

## Walking

By Kaizer Rangwala, AICP, CEcD, CNU-A

### A PATH TO PROSPERITY, HEALTH, AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

We used to design cities for people. Human comfort, interest, and safety were guiding principles in the design of streets, buildings, and open spaces. Most daily needs were within a five-minute walk or a transit ride. For the last half a century, we have designed our cities and suburbs around the automobile. In the wake of recent demographic and market shifts and the looming public health crisis resulting from a sedentary lifestyle, cities are rediscovering the many and lasting financial, health, social, and environmental benefits of walkable places. This article explores the economic and other advantages of walking to create vibrant and successful places. It offers suggestions on what economic developers can do to improve walkability of an area.

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# walking

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It is difficult to imagine children playing today in the streets or even people walking in the streets. Today, children play in the safety of parks or rear yards, away from the dangers that may lurk in the streets. Walking in the streets has been marginalized to sidewalks and crossings. People walking in the streets are condemned as “jaywalkers.” Yet, less than a century ago, the street was a shared public space used for movement primarily by foot, horse, trams, and bikes. Streets were also used for many essential trade activities and a variety of civic, social, and recreational activities.

What happened? Why did we stop walking? What did we gain and at what cost? Why should economic developers be concerned about streets and walking? This article attempts to answer these questions by exploring the lesser known history of streets and the many advantages of walking, including economic benefits related to recent demographic shifts. It also offers a few strategies to improve walkability.

## WHY DID WE STOP WALKING?

In just two decades from the 1910s to 1930s, American cities went through a physical and social transformation. In the 1910s, cars were still a novelty item primarily affordable for the wealthy. Cars offered speed and speed killed. Many of those killed were children. Peter Norton in his book “Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City” notes the broad anti-automobile campaign that reviled motorists as “road hogs” or “speed demons” and cars as “juggernauts” or “death cars.”

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Photo Credit: Lara Swimmer Photography

Vulcan Inc. developed pedestrian-friendly pocket parks in Seattle's South Lake Union area to create a vibrant landscape.

In Cincinnati, there was a strong campaign in 1923 to require cars to have “governors,” which would not allow a car to be driven over 25 mph.<sup>1</sup> The parents of victims and pedestrians campaigned against motorists on moral grounds, fighting for “justice.”

Cities and downtown businesses tried to regulate traffic in the name of “efficiency.” This involved removing curb parking; optimizing traffic signals; and educating the “jay” pedestrian (a term synonymous with a naive person out of touch with urban living) to keep out of the way of speeding cars.

The fatal blow was struck when the automotive interest groups, referred to as Motordom by Norton, came together to support a new tax on gasoline on one condition: every dollar from the tax would go to increasing street capacity. Streets and high-

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ways built by gas money legitimized Motordom's claim to the streets. Highways free from intersection traffic and pedestrian safety conflicts were framed as an American act of freedom and progress.

Decades of dominance by automobiles and highways have led to congestion, sprawl, and addiction to fossil fuels. However, the romantic notion of freedom to get on a highway with a car and go anywhere is being reconsidered now as the result of a shift in demographics and market. Due to this shift, people are walking and biking on streets in record numbers.

Gen Ys are driving less, want to live in urban environments, and prefer walkable areas.

Photo Credit: Vulcan Inc.



South Lake Union enhances the pedestrian experience by incorporating pocket parks, wide sidewalks, and public art.

## DEMOGRAPHICS AND MARKET SHIFT

The composition of the U.S. population is going through a big shift. The dominant segments of the population are the boomers and Millennials. The boomers, aged 49 to 67, are the biggest population wave of retirees and empty nesters. The Millennials also known as Gen Ys, particularly those aged 21-31, are the first wave of boomer children becoming adult independent households.

Gen Ys are driving less, want to live in urban environments, and prefer walkable areas. Boomers, having passed their child rearing days, have no desire to maintain their houses' large backyards and empty rooms. The suburban homes are also socially isolating, particularly for aging residents who cannot drive anymore. They prefer flexible independent living in walkable areas.

The National Association of Realtors' 2013 Community Preference Survey found 60 percent of residents favor a walkable neighborhood over neighborhoods that require more driving between home, work, and recreation.

