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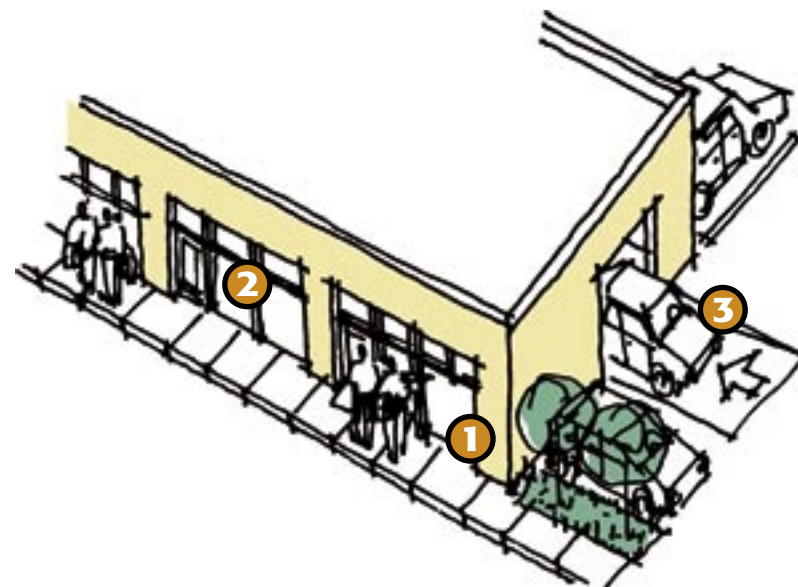
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Clarification added 4/3/08

The Three Rules have precise and limited applicability. They are primarily or only relevant in commercial (i.e. general business, retail, office) and mixed-residential/commercial districts. But in those districts I believe that the Rules are a tool to analyze why and predict whether a street has a chance of being "walkable."

They do not particularly apply to neighborhoods which are intended to be residential-only.

THE THREE RULES

This is the most important chapter in this book. If the problem is to create a walkable, pedestrian-oriented neighborhood, much of the answer is architectural. Actually, it is not so much “architectural” in the usual sense of the word, for it ignores style. Site plan trumps architecture. That means the basic arrangement of the building on the site is far more important than what usually passes for architecture: the exterior appearance and “envelope” of the structure.

This chapter explains the Three Rules for creating such places. Let’s assume that we agree that the goal is to create this mythical urban village. How do we do it?

The key decision is the position of the building with respect to the sidewalk. This decision determines whether you have a city or a suburb.

- 1 Build to the sidewalk (i.e., property line).
- 2 Make the building front “permeable” (i.e., no blank walls).
- 3 Prohibit parking lots in front of the building.



The decision is a very simple one: place the building alongside the sidewalk. That's it. Don't make it complicated. Simply bring the building to the sidewalk. The banal and all too typical strip center below could have contributed to a pedestrian neighborhood had it been designed to work with the Rules rather than against them.

If you question this, consider the places that most people like to go on vacation: New York, Paris, London,

Aspen, Carmel, Nantucket, Park City, Friday Harbor, and even Disneyland. Every last one of them is built so that the building walls are right next to the sidewalk.

Historically, with only human and animal power to move goods, and with market forces in charge, it made sense to bring the building close to the street in the effort to maximize profit, creating, ironically for modern, often anticapitalist preservationists, the most charming streets.



Seattle, WA



Los Angeles, CA

The Rules are only a start

The Three Rules will emerge over and over again in this book. Their importance cannot be overemphasized; they are the common denominator and *leit-motiv* of comfortable urban spaces. They are an absolute necessity and precursor to creating pedestrian-oriented communities. But by themselves they are insufficient. There are unhealthy, inner-city neighborhoods that follow them. There are auto-dominated — but healthy — suburbs that don't. But as a general rule the Three Rules are essential to create human settlements that have any real sense of interpersonal community.

RULE 1: Build to the sidewalk (i.e., property line)

Create a strong “streetwall” in which each building meets or comes close to the sidewalk. The sidewalk is important because it channels pedestrian movements and forces people into closer proximity where they may bump into each other and act neighborly.

Obviously we don't want to end up with streetfronts like this one at the right, but as a way of deconstructing a desirable streetfront, and to make our point clear, we start with this rule.

(A note on terms: In the majority of situations and for practical purposes, the sidewalk is at the property line.)

As we said before, this rule is central, and to paraphrase Professor William Strunk, Jr. (in *The Elements of Style*), whose desire to eliminate useless words left him repeating the useful ones for emphasis: “Build to the sidewalk! Build to the sidewalk! Build to the sidewalk!”

