SECTION 2D: Designing Places That People Truly Inhabit

Urban quality comes from places that resonate with identity, welcome diversity, and are shaped by everyday life. This section explores how to make public space human-centered and inclusive.

High quality public space in King's Cross, London.
Source: Françoise Labbé

Creating Places with Meaning

- Places are more than locations—they carry memory, identity, and belonging. Meaningful places invite attachment and reinforce community life.

- **What to plan**: Public spaces that reflect local culture, memory, and lived experience

- **How to plan it**:
  - Protect heritage and everyday landmarks
  - Design spatial thresholds and transitions that support social interaction
  - Engage communities in defining what matters in their environment

- **Why it works**: Builds emotional connection, supports continuity, and anchors collective identity in fast-changing cities

Places for people in Havana.
Source: Françoise Labbé.

Viikki Eco neighbourhood in Finland. Thresholds and transition zones between public and private spaces. Residents appropriate these social exchange interfaces.
Source: Françoise Labbé

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Starting Design with People

In Chongqing, people spent far more time in traditional streets with open facades and fine grain—150% more than in new commercial spaces, and 640% more than in streets with closed fronts. *Source: Gehl Architects*

Public space design begins with people—their lives, activities, and aspirations—not abstract metrics.

What to plan: Streets and spaces shaped by people's behaviours, needs, and rhythms

How to plan it:

Use public life studies to observe where and how people spend time

Prioritize street life, human-scale facades, and interactive frontages

Let people's routines and preferences guide the design of form and scale

Why it works: Increases use, safety, and comfort; fosters vibrant, inclusive public life grounded in real human presence

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3

Designing for Social Diversity

Neighbourhoods thrive when they welcome all—across ages, incomes, and lifestyles—through inclusive design choices.

What to plan: A diversity of buildings, spaces, and experiences for a mix of users

How to plan it:

- Vary building types, tenures, and public space functions
- Ensure safety, comfort, and accessibility for women, children, and the elderly
- Create layered environments that allow choice and belonging

Why it works: Supports social inclusion, broadens affordability, and creates resilient communities that reflect real urban life

Ample pedestrian and cycling realms in London streets. Source: Mayor of London 2018.

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SECTION 2 E Designing the Urban Room

How well-shaped public space—defined, enclosed, and activated—creates social belonging and enduring city identity

French Dream Town, Hangzhou. Design: Serge Salat

From Void to Place: Designing Positive Public Space

When designed with spatial enclosure and clear edges, public space becomes a "positive" entity—shaped, legible, and central to civic life. This was the logic behind the continuous, interlinked network of streets, squares, gardens, and public interiors shown in Nolli's 1748 map of Rome. In this view, public space is not leftover or residual—it is as important as buildings, forming a coherent urban fabric.

Modern examples like Stockholm's Slakthusområdet demonstrate how design can reuse existing urban assets, animate ground floors, and create vibrant neighborhoods. These interventions build local identity, promote interaction, and foster a sense of belonging.

Extract of the map of Roma, by Giambattista Nolli, 1748. The map shows that public space has a well-defined shape and is designed as a hollow architecture encompassing exterior space and the interior of public buildings.
Source: Map of Roma, Giambattista Nolli

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Getting Public Space Right: The Urban Room

Square Rômerberg, Frankfurt am Main. Source: Lea Ghotmi. ESA, Paris.

Public space is the stage of urban life. Streets, squares, and gardens together make up about half of urban land, but their impact depends on how they're shaped.

The concept of **enclosure**—the extent to which vertical elements (buildings, trees, walls) frame the space—gives public spaces a room-like quality. When edges are well defined, public spaces become comfortable, human-scaled, and inviting for pedestrians. These are the spaces people want to occupy, where community life thrives.

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Enclosure Matters: Form and Proportion in Urban Design

Left: Siena, Piazza del Campo. Source: Creative Commons.
Middle: Doors leading to Piazza del Campo. Source: Serge Salat, Cities and Forms.

. In traditional cities, enclosure was achieved through careful proportions: streets were often framed by buildings in a 1:1 height-to-width ratio or narrower. This created a comfortable, spatially coherent experience. Modern zoning often neglects this logic. Form-based codes can restore these proportions, ensuring that new developments frame the street and support pedestrian-friendly public spaces. Enclosure turns open areas into places with direction, meaning, and identity.

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Designing the Square as an Outdoor Room

Place des Vosges, Paris.
Source: Françoise Labbé.
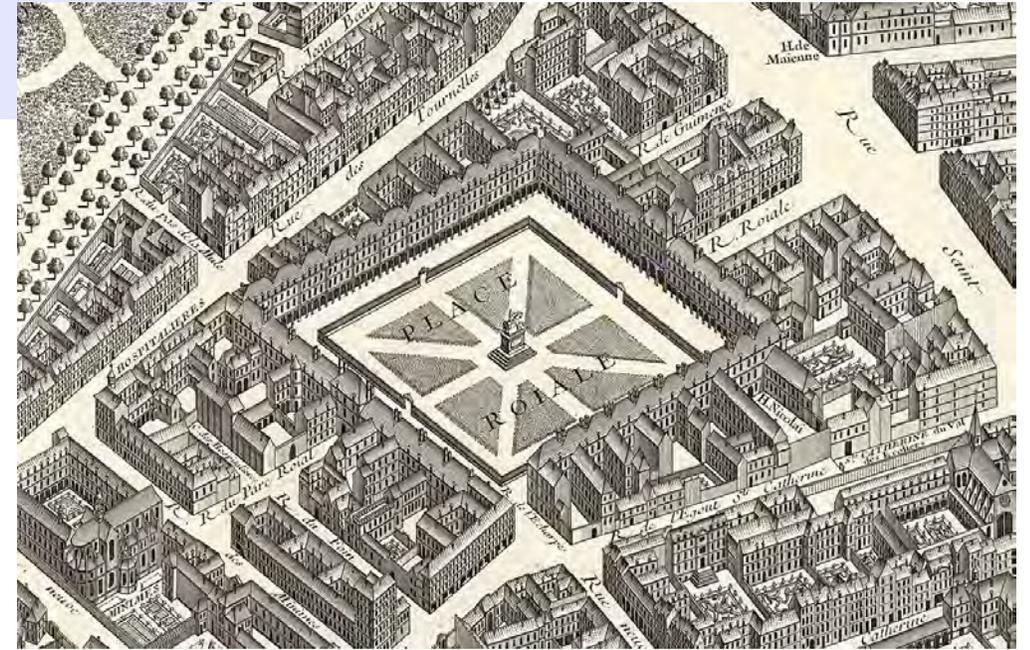
Paris Turgot Plan (1734). Source: Gallica

Great public spaces function as outdoor rooms. They have defined edges, gateways, and shapes that respond to their context. One side often hosts an important building that gives identity to the space. At the same time, the public space takes precedence—its form dictates how surrounding architecture relates to it.

