

# Shades of Comfort: Privacy and the Street

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## Introduction

The importance of public space in a democratic society is understood (Westin 1970). Urbanists have identified the street as the “major public space for...sociability to develop” (Jacobs 1993, p. 4). In Mitchell Duneier’s words, “sidewalk life is crucial” because it is on the sidewalk that strangers and friends interact, exchange information, and monitor activity (1999, p.8).<sup>1</sup> Oscar Newman pointed to the importance of “natural surveillance” that occurs when people feel comfortable in the semi-private, semi-public and public space of their neighborhoods (1972, p.78-79).

However, the auto-oriented urban planning and design of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has resulted in the erosion of the streetscape as public space. Social critics and urbanists have noted that the public space of the street has been replaced by mere circulation space (Beaudrillard 1988, Jacobs 1993). Urban designers now look to historic streets as patterns for recreating pedestrian-friendly streetscapes. Conditions of pedestrian comfort have been evaluated by other researchers as they relate to climate, protection from vehicles, and spatial conditions of the street (Burden 2000, Jacobs 1993). But in a discourse that emphasizes the public nature of the street, privacy is seldom addressed.

A person’s ability to regulate privacy, both in seclusion and in public, is an aspect of personal freedom (Westin 1970). Privacy occurs and is necessary in public space, especially in dense urban environments, where privacy indoors may be limited (Westin 1970). Although little has been written about privacy on the street, Allan Jacobs’ statement from the introduction to his book *Great Streets*, is evidence of his awareness of the need for privacy on the street (1993, p.4):

...At the same time [as it is public], the street is a place to be alone, to be private....It is a place for the mind to wander, triggered by something there on the street or by something internal, more personal, a place to walk while whatever is inside unfolds, yet again.

However, this statement considers only one type of privacy, that of the *flâneur* who escapes into anonymity on the street. Anonymity is just one of four recognized states of privacy. Privacy is a complex phenomenon, dependant above all on the individual’s need for it. Achieving a desired level of privacy has a profound effect on the comfort of a person on the street.

This paper presents exploratory research into privacy on the street. First, working definitions of privacy and exposure are explained. Each state of privacy is discussed as it applies to streets. Factors that allow for privacy on the street are identified and described through an introspective study of several streets. Directions for future research are then proposed.

## Privacy versus Exposure

### *Privacy*

Privacy is a boundary regulation process critical to the formation of self-identity. By regulating privacy, an individual creates boundaries between the self and the non-self (Westin 1970). A person’s need for privacy is dynamic, like the “shifting permeability of a cell membrane,” sometimes receptive to inputs, sometimes closed (Altman 1975, p.10). Through privacy, individuals and groups “control their visual, auditory and olfactory interactions with others” (Lang 1987, p.154).

Some empirical studies substantiate the need for privacy in the formation of a healthy self-identity; this data comes primarily from psychological studies of mental patients (Goffman and Jourard cited in Altman 1975). Anthropological study of privacy in world cultures also bolsters the argument that privacy is necessary to human beings. Studies by Mead, Hall, and

Geertz, all pioneers of cultural anthropology, have pointed to privacy as a dynamic process based upon culturally-dependant mechanisms (Westin 1970).

Alan F. Westin, legal scholar and political scientist, identifies four states of privacy through his review of anthropological, psychological, and sociological evidence. *Solitude* is a state in which the individual is “freed from the observation of other persons” (1970, p.31). Solitude may occur on the street as meditative or reflective walking, in both isolated and busy street settings. *Intimacy*, in which a group of two or more individuals seclude themselves from the outside world, allows for a “basic need of human contact” (1970, p.31). Intimacy commonly occurs as couples or groups walk together and gather along the street (Figure 1).

