

Successful Streetscapes Vol. 1

What is a Successful Streetscape?

Successful streets are a combination of many factors, as all of us familiar with the Main St. approach are aware. They include economic, social, cultural and design factors. This tech sheet is particularly concerned with the physical or designed features of a streetscape that contribute to its success. In considering the physical features that contribute to success it is important to identify what it means to be a successful street. A successful street is more than a means to get from one place to another, it becomes a place to be in and of itself. It serves as a community's center for commerce and politics, it is a place where everyone in a community is welcomed and accommodated and it facilitates the interaction between these individuals, it is the heart and the identity of the community.

The 8 Physical Requirements of a Great Street.

Alan B. Jacobs, an urban designer, professor at UC Berkley from 1975 to 2001, and author spent a lifetime traveling the globe and seeking, through personal observation and research, what he termed "Great Streets." He notes that the "interplay of human activity with the physical place (i.e. the streetscape) has an enormous amount to do with the greatness of a street." He goes on to identify the eight most essential physical elements of this interplay and how they each contribute to a great street. In this discussion Jacobs takes for granted what we normally think of as the standard function of a street, i.e. the movement of vehicles, something all but the most ineffectual streets do, and instead looks at those additional elements that really make a good street great.

1. **Places for people to Walk with Some Leisure:** It is on foot that we are most intimately involved with the surrounding urban environment; the stores, the parks, the sidewalks, and the other people. It is essential that this experience is pleasant; that there is space to walk at different paces, importantly at a leisurely pace, that the pedestrian is neither crowded or alone, and that he/she is safe, primarily from vehicles.
2. **Physical Comfort:** The best streets are as comfortable as they can be in their settings. They offer warmth or sunlight when it is cool and shade and respite when it is hot.
3. **Definition:** The best streets clearly communicate to the user where its edges are. They focus the user's eyes on and in the street by clearly informing them where the street, i.e. the public realm, ends and where the buildings or neighborhoods, i.e. the private to semi-private realm, begins.
4. **Qualities That Engage the Eyes:** As we move through our world our eyes are in constant motion, taking in our surrounds and looking for things of interest. A great street has elements that not only facilitate but encourage this activity by creating visual interest. This may be through architectural elements, art, signage, vegetation, the possibilities are endless, but the need is definite.
5. **Transparency:** We mentioned earlier the public realm, the street, and the private or semi-private realm, the buildings. This physical requirement deals with the definition at the street edge between these two realms and is particularly important in our Main Street communities. Pedestrians must be able to see into the buildings from the street, they must be able to gather information about the semi-private realm from the public realm without have to actually enter it. This means store front
6. **Complementarity:** The buildings on the best streets overwhelmingly get along with each other. This does not mean that they look the same or are all the same color, but rather that they display a similar scale and proportion, particularly in terms of height. Again this does not mean one can draw a straight line along the roof line of the entire street, but that there are not big jumps in height. Nothing bigger than two to three stories from one building to another. There is a sense of regularity in their physical characteristics, great streets are not usually made by single examples of standout architecture, but instead by the combination of consistently attractive buildings that respect each other in terms of their form.
7. **Quality of Construction and Design:** This is primarily the issue of using the right materials in the right places, refusing sloppy work, and always considering how changes to the street will affect these elements. While quality and craftsmanship are often equated with cost, this reveals a short-term and misguided view. Failed projects, the result of inappropriate material choices and poor workmanship will inevitably be more costly than well considered investment in quality construction and design initially.
8. **Maintenance:** Last, but certainly not least, maintenance is often the single most overlooked, most cost effective and attainable physical requirements of a great street. When surveying consumers regarding the most important attributes of a downtown, "cleanliness" consistently comes back as one of the most important, if not most important, element. This goes for both the public and semi-private realms. Shining windows, sweeping sidewalks, changing burnt out light bulbs, fixing broken windows, all contribute to the sense that people care about this street and that it really is a wonderful place to be.

Information collected from STMS
Designer experience and Alan Jacobs'
"Great Streets" by N.C Main Street