

Southworth, Michael and Eran Ben-Joseph.

Streets and the Shaping of Towns and Cities.

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An oddity of urban research is the paucity of books about streets. City streets occupy more than a quarter of the land in most North American cities, literally shape the city, and set the tone for sections of cities. Despite their omnipresence and influence, they are usually treated only slightly less functionally than sewer pipes. A few writers raise their sights to the aesthetic of streets, or lack thereof, or to the social importance of streets. The enduring quality of Michael Southworth and Eran Ben-Joseph's book is that it brings all of those concerns, and more, to one place. Readers learn how streets declined to merely functional status, and how and why their star is now rising.

In all but name this is a second edition of *Streets and the Shaping of Towns and Cities* published in 1997 by McGraw-Hill. It exemplifies what appears to be a new publishing industry trend: the initial publisher sells the rights to publish a second edition of a book to a smaller house if profits can still be made, but the output isn't labelled "second edition" because it's now on a different publisher's list. In the case of *Streets*, the revisions are modest but helpful: new data about initiatives to scale streets and calm traffic appropriately, and to make rights-of-way more environmentally effective.

In terms of structure, the first four chapters review the history of streets through American eyes, with reference to Britain. It's a history that in the main characterizes the role of streets in shaping towns and cities in Canada too, at least as an overview. Excellent photographs and drawings illustrate the evolution of fashions in the widths of rights-of-way, usage of street surfaces, codes, by-laws and practices.

The fifth chapter is devoted to the re-thinking of streets that began in the 1980s. Under various names, that re-thinking has three legs. First is the "right-sizing" of streets for the uses they are supposed to serve. Second is form: straighter versus curvilinear streets, and grids versus discontinuous patterns. Third is displacing the automobile-as-king syndrome by finding palatable trade-offs between traffic efficiency and improved social and residential environments. The notion of "shared streets" has been at the centre of this school of thought. The authors attribute the idea of shared streets to Sir Colin Buchanan and his seminal 1963 work *Traffic in Towns*, (in which he wrote of streets as 'urban rooms'), and then go on to show how that concept has since been developed as the well-known *woonerf*. The *woonerf* has been adapted for use in several countries (particularly in the Netherlands), though it's hardly used in North America. My favourite sketch in the book shows a behaviour map of children's play before and after a street was re-designed as a *wohnstrassen*, or "living street", in Germany. Outdoor play increased 20%, with much more movement and activity along the length of the street because children had more space, and as a result they played more complex games and used their bicycles and toy vehicles more than they had before. Could there be a stronger argument for streets as urban rooms? A virtue of the chapter is that initiatives are well explained and substantiated.

Chapter 6 shows that the shift found generally in planning to establish performance standards – rather than specify rules – is reflected in street planning. If one is left to wonder why all cities aren't rushing to change design standards, the authors provide an explanation: arguments against right-sizing streets and traffic calming are often framed in liability terms by transportation and safety officials. Fortunately, the Californian experience with liability claims has been encouraging: new street standards have withstood challenge in legal cases involving accidents on public property in which street standards have been invoked, provided certain criteria concerning those standards are satisfied. Similar investigations should be made into liability in Canada.

Besides being an engaging and instructive book for any cityphile, it is an ideal text for city planning students because it's an overview, yet directs readers to more detailed studies. In addition, it can help planners develop arguments in order to connect their work to the challenges being raised by pedestrian, bicycle, environmental, and take-back-the-streets groups.

Thank goodness it didn't go out of print.

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