## TALENT AND BUSINESSES PREFER WALKABLE AREAS

Corporations are following talent to walkable areas. Across the country, venture capital and start-ups are choosing walkable urban centers over suburban office parks. In a 2014 report, Christopher Leinberger and Patrick Lynch ranked the walkability of the 30 largest metropolitan areas and found that office and retail space in walkable areas had 38 percent higher per capita GDPs and higher percentages of residents with bachelors' degrees. The report also found office rents in walkable areas are at a 74 percent higher premium per square foot over drivable suburban areas.<sup>2</sup>

Following are three examples of walkability.

### South Lake Union

"We have made walkability a priority in our development strategy for South Lake Union," says Ada Healey, vice president of real estate for Vulcan Inc., a Paul G. Allen company that has been recognized nationally for its investment in downtown Seattle's South Lake Union neighborhood, which has become a magnet for a variety of tenants. Vulcan has attracted numerous companies to the area, most notable of which is Amazon.com, whose headquarters campus is centered in South Lake Union.

Since 2004, Vulcan has delivered over 5 million square feet in 24 new offices, life sciences, residential and mixed-use projects. Its five apartment communities are fully occupied and as many as 40 percent of the residents are within a five-minute walking distance of their jobs.

### Mercer Village

Mercer Village is the College Hill Corridor's retail and restaurant destination located across from Mercer University in the center of Macon, GA. This corridor was reimagined as a walking environment with enhancements that increased pedestrian safety by slowing down traffic, improved lighting, and increased the opportunity to walk.

Besides the local residents who walk or bike to local establishments, the walkable area also caters to those who travel by car and find the streets and parking safer to use. "The risk we took in moving to Mercer Village has paid off – our customer count and sales have more than doubled," says Carl Fambro, owner of Francar's Buffalo Wings, an independent restaurant in Macon.

### Uptown City Center

Butte, MT, once a prosperous mining town, is redefining its economy around the historic Uptown city center. Butte is using tax increment financing to fund a walkability plan to revitalize the Uptown area.

"Walkability, Quality of Life, and Economic Development all go together, especially when seeking to revitalize the city core – the more inviting, safe, accessible, and interesting a street and its edges are to pedestrians on foot, bike or other means, the more people will come, stay, and invest in the Uptown area," notes Karen Brynes, director of community development/Urban Revitalization Agency.

Parking once and walking to many destinations reduces parking demand, thereby reducing the cost of providing parking – a huge economic incentive considering each space can cost about \$5,000 in surface parking and up to \$30,000 for structured parking.



Before and after photos of the Mercer Village area. The parking lots and once vacant, dilapidated buildings have been transformed into a retail and restaurant destination, which is now home to eight businesses, 200 new residents, as well as the Center for Collaborative Journalism, which combines the local Macon Telegraph newspaper, National Public Radio station, and Mercer University Journalism School.

Photo Credits for both: Nadia Osman

## WALKING – A PREREQUISITE TO DELIGHTFUL PLACES

Think about a delightful place and chances are it is a walkable place. We experience places with all our senses, although the most critical assessment of a place is based on what we see and what we hear. These two senses plus the sense of touch, smell, and taste are heightened when we are walking through an area.

Places designed as drive-by experiences fail to engage our senses. In stark contrast, places designed as walkable places engage all our senses. The attention to human scale details such as open and active building frontages makes the places safe, comfortable, and interesting.

## ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF WALKABILITY

Not having to drive saves money on gas and auto maintenance and allows more money to spend in the local economy – thereby providing a stable and resilient economy. Walkable places with access to services, jobs, destinations, transit, and density have lower household transportation costs.

As miles driven increases, particularly in congested commutes, stress increases and productivity decreases. Safe walkable areas tend to have fewer accidents, which reduce costs for drivers, emergency responders, and lost productivity. If the walk to schools, parks, and other local destinations is safe and comfortable, parents save time not having to drive the children for shorter trips.

Joe Minicozzi of Urban3, a real estate development company, has compared fiscal impacts of walkable areas to comparable acreage of sprawl and concludes that walkable areas produce more property and sales revenues for cities than drivable suburbia.

Walkability increases parking efficiency. Parking once and walking to many destinations reduces parking demand, thereby reducing the cost of providing parking – a huge economic incentive considering each space can cost about \$5,000 in surface parking and up to \$30,000 for structured parking.