*Anonymity* “occurs when the individual is in public places...but still seeks, and finds, freedom from identification and surveillance” (1970, p.31). Anonymity, being ‘alone in the crowd,’ is a state of privacy especially suited to busy streets teeming with pedestrians. *Reserve* “is the creation of a psychological barrier against unwanted intrusion” (1970, p.31). Reserve, a subtle state of privacy, depends upon the willingness of others to respect the psychological barrier. Reserve occurs on the street when verbal and body language cues are given and respected. For example, a patron at a sidewalk café may sit in the midst of street life, but an open book in her hands and her focus on the book sends a signal that she wishes to be left alone.



Figure 1. A pedestrian couple in a state of intimacy on the street. Photo by author.

Westin goes on to identify four functions of privacy: personal autonomy, emotional release, self-evaluation, and limited and protected communication. While some functions are better satisfied by certain states of privacy, every state has in common the attempt to control “the movement of information across a boundary...” (Shils quoted in Altman 1975, p.18). The boundary may be of the self, a boundary between groups, or a boundary between groups and individuals.

### *Exposure*

The opposite of privacy, exposure, is a lack of refuge or cover from unwanted intrusion or surveillance. Exposure could be the intrusion of curious individuals, or it could be surveillance by a group (Westin 1970). In democratic societies, individual privacy is primarily threatened by the ‘gaze’ of other individuals. However, it should be noted that a limited amount of police or governmental surveillance of citizens on the street does occur in democratic societies. Other societies engage in extensive surveillance of citizens on the street (Klein 2008).<sup>ii</sup> While democratic societies view privacy as a right, totalitarian societies have historically attempted to deny the need for privacy, painting it as “immoral” or “antisocial” (Westin 1970, p.23).

On the street, as in other settings for life, the need for privacy occurs along a dynamic continuum based upon the dialectal relationship between privacy and exposure. ‘Seeing and being seen’ is a common activity; yet privacy is still needed. This continuum can be expressed in

a gradient of value, from excessive, undesirable privacy (obscurity) to a total lack of privacy (exposure) (Figure 2). The primary threat to privacy of pedestrians on the street comes from the gaze of motorists and passengers in vehicles, from other pedestrians, and from occupants of adjacent buildings. In an instance of absolute exposure, the pedestrian has no protection, while motorists and building occupants enjoy some degree of privacy in their ‘bubbles.’

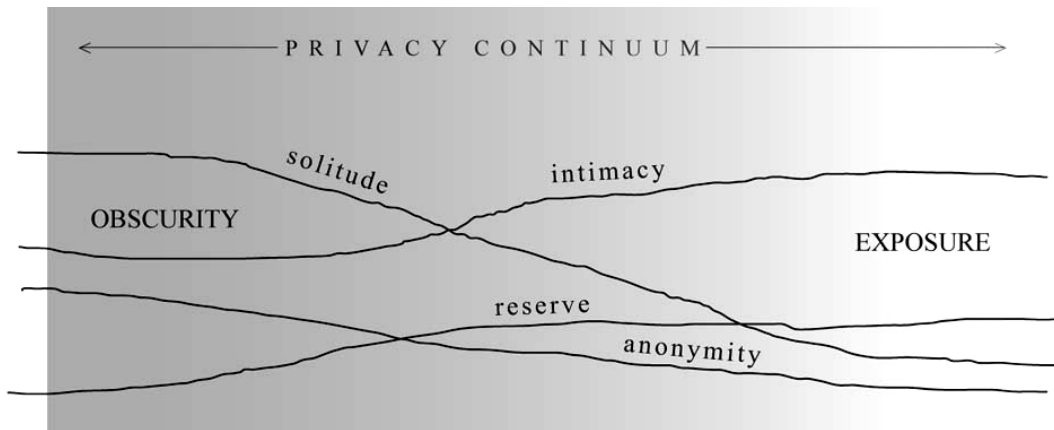


Figure 2. *Shades of Privacy: An individual's need for privacy, in various states, is dynamic. Image by author.*

In the most extreme streetscapes, the pedestrian is totally exposure (Figures 3 and 4). While a sidewalk is provided along the roadway, spatial conditions give no protection from the gaze of motorists. A pedestrian on this street feels like he is ‘in a fish bowl.’ Four spatial factors create the sensation of exposure:



Figure 3. *Pedestrian exposure on Fort Riley Boulevard, Manhattan, Kansas. Photo by author.*

- direct site lines between motorists and pedestrians,
- no secondary masses (such as trees) to separate the walkway from traffic lanes and baffle sight lines,
- an impermeable street wall with no opportunity for refuge, and
- a disproportionate relationship between the width of traffic lanes and the area allotted to pedestrians (see Figure 4).

