

MARICHELA SEPE

Planning and Place in the City. Mapping Place Identity

Routledge, New York, 2013, 352 p. English

VIKAS MEHTA

The Street. A Quintessential Social Public Space

Routledge, New York, 2014, 256 p. English

CARMEN HASS-KLAU

The Pedestrian and the City

Routledge, New York, 2015, 316 p. English

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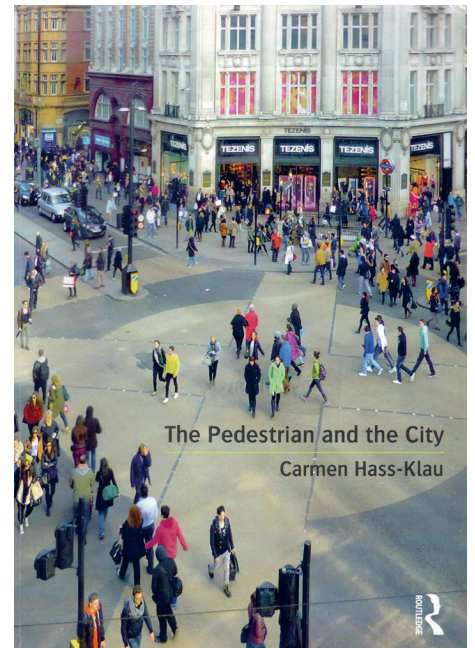
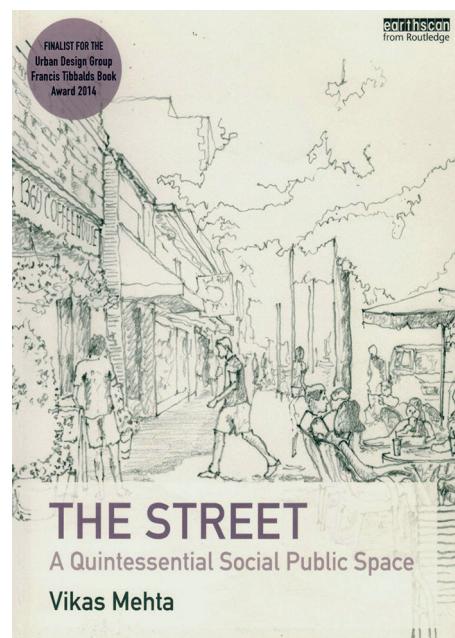
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Finding, Preserving and Augmenting Livable City Places

What happens when three scholars with multiple backgrounds, livings and working in different countries decide to research livable places in cities? The purpose of this essay is to answer this question by reviewing these three scholars' most recent books. At first glance, these three authors did what most scholars do when they have a particular interest and want to know more about a topic: They traveled the world (or part of it, at least) in search of places that would allow them to understand, conceptualize, analyze, document and finally write their studies; in between there were many hours of thinking, walking, talking, debating, photographing, recording, drawing, and mapping.

These three authors are very concerned with what makes places livable, what adds value to public places and what makes people prefer certain public spaces instead of others? How can streets, plazas and neighborhoods have their identities preserved, reconstructed and enhanced? Why are certain streets more sociable, more economically viable and safer than others? And finally, what has contributed to the decline of walking and is it possible to increase the safety, attractiveness and comfort of streets for all?

In their different studies, the authors have examined a variable number of places in Europe, North-America and Asia; seven in Sepe's, three in Mehta's and more than thirty in Hass-Klau's case. The authors' approaches were relatively similar; they began by either reviewing the theory (in Sepe's and Mehta's cases) or the history (in Hass-Klau's case), then they devised more or less structured analytical frameworks, studied different places comprehensively, and finally, they distilled sets of guidelines and public policy recommendations.



These three books had different genesis. Sepe's and Mehta's volumes represent an attempt at synthesizing prior research, while Hass-Klau's is a new book updating and expanding an earlier volume. This different genesis is also observable in the research methods and efforts dedicated to the final products. Both Sepe's and Hass-Klau's volumes gave priority to a relatively large number of international case studies with multiple-day research visits to each city, while Mehta's is an in-depth eight-month case study analysis of a limited number of city streets, all in the Boston metropolitan area. Fortunately, there is no overlap of case studies and when read in unison, these three books complement each other quite nicely in their commitment to creating and augmenting sociable and livable places.

I am interested in walkability from morphological, design, social and economic perspectives. Some of my most recent research compares the right to walk in cities located in three different continents and how the replacement of the person by the vehicle as the main design element has altered the scale of cities, while simultaneously producing unfriendly and dangerous city and suburban neighborhoods. This research theme is directly addressed by Hass-Klau and Sepe, while Mehta concentrates mostly on how pedestrians utilize sidewalks and on how the built environment in commercial neighborhood streets plays an important socialization role. Our fundamental concern is with the future of the street and how multiple stakeholders can strengthen public fruition of common areas in pedestrian precincts and city streets.