A study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found retail businesses in walkable areas doing better and attracting patronage beyond the immediate trade area more than their suburban driving oriented counterpart. The study found rents in walkable areas 27 percent to 54



percent higher than non-walkable areas. The key difference is the “place dividend” found in walkable areas.<sup>3</sup>

Walkability also helps attract and retain employees. DOWL HKM is a multi-discipline engineering firm that employs nearly 200 Alaskans. “The people that are attracted to our company are hard working, hearty individuals that want to remain fit and active, so they want a trail and park system that affords them immediate access to trails and green spaces, not just on the weekend or during the 2 week vacation, but also during lunch and after work – a key reason for us to be in Anchorage is the easy access to wilderness and outdoor activities for our employees,” notes Osgood Stewart, president of DOWL HKM.

## OTHER BENEFITS

Walking is the most convenient way to incorporate exercise into our daily routine, providing a number of physical and mental health benefits. An active community saves on healthcare costs. Hippocrates, a Greek physician, said “walking is man’s best medicine.”

Walking, including walking to transit, provides access to jobs, services, and goods. Poor walking conditions lead to social exclusion of people who do not drive, including the elderly, those with disabilities, and low income individuals.

Walking promotes awareness and sense of community. Children walking to school learn more about their local environment and who their neighbors are, making friends as they chat with each other on the way to school. More people walking create a sense of community as it provides greater opportunities for social interaction. Walkable places build social capital – resources that

people can access through their connections to people they know.

Walking promotes safety. High volumes of pedestrians help to create a safer environment.

### STEPS TO IMPROVE WALKABILITY

We must change our approach to street design that accommodates the pedestrian while providing effective and safer outcomes for drivers.

Our walking environment is shaped by the public and private realm. The public realm includes the streetspace and open space. The streetspace is the space enclosed by the private buildings on either side, which includes travel lanes, and accommodates transit, on-street parking, and sidewalks with amenities and landscaping. The design of the private realm involves the location, massing, and scale of the building in relation to its context and the design and uses at street-level. Collectively, the design of the public and private realm can create a safe, comfortable, and memorable walking experience.

The public and private realm details can be aligned in a walkability plan that involves three basic steps: 1) take stock of where we are, 2) collectively decide where we want to be, and 3) then figure out how to get there. The walkability plan can be prepared for different scales: from city or community scale to a specific neighborhood or project.

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### WALKING AUDITS

Walking audits are a powerful workshop tool for redesign and visioning. Popularized more than 10 years ago by Dan Burden of Walkable Communities, Inc. these 45- to 90-minute teaching events are fun, healthy, democratic, and inspirational. The media loves to cover these events. Basics of walking audits include:

1. Select routes that include type of change needed in the neighborhood, town center, school, corridor or waterfront. Generally a distance of 1/2 mile to a mile is enough. Use a bus if a number of distinct sites will be visited. Limit stops if a large number of people are in the workshop.
2. For a large downtown, it is possible to conduct up to four walking audits over two days (one quadrant a day).
3. Groups of 10 to 20 are common, but larger groups work. Use cameras, measuring tapes and

wheels and discuss key issues of redevelopment.

4. Stop frequently and discuss things that work or fail to work for the last 200-400 feet. Multi-disciplinary groups come up with the best balance of ideas.

**Role Playing.** Some walking audits include role playing.



During the walking audit in Avondale Estates, GA, participants were asked to take notes on a dry-erase board, documenting their vision for a specific place along the walking route or an overall ideal/feeling generated from the walk. The most common response was the desire to focus on place-making, and streets as places



Birds-eye view of walking audit in downtown Chicago



A walking audit in Kona, HI. A wheelchair on the walks allows everyone to experience the accessibility of the area. The photo shows the director of Public Works for the County of Hawaii.

The police officer is pretending to be 8 years old, while the fire chief is pretending to be 80 years old. At stops, role players explain what works or does not work for them.

**Stakeholders are the experts.** Although a key facilitator conducts the walk, stakeholders with specific insights on landscaping, conservation, and placemaking help teach one another about preservation or development opportunities .

**Experts discover new answers.** Many times on walks, specialists, such as fire chiefs, discover how a new tool such as a curb extension helps them gain access to roadways.

**Wheelchairs** are brought out on some walks so that all participants can learn the challenges of existing street conditions.

**Groups stop frequently** each time there are new teaching points on how to repair a corridor, create a crossing or make some other improvement.