Examples like Siena's Piazza del Campo and Paris' Place des Vosges show how civic squares can be places of discovery, civic pride, and community gathering.

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Edges that Shape Place: Rhythm, Texture, and Scale

Square Rômerberg, Frankfurt am Main. Source: Lea Ghotmi. ESA, Paris.

The edge of a public space defines its character. The visual rhythm of openings and solids, the degree of transparency or opacity, the material texture, and the articulation of surface— all these factors influence how people perceive and use the space.

Crucially, the relationship between vertical and horizontal dimensions must reflect human scale. When done right, the enclosing wall of the public space feels welcoming, not overwhelming.

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Linking Spaces: Systems of Squares and Layered Identity

Source: Françoise Labbé.

Public spaces gain power when linked into systems. Contemporary interventions can enhance accessibility and enrich experience by creating new squares within historic urban fabrics.

Examples like MACBA in Barcelona or the French Dream Town in Hangzhou show how careful layering of old and new—materials, scales, narratives—can create sequences of spaces that invite movement and exploration while reinforcing identity.

Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) articulates two public squares, and a complex composition of ancient and modern architectures, materials and volumes, with a great sense of space layering.
Source: Richard Meier Architects

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Making Place: Distinctiveness, Visual Quality, and Belonging

French Dream Town, Hangzhou. Design: Serge Salat, Northern Part; Anouk Legendre, XTU Southern Part. The design is inspired by Feng Shui, a harmony between human culture and nature with water, mountains, clouds and architecture elements. Drawing: Nanfang Design Institute. Source: Optiva Darna.

A strong **sense of place** grows from more than good design—it involves visual quality, cultural resonance, and the power to attract human activity.

Well-designed public spaces express local distinctiveness, support storytelling, and encourage economic and social interaction. In French Dream Town, Hangzhou, Feng Shui principles shape an urban landscape where water, mountain, and architecture form a harmonious whole—a place with both beauty and meaning.

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Activating Public Space: From Design to Daily Life

Zuccoti Park at night, New York. Source: Françoise Labbé.

Middle and right: King's Cross, London. Source: Françoise Labbé.
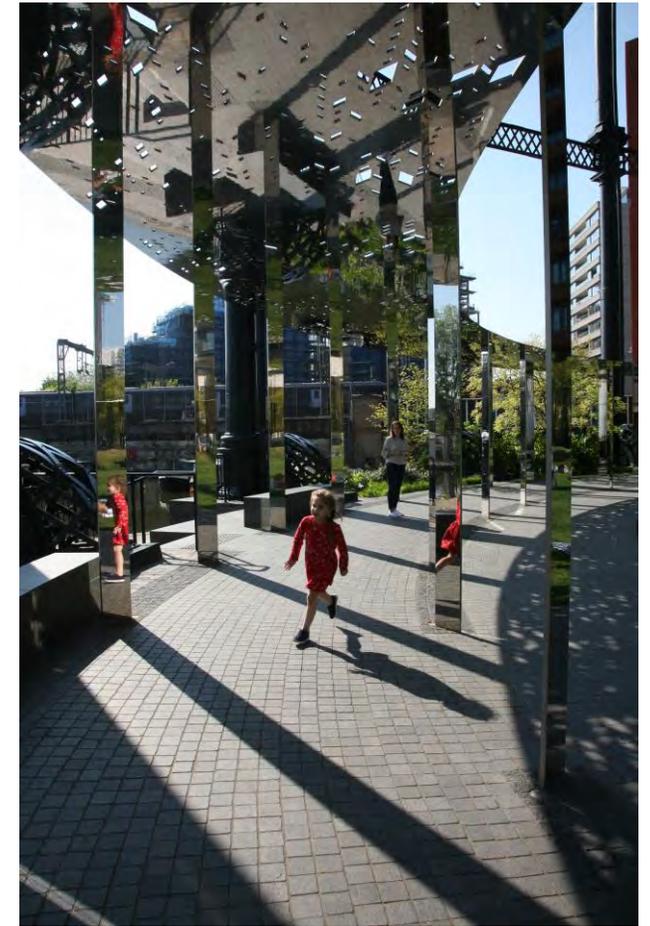
Design alone is not enough—public spaces must be **activated**. Programming events, supporting retail, ensuring safety, and encouraging informal use all help attract people and sustain vibrancy.

Places like Zuccotti Park in New York or King's Cross in London demonstrate how thoughtful activation generates social mixing, fosters economic vitality, and encourages people to live, work, and stay in the neighborhood.

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SECTION 2F: Connecting People Through Street Patterns

How walkable networks and human-scaled streetscapes enable movement, identity, and climate resilience

