A great street for a real estate broker might have a location that commands high rents; for a traffic engineer it might have a high capacity in vehicles per hour. But for a planner or urban designer, the phrase is likely to call to mind Allan Jacobs's 1993 manifesto for traditional street design, Great Streets.

In designating Great Streets—part of APA's Great Places in America program—APA was lining up with Allan Jacobs in favor of streets defined by continuous building frontages, sidewalks that are friendly to pedestrians, and a consistent concept for streetlights, paving, and landscaping. For the last two generations, modernist buildings surrounded by open space, not lined up fronting a street, and modernist streets designed for high-speed traffic, not pedestrians, have dominated city development. Outside of older centers, most U.S. streets conform to this modernist vision.

The 10 streets selected for recognition this year are all traditional streets, or are in the midst of an attempt to make them into traditional streets. There are impressive stories to be told about all 10 of them, but some are closer to greatness than others.

Preserving great traditional streets
Some of this year's streets had a head start. They date from the days of the traditional city, and much of what we value today was built into them at the beginning.

Main Street in downtown Annapolis, a historic street in a historic city, is a Great Street by anybody's definition. It is part of a progression of urban spaces that starts at Church Circle around historic St. Anne's Episcopal Church. St. Anne's pointed octagonal steeple is the focus for Main Street looking west. In the other direction the street descends to a view of the waterfront and a new waterfront square surrounding a traditional market building.

Main Street has always been a commercial street. It is lined on both sides with two- and three-story buildings. Most of them have been there a long time and all are carefully maintained. The shopping experience is continuous. A big parking garage is carefully hidden half a block off the street.

Both the street and sidewalks are brick. There are no above-ground utility wires and no intrusive traffic signals. The street lights are modeled on traditional gas lamps, but they are otherwise straightforward, and they are not angled out to invade the space of the street. There are few trees, because there never were trees; the street predates the 19th century fashion for street trees.

Main Street in Annapolis meets every textbook criterion for what a great street should be. The only possible argument against it would be that perhaps it is too perfect.

The blocks of South Broad Street in downtown Philadelphia from City Hall to South Street formed Philadelphia's main business district before World War II and are lined with neoclassical office towers asserting the permanence of now long-forgotten banks. The tower of Philadelphia's ornate City Hall creates a traditional focal point to the north. The Academy of Music opera house, other theaters, and the main building of the University of the Arts are also located on these blocks. The Kimmel Center for the Arts, Philadelphia's new performance center at Broad and Spruce streets, reinforces this arts concentration, as does a recent apartment house with a new theater on its lower floors.

These blocks have been given neo-Parisian street lights and a palate of gray masonry sidewalks and crosswalks that fits well with the belle époque character of the older buildings. The placement of traffic signals has also been controlled to keep vistas open up and down the street.

The sympathetic design of the street and the mix of offices, retail, arts, and residences on Broad Street and in the nearby blocks produce a vital urban district. The only problem is that the greatness pretty much runs out seven or eight blocks south of City Hall. This section of Broad Street is part of Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts concept, which is planned to extend farthersouth to Washington Avenue and north above City Hall, but it hasn't been completed yet.

The western end of West Main Street in downtown Louisville is predominantly lined with 19th century cast-iron-front warehouse buildings that have become Louisville's counterpart to the SoHo district in Manhattan. Moving east of Sixth Street, but still on West Main Street, takes you to an area transformed by urban renewal into a collection of detached modernist buildings set within plazas, including the Belvedere, a centerpiece of the original urban renewal plan.

On the south side of the street is the Humana Building, designed by Michael Graves, with two front pavilions more or less evoking the massing of the old warehouses, but framing a much taller tower.

The streetscape uses a simplified version of a traditional light fixture, a glass luminaire atop a metal pole, combined with brick pavers, street trees, and, at the western end, some imaginative street furniture, including a dragon bicycle rack. The scale of the streetscape works better at the warehouse end of the street than on the east, where it is the setting for much bigger buildings.

However, what is great about this street is that both old and new buildings are close to the street line and frame the space, giving it the vitality and variety of a downtown in a much bigger city.

South El Paso Street in El Paso, Texas, runs from the Santa Fe Street Bridge over the Rio Grande north through dense retail blocks into the center of the downtown, where the street loses some of its definition among bigger structures at Pioneer Plaza. Most of South El Paso Street is a utilitarian but very active urban retail district. While there are pawn shops and some vacant store fronts, the frontages are intact, with only
We once knew how to make them and we are learning to make them again.
one big corner parking lot directly on the street. The streetscape, with its neo-Parian fixtures and occasional trees, creates a lively environment and helps pull the experience of the street together. It’s active, it’s urban, and it works.

Summit Avenue in St. Paul is a mansion street, comparable to St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans, which was recognized last year. It occupies a plateau, and like other mansion streets that once were found in every city, it was and is a social summit as well as a physical one.

Summit Avenue runs from near the state capitol west for four and a half miles to the banks of the Mississippi River. Its predominant character is formed by its landscaping, with ample space for trees between sidewalk and street on both sides. A landscaped center island is added for the western end, creating a full boulevard.

