



## DESIGN

Supports a community's transformation by enhancing the physical and visual assets that set the commercial district apart.

# Successful Streetscapes

## What is a Successful Streetscape?

Successful streets are a combination of many factors, as all of us familiar with the Main Street approach are aware. They include economic, social, cultural and design factors. This tech sheet focuses on the physical or design features of a streetscape that contribute to its success. In considering the physical features of the streetscape that contribute to success it is important to identify what it means to be a successful. 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 Eight Physical Requirements of a Great Street.

Allan B. Jacobs, an urban designer, professor at UC Berkeley 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 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, such as 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 other people. It is essential that this experience is pleasant; that there is space to walk at different paces, 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, or the public realm, ends and where the buildings or neighborhoods, such as 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 surrounding 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:** 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 having to actually enter it. This means storefronts should be transparent. Transparency equates safety.

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6. **Complementary:** The buildings on the best streets overwhelmingly compliment each other. This does not mean that they look the same or are all the same color, but rather they display a similar scale and proportion, particularly in terms of height. 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 be more costly than an investment in quality construction and design initially.

8. **Maintenance:** 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 and Allan Jacobs' "Great Streets" and the collective knowledge of the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center staff.



*"People should feel that some part of the urban environment belongs to them, individually and collectively, some part for which they care and are responsible, irrespective of whether they own it. The city environment should be one that encourages participation... The public environment, by definition should be open to all members of the community. It is where people of different kinds meet. No one should be excluded unless they threaten the balance of that life," Allan B. Jacobs, author of "The Good City."*



This document was created to assist designated NC Main Street Communities and any other community that would like to develop best practices for downtown economic development.