Prague. Source: Tristan de Luze, ESA, Paris

# Understanding How People Move
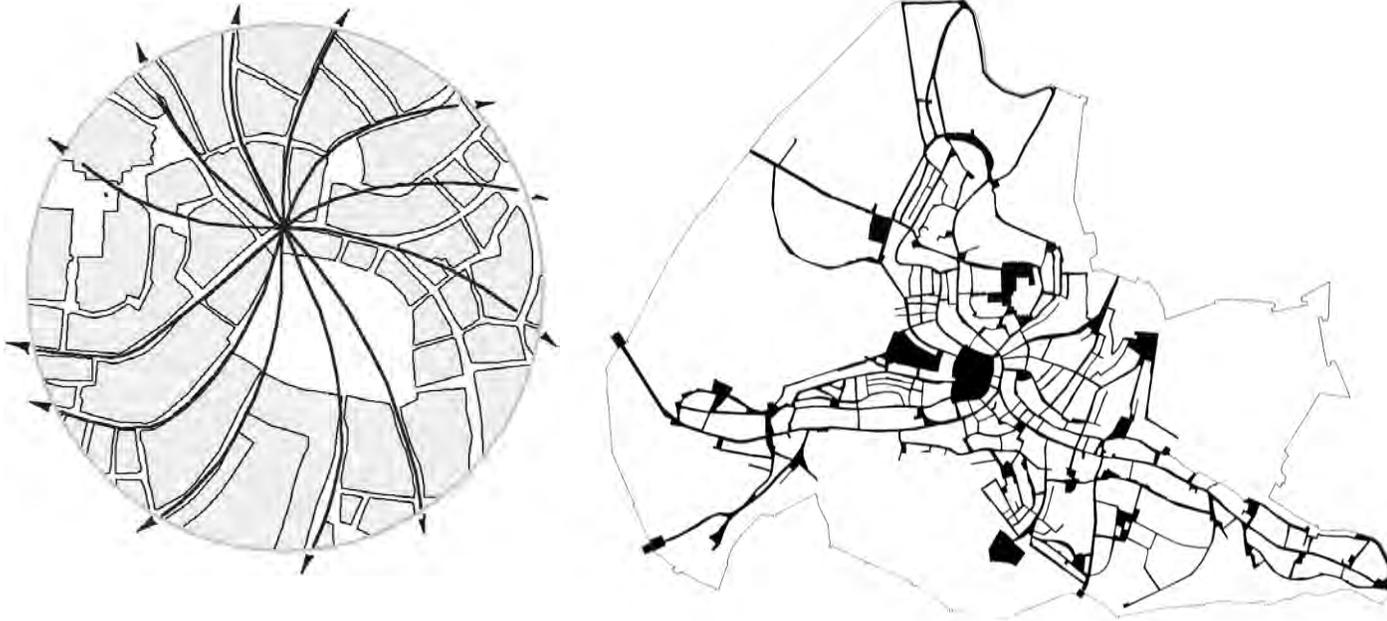
Lines of movement link an interconnected network of public plazas in Siena. Source: Urban Morphology and Complex Systems Institute.

Sustainable urban design starts with understanding how people move. Streets are more than transport corridors—they host commerce, culture, civic life, and informal social exchange. Movement patterns shape access to daily needs: homes, jobs, green space, and recreation.

Urban form should not be thought of as a static shape, but as a dynamic system of flows. In cities like Siena, movement lines connect a continuous network of public plazas and streets, supporting both place-making and mobility.

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Why Street Connectivity Matters
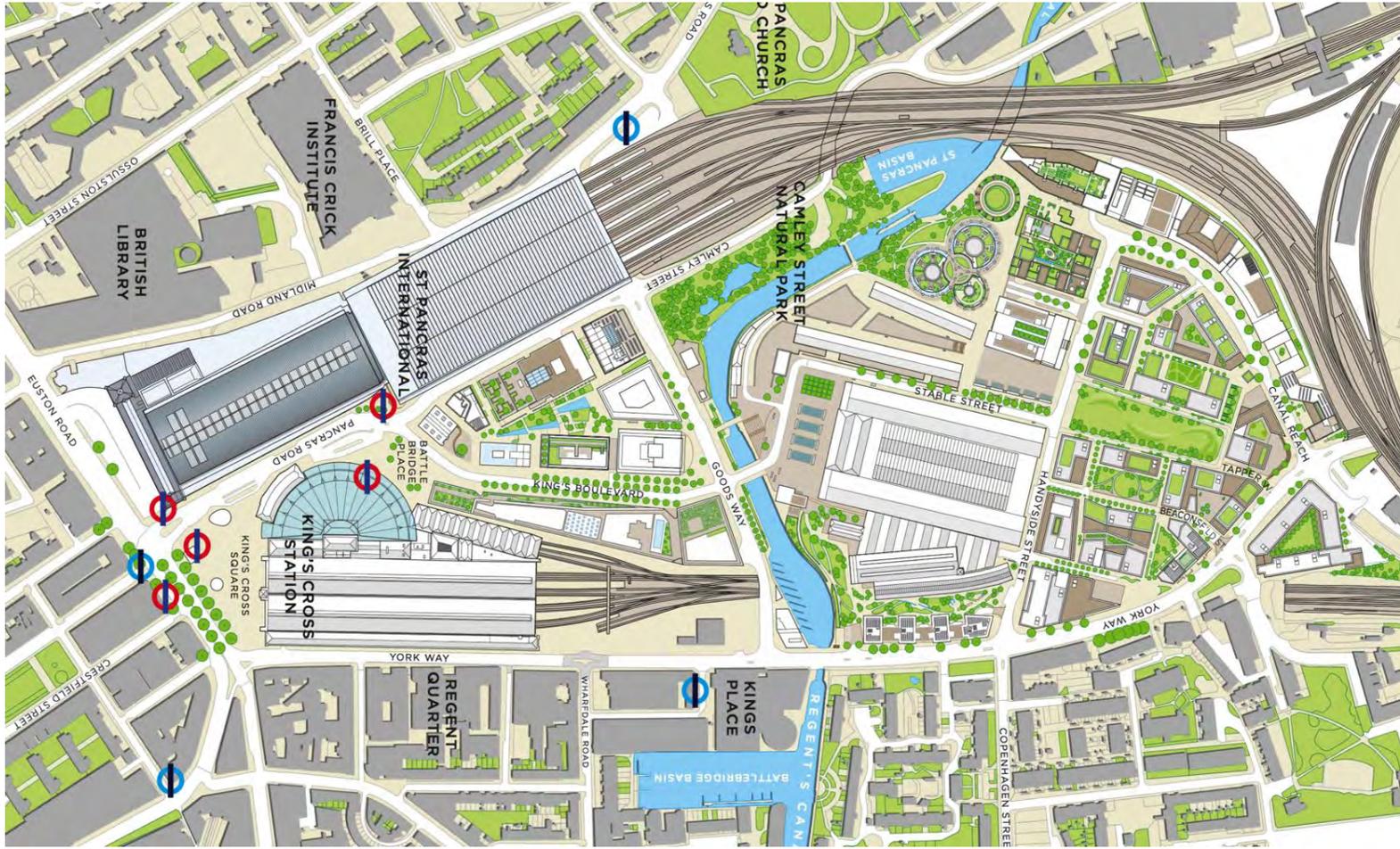