As on all such streets, there are interpolations of larger buildings among the original mansions, but the landscaped character is consistently maintained, making it one of the very few very few City Beautiful parkways whose original quality has been preserved.

Reinventing modernist streets as traditional streets
Clarendon and Wilson boulevards in Arlington, Virginia, between the Clarendon and Court House Metro rail stations, once made up an ordinary suburban corridor. But today the parallel one-way streets have become very like traditional urban streets because of the far-sighted decision of Arlington County to welcome the Washington Metro into the community—unlike neighboring Fairfax, which segregated the Metro in the center island of Route 66.

The Arlington Metro stations have supported urban densities, including a cluster of office buildings at the Court House stop, a distinctive tower at the Clarendon station, and—in between—a walkable, mixed use urban center called Market Commons. The urbaniy is not consistent. There are new buildings that hold the street frontage, but there are still many block frontages of parking and several suburban-style buildings surrounded by parking near the western end. But the new direction is clear and Clarendon and Wilson boulevards have already undergone a remarkable transformation.

If you look at old maps of Boston, you will see that Washington Street in Boston's South End once occupied a narrow ridge of land, almost a causeway, connecting the center of Boston to its surroundings across wetlands and open water. The land on either side was long ago filled in and the neighborhoods developed with streets of brick town houses, similar to those on Beacon Hill.

The South End neighborhoods lost a battle for social prestige to Beacon Hill and the Back Bay by the end of the 19th century, but remained viable housing. Washington Street became a traffic artery lined with a mixture of old buildings, modern buildings set back from the street, and vacant and underused properties. Now both the street and neighborhoods have been given a new vitality as a mixed use, mixed income area. A consistent streetscape design has been installed on Washington Street all the way from Melnea Cass Boulevard across the intersection with Massachusetts Avenue and northeast up to the on-ramps for Interstate 90 on the edge of downtown. This is an intervention at a very large scale.

Even more important, empty and underused sites along Washington Street have been filled in with brick-faced buildings that hold the street frontage line. These buildings, although larger than the town houses on the side streets, are in scale with the neighborhoods and recreate a traditional frontage at many points along the corridor.

The streetscape design of neo-Parian twin luminaries, brick paving, and trees has been installed for the entire length of the street, providing continuity despite modernist housing projects, hospital buildings, and other structures set back from the street or turning away from it. Not every block is equally good, but the overall effect is a great street.

Mill Avenue in downtown Tempe, near the University of Arizona campus, was widened in the 1950s to become a major arterial. Sidewalks were narrowed and verandas were removed from old buildings along the frontages so the street would meet state highway standards.

In 1987 traffic patterns were changed. Broad sidewalks were restored, verandas put back, and the street was landscaped with brick pavers, live oaks, and Washington-style light fixtures. Many vacant or underused lots have since been filled in with moderately large mixed use buildings that hold the street line. Most recently the street has been reorganized to have only one through-traffic lane in each direction, making the street even friendlier to pedestrians, and a more attractive part of the vital urban district of which it is an edge. Tempe Butte and the flour mill at the north end of the street make it certain that the stretch of Mill Avenue will never be mistaken for anywhere else. There are plans to adapt the mill, now vacant, to be a mixed use development.

Can a great street have overhead utility wires?
Commercial Street in downtown Portland, Maine, runs parallel to the Fore River waterfront. The landward side of the street forms the southern edge of Portland's historic center. It has a continuous row of older buildings with some modern residential structures that are in scale with their neighbors. The narrow brick sidewalks and granite curbs have the same finishes that are found on other streets in central Portland.

On the water side there are some historic warehouse buildings, but also parking lots where other waterfront buildings used to be. Redevelopment stopped on the water side of Commercial Street following a public debate about whether the harbor was losing its character as a working waterfront. Some working piers are left and bits of the river are visible beyond the continuous parking lot frontages, which also have brick sidewalks. The big problem with the street is not the parking lots but the wooden utility poles on both sides, the overhead electrical and telephone wires strung along and across the street, and the metal transformer canisters hanging from the poles.

Seventh Avenue in the Ybor City District of Tampa, Florida, is the center of a group of old cigar factories and neighborhood stores that has been turned into a regional destination for restaurants and entertainment: a great success story. The streetscape has tall palm trees and the pedestrian light fixtures are clusters of globe lights in a 19th century style. Seventh Avenue also has overhead utility wires, and the street lights are fixed to the utility poles.

It is true that Seventh Avenue in Ybor City is much narrower than Commercial Street in Portland, and it has fewer wires. There are permanent armatures for ornamental lights suspended across the street so there are wire-like elements bridging the street in any case. One could also argue that the ad hoc mix of utility poles and overhead service wires are part of the original gritty character of Ybor City.

All the same, the street would still be better without the utility poles and wires. The heavy booms suspending signals out over the traffic lanes are also unnecessarily intrusive for such a narrow street with relatively slow traffic. You don’t see traffic signal armatures like this on Broad Street, a busy traffic artery right in the center of Philadelphia. Creating a great street means paying attention to such details. They make a difference.

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