Shaping Our Public Realm: Making Places for People

David Walters RIBA. Prof. Emeritus of Architecture and Urban Design, UNC Charlotte, and
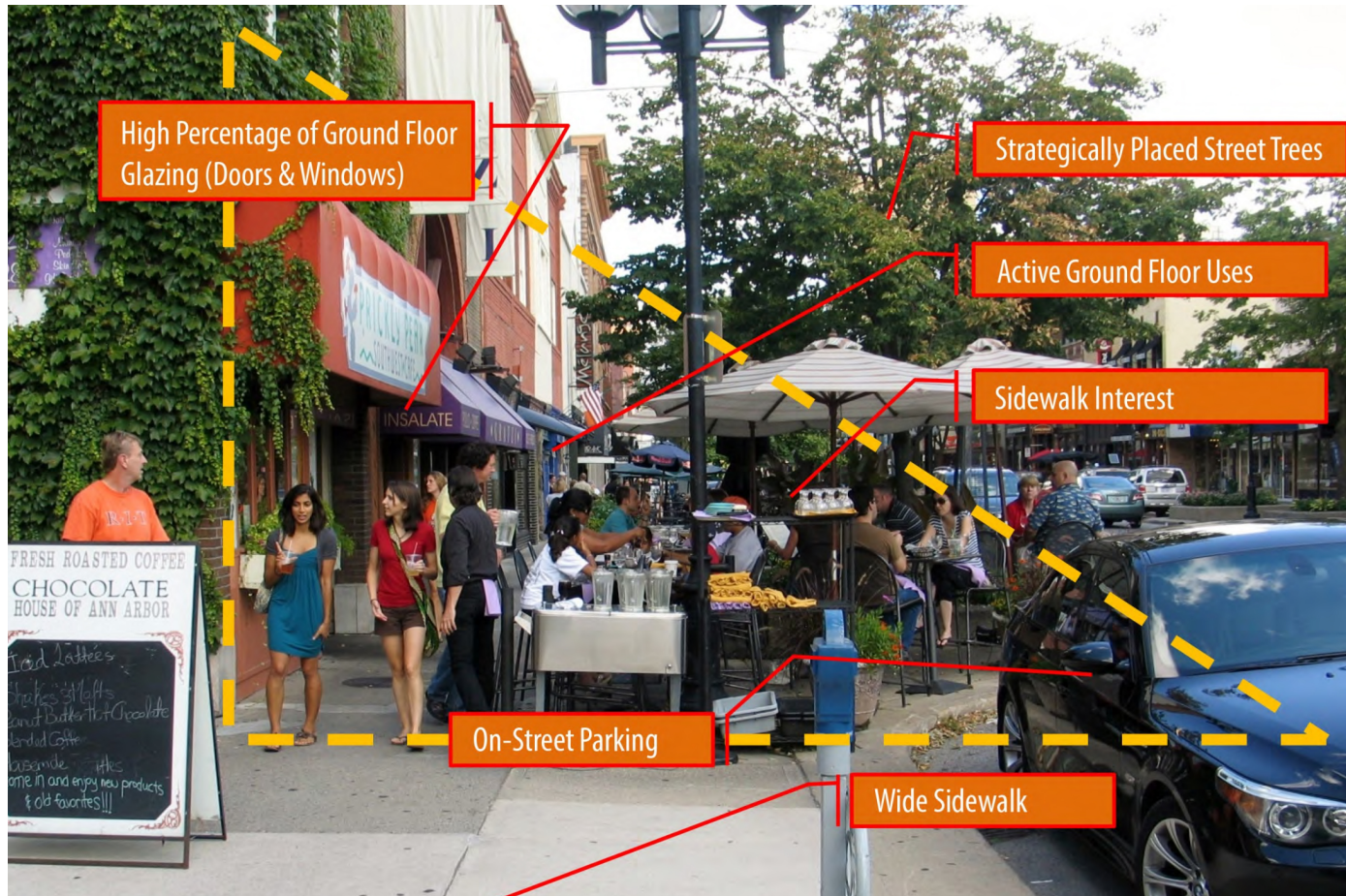Consultant Urban Designer, Stantec Urban Places Group   September 2017

Restaurant Row,
17th Street, Denver, CO

If you design spaces for cars they'll fill with cars.
If you design spaces for people they'll fill with people.

