

STREETS AND SIDEWALKS—OUR PUBLIC HIDDEN GEMS

Gord Hume...Municipal World...April 2015

Streets. Sidewalks. They are just sort of ‘there’. We don’t think about them much. Don’t give them much love. But, in fact, they are some of any municipality’s most important and valuable assets.

Since the 1950s rush to suburban living, it is the streets and highways of our towns and cities that have received the primary focus. The problem for communities across North America is that the car-centric design has left little interaction with the sidewalks and the neighbourhoods and communities through which the streets pass.

European cities have always has a much greater emphasis on people, walking, socializing in public squares and piazzas, bicycles and trees, parks, and green spaces throughout their core. Many European cities offer glorious, tree-lined boulevards as primary thoroughfares—the Champs-Elysees is arguably the most beautiful street promenade in the world as it wanders up to the Arc de Triomphe. It offers romantic walks along tree-lined boulevards, parks, shopping, food from little crepes trucks, and some protection from the traffic by separating the road from the pedestrians.

Part of the difference in civic design between Europe and North America is cultural; part is different urban and suburban planning standards; part is the economics of sprawl.

North American cities are increasingly looking at design alternatives for pedestrian and traffic movements. The substantial increase in the number of roundabouts, long a staple of road engineering in Britain, New Zealand and other nations, is an example of traffic calming and trying to ease vehicle impact on neighbourhoods.

Canadian and US cities have traditionally designed intersections with sharp and stark 90-degree angles. The result has often been an unappealing intersection where pedestrians are very much an after-thought, even a dangerous hindrance to traffic movement. Building entrances are often cold, rigid and don’t interface well with the street.

Compare that to say, Paris. Intersections there are softer, rounder, gentler and there is usually a key piece of design to provide a human element. Frequently it is a boulangerie, patisserie, café or restaurant—and almost invariably there are sidewalk tables and chairs to promote a street presence and enhance social interaction. What is particularly fascinating is that all the chairs face out onto the sidewalk and the street rather than our pattern of sitting across from one another where at least someone’s back is to the street. {{see picture, attached}}

This openness supports the casual social interchange and culture of European cities. In Italy the piazzas have been thoughtfully designed for generations to promote the important civic function of socializing, as architect Jack Diamond notes in the book “Places and Spaces”:

“Creating somewhere where people can gather where you can have concerts, parades, and protests is critical. It gives focus to community life. If you look at the most successful public spaces, using Italy as an example, you could sit at a cafe in the plaza and observe the passage of people. It is no mistake that the successful cafes are at the upper end, and the walk-through at the lower end. People watching is a very important aspect of public life, of observing your citizens...you can go there without having to look like you’re lonely. That’s the pub in England.”

It is this importance of socializing, of using our public realm, of developing public places and spaces, that is becoming a crucial part of urban design. As living spaces in metro and urban areas get smaller and smaller, the public realm is becoming the new community living room. The streets, sidewalks, libraries, parks, cafes, squares and other public places are where many people are meeting friends, eating, sharing entertainment experiences, enjoying public festivals and events. The local government has almost complete control over these places and spaces, yet there has been a lack of understanding of the importance in our society about their design and use.

“At a very fundamental level, human beings need to be part of a society,” emphasizes Mr. Diamond. “There is a great deal of satisfaction in being part of a community. Informal contact is as important as formal contact, so the chance encounter is more likely to occur at a cross-roads or some place that is commonly peopled. The most successful public places are those that you have to go through to get somewhere. Looking at the quintessential successful public space, the Italian piazza, (albeit it a different climate and a different society), the lessons are strong. They were very well defined by the private sector, with public sector buildings involved. Typically they didn’t have empty or open corners. The public space had clear definition, and an inevitability of containment. Both informal and formal components combine for success where people can gather for events.”

As people, especially the younger generations, are increasingly compelled by social media there are fears by some of a growing lack of human contact and what that may do to our traditional social structure.

“Increasingly we become not only an ideas economy but an ideas culture. As we communicate in every possible way, it is becoming more important than ever that people can communicate face to face. The public realm becomes where it’s happening,” observes international urban planning expert Larry Beasley.

Cities need to furnish, design and animate their public places and spaces much more effectively. We tend to have way too many rules and restrictions, and don't let public experiences simply evolve in a natural, community way. We rarely build public spaces with electrical outlets or innovative design that can suddenly become a stage for a performance.

“Copenhagen—all Northern European cities—show how much the people live in the public realm. Part is the compactness of their (living) spaces. Density. Nature and size of units. Often they don't have lavish private homes, so cities have furnished the public environment to attract people.” says Larry Beasley in “Places and Spaces”. For example, a network of streets can be closed to become public spaces and later re-opened to traffic.

“Stockholm has beautifully designed places in and around its core. They also program the public places—entertainment, buskers, keeps quality and freshness up. Events going on. Street food. They have designed streets for that—electrical outlets, natural amphitheatres, regulatory freedom for private activity on the edges of public spaces (restaurants that spill out into public space). We have many rules that limit that in North America. Civic programming of public spaces is richly alive. Amsterdam designs its transportation system to encourage cyclists, pedestrians, families to use public place and space. (Smart) cities have removed limitations to spontaneous activities, events,” he concludes.

It is wise advice. We need to change and adapt our downtowns, our sidewalks, our public squares and plazas. As more and more people want to use the public realm for socializing, entertaining, family outings and simple observing life, cities in Canada need to get more innovative and less restrictive.

We have tended to build wide streets and narrow sidewalks. Perhaps it is time to reverse that philosophy in some instances. Auckland is now designing narrow, gently curving bike-friendly streets as part of their new urban design; sidewalks are wide, tree-lined, and encourage tables and chairs out on the sidewalk as part of the natural streetscape. And in a particularly clever idea, they provide clear ‘roofs’ or canopies over the sidewalk to protect pedestrians! {{See picture}}

Melbourne, Australia has replaced 30 hectares of asphalt with new green spaces, and is planting 3,000 extra trees a year in their central city. The city has made a concerted effort to make its downtown walkable and connected. The city has widened foot paths and sidewalks. It has the largest tram system in the world. Oh yes--it is now the most livable city in the world.

These are just a few of the fresh new ideas cities are beginning to contemplate as they take a bold new look at their sidewalks, street-design and their public realm. A lot of elected people don't get this yet. Some planners don't fully understand the implications and urgency.

Cities need to reclaim small, dirty or unused spaces. They need to bring beauty back to their city centre. They need to invest in public art. They need to animate public places. They need to work with the private sector. They need to ensure people are engaging with their street and their city, not just whipping through a neighbourhood at high speed, cell phone clutched desperately in hand.

There are competitive economic advantages in building a vibrant public realm that is fun, animated and social. That will help to attract creative talent and entrepreneurs. Providing a great quality of life enhances a city's attraction and economic opportunities.

Urban society is changing rapidly. Local government can no longer struggle to understand that. Smart, leading cities will adapt new policies and procedures to ensure their community is creative, exciting, focused on people and is encouraging this new form of social engagement.

This is going to be one of the most significant trends for cities in the upcoming decade—how to better utilize their public places and spaces.

Pictures:

1. Café society in Paris—chairs point out to the street to promote socializing.
2. Las Ramblas pedestrian area in Barcelona—a glorious people-focused boulevard in the city centre.
3. New urban street in Auckland—note the canopy over the sidewalk.