

# What Makes a Good City? Part 1

Good cities are made by good urban design,  
and good urban design is based around . . . .

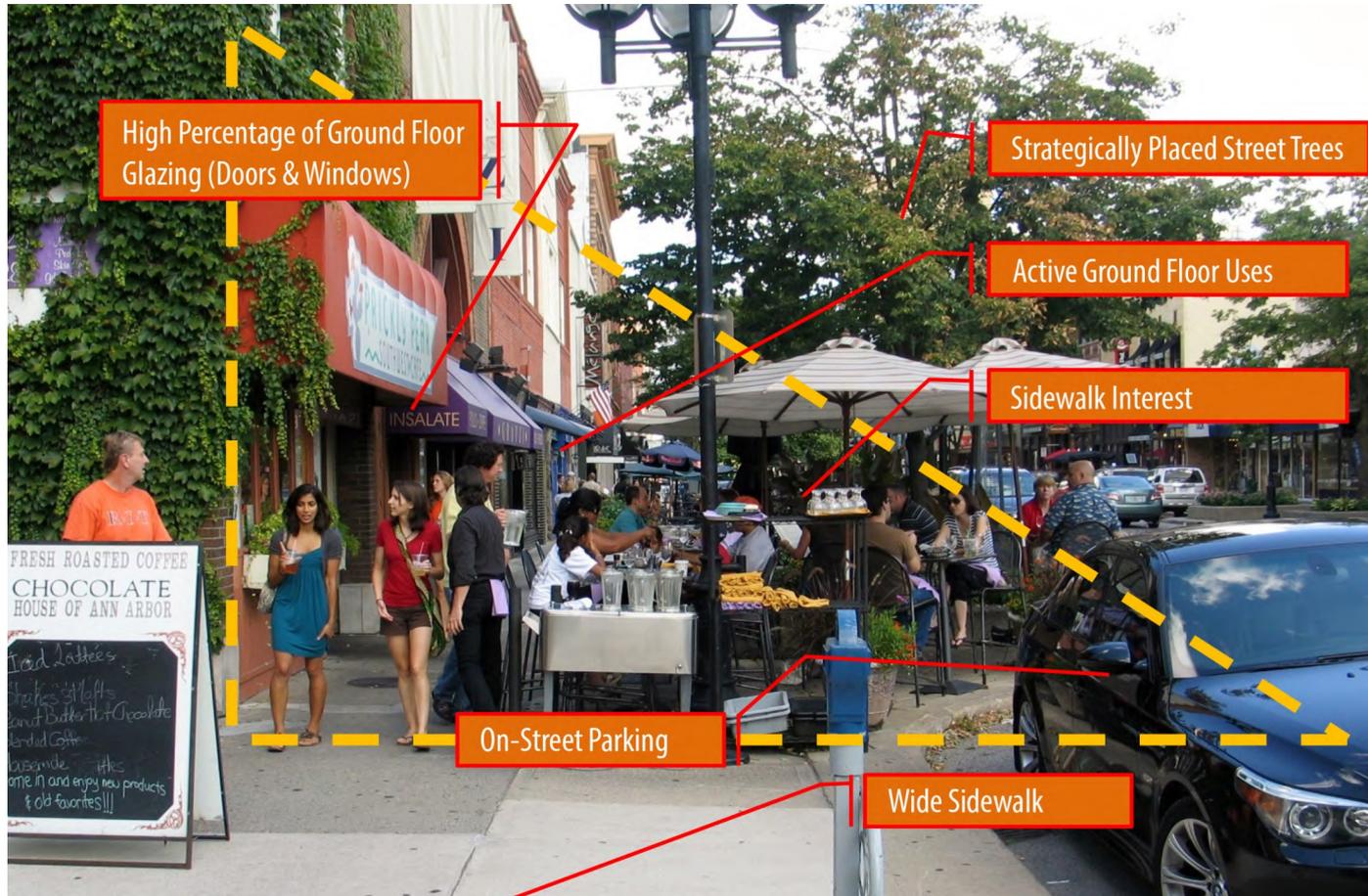
*Making Places for People*



Restaurant Row,  
17<sup>th</sup> Street, Denver, CO

**If you design spaces for cars they'll fill with cars.  
If you design spaces for people they'll fill with people.**

That Denver street on the previous slide is a great example of what urban designers call the “Golden Triangle” of urbanism.  
What exactly is it?



It's the triangle formed by the vertical walls of the private buildings and the horizontal surfaces of the public street or square.  
It's a *really* good way of thinking about the comfort, safety, and attractiveness of public space from the point of view of pedestrians.

# The principles of the “Golden Triangle” apply in commercial & mixed use situations . . .



On two different continents, in two different cultures, and in two different cities 4000 miles apart (Athens, GA, left and Berlin, Germany, right) exactly the same urban design principles apply.

- Visual and functional connections from outside to inside – clear glazed doors, windows etc.
- Active and “thick” edges to public space – i.e. spaces for people to comfortably sit, stop, chat, shelter etc.
  - **The quality of a public space depends on what happens at its edges. This is very important.**
- Safe and attractive sidewalks are shielded from moving cars and they can accommodate several activities.
- Mixing uses means different people use the space for different reasons at different times of day; this increases safety by informal supervision.
  - Trees are used to define space and create shade.

... And the “Golden Triangle” applies just as well in residential situations. The details are different but the principles are the same.



Townhomes, Iverson Way, Charlotte, 2017



Single-family homes, Kingston Avenue, Charlotte, 1920s

In residential areas relationships between public and private spaces become more important.