① Typical Cul-de-sac Subdivision

A to B = .8 mi
C to B = .6 mi
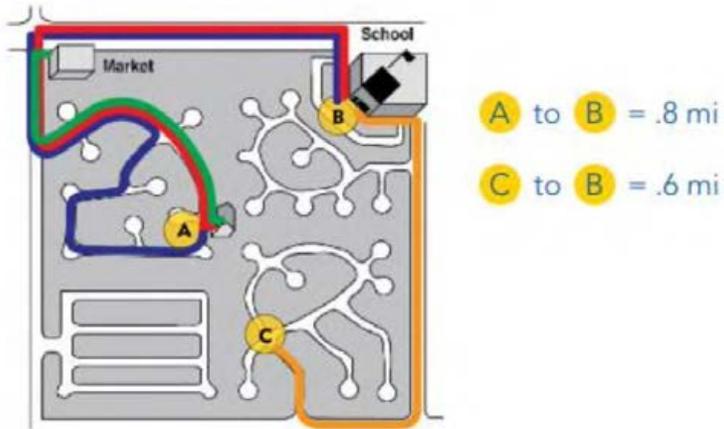
② Well-Connected Street Network

A to B = .2 mi
C to B = .3 mi
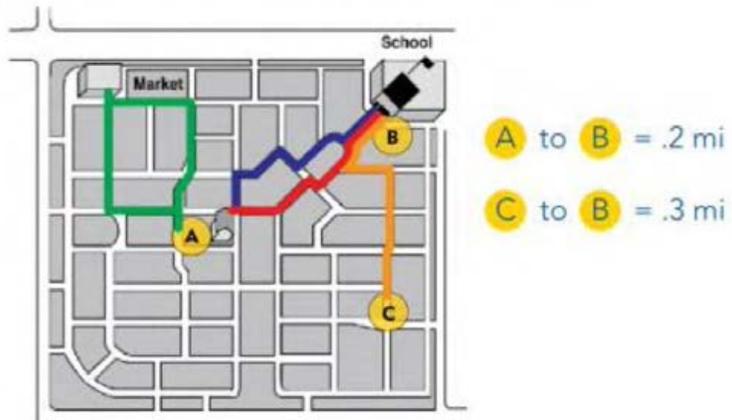
- Street layout directly influences mobility behaviour and carbon emissions. In well-connected street networks—with frequent intersections and small blocks—trips are shorter, more direct, and more likely to be walked or cycled. Emissions and infrastructure costs are reduced.

- But not all grids are walkable. Superblocks in Beijing or Pudong may appear connected but force long detours. True connectivity means high **intersection density**, pedestrian-scaled blocks, and accessible links between transport, green space, and daily destinations.

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A Street Network Is a City's Lasting Framework

Buildings may change, but the street network endures. It defines the character and continuity of urban life. In successful projects like King's Cross, London, 40% of land is dedicated to new streets, squares, and parks.

The backbone of regeneration is a coherent grid of routes and public spaces. At King's Cross, 20 new connective streets, 10 plazas and gardens, and restored historic buildings create a walkable, fine-grain district anchored by public life and access to transit.


King's Cross regeneration project master plan

Design Principles for a Walkable Grid

Walkable grids are based on clear principles:
– **Intersection density**: 100+ intersections/km² ensures walkability
– **Grid spacing**: 80–100m optimizes access
– **Street length & width**: Short blocks and narrow streets (12 m) feel more navigable
– **Grid diversity**: Irregular or layered grids add richness and connect destinations
Streets should be framed by active uses and well-proportioned public space. A fine-grain texture, with multiple small plots, supports mixed use and urban vitality.
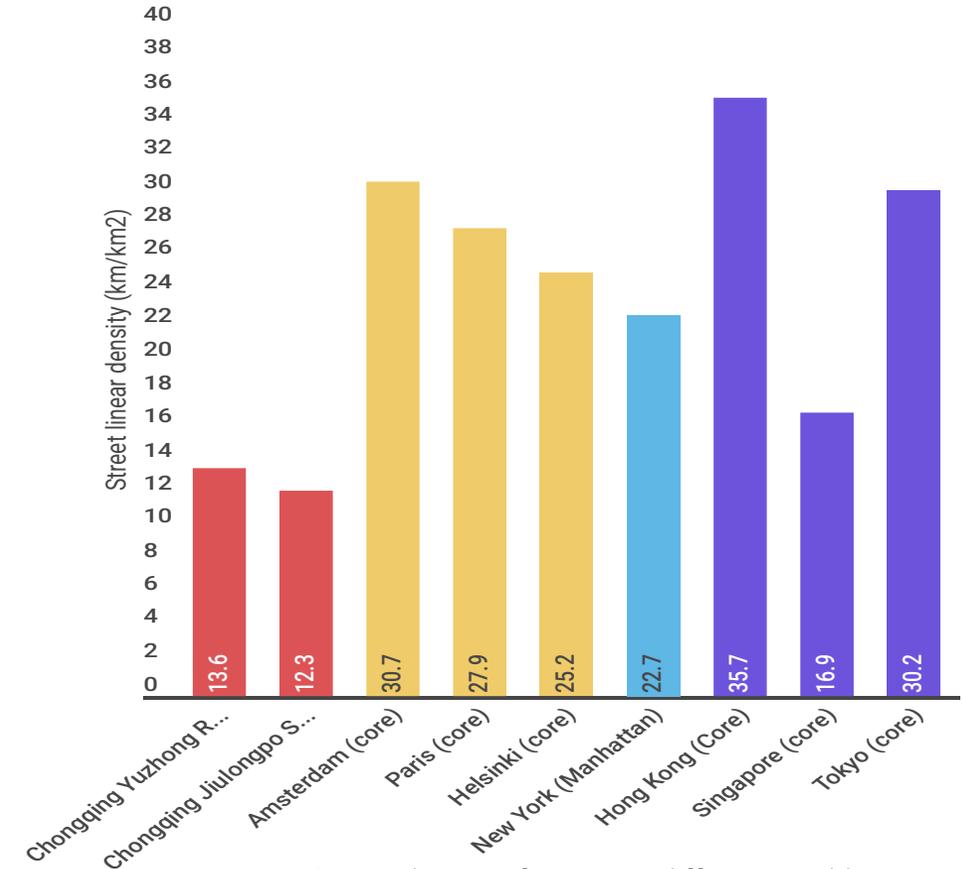
Linear density of streets in different world cities.
Source: Urban Morphology and Complex Systems Institute.