The uncomfortably narrow sidewalk, with no ‘spill over’ area for pedestrians on either side, also makes pedestrians vulnerable to intrusion by one another, as it is difficult to pass without entering each other’s personal space.

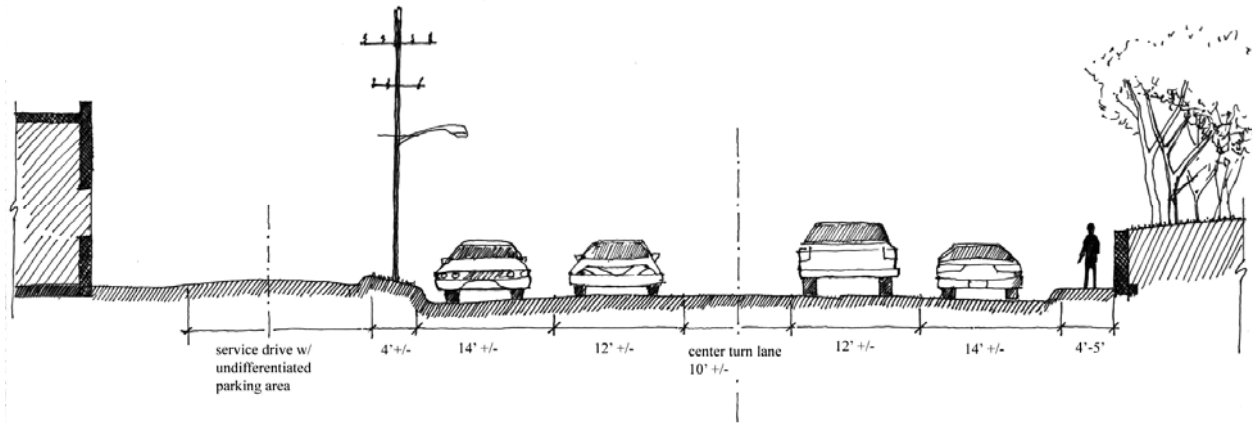


Figure 4. Cross Section of Fort Riley Boulevard, Manhattan, Kansas. Image by author.

### Types of Streets for Exploratory Study

Fort Riley Boulevard, which typifies pedestrian exposure on the street, is an arterial street and state highway. Some argue that the role of such a street is to move cars and trucks, not to accommodate people. However, small and mid-size cities often lack effective public transportation, forcing those without cars to walk, even along arterial highways. As North America strives to reduce oil-dependence, providing for pedestrians is more important than ever.

Allan Jacobs identifies twelve types of pedestrian “streets that teach” (1993, p.133). Of Jacobs’ street types, I have identified five which occur in Manhattan, Kansas, the location for this exploratory study:<sup>iii</sup>

- Residential Boulevards,
- Residential Streets,
- Small Town Main Streets,
- One-sided Streets, and
- Tree Streets.

These five types, already identified by Jacobs as ‘great’ pedestrian streets, were examined through introspective analysis for conditions that foster all four states of privacy. Each of the streets studied in Manhattan, Kansas, is part of a linked system covering approximately two square miles.