SUB-RULE: Locate the inside floor level as close as possible to the level of the sidewalk outside.

Make it easy to see and move into the building. Current laws on accommodating people with disabilities encourage this anyway, but don't let the ramp be the only method. Try to keep the interior floor levels as close to the sidewalk grade as possible. To the right we see the exception to the rule, which is acceptable only because it is a retrofit of an old townhouse. It works in a historic context, but it is not ideal.



Seattle, WA



Boston, MA



Vancouver, BC, Canada

RULE 2: Make the building front “permeable” (i.e., no blank walls)

Connect the inside of the building and the sidewalk outside with windows and doors.

Life attracts life. If you can't see the merchandise for sale or the other patrons mingling, you won't stop to go in. It's a basic rule of retailing and practical urban design the world over. Flaunt it. Don't hide it with a blank wall. Place windows and openings along the sidewalk.

Of course, not only must people be able to see in and out, they must also be able to enter. Therefore put your front doors where they are visible from and directly face the sidewalk.

Making the building open to the sidewalk is a common denominator of all healthy neighborhoods and potential urban villages.

SUB-RULE: Prohibit mirrored glass or window coverings that block visibility.

Creating connections between humans inside the building and outside it is the essence of creating pedestrian-oriented streets. So it follows that mirrored glass, or blinds, or any other device to block visibility is a rule breaker, as would be mirrored sunglasses in a tête-à-tête. If you have experienced the discomfort of talking with someone wearing mirrored sunglasses, which deliberately limit contact, you understand what I mean. No matter what advantage it might otherwise offer, such as energy savings or privacy, blocking visibility is inimical to a pedestrian-oriented street.



Seattle, WA

RULE 3: Prohibit parking lots in front of the building

Put on-site parking lots above, below, behind, or beside. Pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods start with location of the parking lot.

Parking lots are a necessity. But unless you are in high school, or are at a tailgate party before a football game, or at a classic car *concoirs d'elegance*, parking lots are not the place you want to hang around. It is ironic, of course: we invest such great money and emotion in our cars and yet we don't want to hang around them in parking lots.

Parking lots are crucial; taming them will be one of the challenges of piecing together urban villages.

In an urban village, there are no parking lots along the streetfront. This is the corollary of the rule that asks for the buildings to be brought to the sidewalk. Since it's so important (and so simple) it bears repeating: locate on-site parking above, below, behind through an alley, behind from a street, or beside the building, and place the building at the sidewalk. *Save the front for people.*



Seattle, WA

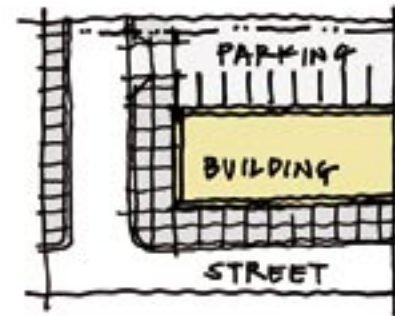


Vancouver, BC, Canada

parking above the building



parking behind from a street

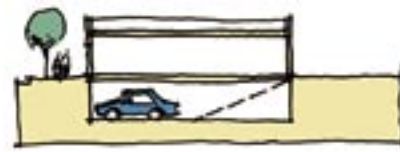


Seattle, WA



Vancouver, BC, Canada

parking below the building



parking beside the building

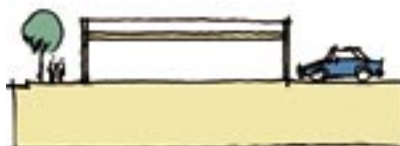


Seattle, WA



Boulder, CO

parking behind through an alley



The rule applies at every scale. This small mixed-use building (below right) is on a site with no alley. Required parking can be provided only if cars are allowed to cross the sidewalk. It's not the ideal, but in the parking context of this city (every building must have its own parking) there was no alternative. The entry is minimized and the front still has commercial space facing the street.

Another solution might have been to relieve the developer of parking requirements entirely in lieu of contributing to a neighborhood parking garage or lot — see page 88.



Seattle, WA



White Rock, BC, Canada

Even large corporations can follow rules about the location of the parking lot, even though often there is resistance and claims of “We can’t operate that way.” Here is a large supermarket that has underground parking (albeit within a shopping center, but it could very well have been within an urban core). The problem of vertical movement of shoppers with their carts — it’s a common question — is solved simply with an escalator (or elevator).



White Rock, BC, Canada

SUB-RULE: Allow on-street parking. Stop-and-go parking is essential to real shopping districts.

These are very simple rules but, alas, in reality easier said than done. The reality is that in our car-oriented culture there are situations in which we want the parking very close at hand. The typical strip-mall approach — the parking in front of the building — is hard to avoid if you want to serve people late at night.