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Design Principles for a Walkable Grid
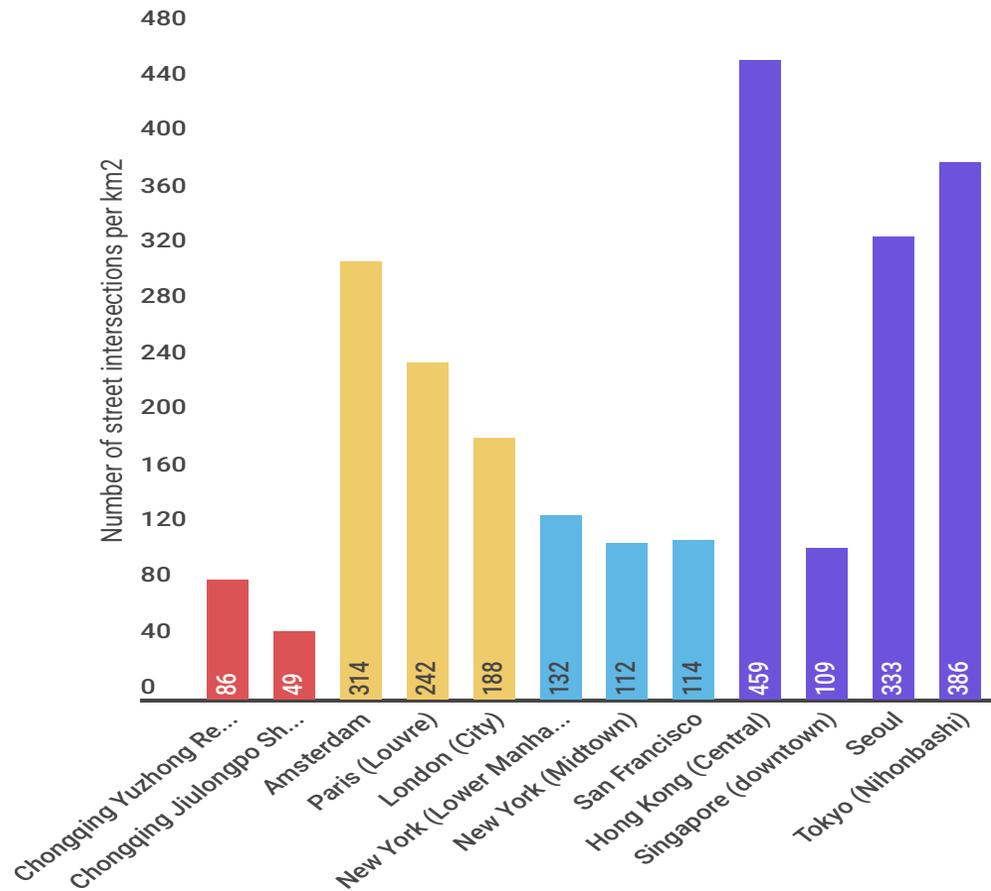
Density of street intersections in different world cities. Source: Urban Morphology and Complex Systems Institute.

Venice 688 — Toledo 420 — Florence 255 — Turin 191
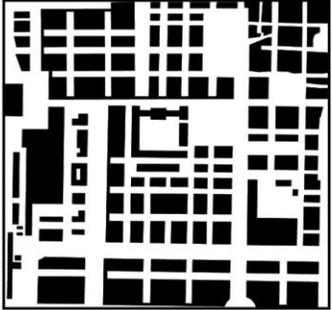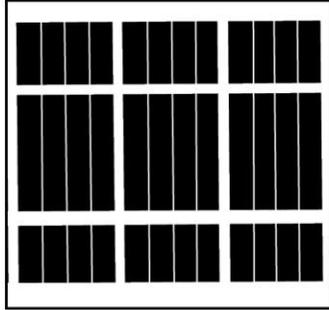Amsterdam 17th c. 195 — London Mayfair 1735 165 — Paris Étoile 133 — Barcelona Cerda plan 103

Street patterns drawings in 800 x 800 squares with corresponding intersection density per square kilometre.
Source: Urban Morphology and Complex Systems Institute.

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Street Patterns Shape Place

Rectilinear grid

Turin, Italy

Priene, Turkey

Concentric grids designed to promote acces to a foca point

St Petersburg, Russia

Bologna, Italy

Irregular layout

Prague, Czech Republic

Prague, Czech Republic

Street patterns define how cities feel and function. From grids to organic forms, they generate block shapes, land use, and access. The most effective patterns are **fine-grain**, **connected**, and **flexible**.
They offer:
– Efficient land use
– Human-scaled variety
– Seamless public space
– Room for local innovation in plot size and building form
Whether regular or irregular, patterns must offer permeability and a sense of structure across different cultures and climates.

Diagram illustrating variations in street patterns and block structures. Layouts don't need to be regular but they must be fine grain and connected. Source: Urban Morphology and Complex systems Institute
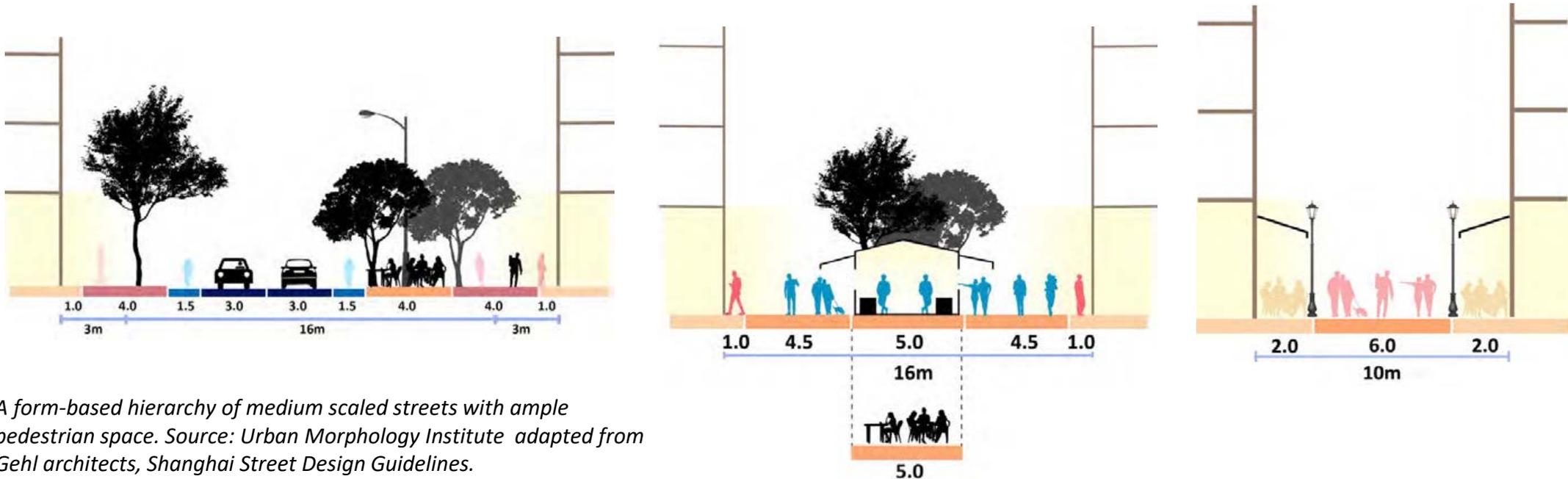
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Street Widths Define Public Life

