

My Pick for the Great American Neighborhood

By Jay Walljasper

Last year I published the [*Great Neighborhood Book*](#), which offers hundreds of ideas from around the world about making community improvements on issues ranging from crime prevention to environmental restoration. Since then almost everyone I meet asks: What's your favorite neighborhood?

I should have an answer ready. But each time the question arises, my mind starts wandering through the great places I've explored through the years. Is it the Plateau neighborhood in Montreal, where I became infatuated with cities years ago as a college student? Maybe Trastevere, the old bohemian quarter of Rome my wife Julie and I visited as newlyweds? Or what about Harter Heights, which I enjoyed strolling through recently on a trip to South Bend, Indiana?

To settle the matter once and for all, I wrote up a list of all the wonderful corners of the urban world I've had the pleasure of visiting. Then, with great deliberation, I began to cross off names until only Jacobsburg remained. It is, in my opinion, is the finest neighborhood in America.

To keep the suspense going, I will let you figure out the surprising city where Jacobsburg is located. But here are the things I love about it.

Jacobsburg grew up slowly in a variety of architectural styles between 1890, when streetcars first reached this wooded spot along the river, and 1920, when the boom in automobile sales opened up distant suburban tracts for development. Buses now ply streets where rails once ran, but the corner business districts that popped up to serve trolley riders are still the heart of the community. Butcher shops and haberdasheries, however, have now given way to ethnic eateries and vintage clothing shops.

One of the traits I most admire about Jacobsburg is a knack for being quaintly old-fashioned and au courant cosmopolitan at the same time. At one of my favorite streetcorners in the world, 19th St. and Holly Avenue, a delicatessen run by an old guy named Rocco and his son Gus looks out across the intersection at a high-fashion coffeeshop with fair trade beans from 14 countries and the best selection of design magazines this side of Tokyo. On the other two corners sit the Mogadishu Star, a Somali restaurant, and Crazy Kat Comics, a used and rare comic book store. Within a few steps you'll come across a Reconstructionist synagogue, the largest fan belt dealer in the state, a Carnegie library, a Caribbean seafood restaurant once written up in Food + Wine magazine and a laundromat made famous in an R&B song.

Years ago, the neighborhood was an Eastern European enclave with a sprinkling of Jamaicans who first came to the area as farm laborers during World War II. Today it is a veritable United Nations, thanks in part to the nearby college whose diverse student body keeps the streets lively all day and most of the night.

What do I like most about Jacobsburg? Well, I could mention plentiful trees shading the sidewalks or the pleasing sequence of three-and four-story buildings with front stoops where

people sit out to socialize on warm evenings. Then there's the newly refurbished Riverwood park (which everyone says was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, but wasn't) with a swan pond, skateboard ramps, a weekend farmers' market, summer band concerts and a café with better pastry than you'll find in Copenhagen.

And how could I ignore the invincible spirit of neighborliness, apparent even to a casual visitor? Current residents explain that the neighborhood set aside its own ethnic tensions in the 1960s and came together to fight a freeway that would have essentially leveled the place. That sense of civic engagement endures to this day. The local business association sponsors an annual Spring Festival with a 30-foot maypole in the playground of St. Stanislaus School. Meanwhile a VFW Post, a commedia dell'Arte theatre troupe, a Baptist congregation, a Mexican motorcycle club and a gay men's chorus are among the dozens of local organizations that collaborate to raise money for the neighborhood food shelf.

But if forced to name one thing that makes this neighborhood so great, I would have to say it's the streets. That sounds prosaic, I know-how can mere asphalt compete with Rocco's famous Ukrainian sausage or the boysenberry-fig Danish at the Parkview Café? Please let me explain.

The streets of Jacobsburg-thanks to far-sighted urban planning at the turn of the 20th century and lots of vigilant neighborhood activism ever since-are places for people more than conduits for cars. From my first visit in the early 1990s, I remember being amazed at how liberating it felt walking the streets in a place where pedestrians take priority over automobiles.

Nineteenth Street, like busy streets all around the country, was widened in the 1970s. But after two kids were killed by speeding cars on successive Saturdays, the neighborhood rose up demanding that the road be scaled back to two lanes. It took twelve years, but City Hall finally agreed and the whole area soon blossomed into a favorite destination for visitors from all over town. They come to browse shops, dine in restaurants, drink beer, tour art galleries, see shows at the clubs, but most of all to simply be part of the crowd strolling up and down the sidewalks.

This popularity means the streets carry a lot of traffic in both cars and buses, but not at the expense of pedestrians. Careful attention has been paid to make walking a pleasurable activity. The sidewalks are wide enough to function almost as town squares, so you'll find sidewalk cafes, whimsical sculpture, flower patches, buskers and plenty of benches to sit down for a conversation.

Parking is scarce but that's not been a deterrent to ever-growing economic vitality. Residents generally walk or bike around the neighborhood, and motorists are willing to park some distance away since the side streets are both safe and interesting, thanks to the heavy foot traffic. A new transit line connecting Jacobsburg to the university and downtown has become the preferred way for many folks to arrive. Bike trails proliferating across the city are also helping lighten the traffic load.

One last thing I want to mention about Jacobsburg is the wealth of great pubs, which live up to an older sense of the word -- meaning "public house" -- rather than the current definition as "a place to drink." Families encompassing three generations can be found in the booths at corner taverns like The White Eagle or Syl & Mary's eating supper right alongside laborers celebrating quitting time and students commemorating the end of another day of classes. The great majority

of these pubs share a virtue that English novelist George Orwell described as "quiet enough to talk," in a 1946 essay about his favorite London pub, The Moon Under Water.

But The Moon Under the Water existed only in Orwell's imagination, a composite of the qualities he found in pubs across England. And the same is true of Jacobsburg, a neighborhood that I dreamed up out of wonderful experiences I've had on the streets of many American cities. I named it after urbanist visionary Jane Jacobs. Holly Avenue honors William H. (Holly) Whyte, the far-sighted champion of public spaces.

But rather than being uselessly Utopian, I see Jacobsburg as the future that's possible for neighborhoods everywhere as people work to create great streets and public spaces in our communities.