Talk as we might about proper urban design, no one is going to feel comfortable going to a convenience store at 2 A.M. and walking around from the back of the building to the entrance. It’s bad enough when the parking is in front — in the dark of night it is not an inviting choice. The basic rules of feeling safe — natural surveillance and territoriality — are at work in the conventional strip-center development. But while this principle may work for the one site, the same pattern, repeated over and over, is counterproductive to safety as it creates a neighborhood where people only want to be in cars.

Luckily, there are very few places such as the twenty-four-hour convenience store where access at odd hours must be a design constraint. The sketch at the right shows an alternative to parking lots between the street and the storefront. Certainly safety is essential. But the idea that parking must be in front of the shop, right off the sidewalk, would be designing a city around a worst-case situation. It would create a city designed around the need to go to a convenience store



Nantucket, MA



Seattle, WA

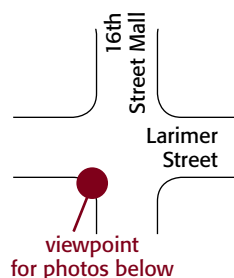


for a six-pack at 2 A.M. So the basic rule must be to put the parking out of sight. (Here is where we see the importance of on-street parking.)

A comfortable city starts with the location of the parking lot. To paraphrase Mies van der Rohe, form follows parking.

The primacy of parking requirements in zoning codes supports that statement. But so does the process of design. The very first step in designing — from a hut to a high-rise — is to figure out how to get the car onto and off the site and where to store it.

Our three rules simply acknowledge that process. We accept the centrality of parking but ask that it be done in a manner that supports rather than destroys pedestrian-oriented streets.



The pastiche below shows the power of the Three Rules. The photos were taken from the same spot. On the left we have a lively, pedestrian-oriented street; on the right we have an incomplete following of the Three Rules that yields a sterile and lonely streetfront.

And it could have been avoided had the builders of the building on the right understood the Rules and designed the parking garage (see page 187) to be a contributor to the street rather than an enemy.

Here is another example of the power of the Three Rules to shape places, even in the face of global enterprise. The KFC, so familiar to North Americans, nestles into Queenstown, New Zealand. It provides a streetfront and yet it also provides the drive-through access demanded by auto-oriented cultures.

Whether this compromise is acceptable is up to local communities. One can certainly argue that the Rules should be inviolate. But the reality of land-use politics sometimes calls for compromise.

It may seem pretty deflating that great streetscapes can be based on such simple elements as the Three Rules. After all, shouldn't it be more complicated, artistic, requiring a heightened sensibility and aesthetic? That would be nice for snobs. But great cooks often say that the basis of great cuisine is simply fresh food. So it is with great streets. The irreducible basis is simple: the Three Rules.





Photo by Bryan H. Smith

Be the hedgehog, not the fox

The English philosopher Isaiah Berlin made famous a quote from an ancient Greek poet: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”

This thought serves us well in urban planning. The Three Rules are the “one big thing” we must follow to create pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods. Even when rebuffed by large institutional forces such as the big-box store, the state highway department, or the nonprofit institution, the Three Rules focus the discussion on the few key variables that really count to create pedestrian-oriented streetscapes.

Such creation happens in an explicitly political arena, with interest groups and lobbying. Around every regulatory body such as a planning agency gathers the regulated interests and those concerned. The U.S. Forest Service has the timber companies and the environmental groups. The corollary is that supporters of comfortable cities must have a set of easy-to-grasp mental tools and standards by which to judge new development. I believe that the Three Rules provide such a framework. They are simple to understand and go to the heart of the issue in creating walkable neighborhoods. They pick out a key relationship and work it thoroughly. Most “amateurs” (and it is no disrespect to characterize most mayors and councilmembers as nonspecialists when it comes to urban design and planning) face issues for which their education and prior work provide little insight.

The Three Rules provide an analytic framework that can be easily visualized to help create walkable streets.

Some developers know the rules

People who build ersatz cities also understand that this spatial relationship is central to our sense of being in a city. There is a very interesting tourist attraction called CityWalk: it is a festival shopping center, a place to shop for things one doesn't need.

Of course it has valet parking, which is de rigeur in Los Angeles. Valet parking combines both status and security. Only uniformed attendants are allowed in the parking structure. The attendants run to and fro to fetch cars. Anyone else in the garage sticks out by their presence alone.

The fascinating thing about CityWalk is that its developers understood the essence of “citiness”: it is buildings that come up to sidewalks where people can stroll and shop safely. This mall — even more than most malls — has the basic village pattern: the old village sidewalk. While many developers seem to have an aversion to cities, they also recognize that people are drawn to city-like situations and will drive to find them.



