

Communities By Design, a
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education
organization, in cooperation with the
City of Redwood City,
is pleased to present:

The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



GREAT CITIES, GREAT STREETS: INSIGHTS INTO SUCCESSFUL CITY PLANNING

2005-06 SEASON: FORUM #1
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2005
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On October 5, 2005, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit "Communities By Design" hosted the inaugural presentation of the third season of the Forum, with a presentation by **Allan Jacobs**. Mr. Jacobs – who is Professor Emeritus of City Planning, University of California, Berkeley and the former Director of Planning, City and County of San Francisco – spoke about "Great Cities, Great Streets: Insights Into Successful City Planning."

According to Mr. Jacobs, "We can measure the design of our cities by how we design our streets." Great streets go beyond the movement of vehicle traffic or the location of utilities. Streets are owned by the public; they are where people go to relax and to socialize. The public realm, for the most part, is streets. Mr. Jacobs' Forum discussion focused on the attributes that make streets and cities truly great: accessibility, diversity, comfort and safety, transparency, and authenticity.

Mr. Jacobs opened his presentation by contrasting the downtown street system of several major cities. With the use of one square mile maps, Mr. Jacobs illustrated how great cities have many more intersections than conventional cities. The fifteen intersections of Irvine's downtown appear skeletal when juxtaposed with San Francisco's 293 intersections, or the more than 1700 intersections of central Venice.

Intersections are important because they create choices for pedestrians. The corners of intersections also help to make the pedestrian experience more visually appealing and interesting by breaking up what would otherwise be long, uninterrupted blocks of buildings.

Mr. Jacobs also showed that many cities have lost intersections as a result of poor planning policies. By allowing large-scale development in its central city, Boston lost approximately 245 intersections between 1895 and 1970. These sorts of planning decisions have been made in cities around the world, resulting in less involvement by small-time builders in the development process and fewer great streets.

Accessibility

Cities and streets cannot be great unless they are within reach of the surrounding community. Mr. Jacobs emphasized that “City centers are, and must be public, open and inviting to all.” A strong transit system is critical to creating accessible cities and streets. In the words of Mr. Jacobs, “a good public transportation system is what brings people together.” He stressed that accessibility does not mean that freeways should serve downtowns, as they are often barriers to good urban design. Mr. Jacobs reminded the audience that freeways were originally designed for civil defense purposes, as a way to get people out of cities, not into them. Vancouver, British Columbia is an example of a great city that has no freeways; the city is served exclusively by surface streets.

“Really good downtowns are congested. Stop worrying about it and pray for it.”
-Allan Jacobs

Accessibility does not necessitate free-flowing traffic or plentiful parking. Mr. Jacobs explained that great cities and streets are almost always congested and have chronic parking shortages. Mr. Jacobs went so far as to say that cities that spend the most on fixing traffic and parking problems are typically worse off than cities that spend comparatively little on these issues. Kansas City is an example of a city that solved its congestion and parking problems, while simultaneously eliminating any of its downtown vibrancy.

Diversity

The best downtowns and the streets within them are characterized by a diverse mix of land uses including housing, retail and commercial, and office. According to Mr. Jacobs, segregating land uses is a city’s death knell. A range of housing options, with lots of entrances onto the street, is a key component of a successful downtown. Mr. Jacobs cited Vancouver as a leader in mixing high-rise and low-rise housing together in its downtown.

Comfort and Safety

Great streets should provide for a pleasant pedestrian experience. Streets should be well shaded and cool in the summer, and sun-soaked and warm in the winter. Safe streets should also have narrow lanes – no more than ten feet wide – that limit the speed of cars to be compatible with the pace of pedestrians. Narrow sidewalks enhance pedestrian comfort and safety by creating a bustling and lively street scene. Narrow streets and sidewalks also help to create nooks, crannies, and alleys that create mystery and pique the interest of pedestrians.

Transparency

The concept of transparency refers to the pedestrian’s ability to see what’s inside buildings or stores. Transparency helps to make streets feel more open and vibrant, as opposed to

the lifeless appearance of streets walled-in by office or apartment buildings. The Macy's on Union Square in San Francisco enhanced its appeal by replacing its dull, windowless storefront with ceiling-to-floor glass on every level. Pedestrians can now peer inside the store to see shoppers and product displays.

Authenticity

Mr. Jacobs described authenticity as “a physically present continuity with the past.” The best streets grow out of local traditions and culture; they reflect the unique identity of the cities in which they are located. Mr. Jacobs cited Granville Island in Vancouver as an excellent example of a distinct, mixed-use district that honors the region's heritage.