

Street Smarts

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Do you walk down the “street” or the “road”? It probably depends on whether you’re in the city or country. In fact, it would be hard to find a “road” in New York or Chicago, or a “street” in a rural area. The distinction may lie in the words’ origins.

“Road” comes from the Old English verb *ridan*, to ride. Originally “road” referred to the journey itself, and not the path traveled. Since many such trips were made on horseback through countryside, it may explain the word’s predominantly nonurban usage. The term also shows up in nautical usage, where “road” or “roadstead” signifies a protected place offshore where ships may ride at anchor.

“Street,” on the other hand, is a borrowing from the Romans, who were master road builders. Typically a Roman *via strata*—a way paved in layers—was as straight as an arrow, to represent the shortest distance between two points. Most of today’s urban “streets,” in fact, are straight, in contrast with rural “roads,” which can be twisty and unpaved.

And while most urban thoroughfares — another term to think about — in the United States have been dubbed “street,” there’s no shortage of more elegant words for the same thing. Most are borrowed from foreign languages. We’ve often tried to glorify the most ordinary street by bestowing on it the French “avenue”. In its strictest sense, this is a grand, wide street with ornamental plantings down the side or on a narrow center island. Granted, few people would regard, say, New York City’s Second Avenue as grand at all. (Considering the rents now charged there, though, we may have to reconsider.) But at least New Yorkers make a distinction between streets and avenues. The avenues in Manhattan, running north-south on that narrow island, are longer and wider than the streets, which run east-west.

One step farther than “avenue” is “boulevard,” recalling the broad, leafy thoroughfares of 19th-century Paris. A boulevard is even wider, grander, and more elegant than an avenue.

The term “block”, as it pertains to small chunks of real estate bounded by urban streets and avenues, is a homegrown American usage, though borrowed from Dutch apparently. Only recently has it been adopted by the British. I once knew an English romance novelist who gleefully pointed out the error of a rival American writer who had used the word “block” to describe a stretch of 18th-century London street. What solecism !

In most cities as you walk along street, avenue, or boulevard, you are likely to come across open spaces with geometrical designations: square, circle, crescent. Why are there

no triangles or rectangles, I wonder? (College campuses, though, do have quadrangles.)

In any case, these geometrical terms have become notoriously approximate. Many visitors to New York City must leave wondering where exactly is Times Square, because, in fact, there isn't much of a square there anymore; it's more of a jumbled nexus of streets and traffic. A visitor to London might feel the same about Oxford Circus, a widening in the middle of busy Oxford Street that hardly appears round.

Road signs labeled "cross" or "cors" are reasonably common in our countryside. This last one puzzled me for a long time until I discovered it was a sign maker's abbreviation for "corners" — another place where two or more roads intersect.

Closer to home, there is a small street in my Brooklyn neighborhood with the whimsical appellation of "Tennis Court." While the term "court" — from the Latin *cohors*, or enclosure — may be alive and well in suburban subdivisions, I suspect there are far fewer "courts" in U.S. cities than there once were. Ditto with the terms "passage," "lane," "place," and "alley." But Pirate's Alley survives in New Orleans.

Gutter Talk

I always thought I knew the definition of "gutter": that part of the edge of the street where garbage collected, where rainwater ran, and where you would end up if you didn't listen to your mother. But in the United States the meaning seems to depend on where you live.

In rural parts of New England, for example, "gutter" means a small stream. But to some people in New York City— certainly in Brooklyn — it is a synonym for "street." The term, as in "don't play in the gutter," lacks pejorative overtones or any exclusive reference to the *side* of the road. One colleague's mother warned him as a boy: "Don't play in the gutter and cross the street at the light." Two words for the same thing. He did not know why.

In British cities, wise pedestrians stick to the "path," "footpath," or "pavement." "Sidewalk" seems to be purely an American usage. Imagine the puzzlement of a British friend of mine who, studying to take a U.S. driving test, read that he must drive on the right-hand side of the pavement. (The concept of driving on the right side of the road was bad enough.) But my friend would have felt right at home in Philadelphia, where they sometimes use "pavement" to mean sidewalk.

Then there's the old question of what to call the grass strip between the sidewalk and the road. I, for one, have never called it anything. But in the U.S. South, I'm told, names include "parkway" (Alabama); "sidewalk plot" (Georgia and Tennessee); and "tree lawn." Another term, oddly enough, is "boulevard" (eastern Louisiana).

Foreign-derived street talk goes beyond avenue and boulevard. In fact, even the prosy and utilitarian word "route" is derived from the French. Somewhat more elegant is the

Spanish-derived “plaza,” translated simply as “place.” This term is common in cities of the U.S. West and Southwest, regions settled by the Spanish. San Francisco, for example, has its Hallidie Plaza (named, apparently for the inventor of the cable car).

“Highway” however, is thoroughly English. Most of us use this term to denote a long, multi-lane road on which traffic can travel quickly and without interruption. That has been its meaning, more or less, throughout its long history, except, of course, in Brooklyn again where King’s Highway wanders amiably like a cowpath, though you can move fairly quickly on it. Our King’s Highway dates from the days when King’s County was really the king’s, but the term “king’s highway” goes back much further than that: it is found in an Anglo-Saxon land charter from the year 859. “High,” in this case, means main or “principal,” as in High Street or high altar.

Over the years, U.S. highways have been called thruways, freeways, parkways, and expressways; the derivations are obvious. But what about “turnpike,” you say? First used in the 18th century for toll roads where a wooden pole or “pike” was turned to let paying travelers pass, it subsequently began to stand for countless other toll roads across the country.

The United States, of course, boasts many roads that originated as Indian trails. Many were later expanded and used by settlers and pioneers: the Chisholm Trail, the Natchez Trace, and Nemaquin’s Path — the original name of Braddock’s Road in Pittsburgh. Perhaps later generations will find our “drive”, as in Lake Shore Drive just as evocative. But I doubt it.

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