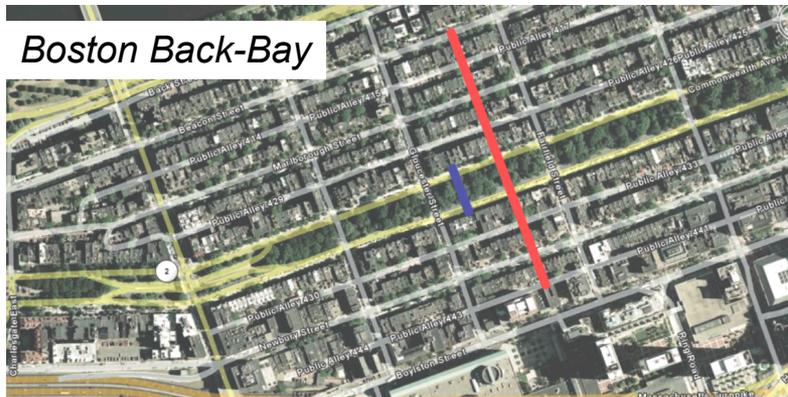
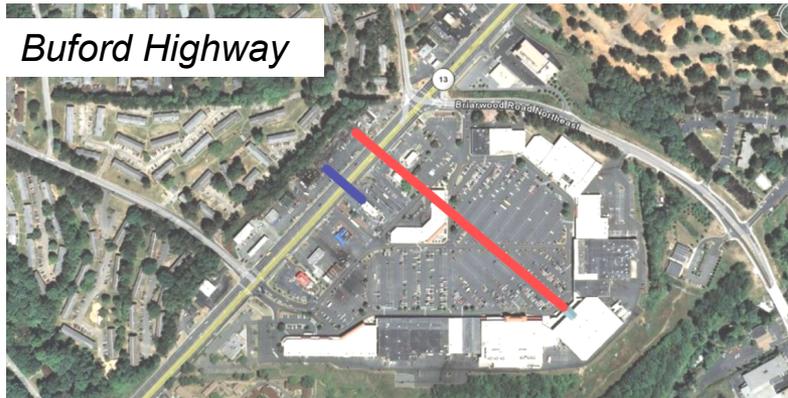
We design extra “layers” of space: the public realm of the street, the semi-public space of the front yard, the semi-private space of the porch, and the private space of the home. We still have thick, active edges to public space (the porches) and everything fits within that triangle.

Two different types of homes, built nearly 100 years apart, follow the same urban design concepts. **This is because there are some basic strategies of good urbanism that underpin these long lasting design concepts.**

There are at least SIX strategies essential for successful urban design.

The first two:

1. Block Size and Block Structure must be scaled for easy pedestrian use
2. Streets must connect for efficient travel choices. This means small block sizes



Images courtesy of Prof. David Green, AIA. Georgia Tech/now a Principal with Perkins and Will, London office

Two prosperous communities: Atlanta (top) and Boston (bottom).

The red lines and the blue lines (Buford Hwy and Commonwealth Ave.) are exactly the same length.

Which example is more attractive, longer lasting, and more economically sustainable?

And note in passing . . . The good example is *much* denser than the bad one.

## The next two:

3. Fronts must be distinct from Backs (Fronts face Fronts and Backs face Backs)
4. The relationship between Public Realms and Private Realms should be carefully designed



Two examples:

**BAD** (left) - Front faces Back with unpleasant, useless space between (South End, Charlotte)

**GOOD** (right) - Active façades face each other with attractive, useful space between (Baxter Village, Fort Mill, SC)

## And the last two:

5. Density is essential in key locations: You can't have active public spaces without it
6. Mixing uses in walkable proximity promotes economic and physical sustainability



Farmers' Market, Downtown Des Moines, Iowa



Downtown Boulder, CO

Density, combined with a clearly defined mixed-used environment, supports a lively variety of different uses in public space.

Density is too often misconceived as a “problem”. It is, by contrast, the *solution* to most communities' quest for active, economically successful, and attractive public space.

When put together, these six concepts form the basis of what's called “**Traditional Urbanism**”.

But none of this means want to turn the clock back to earlier times . . .  
However, we can recapture some of our old urban wisdom.  
America once built towns and cities we would cherish today, and we can,  
with the right approach, build new versions for tomorrow.



West Union Street, Morganton, N.C. 1950s  
A thriving scene unrecognizable today.



Village Square, Clemson/Pendleton, S.C. Garden Suburb  
Master Plan 2016. Illustration by J.J. Zanetta, Urban design by Stantec Urban Places Group

The “Golden Triangle”(shown earlier) is as old as cities themselves. It shaped American towns for two centuries.  
Then, after World War II, we forgot all about pedestrian space in our love affair with the automobile.

Now we are relearning how important it is as we reshape our communities for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## And one more thing: we MUST screen cars by buildings at the edges of pedestrian public space



Above left: Designed correctly: Parking is screened by the building, and the building presents an attractive “Front” to public space with “eyes on the street” (i.e. people observing the street while going in and out and sitting on balconies). It feels friendly and safe.



Right: The complete opposite: “Cars behind Bars” create a hostile edge to public space. Blank walls, no activity, dark spaces.

More than ever, Charlotte needs public spaces like the (now demolished) Common Market courtyard in South End, a place once bustling with life (below, left.) Instead we get dreadful mistakes like the dead space DIRECTLY NEXT TO a light rail station! (below, right). These locations are exactly where we need that life and activity!



Several thousand people live and work within a five minute walk of this empty space at the Carson Street rail stop right on the Rail Trail (above right).

The building edges around this barren paving should hold small retail spaces - a juice bar, a bicycle shop, etc.

Instead we see blank walls, ground-floor parking lots and utility boxes.

This badly designed private development undermines and devalues the public tax dollars invested in the light rail line and the Rail Trail.

Yet architects designed this mess and the city allowed it to be built.

Watch for the next installment in this series to learn how to prevent design blunders like this.