### Privacy Conditions on the Street

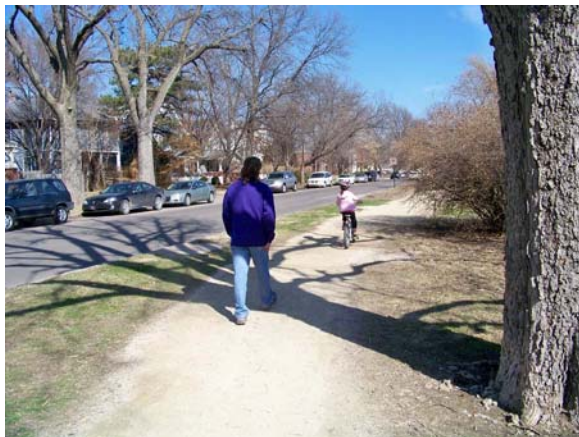
The following description of conditions for privacy on the street is drawn from an introspective analysis, carried out over several days with a notebook, camera, and two willing pedestrian subjects<sup>iv</sup>. I walked each street and photographed the pedestrians for scale. I noted my sensations of privacy and exposure along the walk. I identified a list of eight factors affecting privacy conditions on the street: pools of shade, baffles to break sight lines, topographical protection from sight lines, setbacks from vehicular traffic lanes, porches, noise levels, amount of vehicular traffic, and occupancy of the street wall. The list is not meant to be exhaustive; it simply represents what occurred as I walked in Manhattan, Kansas.

### *Pools of shade*

The primary difference between pedestrians on the street and those who might intrude upon their privacy is exposure to sunlight. Building occupants have refuge in shaded interiors; motorists, though more visible, experience some degree of privacy within the shade of automobiles. Tree shade (Figure 5) provides intermittent obscurity to the pedestrian, visually protecting him from others and potentially facilitating a feeling of solitude, anonymity, intimacy or reserve.

Fourteenth Street between Fremont Street and Poyntz Avenue is a ‘one-sided street’ (Figure 6). This residential street fronts City Park, a 45 acre public park. The west side of the street is defined by large single family homes and mature street trees. The east side of the street is less defined: in some areas, street trees and park trees define a walking trail, in other areas, the trail is exposed and the street opens to a grassy expanse of park. On its east side, Fourteenth Street can be considered a ‘tree street’ where space is predominantly defined by trees.

Because definition of the east side of the street is sporadic, pools of shade are the only refuge for pedestrians from the gaze of motorists and other persons on the street. When other secondary masses are absent (shrubs, low walls, street furnishings, light poles), street trees that cast shade over the sidewalk in ‘pools’ can foster privacy.



*Figure 5. Pool of Shade. Photo by author.*



*Figure 6. One-sided street: Fourteenth Street along City Park, Manhattan, Kansas. Photo by author.*

### *Baffles to break site lines*

When the street wall is primarily defined by architecture, secondary masses separating sidewalks from buildings and traffic lanes can give pedestrians refuge from exposure. Except in dense commercial areas, trees are the most common form of secondary mass.

Legore Lane is a dead-end ‘residential boulevard.’ The traffic volume is low; I felt safe walking, although there are no sidewalks (Figure 7). Because of its seclusion from through-traffic, walking into Legore Lane as a stranger feels like an intrusion into the privacy of its residents. Because the homes on Legore Lane do not have attached porches, pedestrian and resident are in direct view of one another as residents enter or leave their homes.

The trunks of mature sycamore trees, planted in a triple row down the boulevard (Figure 7), are the only elements that allowed me some privacy from residents in their yards (Figure 8). However, the justifiable curiosity of residents made it hard to maintain my reserve.





*Figure 7. Residential boulevard: Legore Lane, Manhattan, Kansas. Photo by author.*



*Figure 8. Baffles created by tree trunks are the only privacy element between residents (seated near house) and pedestrians. Photo by author.*

### *Topographical protection from sight lines*

Elevating sidewalks above motorists' line of sight also increases the possibility of privacy for pedestrians. Although a motorist or passenger could crane her neck or adjust his seating position, the pedestrian assumes that the motorists gaze is focused on the road ahead. Therefore, even a slight elevation of the walkway (two feet) above the bottom of curb enhances privacy of the pedestrian. On the example 'residential street,' Poyntz Avenue near Delaware Street, the sidewalk occupies a middle position, protected from lower site lines of motorists and higher site lines from porches (Figures 8 and 9).



