Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

# The Street

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, April 8th, 2015

**Introduction**

When the American Institute of Architects awarded Louis Kahn its Gold Medal for his architectural production and teaching activities, he titled his acceptance speech ***"The room, the street and human agreement"*** ( A.I.A JOURNAL, September 1971, pp. 33-34).

According to Kahn, the human agreement concerning a street is about the spirit of ***"commonality"*** and, as such, the street is one the city's ***"first institutions,"*** elaborated In terms of physical and behavioural dimensions in support of traffic and transportation of people and goods through the city, as well as being a means to organize the city in terms of its functional parts, and in terms of access to its major cultural and political centers … let alone being its founding gesture on the landscape. (See J. B. Jackson, "The discovery of the street" in THE NECESSITY OF RUINS, AND OTHER TOPICS, U. of Mass. Press, Amherst, 1980, pp.55-66)

As streets come to service life in the city, they will (should?) channel and support that spirit of ***"commonality,"*** which Joseph Rykwert considers to be a *"pattern of exchanges without which the community would break down"* (See J. Rykwert, "Learning from the street" in THE NECESSITY OF ARTIFICE, Rizzoli, N.Y., 1982, pp. 102-113)

I will attempt to describe, in what follows, how streets are made to accommodate these patterns of contacts and exchange and come to be "live places" in helping to orient and connect people, and in making them feel aware and competent, spatially and socially.

**Three use zones: Traffic zone, Pedestrian edges and Places in-between.**

Encapsulated in these three terms are the **usual spatial and functional dimensions of the street,** which, according to Rikwert (op cit) is where a community's pattern of exchanges usually occur (see image below):

– The paved surface for vehicular movement or **traffic zone**, from curb to curb (street, avenue, lane, thoroughfare, etc.) … we borrow this area to ***"go through"*** the city to our destinations, using the city's landmarks and directional markers to orient ourselves while we focus our attention on the shared traffic area and its potential dangers. The edges of that zone being usually given to curb side parking, free or paying, and often controlled as to day and time of permitted use to allow for rush

hour traffic, etc.

– The **pedestrian edges**, from curbs to building lines, are surfaces for pedestrians movement, and other occupancies as permitted (usually sidewalks, of various width and paving, their curb side sometimes lined with bollards so as to be respected by cars). We borrow these areas to ***"go to"*** destinations among the places between curb and building line … and sometimes have a seat on a bench under a tree, or sometimes cross it, where indicated, to drive into a parking lot.

– The **places in-between** refer, on the one hand, **to the buildings** that help define the volume of the street, and their ***"go to"*** targets (storefronts, residential entrances, coffee joints with outdoor areas, arcades, sliding glass doors at restaurants for an outdoor feel in summer, office buildings entrances, etc.) … and refer, on the other hand, **to the curb** with its points of transfer from vehicular to pedestrian zones, and vice versa, (bus stops, subway entrances, loading zones, taxi stations, parking lots, etc.).

The use **zones** of a busy street.

**Two modes of use and experience: To "go through or to go to".**

The expression ***"to go through or to go to"*** that I used above is borrowed from Barrie Greenbie, who describes the types of exchanges and contacts Rykwert talks about, in various street situations and in their urban and suburban contexts. (See B.. Greenbie, "Street space" in SPACES, Yale, New Haven, 1981, pp. 36-70)

Those situations suggest the importance of an **information system,** needed to function in them, and usually obtained from reading the street layout in terms of its above described use zones and from watching other users, and use enforcement (think of a cop on the beat ticketing you for riding your bike on the sidewalk, think also of a squeegee making a run for your windshield at a stop sign). The **nature of that information** can begin to frame the dual sense of competence and belonging (being-in-the-know) that comes with live place experiences as described in two differing types of city districts for ease of comparison:

**In suburban residential districts,** where houses are strung along the street as beads on a necklace, the needed information is probably a matter of: who just moved in or moved out, got a new car, or spouse or another child, who is shopping where in case purchased goods are delivered, who got a new roof, or siding or paint job on the house, who added a floor to the same because the in laws are moving in, whether the street is properly lit at night, or well patrolled by police, whether curb side parking is limited to days or hours, whether houses are well maintained as indicator of socio-economic profile of neighbourhood, etc. … information verging on gratuitous curiosity perhaps, but which is the by product of necessary social networking skills to fit in the life of the street, and to belong to one's neighbourhood. (See feature image)

**In mixed occupancy districts**, where business and institutions line the street, with condos or rental units above, the needed information is probably a question of noting: the relative truck to car to bike traffic ratio, the free or paying curb side parking and whether it is limited to days or hours, the intensity of police presence, the location of bus stops and subway stations, the age, gender or

indicators of social status, of passers by who transit on the sidewalks and/or who window-shop, and of course, the likelihood of a civic minded business having a public restroom, which are the sunny or windy sides of the street, the quality of night lighting of the street, etc. … all building up the sense of being “of the neighbourhood” and “in-the-know”. (See image below)



Street as **information** system

**Two analogies: The street as “river” and/or as “urban-room”.**

Both analogies refer to familiar figures, be it the **river like** flow of car lights at night viewed from above or the crunching flow of pedestrians on sidewalks at lunch time or at end of work day in any large American city, or the **urban-room like** feel of a dead end or a stretch of curving street covered with foliage and aligned building front, with little traffic so as not to impede the formation of social relations between residents of the two opposite sides of the street. (See D. Appleyard, LIVABLE STREETS, U. of Cal. Press, 1982)

These opposite analogies are used only as conceptual handles for we are in need of both referenced figures: on one hand, to have goods and people be moved in quantities and at speed that warrant the vehicular traffic reserved part of the street and, on the other hand, to move and congregate on safe sidewalks, small squares, etc. furnished with lighting and benches and extra width on which the contextual building occupancies can spill over on: sidewalk cafés, stoops, etc. (See image below)



Street **to “go to”**

**Discussion**

The social, spatial and functional structure of the street as an active modulator of lively exchanges is a stimulator of environmental and social awareness: from the feeling of relative safety, to feeling oriented in the city, to feeling on familiar ground where you know people and are known to them, to becoming aware of the changes in stores or neighbours, to know whether you can address strangers or not … in a nut shell, to know where you feel physically and socially comfortable and safe, and where “being-in-the-know” eventually leads to knowing where you belong!

All of these aspects of the street, in various degrees of course, can make for live place experiences … i.e. for street places we enjoy ***“going to”.*** Some streets may constitute the basis for a sense of neighbourhood (usually within walking distance to its limits), others will be strung together into a circuit of daily stops, or lead up to high points where we can see and understand the city as a whole, or be particularly busy at night given certain attractions and the population attracted, not to forget the Main Street of towns and cities, etc…

If, to paraphrase Louis Kahn, it is the *“**desire”*** to live in common with others that makes for live street places, we may be excused at times for doubting that desire, particularly when streets seem

to fulfill only a basic function of conveyance between anonymous building façades. … streets ***“to go through”*** (See image below)

Street to “**go through”.**

*All photos by Maurice Amiel*

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