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Making Streets that Work [Streets: Old Paradigm, New Investment]

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Making Streets

What is your favorite street?

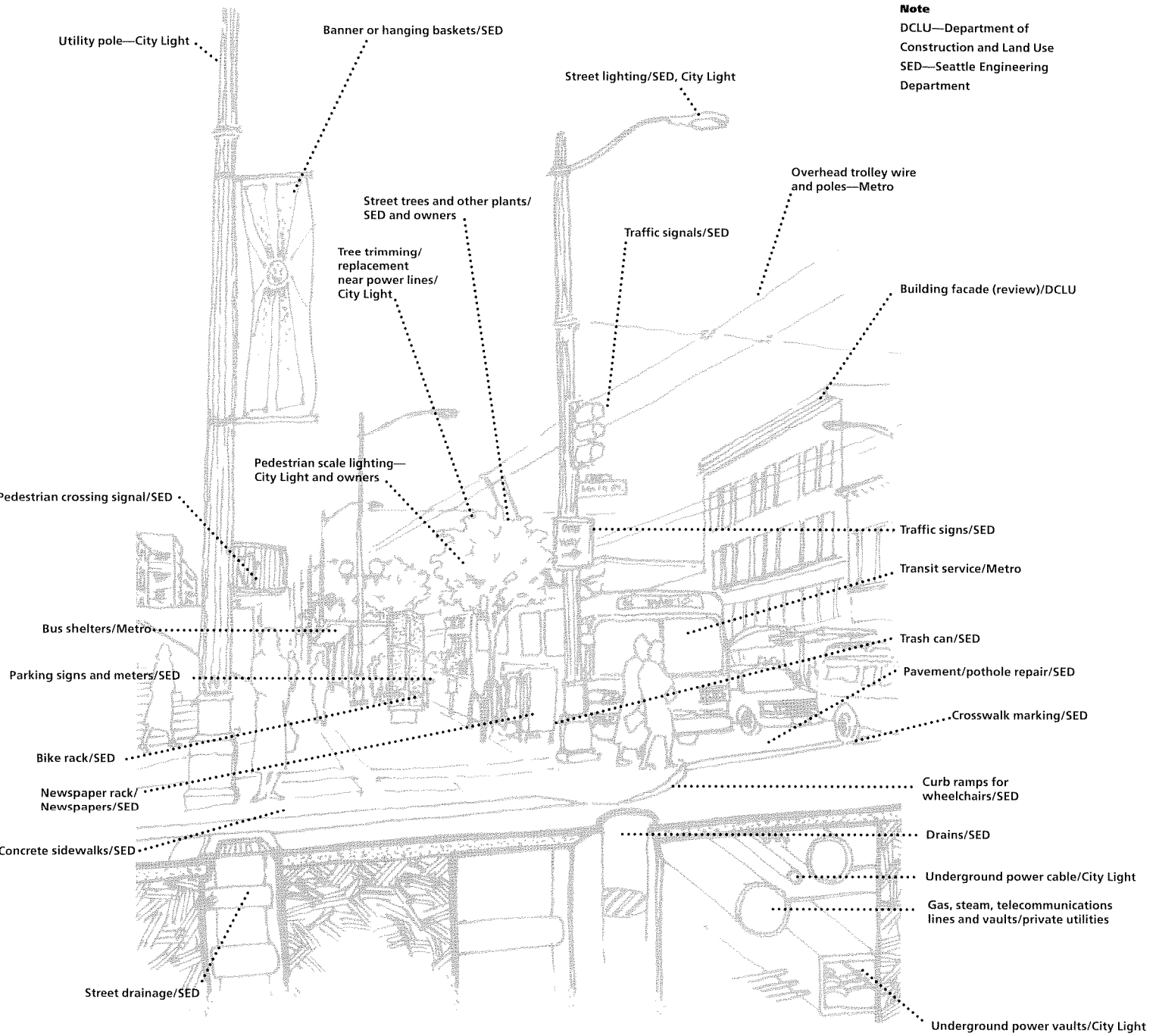
In spring, 1994, Seattle residents had a chance to answer that question. The Seattle Design Commission sponsored a unusual design awards program, seeking nominations for “Streets that Work” — streets that have a good balance among various transportation modes and that enhance the character and vitality of the communities they serve. Hundreds of posters went up throughout the city, even in its famous coffee bars.

The awards were a continuation of the commission’s “Designs That Work” project, which recognizes both quality design in the everyday environment and the efforts of individuals and organizations to improve their neighborhoods. Our goal for these awards was to show how streets can be tools in planning neighborhoods and building communities; in previous years, award programs focused on housing, neighborhood commercial projects and downtown buildings.

The commission convened a workshop to help identify the criteria that make “streets that work,”

That Work

The care and maintenance of the various elements of a street are not the responsibility of a single person or agency. This shows the variety of jurisdictions that are responsible for each part of the street; by one count, 48 entities have some role in designing or maintaining Seattle’s streets. Graphics courtesy Seattle Design Commission and Dennis Sellin.