That Denver street is a great example of the "Golden Triangle" of urbanism. What exactly is it?

High Percentage of Ground Floor Glazing (Doors & Windows)

Strategically Placed Street Trees

Active Ground Floor Uses

Sidewalk Interest

On-Street Parking

Wide Sidewalk

It's the triangle formed by the vertical walls of the private buildings and the horizontal surfaces of the public street or square

It's a *really* good way of thinking about the comfort, safety, and attractiveness of public space from the point of view of pedestrians.

The principles of the "Golden Triangle" apply in commercial / mixed use situations . . .

On two different continents, in two different cultures, and in two different cities 4000 miles apart (Athens, GA, left and Berlin, Germany, right) exactly the same urban design principles apply.

- Visual and functional connections from outside to inside
- Active and "thick" edges to public space
- The quality of a public space depends *on what happens at its edges*
- Safe and attractive sidewalks shielded from moving cars and accommodating several activities
- Mixing uses means different people use the space for different reasons at different times of day
- Landscape used to define space and create shade

. . . And the "Golden Triangle" applies just as well in residential situations.
The details are different but the principles are the same.

Townhomes, Iverson Way, Charlotte

Single-family homes, Kingston Avenue, Charlotte

In residential areas relationships between public and private spaces become more important.
We design extra "layers" of space: the public realm of the street, the semi-public
space of the front yard, the semi-private space of the porch, and the private space of the home.
We still have thick, active edges to public space (the porches) and everything fits within that triangle.

Two different types of homes, built 100 years apart, follow the same urban design concepts.
**So what are the strategies of good urban design that underpin these long lasting
concepts that shape attractive communities?**

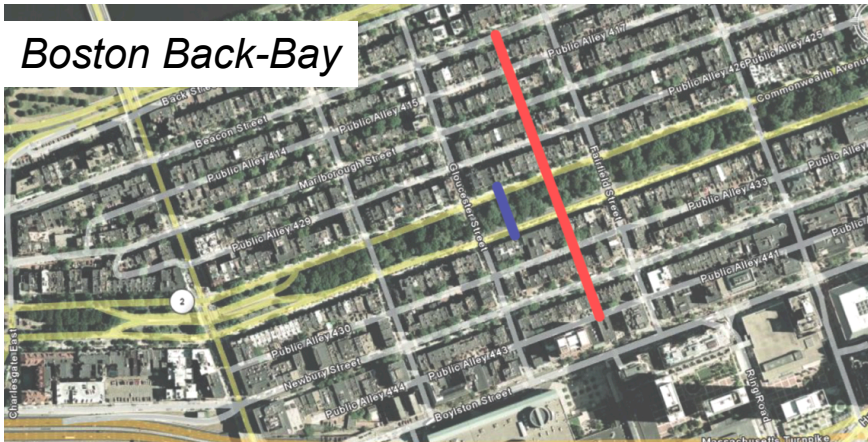# There are at least SIX strategies essential for successful urban design.

The first two:

1. Block Size and Block Structure must be scaled to facilitate pedestrian uses
2. Streets must connect for efficient travel choices (small block size)