*Figure 8. Residential street: Poyntz Avenue near Delaware Street, Manhattan, Kansas. Sidewalk elevation, combined with generous setback of sidewalk from traffic lanes and tree baffles, creates a setting for privacy. Photo by author.*

### *Setbacks from vehicular traffic lanes*

Increasing the viewing distance between vehicles and pedestrians reduces intrusion on pedestrian privacy. A generous setback of eight feet or more, combined with baffles (such as street trees) to break sight lines, reduces the sensation of exposure to motorists (Figure 8). Without intermittent baffles, however, a pedestrian would still feel exposed, even with a setback from traffic lanes.



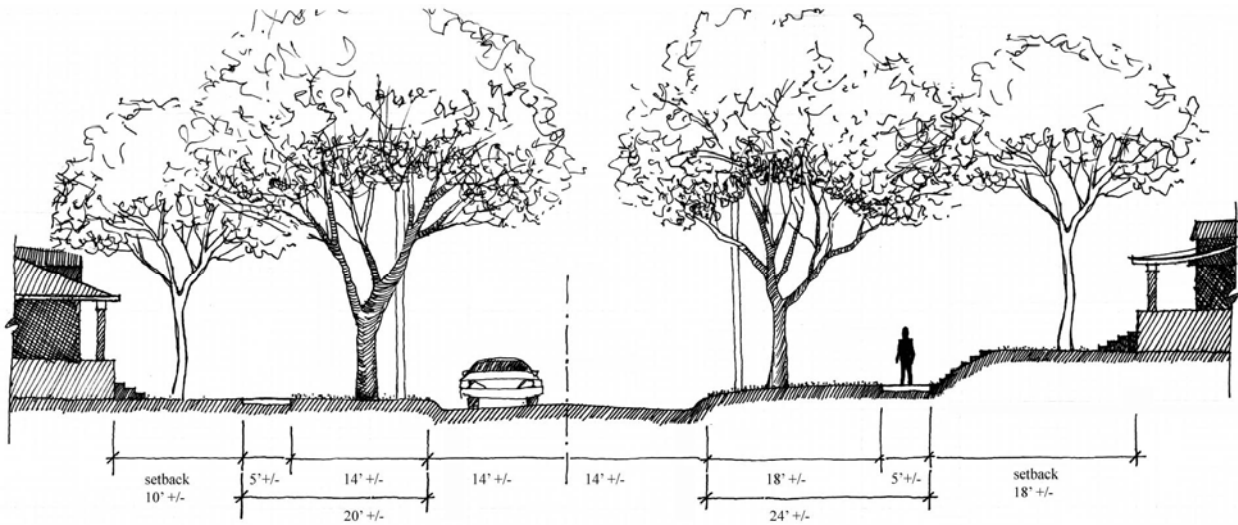


Figure 9. Cross section of Poyntz Avenue near Delaware Street, Manhattan, Kansas. Image by author.

### *Porches*

The street is a place where zones of privacy overlap. Marc Treib notes that the street wall is a changing membrane where semi-private, semi-public, and public space meet. Changes occur over time as façades are opened or closed for daily and seasonal purposes (Treib in Celik, ed. 1994).



Figure 10. Residential street: Porches give pedestrians advanced notice of residents entering the street. Photo by author.

Porches are transitional, semi-private spaces between house and street. Porches not only shield pedestrians from inhabitants, they also protect residents from the gaze of pedestrians by providing shade and a baffle to windows. For the pedestrian, porches allow for early awareness of others on the street, before building occupants enter a sidewalk (Figure 10). Even peripheral awareness of activity on porches allows a pedestrian to choose between many options to preserve privacy. A pedestrian walking on a quiet residential street, for example, may choose to slow down, cross the street, change direction, or adjust body language to maintain a desired level of privacy.