Street width is a key determinant of comfort, safety, and social activity. In livable cities, 70% of streets are under 12m wide, with half of street space reserved for pedestrians. Narrow streets prioritize local life; wide, tree-lined boulevards mark edges and ensure connectivity.
A people-centered hierarchy includes:
– Narrow interior streets for walking and daily life
– Mid-sized streets for shops and services
– Wide promenades and boulevards for district links
Designing streets for humans—not cars—brings public health, equity, and vibrancy to everyday life.


A form-based hierarchy of medium scaled streets with ample pedestrian space. Source: Urban Morphology Institute adapted from Gehl architects, Shanghai Street Design Guidelines.

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Streets as Social Infrastructure

行走
Walking

驻足休息
Sitting waiting

获取信息
Sitting using technology

交流
Strolling

跑步
Jogging

拍照
Taking photos

扩展活动 Additional activities

观察
People watching

购物
Shopping

吃饭
Sitting eating

室外咖啡
Café

买卖
Kiosk

家人与朋友间的会面
Meet family and friends

举办室外活动
Flexibility of everyday

舞蹈
Dancing

孩子玩耍
Children playing

室外健身运动
Tai chi

服务设施 Service facility

过街设施
Easy crossing

休闲与游乐设施
Sitting and playing

标识系统及信息终端
Information for wayfinding

树荫
Walking in the shade

夜间照明
Lighting in the night

Well-designed streets are full of movement, nature and recreation. Shanghai Street Design Guidelines. Source: Gehl architects.
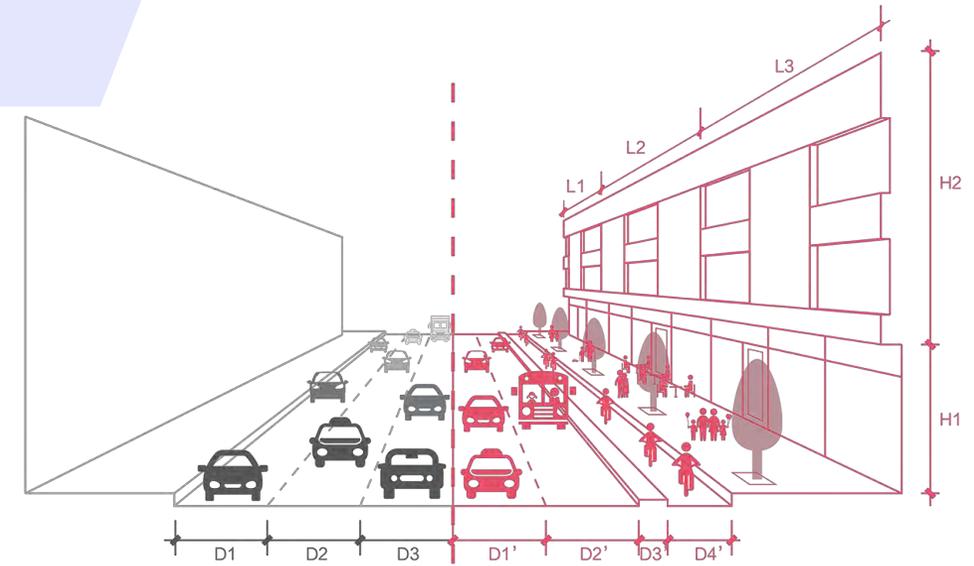
From car oriented engineering to people centered design. Shanghai Street Design Guidelines. Source: Gehl architects.

Streets are more than connectors—they are **major public spaces**. Representing over a quarter of urban land, they shape neighborhood identity and economic vitality.

Great streets:
– Trigger local retail and services
– Enhance safety and belonging
– Invite walking, cycling, and informal social interaction
– Offer shared space for play, exchange, and community

"Living streets" reverse the car-centric paradigm. They are designed for people first, where vehicular access is secondary and spatial quality invites daily life.

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Designing for Walkability, Not Just Connectivity

Ample pedestrian and cycling realms in London streets. Source: Mayor of London 2018.

Shared space schemes for London streets. Source: Mayor of London 2018.

Connectivity is essential—but not sufficient. To make streets walkable, spatial **design quality** is key. What makes people choose walking?

– **Safe, continuous sidewalks**
– **Street-level animation** (doors, windows, not blank walls)
– **Shops and cafes** that bring life to the edge
– **Shade, trees, benches, and visual cues**
– **Short blocks** to reduce walking effort

Walkability is perceptual. People walk when streets feel active, coherent, and engaging.

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Creating Enclosure: The Street as Outdoor Room

Enclosure gives streets spatial coherence and emotional resonance. It's achieved when the **height-to-width (H/W) ratio** creates a room-like experience.
**H/W ≈ 1**: Balanced, comfortable
H/W > 1: Protective, shaded
H/W < 1: Exposed, undefined
In traditional cities, this sense of enclosure is both aesthetic and **bioclimatic**. Narrow streets in hot climates, with high walls and bright reflective surfaces, reduce heat and enhance pedestrian comfort.
Good enclosure guides movement, provides identity, and shapes urban microclimates.