Buford Highway
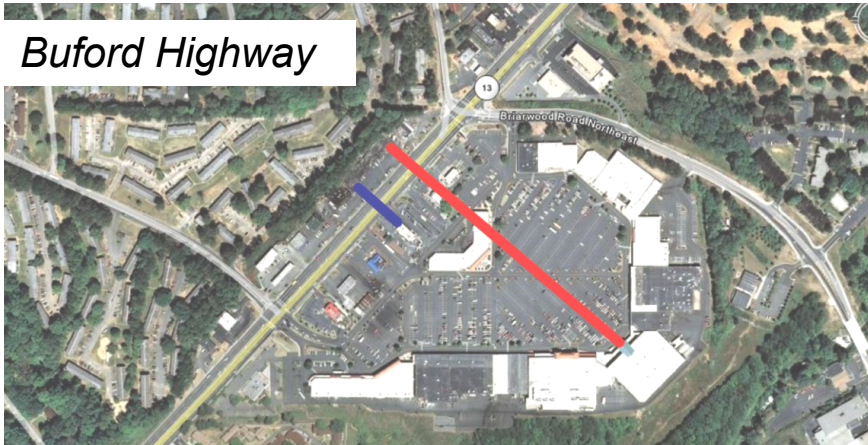
Boston Back-Bay

Two prosperous communities: Atlanta (top) and Boston (bottom).
The red lines and the blue lines (Buford Hwy and Commonwealth Ave.) are exactly the same length.

Which example is more attractive, longer lasting, and more economically sustainable?

The next two:
3. Fronts must be distinct from Backs (Fronts face Fronts and Backs face Backs)
4. The relationship between Public Realms and Private Realms should be carefully designed

Two examples:
BAD (left) - Front faces Back with unpleasant, useless space between (SouthEnd, Charlotte)
GOOD (right) – Active façades face each other with attractive, useful space between (Baxter Village, Fort Mill, SC)

And the last two:
5. Density is essential in key locations: You can't have active public spaces without density
6. Mixing uses in walkable proximity promotes economic and physical sustainability

Farmers' Market, Downtown Des Moines, Iowa

Downtown Boulder, CO

Density, combined with a clearly defined mixed-used environment, supports a lively variety of different uses in public space.

Density is too often misconceived as a "problem". It is, by contrast, the *solution* to most communities' quest for active, economically successful, and attractive public space.

And one more thing: we MUST screen cars by buildings at the edges of pedestrian public space

Above left: Designed correctly: Parking is
screened by the building, and the building presents
an attractive "Front" to public space with "eyes on the street".
Right: A complete mess: "Cars behind Bars" creates a hostile
edge to public space.

We have approved *too many bad developments like this.*
PLEASE . . . . No more!

In an ideal world all designers and developers would understand these straightforward urban design principles.
But we don't live in an ideal world – so we need proper zoning codes to make sure all development gets these basic principles right.
These are examples of the kind of clear, design-based Zoning Regulations you need to have.
These are your tools for ensuring Charlotte's Public Realm is protected and enhanced.

C. **Building Location and Orientation**

1. Buildings shall be located so as not to disturb the viewsheds noted on the Comprehensive Plan map.

2. Building facades shall be parallel to the frontage line.

3. In the T5 and T6 Districts, large-scale, single-use buildings (such as parking garages, conference facilities, theatres, athletic facility, superstores, etc.) shall be located behind or above habitable street front space.

EXAMPLE: HABITABLE STREET FRONT SPACE
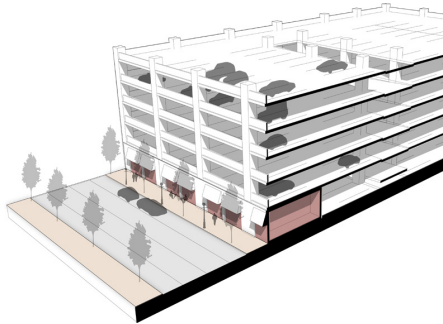
Parking Garage Retail Screen: A ground floor retail liner in a parking garage creates an appropriate streetscape environment by screening the parking areas behind.
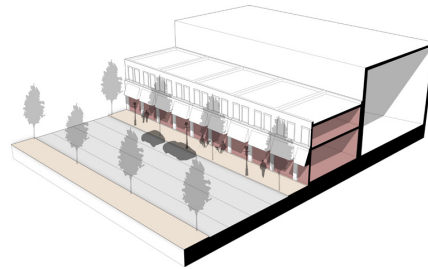
Big-Box with Liner Building: A two-story retail/office liner building provides an appropriate screen for a large-scale single-use building (such as a conference center, theatre, athletic facility or superstore).

4.5   TABLE OF PRIVATE FRONTAGES

The Private Frontage is the area between the building Facades and the Lot lines. The Private Frontage of buildings shall conform to and be allocated in accordance with the allowances for each district specified below.