Ravenna Alley

This alley is linked to the wonderful pedestrian ambiance of the Ravenna Park Ravine and the surrounding neighborhood. A great place to be—neighbors really live in the alley—they plant flowers, play basketball, receive their mail and enter their houses through the alley. It is a sociable space where neighbors can congregate.

involving people from public agencies, designers and neighborhood advocates. We brainstormed characteristics of good streets (vegetation, comfortable for residents and users, low traffic speeds, variation in streetscape materials, mixed uses were mentioned most). And we thought of categories we might seek out, such as “best play street,” “best alley,” “best sociable street,” “best community involvement in street design.” Ultimately the commission gave awards to 15 streets that represented a cross-section of types and uses; profiles of some of those streets accompany this article.

Streets and Neighborhood Planning

Seattle’s comprehensive plan predicts solid population and employment growth for the city and directs it to urban villages and centers. This plan

Olmsted Boulevards

Frederick Law Olmsted believed that urban residents deserved a little country in the city. For Seattle, a city possessing “extraordinary landscape advantages,” the Olmsted brothers envisioned a system of green pathways, boulevards linking parks and bodies of water. That vision became reality between 1903 to 1936. Today, Seattle has one of the largest and best preserved Olmsted boulevard systems in the United States, a legacy of beautiful and elegant boulevards.

is linked to a neighborhood planning initiative, which gives neighborhood residents some power to chart their own future. In 1995, the city established a Neighborhood Planning Office, providing neighborhoods with staff assistance and a toolbox of background material, covering hundreds of topics from economic development to zoning. Already, several dozen neighborhoods have begun planning work.

But when the neighborhood planning program began, the toolbox did not include material about streets or street design. The design commission, following on the interest generated by the awards program, developed a workbook and video as a primer on streets. The city’s engineering department (now Department of Transportation), its Office of Management and Planning and its Pedestrian Advisory Board collaborated on the project.

The workbook and video, both called Making Streets that Work, seek to demystify streets without obscuring their complexity. They help the public recognize the value streets have in commu-



Fairview Avenue in the Eastlake neighborhood is surprisingly casual and personal, accommodating floating homes and small marine businesses as well as informal parking and strolling places.



nities and provide useful information on ways to improve neighborhood streets.

The workbook begins by explaining the role of local streets in the regional transportation network, the role streets play in urban form and the relationship between transportation and land use. It also includes a section drawing of a street, showing components as varied as street lights, trash cans and underground sewer mains. The entities responsible for each component are listed on the drawing; by one count, some 48 agencies and organizations have a hand in designing or maintaining Seattle streets.

The workbook also gives residents tools they can use to get involved with the design of their local streets. It shows them how to profile their streets by identifying problems and opportunities. It offers 55 strategies for improving streets and helps residents determine which might be most appropriate for their neighborhoods. Then it presents information on how to implement projects and case studies of completed street improvement projects in Seattle (including budgets),

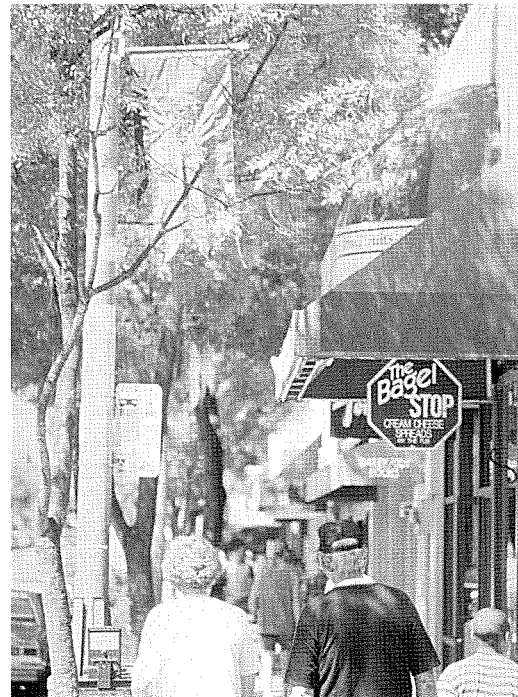
Making Streets That Work has been successful because it is accessible to a general audience and because it is comprehensive — a single source of reference for information on streets and strategies for making them better. Appendixes include a list of commonly asked questions (“How do I drive around a traffic circle?”) and

a glossary, bibliography and contact list.

Just as important, both the awards, book and video offer a perspective on streets that people aren't used to hearing. These projects treat streets as significant public open spaces, not just transportation corridors or utility conduits. This emphasis reinforces the point that streets are places; recognizing that is the first step towards making streets great places to be.

For more information on these programs, please contact Marcia Wagoner, Executive Director, Seattle Design Commission, 710 Second Avenue, Suite 200, Seattle WA 98104. Telephone (206) 684-0434. Email: Marcia.Wagoner@ci.seattle.wa.us

“Making Streets That Work” is available from the Local Government Commission, 1414 K Street, Suite 250, Sacramento, CA 95814-3929. Fax: (916) 448-8246. Web site: <http://www.lgc.org/clc/street.html>



Broadway
This is one of Seattle's best-known and -loved streets. The people are what make it special; the sidewalks are filled with all types of people, day and night, making Broadway a safe place to be. The street balances all modes of transportation—bikes, cars, buses and pedestrians. And it is a vital shopping street, with plenty of storefronts and entries lining the street. Sidewalk tiles, art and banners are distinctive markers.