Well-defined streets in Hammamet Medina.
Source: Françoise Labbé.
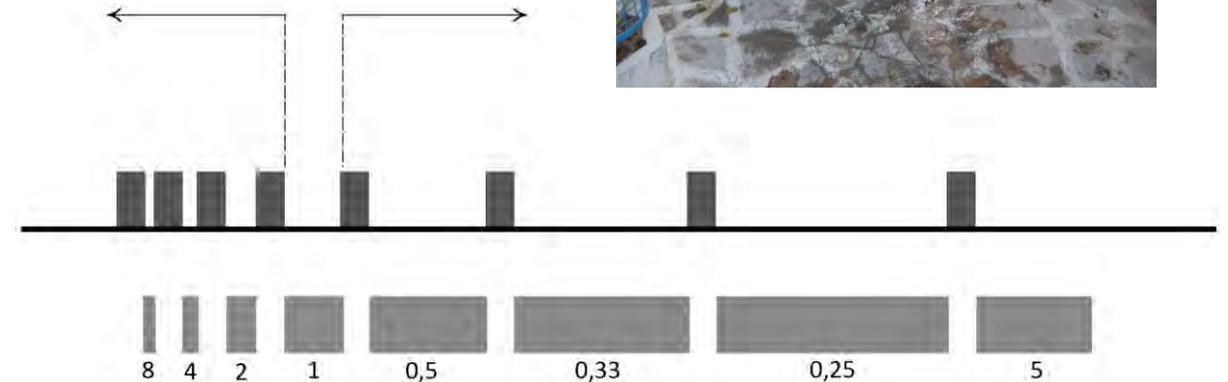
8   4   2   1   0,5   0,33   0,25   5

Source: Urban Morphology and Complex Systems Institute.

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Dynamic Streetscapes: Movement and Discovery

Memorable streets invite **sequential discovery**. Instead of static corridors, they become a choreography of spatial moments.

Design tools:

– **Triangular funnels** that open and close vistas
– **Irregular paths** that prompt choice
– **Small plazas** that punctuate movement
– **Layered paths** (streets, alleys, water edges) that offer rhythm

Malmö's Bo01 and Copenhagen's medieval core use these principles to engage people at a human scale, revealing the street as a walkable narrative.

*Malmö Bo01 plan. Source: ©Malmö City Planning Office.*

Malmö Bo01 streetscapes. Source: Françoise Labbé.

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Dynamic Streetscapes: Movement and Discovery

For designing dynamic streetscapes, a series of triangular funnel shapes closes and opens the streetscape and vistas in a dynamic way creating sequences of discovery along people progression.

Diversity of street shapes with irregularity and funnel effects. Malmö Bo01,Sweden.
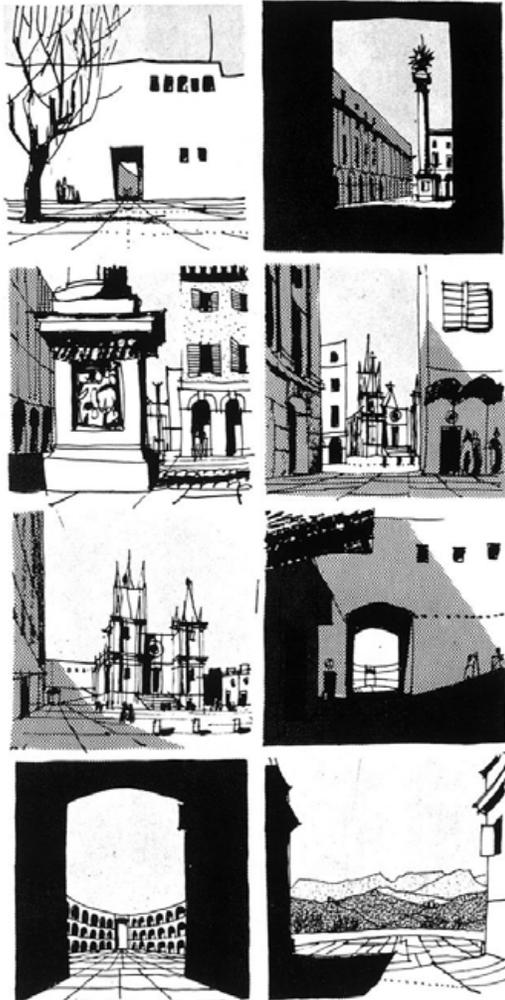*Source: Creative Commons.*
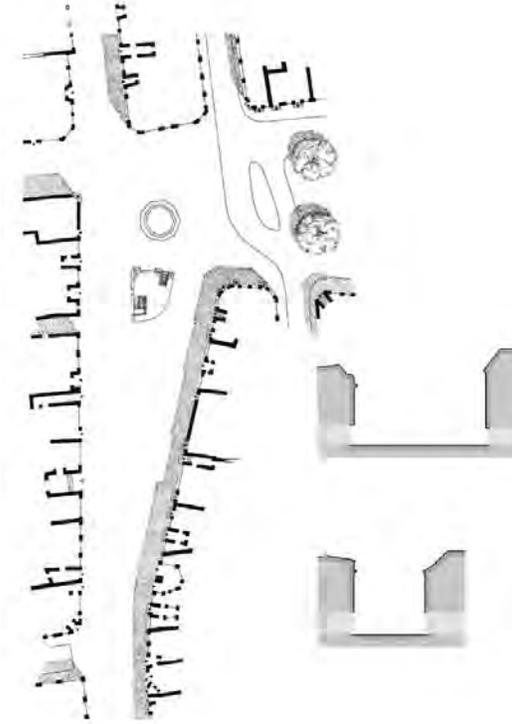
Left : Copenhagen, medieval district, Strøget.
Source: Serge Salat. Cities and Forms
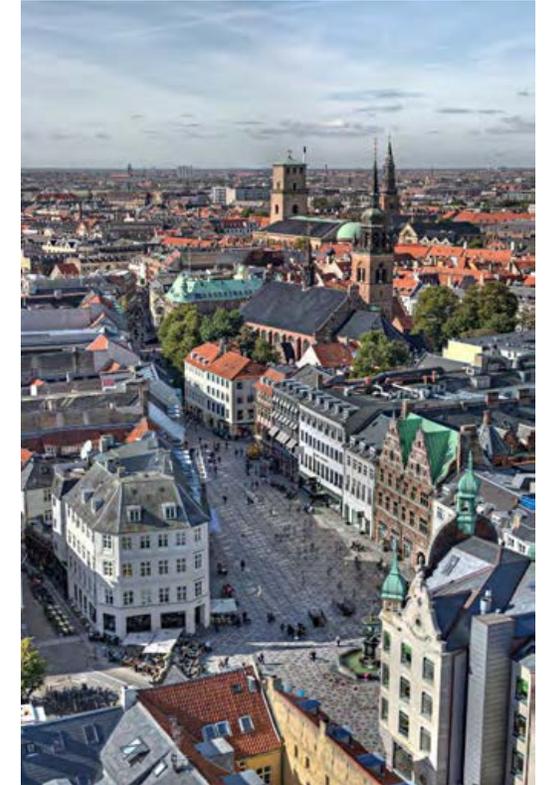
Right: Source: Mik Hartwell. Creative Commons.