Los Angeles, CA



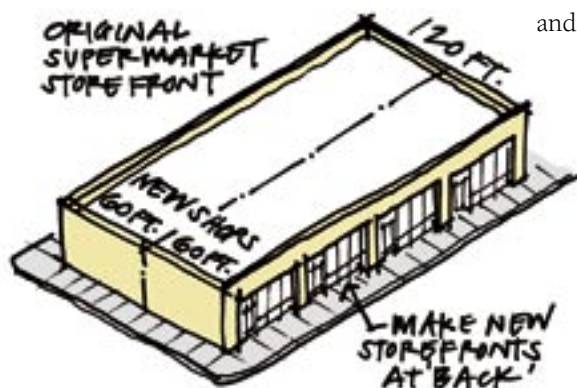
Boulder, CO

It's a very plastic world

What is meant by “plastic” is that our cities are undergoing constant change. They may look solid and fixed. But over even a very short period of years, they undergo enormous reconstruction, a characteristic of a vibrant economy.

We can take advantage of this process of regeneration by applying the Three Rules to every land-use action on a commercial street. Here is an example that arose out of the natural desire of the property owner to maximize value from an old supermarket. He divided the very deep (120 feet) store in half so that what had once been the back of a large supermarket — blank and uninviting —

is opened up with storefronts and becomes a new front to the street. It's not ideal that the shops are so far above street grade, but that was the existing condition.



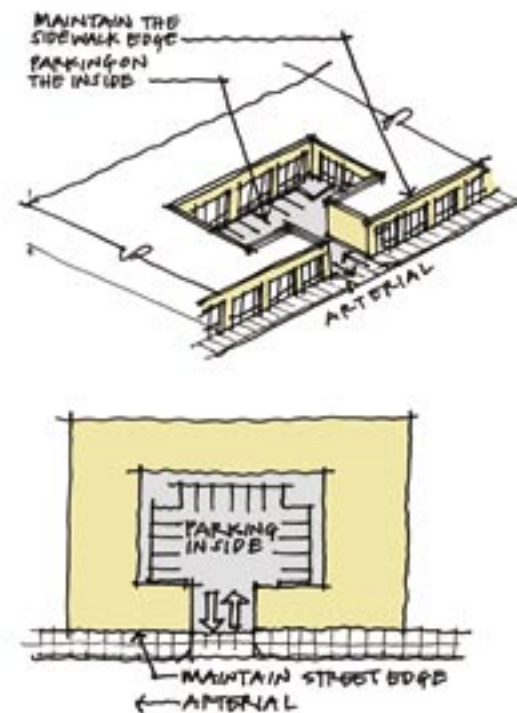
Edmonton, AB, Canada

The problem of the arterial

On a larger site often found at an urban edge, one can place the parking within, creating a strong street edge and yet providing the required on-site parking.

Major urban arterials are often controlled by state highway departments. There is a difficult push and pull between the local government's desire to transform an auto-oriented strip (see page 7, “Dystopia”) into something at least a little bit better and the state highway department's mandate to move as many cars through the area as possible. On-street parking is usually impossible, at least at peak commuter hours.

One solution is to create a street wall of shops while allowing parking on the inside.





Salt Lake City, UT

The special problem of the major institution

Do the Three Rules have any place with noncommercial buildings? Or on “campuses”? Yes.

Public (federal, state, local, special district, etc.) and nonprofit (museums, hospitals, universities, etc.) institutions develop a huge amount of urban property. They have a significant impact on the urban environment. They often have a strong institutional ambition and wish to both manifest and further that identity in architectural form. While the institution might do great work, its urge to differentiate itself and show itself as unique architecturally can be very destructive to the streetscape.

Typically, an institutional design symbolizes its uniqueness in two related ways:

- *By use of sheer space (i.e., distance).* Often, as if to mimic the English gentleman who recoils from trade, their designers hew to the image of “the campus”: pulled back from the city and its jostling activity into a plaza or park.
- *By use of style to separate the building from its surroundings.* Each building is a self-proclaimed work of genius by a “star” architect, whose name is too well known and too fleeting of fame to justify mentioning here. Such an “object” building is separated from its neighbors by outrageous stylistic gimmicks and often setbacks from the sidewalk to form a purposefully symbolic urban moat.



