

RETHINKING THE STREETS OF LONDON

Gord Hume...Nov 2014

(NOTE: This is the first of what will be a monthly column dealing with many of the larger urban issues facing London as we move forward in an ever-more global urban environment. Gord Hume is the author of 5 books on local government and building creative communities, he is a sought-after speaker at conferences around the world, and is a four-term former member of City Council. London Community News is proud to introduce Gord as our latest independent columnist providing a vigorous voice for building a prosperous London.)

As London prepares for the swearing-in of our new City Council, there is a palpable sense of optimism and enthusiasm after the past four years of a dysfunctional council.

What is clear is that the old, traditional ways of running local government and doing urban planning no longer work very well. London now has the opportunity to learn from great cities around the world. We can change how the city is perceived, how it functions and how it can attract talent, investment and buzz.

A big part of this revitalized opportunity is the physical realm of our city, and how we can best use the public places and spaces in our city. That journey starts for many urban planners, engineers and community leaders on the streets and sidewalks of Paris.

It is a beautiful city. The dramatic redesign by Georges-Eugene Haussmann of the arrondissements (districts) of Paris in the 1850s and 1860s has stood the test of time. The life and life style of Parisians is on the street as they socialize, do business, live and work, entertain and celebrate the unique style and character of their city.

Design differences become apparent quickly. North American cities tend to build intersections in sharp, cold, right- angles. The intersections of Paris are softer, rounder and buildings are often set-back. More importantly, the street-level bistros and cafes open onto the intersection. It is remarkable to see chairs and tiny tables all facing outward towards the sidewalk, which promotes openness, social interaction and lots of feet on the street.

Sidewalks are wide. Grand boulevards are tree-lined, offering shade and visual appeal to the strolling pedestrians and cyclists.

Buildings in downtown Paris are limited in height, usually about six storeys, which makes them more comfortable to human scale. They are similar in general concept, which presents a pleasing streetscape while still offering unique design opportunities. Flowers, trees and little parkettes are frequent.

This interface with the street is consistent throughout the design of Paris. There is a lot of walking by a great number of people. Little patisseries thrive in every neighbourhood, and many families do daily shopping for food rather than driving to a huge big box store for a weekly splurge.

There are, of course, some challenges—OK, unique problems—with Paris traffic. You NEVER want to drive in Paris. Pedestrians wander across intersections with disdain for traffic signals. Miraculously, no one was killed on the streets when I was in Paris last week. I watched in awe-struck disbelief as a car roared up a steep underground parking structure and insouciantly edged across a wide, busy sidewalk to get to the street, as pedestrians exhaled cigarette smoke and indifference.

The Champs-Elysees is arguably the world's most beautiful boulevard. Paris is full of treasures, and its urban design is one of them. North American planners and community leaders can learn much from studying the design and street patterns of Paris. Can it be replicated here? Of course not.

But, some of the key design elements—tree-lined boulevards, wide, comfortable sidewalks, buildings that interface pleasantly and compatibly with the sidewalk, the open concept for coffee bars and bistros that populate most intersections and encourage socializing and human interaction, the preference of people over cars, abundant trees and flowers on streets—these are all concepts that we can adapt. Dundas Street is ripe for a make-over.

Public places and spaces are the greatest physical asset of any city. We have to focus more on their design, usage and how we animate them and attract people. The public realm is our new community living room. We need to change the thinking from quickly moving tons of cars to the social interaction of our streets and sidewalks. It is an urgent planning challenge for London's new Council.