**Create solutions on the spot.** Workshop members may pause in quiet locations to design a curb extension, mini-circle or other feature.

**Source:** Dan Burden, director of Innovation and Inspiration, Blue Zones

Photo Credits: Samantha Thomas, Built Environment Manager, Blue Zones

The context for walkability projects ranges from retrofitting downtown areas to redeveloping defunct suburban strip corridors and regional malls. Not all areas are going to be walkable – many areas will continue to be automobile dominated. Cities should identify the geography of existing and potential future walkable place types such as urban neighborhoods, corridors, and districts. The political capital and limited financial resources can be directed strategically to these walkable places that desire change and hold the greatest potential for that change.

The walkability plan process starts with a walkability audit of the built environment. The audit brings together local businesses and residents including children and the disabled, elected officials, planners, health care professionals, urban designers, and engineers to identify concerns related to pedestrian safety, comfort, and convenience. A key advantage of the audit is the dialogue that takes place among the various disciplines involved in shaping the built environment – disciplines that rarely speak to each other. “When people walk together, they are not only in step with one another, they discover, dream, achieve together,” notes Dan Burden, director of Innovation and Inspiration, Blue Zones.

The next step is to generate alternatives to address the concerns from the audit. A preferred alternative is selected. Strategies are formulated; funding and responsible people to carry out the tasks are identified. The walkability plan is periodically evaluated and monitored; adjustments are made to keep the plan relevant.

When the Brunswick Naval Air Station closed in 2011, the town of Brunswick, ME, turned to invest in its core asset: the downtown area. The town developed a Master Plan and a subsequent Federal Highway Administration grant allowed for a consulting team to develop a Downtown Walkability Plan. “The Town recognized

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that to improve local commerce and reinforce the unique downtown place, which is better enjoyed walking, while still accommodating cars, Maine Street would need to be redesigned,” notes Margo Knight, chair of the Downtown Master Plan Implementation Committee.

The Maine Street redesign recommendations include:

- Reduced number of travel lanes from two lanes in each direction to one lane in each direction with a median or turning lane;
- Reduced width of travel lanes from 12 feet to 10 feet;
- Curb extensions at intersections to create a visual narrowing of the street, which typically results in reduced vehicle speeds; and
- Change head-in on-street parking to the safer option of head-out parking where you can better see oncoming traffic when pulling out of a parking space.

#### WHAT CAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS DO?

Most of the post-war growth and development has been focused in suburbia. We have a huge oversupply of drivable suburban options. The demographic change in preference has created a strong demand for walkable places.

Providing walkable environments involves many players. Economic developers, both in the public and private sectors, are in a unique leadership position to influence change.

Economic developers could promote walkable development as a workforce and business attraction and retention strategy. Besides promoting walkable development, the more difficult task is to say no to deals that appear to produce short-term gains but compromise lasting prosperity.

Walkability increases property values, attracts and retains businesses and talent, increases retail sales, and supports tourism, while reducing health related costs, energy consumption, and pollution from cars.

For example, a large-scale retail store or regional mall surrounded by acres of parking may produce short-term gains but fails to create a place that connects with people. The same retail store or mall when carefully integrated within the urban fabric of a walkable place will produce more and lasting economic benefits.

“An emphasis on mixed-used development means shopping, restaurants, clubs, theaters, and other uses located amidst offices, hotels, and residential buildings, generating an urban energy and a walkable environment – a place where people want to be,” says Cynthia Richmond, acting director, Arlington Economic Development.

## CONCLUSION

People walking, shopping or socializing on the street are the bellwether of a community’s wealth, health, and happiness. Bring back the pedestrians and the businesses and retailers will follow. Walkability is a sound investment that produces increasing and lasting dividends. Walkability increases property values, attracts and retains businesses and talent, increases retail sales, and supports tourism, while reducing health related costs, energy consumption, and pollution from cars.

Cities with time-tested walkable areas have proven to be resilient to cyclical real estate markets and are well positioned now and in the future. 🌐

## ENDNOTES

1. New York is considering similar technology through the Vision Zero program intended to stop traffic related deaths and injury.
2. Christopher Leinberger and Patrick Lynch, *Foot Traffic Ahead, Ranking Walkable Urbanism in America’s Largest Metros*, George Washington University School of Business, 2014.
3. Gary Hack, PhD, *Business Performance in Walkable Shopping Areas*, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, November 2013.



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