### *Level of Noise*

Intimacy, more than any other state of privacy, may be affected by noise levels on the street. Ambient sound on the street can either enhance or detract from feelings of privacy. ‘White noise’ creates an acoustic cover for intimate conversations. I experienced pleasant white noise on Legore Lane, where the sycamore trees host songbirds on a spring day and there is almost no vehicular traffic. I also experienced pleasant white noise on Poyntz Avenue downtown, where

Poyntz becomes a ‘mainstreet.’ On Poyntz Avenue downtown, steady, slow-moving traffic and other pedestrians create a low, pleasant level of noise.



Figure 11. Small town main street: Poyntz Avenue, downtown, moderate traffic and noise. Photo by author.

Interfering noise, that is unpleasantly loud noise, makes it impossible to hold an intimate conversation. Fort Riley Boulevard, with its high volume of traffic at 40 miles per hour, has a high noise level that necessitates yelling, even to a close companion on the street. Paradoxically, high levels of ambient noise that a pedestrian finds pleasant, such as a street fair, may enhance feelings of anonymity in a crowd.

*Amount of vehicular traffic; Occupancy of the street wall*

Amount of vehicular traffic and occupancy of the street wall can, together, greatly affect a desired level of privacy. Although it seems counter-intuitive, a steady level of vehicular

traffic can protect pedestrian privacy by forcing motorists to keep moving. A busy vehicular street may foster more anonymity, solitude, and reserve than a street with only sporadic vehicular traffic.

Where traffic is slow or sporadic, the motorist has the option to slow and match pace with the pedestrian, or to stop altogether and attempt to engage the pedestrian. On the example street, Houston Street, a downtown cross street one block off of the main street, sporadic traffic combined with an impermeable street wall made me feel vulnerable to motorists. In this situation, where most buildings are vacant or locked, there is no ‘natural surveillance.’ I felt too much privacy (obscurity), without other observers on the street, while I also felt entirely exposed to motorists. There are no baffles between sidewalk and vehicles. Very low traffic volume makes it possible for a motorist to slow or stop and intrude upon the privacy of a pedestrian.



Figure 12. One block off the small town main street: Houston Street, with vacant façades (left) and no baffles between pedestrians and motorists (right). Photo by author.

## Conclusions and Need for Future Research

The exploratory study in Manhattan, Kansas identifies eight factors that affect a pedestrian's ability to achieve a desired level of privacy on the street. However, because privacy is complex, and depends upon a locus of control within the individual, introspective study of these factors does not result in definitive recommendations for better streetscape design. Further study could substantiate the importance of these eight factors, and possibly discover others, using multiple sources of evidence, from multiple subjects, in a variety of settings.

One means to evaluate the dialectic nature of privacy is to measure "desired versus achieved privacy." When the two are equal, an optimal state of privacy is achieved (Altman 1975, p27). Desired amount of privacy varies by individual, location, time of day, and mood. The definition of these variables will guide selection of future streets, and pedestrians, for study.

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<sup>ii</sup> Mitchell Duneier, in his ethnography of Greenwich Village sidewalks, quotes Jane Jacobs' famous phrase "eyes upon the street" from her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* ( New York: Vintage, 1961, p.68).

<sup>ii</sup> In her article, "China's All-Seeing Eye", Naomi Klein notes that American companies are developing streetscape surveillance technology currently used in Shenzhen, China. Cameras in street lamps are trained on pedestrian space at regular intervals, and linked to software that identifies individuals and alerts authorities to gatherings.

<sup>iii</sup> Manhattan, Kansas, population 52,000 and growing according to 2007 census data, is a college town in the temperate zone of the North American Great Plains.

<sup>iv</sup> I would like to thank Lindsay Smith and Iris Kingery, as well as three other 'pedestrians on the street,' for giving me permission to photograph them.

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