	SECTION	PLAN	
	LOT ► ◄ R.O.W. PRIVATE ► ◄ PUBLIC FRONTAGE │ FRONTAGE	LOT ► ◄ R.O.W. PRIVATE ► ◄ PUBLIC FRONTAGE │ FRONTAGE	
A. Common Lawn: a planted Frontage wherein the Facade is set back substantially from the Frontage Line. The front yard created remains unfenced and is visually continuous with adjacent yards, supporting a common landscape. The deep Setback provides a buffer from the higher speed Thoroughfares.			UN
B. Porch & Fence: a planted Frontage wherein the Facade is set back from the Frontage Line with an attached porch permitted to Encroach. A fence at the Frontage Line maintains street spatial definition. Porches shall be no less than 8 feet deep.			UN
C. Terrace or Lightwell: a Frontage wherein the Facade is set back from the Frontage line by an elevated terrace or a sunken Lightwell. This type buffers Residential use from urban Sidewalks and removes the private yard from public Encroachment. Terraces are suitable for conversion to outdoor cafes.			UN / UCMX
D. Forecourt: a Frontage wherein a portion of the Facade is close to the Frontage Line and the central portion is set back. The Forecourt created is suitable for vehicular drop-offs. This type should be allocated in conjunction with other Frontage types. Large trees within the Forecourts may overhang the Sidewalks.			UN / UCMX / DT
E. Stoop: a Frontage wherein the Facade is aligned close to the Frontage Line with the first Story elevated from the Sidewalk sufficiently to secure privacy for the windows. The entrance is usually an exterior stair and landing. This type is recommended for ground-floor Residential use.			UN / UCMX / DT
F. Shopfront: a Frontage wherein the Facade is aligned close to the Frontage Line with the building entrance at Sidewalk grade. This type is conventional for Retail use. It has a substantial glazing on the Sidewalk level and an awning that may overlap the Sidewalk to within 2 feet of the Curb.			UCMX / DT
G. Gallery: a Frontage wherein the Facade is aligned close to the Frontage line with an attached cantilevered shed or a lightweight colonnade overlapping the Sidewalk. This type is conventional for Retail use. The Gallery shall be no less than 10 feet wide and should overlap the Sidewalk to within 2 feet of the Curb.			UCMX / DT
H. Arcade: a colonnade supporting habitable space that overlaps the Sidewalk, while the Facade at Sidewalk level remains at or behind the Frontage Line. This type is conventional for Retail use. The Arcade shall be no less than 12 feet wide and should overlap the Sidewalk to within 2 feet of the Curb.			UCMX / DT

None of this means want to turn the clock back to the 1950s . . .
But we can recapture some of our old urban wisdom.
America once built towns and cities we would cherish today, and we
can, with the right approach, build new versions for tomorrow.

West Union Street, Morganton, N.C. 1950s
A thriving scene unrecognizable today.

Village Square, Clemson Pendleton, S.C. Garden Suburb
Master Plan 2016. Stantec Urban Places Group

The "Golden Triangle" is as old as cities themselves. It shaped American towns for two centuries.
Then, after World War II, we forgot it in our love affair with the automobile.
Now we are relearning it as we reshape our communities for the challenges of the 21st century.

As part of that effort, Charlotte needs public spaces like the (now demolished)
Common Market courtyard (below, left.)
Instead we commit dreadful blunders like the dead space DIRECTLY NEXT TO
Carson Street light rail station! This is exactly where we need life and activity!

Several thousand people live and work within a five minute walk of this empty space (above right).
The building edges around this barren paving – right on the Rail Trail - should comprise
mini-retail spaces - a juice bar, a bicycle shop, etc. Instead we get blank walls, cars
behind bars and utility boxes. This badly designed private development undermines and
devalues the public tax dollars invested in the light rail line and the Rail Trail.
Yet the city allowed this to happen.
WHY? WHO ARE THE GATEKEEPERS? WHO UPHOLDS GOOD CIVIC DESIGN FOR CHARLOTTE?