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Designing Urban Sequences

CASEBOOK: SERIAL VISION

To walk from one end of the plan to another, at a uniform pace, will provide a sequence of revelations which are suggested in the serial drawings opposite, reading from left to right. Each arrow on the plan represents a drawing. The even progress of travel is illuminated by a series of sudden, contrasts and so an impact is made on the eye, bringing the plan to life (like nudging a man who is going to sleep in church). My drawings bear no relation to the place itself; I chose it because it seemed an evocative plan. Note that the slightest deviation in alignment and quite small variations in projections or setbacks on plan have a disproportionally powerful effect in the third dimension.

Urban designers can **reframe the street** from a mobility channel to a lived experience by composing sequences of space.

Inspired by Gordon Cullen's *Townscape*, this approach values:
– Visual rhythm
– Alternating nodes and edges
– Scale transitions and framed perspectives

As people move, they should encounter a spatial "story." Each segment reveals a new moment—supporting orientation, delight, and a shared civic memory.

A page from The Concise Townscape by Gordon Cullen (1961). This page shows the perceptual pleasures of a city fabric. It unfolds a well-organized sequence of movement in space. It reveals the complex melody of lines, nodes, edges and reference points in the design of an urban landscape.
Source: Serge Salat, Cities and Forms, 2011.

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Bringing Time into Urban Form

Great street design incorporates **seasonality and daily rhythm**. Sunlight, shade, weather, and foliage change how streets feel throughout the day and year.

Nature adds layers of temporality that architecture alone cannot. The Philosopher's Path in Kyoto links people to these changing sensations—spring blossoms, autumn leaves, reflections on water.

Streets must be designed not only for geometry, but for the **experience of time**, anchoring people in their environment.
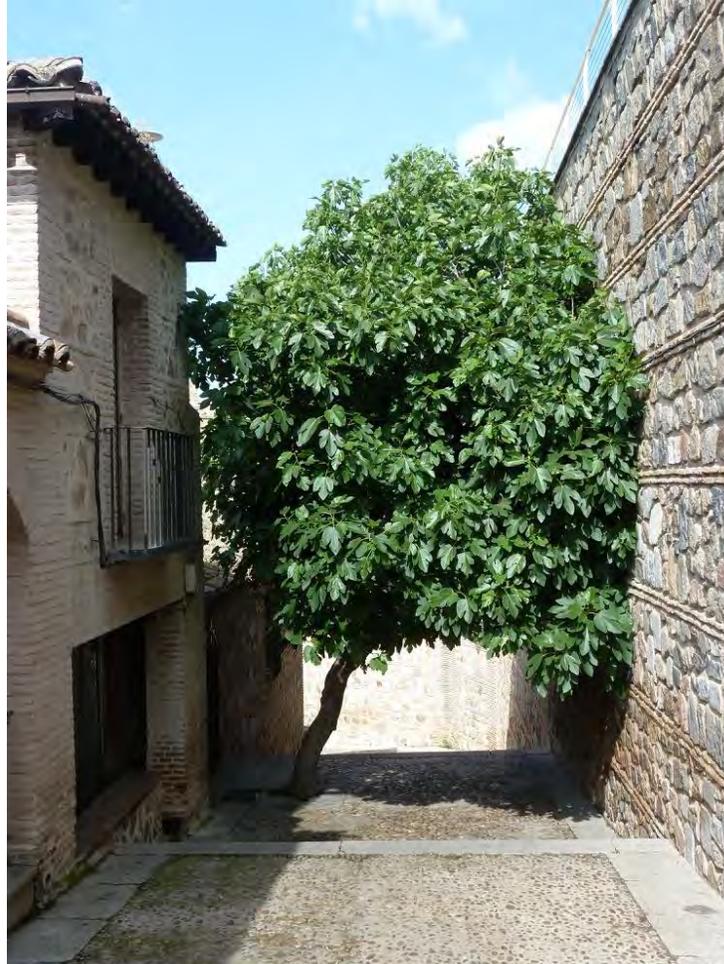
The philosopher's path in Kyoto is a linkage within the city that relates people to nature and to different seasonal experiences.
Source: Creative commons.

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Human Scale Is Built Through Texture and Detail

Bukchon, Seoul, Korea. Source: Serge Salat

Toledo, Spain. Source: Françoise Labbé.

The identity and quality of a street are shaped at the scale of **touch and perception**. Texture, materiality, and physical articulation create a sensory landscape people relate to.
– Surfaces match the scale of walking and seeing
– Corners, edges, and openings generate rhythm
– Materials (stone, brick, wood) add tactility and warmth
In Bukchon (Seoul) and Toledo (Spain), detailing reflects local memory while giving streets a human, timeless scale. This is where planning becomes experience.

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Regeneration from Within: The Yongqing Fang Model

Guangzhou's **Yongqing Fang alleyways** show how fine-grain urbanism can be renewed without erasure.

Key principles:
– **Incremental transformation** through embedded historic fabric
– Removal of unsafe structures to open public space
– Reuse of traditional materials (tiles, bricks, stones)
– Infrastructure woven beneath: stormwater, lighting, cables
– **Inclusive renewal**: residents stay in place, ties are preserved
– Roof gardens, shaded steps, and shared spaces bring street life back

This is **circular regeneration**—socially inclusive, ecologically sound, and deeply rooted in place.

Yongqing Fang Alleyways : an Urban Transformation | Lab D+H

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Streets as the Foundation of Liveable Cities

Dense, connected, and walkable street networks are not just technical tools—they are **cultural frameworks**. They shape how people move, meet, and belong.

When designed with:
– **Fine grain** for flexibility
– **Enclosure** for comfort
– **Sequences** for delight
– **Texture** for memory
– **Integration** for equity

…streets become the living arteries of sustainable urban life.

Yongqing Fang Alleyways : an Urban Transformation | Lab D+H

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