In communities across the country, a movement is growing to “complete” the streets. States, cities, and towns are asking their planners and engineers to build roads that are safer, more accessible, and easier for everyone. In the process, they are creating better communities for people to live, play, work, and shop.
—National Complete Streets Coalition (www.completestreets.org/complete-streets-fundamentals)

In an about-face from the Robert Moses era, New York City is trying to humanize its streets and make them more pedestrian and bicycle friendly. To facilitate this transformation, the city issued the New York City Street Design Manual in May 2009 (City of New York). The manual is intended “to simplify the design process and reduce the costs for city agencies, urban planners, developers and community groups” (Chen) working to transform the streetscape.

Under the leadership of the Department of Transportation and transportation commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, the manual was produced through a collaboration among more than 12 agencies over a two-year period. It includes a detailed process for design review and sections on street context, street operation, and greening. As the city’s website explains, “The Manual builds on the experience of innovation in street design, materials and lighting that has developed around the world, emphasizing a balanced approach that gives equal weight to transportation, community and environmental goals. It is designed to be a flexible document that will change and grow, incorporating new treatments as appropriate after testing” (City of New York).

In a separate effort to make streets better for people, this time facing very different issues, El Paso, Texas is making a concerted effort to become more walkable, green, and vibrant. Instead of driving past parking lot after parking lot of big-box stores, residents and visitors will soon be cruising along tree-lined avenues bordered by bike lanes, wide sidewalks, and businesses that face directly onto the sidewalk. Or, they won’t be driving at all, instead walking or riding mass transit once the award-winning Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system begins operation in 2012, adding a new route every two years until every major transportation route in the city is serviced. El Paso is also turning attention to transit-oriented development, introducing dense communities with a mix of business, housing, and services at major nodes (City of El Paso).
Other cities are undertaking similar efforts, some even replacing elevated highways with tree- and business-lined boulevards or revealing the waterways they obscured, contributing to economic and urban revitalization. Many of them are producing manuals like the one in NYC, including Chicago, San Francisco, Portland, and Washington DC, and New Jersey and Pennsylvania’s Smart Transportation Guidebook (2008).

These efforts are all responding to widespread demand for bringing back the erstwhile multifunctionality of streets and for improving pedestrian safety, public health, and environmental quality. To achieve this, the National Complete Streets Coalition has produced a Model Policy that communities may adapt to their own circumstances (www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/changing-policy/model-policy). It also recommends a process for developing this policy, beginning with workshops for urban design professionals as well as community members to elaborate a collective vision regarding all modes of mobility. The vision should be context-sensitive and include implementation steps and performance standards to provide a feedback mechanism for appropriately adjusting the streets over time.

The goal of the Complete Streets Coalition is to inspire networks of streets that serve all while also saving money and improving air quality. Over 200 communities have committed to building Complete Streets (see Complete Streets Atlas), among them Charlotte, North Carolina that has transformed 19 streets (with eight others in progress) and 11 intersections (with plans for 10 more) (ibid). In support of these efforts, the US Department of Transportation has asked every transportation agency to “integrate walking and bicycling into their transportation systems [and] to go beyond minimum standards to provide safe and convenient facilities for these modes” (US Department of Transportation).

Of all the manuals produced, *Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach* is among the most catalytic and influential. Developed in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and in partnership with the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), the manual can be applied anywhere and aims to balance the needs of the street as a transport conduit with its use as an economic and social space. To achieve that goal, *Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares* recommends building upon existing assets and blending design principles with functional concerns of organizations that regulate the built environment.

The Recommended Practices read like a prescription list written by Jane Jacobs (1961) and David Sucher (2003), offering specific design solutions for everything from mixed-use development and walkable design to simultaneously utilizing thoroughfares for transportation, outdoor markets, civic spaces, and recreational zones. These practices include separated bike lanes and multi-way boulevards, “allowing our streets to be designed and operated with all users in mind” (ITE 2010). Acknowledging the constantly changing character of our cities, the document even explains how to create “a supportive relationship between thoroughfare and context by designing thoroughfares that will change as the surroundings vary in urban character” (ITE 2010).
The many efforts of the Complete Streets movement have been contributing to the establishment of common ground between traffic engineers’ concerns with moving cars at maximum efficiency and those working to improve streets for people. Transforming our greatest urban connector and most frequented public space – streets – into vital urban thresholds, this movement is greatly accelerating the upward spiral toward place prosperity.

References


US Department of Transportation. www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bikeped