhoods with staff assistance and a toolbox of background material, covering hundreds of topics from economic development to zoning. Already, several dozen neighborhoods have begun planning work.

But when the neighborhood planning program began, the toolbox did not include material about streets or street design. The design commission, following on the interest generated by the awards program, developed a workshop and video as a primer on streets. The city’s engineering department (now Department of Transportation), its Office of Management and Planning and its Pedestrian Advisory Board collaborated on the project.

The workshop and video, both called Making Streets That Work, seek to demystify streets without obscuring their complexity. They help the public recognize the value streets have in commu-
nities and provide useful information on ways to improve neighborhood streets.

The workbook begins by explaining the role of local streets in the regional transportation network, the role streets play in urban form and the relationship between transportation and land use. It also includes a section drawing of a street, showing components as varied as street lights, trash cans and underground sewer mains. The entities responsible for each component are listed on the drawing; by one count, some 48 agencies and organizations have a hand in designing or maintaining Seattle streets.

The workbook also gives residents tools they can use to get involved with the design of their local streets. It shows them how to profile their streets by identifying problems and opportunities. It offers 35 strategies for improving streets and helps residents determine which might be most appropriate for their neighborhoods. Then it presents information on how to implement projects and case studies of completed street improvement projects in Seattle (including budgets).

Making Streets That Work has been successful because it is accessible to a general audience and because it is comprehensive—a single source of reference for information on streets and strategies for making them better. Appendices include a list of commonly asked questions (“How do I drive around a traffic circle?”) and a glossary, bibliography and contact list.

Just as important, both the awards, book and video offer a perspective on streets that people aren’t used to hearing. These projects treat streets as significant public spaces, not just transportation corridors or utility conduits. This emphasis reinforces the point that streets are places; recognizing that is the first step towards making streets great places to be.

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