In the remainder of this essay, I synthesize the authors' historical and theoretical frameworks and methodologies, I identify and review their case studies, and finally, I summarize their guidelines and most important recommendations.

After defining key concepts, such as place, identity and sociability, Mehta and Sepe framed their background theory in terms of, respectively, (1) street sociability, hierarchy of needs, and the role of design, and (2) a multitude of approaches (virtual, lateral, people-oriented, multi-scale, configurational, and complex-sensitive), leading towards placemaking practices. Hass-Klau chartered the historic evolution of streets from innovative street layouts to the urban motorways. Streets were contextualized within urbanization tendencies in Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. These tendencies ranged from greenbelt towns to massive road rebuilding in urban areas after World War II, with an emphasis on creating pedestrian precincts in West Germany core city areas as early as 1955, and traffic calming and 30 kph residential zones in the central and peripheral areas in both, formally East and West Germany. With an inside knowledge of transport planning in England during the 1980s and 1990s, Hass-Klau also discusses British attempts at achieving better walking conditions through a combination of local and national government initiatives.

In terms of methods, the three authors utilized a relatively similar array of research techniques to collect, analyze and display data. These ranged from direct observations and sketching, and inventorying to analyzing census data, interviewing, charting; and in the case of Mehta, also utilizing a suite of comprehensive statistical methods to quantitatively arrive at research findings. Sepe's innovative PlaceMaker method and associated software based on nine separate phases has merit, even though the case-specific symbols and final complex maps of projects and design interventions are, at times, too difficult to display and to make sense of in graphical format. The PlaceMaker method's nine phases include: (0) construction of the analysis grid; (1) anticipatory analysis; (2) denominative and perceptual description; (3) analysis of traditional mapping; (4) questionnaire for analysis; (5) complex map of analysis; (6) identification of identity resources; (7) questionnaire for planning; (8) complex map of project and design interventions (section II).

Mehta's keen, almost exhaustive, attempt at quantifying most social phenomena on pre-selected streets can be juxtaposed to Hass-Klau's simple measurements of key indicators. The former include a typology of social behaviors (passive, fleeting and enduring sociability) and statistical analyses of sense of comfort, pleasure, safety, environmental and physical comfort, usefulness and convenience, territoriality, personalization, and control on the street. And the latter range from street length, extension of pedestrianization areas, number and block complexity, number and width of street intersections, signalization, modal split, pedestrian counts, traffic calming, cycling and public transit.

Sepe's case studies are organized into three thematic categories: Preserving place identity (Rome and Los Angeles), reconstructing place identity (Kobe, San Francisco), and enhancing place identity (London, Barcelona and Helsinki). Mehta's north-American case studies of commercial neighborhood streets in Cambridge, Brookline and Summerville are contrasted briefly in chapter seven with the characteristics of a typical commercial street in New Dehli, India. Finally, Hass-Klau's case studies resulted from personalized study trips to tens of cities in Great Britain, Germany, Denmark, Norway and the United States. Given the wide array of experiences in north-America, she provides a European perspective that distinguishes two categories of cities: the leaders (New York City, Boston, Washington DC, Portland OR, San Francisco, Denver, Boulder CO, and Vancouver) and the followers (Charlotte, Charleston, Savannah, Miami, Miami Beach, Atlanta, Seattle, and Los Angeles).

Finally, both Sepe and Mehta provide lists of guidelines to making sociable streets and enhancing place identity, respectively. Instead of guidelines, Hass-Klau offers a synthesis of factors to promote walking. In my perspective, Sepe's and Mehta's guidelines overlap in these five areas: (1) a respect for place identity and a belief in the power of design and management to improve places, (2) the potential to augment the attractiveness and comfort of places, (3) the nurturing of local economies, (4) the need to protect pedestrians from vehicles, and (5) collaborative outcomes from joint actions between professionals and a street's main stakeholders. Hass-Klau concludes that walking levels have been decreasing in the developed world. However the good news is that, with the exception of climate and lifestyle preferences, most factors to reverse such transportation trend are apparently within the control of professionals. These factors range from population density, street typology, block complexity, dimensioning, crossing treatments, built environment activities, sidewalks, street facades, traffic calming and public transportation.

Taken together, these three books are very timely, comprehensive and up-to-date in their theories, methods and analyses, and their recommendations are extremely relevant to design, transportation and urban planning practice. The authors' methods are intuitive but elaborate, and were one to desire, they could even be replicated and improved upon in other case studies elsewhere. The clarity and objectivity of writing in Mehta's and Hass-Klau's books is complemented with detailed descriptions and color pictures in Sepe's. The wealth of illustrations helps to convey the authors' commitments to their research subjects as well as their belief in the need and potential to create safer, attractive and comfortable streets for all, including in neighborhoods beyond city centers. These three books raise

awareness of the social value of streets and of the need to augment and enhance place identity, not only through professional practice, but also through societal and gregarious commitment to gathering in truly public places. Good walking places are and will hopefully remain safe, attractive and successful for all.