Cambridge, MA

Some people, of course, do see cities as collections of architectural sculptures, as “precious objects.” Much of what passes for public commentary on the built environment contends with such faddish work. Indeed there is much to appreciate, in an amusement park manner, in such buildings. A few such are indeed a lively leavening, an exception — a raisin in the oatmeal: contributing most when rare — to create variety and draw attention to the few buildings that symbolize the community. The city hall on the opposite page appropriately and firmly states its importance in its city. But imagine if every institution were able to speak so loudly.

But the “precious object” school leads to cities of isolation. While the sylvan campus and its urban progeny, the precious object, cannot be faulted in their own place, their own place is rarely in the city. Campuses — even when they have a green edge — attempt to isolate themselves from their surrounding neighborhood. Even when the campus grows and sites at the formal campus edge are developed, the building often faces inward.

Our key task is to ensure that the exception does not devour the rule. Object buildings set on an isolated podium cannot create an urban context. I don’t mean to be overly dogmatic and insist that literally every building in a city must adhere to the Three Rules. In fact, only ninety-seven to ninety-eight percent of buildings in commercial zones should follow the rules. We should always allow for the exceptional building, the precious object.



To create pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods almost all noncommercial buildings should adhere to the Three Rules and relate to the street around them. The goal should be to create “background buildings” that fit into the cityscape and do not call attention to themselves.

The photo on the previous page shows an institutional building at Harvard Square that acts as part of the community. There are shops on the plaza and one can walk through it to an adjoining street. (The reader familiar with the building will quickly interject, “But that building doesn’t strictly adhere to the Three Rules.” True enough. The response is simple: an occasional plaza is acceptable so long as the default position is to follow the Three Rules.)

Other institutions can be even bolder in following the Rules. Aside from buildings that require high security such as “justice centers” (police and courts), almost all institutions have functions that could be at street level.

Here, in the photo above, is an excellent solution for a symphony hall, a use that inherently does not need, much less even want, any direct contact with the street. Its foyer runs the full length of the block and provides an assembly point for concertgoers. It also provides space for refreshments during the day. While strict, the Three Rules do not need to be an oppressive and limiting force. In fact, once their centrality and importance to the creation of streetscapes are grasped, they offer a central focus and constraint through which design imagination can soar.

The inevitable cry: “There’s no demand for retail space”

The Three Rules are a distillation of what actually works to make interesting places. They are a *post hoc* observation rather than an *a priori* conjecture. And they imply mixed-used neighborhoods of residential-above-retail. The politics of development of such neighborhoods is inevitably, or at least often, accompanied by developers’ assertions that there is no demand for more retail space. Such is often true. Moreover, development firms rarely have expertise across several markets, such as housing *and* retail. So there is often resistance to mixed-use because the technical as well as political know-how is not found in the same firm, adding to the perceived risk.

Planning authorities must address such concerns with sympathy and practicality so that requirements for retail space at ground level are in tune with neighborhood demands.

But two points need to be made.

- *The retail space may be very shallow.* In fact (see page 212, showing an urban design tool), it is only the edge of the building where it meets the sidewalk that is at issue, perhaps the first fifteen to thirty feet. A very shallow space can be accommodated and yet provide vitality to the street.
- *The use may be interim.* Office uses (even light manufacturing or a shipping room as above) provide a viable interim (or even long-term) economic use and also contribute to street life. Even residences may be appropriate in some locations as an interim use until the neighborhood has grown enough to warrant more retail space.



Pasadena, CA

“Fill up those moats”: the special problem of the shopping mall

The auto-oriented shopping mall and its progeny, the “power center” of big-box stores, dominate retail America. Is there any hope for them?

Yes, if one understands the Three Rules.

The astoundingly comical store above — when I first saw it I thought it a satire of the worst sort that could exist in an otherwise urbane environment — is unfortunately not a joke.

But the mall on the facing page — essentially no different than hundreds of malls across North America except more successful — is a striking example of the power of the Three Rules to transform. The city desired a pedestrian-oriented street. The setback had been heavily landscaped to block the view of the massive parking garage behind it; the result was creation of an “urban moat.” But that planting area created an opportunity for urban backfill. The property owner eliminated the parking-lot buffer, an otherwise dull setback, and built outward to create a real streetfront of restaurants.



Bellevue, WA

A local newspaper recounted a talk by a representative of the property owner:

But perhaps the most telling indicator of the restaurant row’s success was a photo [that] showed several pedestrians walking down a sidewalk outside the project. In the past, the executive told the group, such a scene probably would have required staging for marketing purposes. But these were bona fide pedestrians. “We were so excited when we saw this photo,” she said. “We didn’t have to pay these people.”

It’s a humorous, plaintive, but overall very hopeful sign that we can change the bleakness of an auto-oriented street.

All this city needs now is on-street parking and it will start to feel like a real city.



Bellevue, WA

