



Urban Walkabout

Traveling Afoot Sustains a Sense of Community

by Meredith Montgomery

While traveling abroad, Dan Burden fell in love with some cities, but was unable to pinpoint why. "Then I realized that they were just like American cities, except they were designed the time-honored way, for people, and just accommodating their cars, not the other way around," he says.

Imagine a busy, people-filled scene in Austin, Texas, Fairbanks, Alaska, or New York City, in contrast to an empty street in a sprawling, suburban neighborhood, with many garages, but few sidewalks and community parks. As co-founder of the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute (*WalkLive.org*), headquartered in Port Townsend, Washington, Burden has spent the last 20 years imagining and fostering walkability by shifting the design focus of cities from cars to people. He believes a community qualifies as walkable when walking around in it is a natural activity.

Healthy, Economical, Sustainable

Walkable towns are designed for universal use, catering to pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, bus riders and shopkeepers of all ages. Sidewalks provide benches, shade and



other amenities to make walking feasible and enjoyable. Streets are designed to keep speeds low, with on-street parking, medians, trees and an absence of one-way roads that flush traffic in and out during rush hour. Walking and biking trails are well connected. Where cul-de-sacs fracture street layouts, trail links reconnect neighborhoods.

A walkable destination also includes an intact town center with a compact layout of mixed-income housing near businesses and schools. A library, post office, shops and restaurants enhance the central mix. Accessible public spaces, plus parks, provide gathering spots and meeting places.

Walkable features provide multiple benefits. Environmentally, they encourage smart property development. Rehabbed historic buildings become the place to live, work and play. Older, non-historic structures are replaced with compact, mixed-use buildings for street-level businesses with residential apartments above. Without a need for massive parking lots and multiple driveways, town centers instead invest in green spaces and walkways.

While decreasing fossil fuel use by driving less, citizens simultaneously benefit in improved personal health as increased physical activity becomes a natural part of everyday life. According

to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, the average resident of a walkable neighborhood weighs six to 10 pounds less than one from a sprawling neighborhood.

Improvements to increase walkability make economic sense; a valued, and thus valuable, investment, especially when municipal budgets are tight. "Municipalities simply can't afford to build the massive-scale roads we need to keep traffic moving if we force everyone into their car all the time," observes Burden.

Research by CEOs for Cities that analyzed data from 94,000 real estate transactions found that higher walkability scores were directly linked to higher home values in 13 of the 15 metro areas; homes that scored above average on walkability are worth \$4,000 to \$34,000 more than similar, but less walkable, homes.



Superior Quality of Life

For Fairhope, Alabama, resident Daphne Dvorak, walking is a necessity. Since being diagnosed with macular degeneration two years ago, Dvorak hasn't been able to drive.

"It's a good thing I love walking," she smiles. "I walk everywhere." At 87 years young, her daily routine includes walking for coffee at 5:30 a.m. before walking to work at a downtown bank and later, to the post office. She also walks to visit friends at a nearby retirement community, to church on Sundays and to the grocery store. Despite her inability to read street signs, Dvorak exclaims, "I'm amazed at everything I see when I walk. It's surprising how much enjoyment you can get out of everything around you."

Oakland, California resident Benjamin McGriff is grateful for the expanded sense of home afforded by walkable city life. He remarks, "The line between your autonomous life in your physical residence and shared, day-to-day experiences within a community becomes blurred."

This heightened sense of connection to one's neighborhood is inversely captured in Sightline Institute's Cascadia Scorecard, which tracks seven

“The benefits of making commercial districts and neighborhoods more walkable go beyond healthy lifestyles. Because baby boomers are going to need to rely less on driving as they age and the millennial generation favors a more urban experience, the demand for walkability will soar. There’s a direct economic payoff for investing in communities made for people, not just cars.”

~ Rick Cole, city manager,
Ventura, California

trends crucial to a sustainable future for the Pacific Northwest: health, economy, population, energy, sprawl, wildlife and pollution. They found that for every 10 minutes a person spends in a daily car commute, time spent in community activities falls by 10 percent.



The best benefits of walkable communities are less tangible and more intuited. Whether it’s the stimulating energy of a bustling big-city street corner or the tranquility of quiet spots with tree-shaded public benches, walkable communities enjoy a character and quality that draws people in and grounds them in a satisfying sense of place.

“It’s why you often find people from such places celebrating and defending their particular enclave,” says McGriff, “as if the idea of that place is a part of their family. In a sense, it is.”

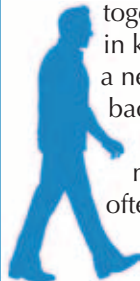


Meredith Montgomery is the publisher of Natural Awakenings Mobile/Baldwin, AL (HealthyLivingHealthyPlanet.com).

Advice from Walkability Experts

by Meredith Montgomery

While some big cities make it easy to live without a car, most modern American communities are lacking in walkability. According to Dan Burden, executive director of the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute, the best way to make improvements is to first bring like-minded citizens together. “It can happen around a school where parents have an interest in kids having a safer to-and-from journey,” he says. “Or it can start with a neighborhood where people realize what they’ve lost and want to get back, such as a park.”



Burden advises establishing a unified plan among community members before approaching city officials. He points out, “Quite often, city leaders want to improve walkability, but don’t feel they have the backing of citizens.”

Citizens wanting to initiate a movement towards a more walkable hometown can learn from these national initiatives:

From Inspiration to Action (WalkLive.org/project/implementation-guide)

AARP and the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute have published *From Inspiration to Action: Implementing Projects to Support Active Living*, a step-by-step guide to making streets more walkable. From working with local governments to securing funding, this comprehensive resource helps to mobilize concerned citizens.

Walking Advocates (AmericaWalks.org)

This group engages, educates and connects walking advocates. Online tools guide citizens in forming a local advocacy group to change transportation policy.

Safe Routes to School (SafeRoutesInfo.org)

Their participatory programs make bicycling and walking to school safer and more appealing to students, thus encouraging a healthy, active lifestyle from an early age. The website provides a step-by-step guide for creating a local program, classroom guides and curriculum, grant information and law enforcement resources.



Rails-to-Trails (RailsToTrails.org)

A nationwide network of trails built from former rail lines continues to expand as area volunteers secure funding and permits. Those labeled rail-trails are multipurpose public paths that replace former railroad corridors, while rail-with-trails are public paths parallel to active rail lines.

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Gaining Strides in Wealth and Well-Being

■ A recent analysis by CEOs for Cities reveals that a one point increase in an area's Walk Score, plotted on a 100-point online neighborhood rating scale, is associated with a \$700 to \$3,000 increase in home values. According to an article published by Social Science Research Network, a 10 point increase pushes up commercial property values by as much as 9 percent.

■ A recent survey by the National Association of Realtors reveals that only 12 percent of future homebuyers want houses in drivable, suburban-fringe areas where many dwellings are currently priced below their mortgage value.

■ Residents of walkable communities feel more trust in their neighbors, are more active in community projects and volunteering and are less likely to name television as a major form of

entertainment than those in non-walkable neighborhoods, according to a study by the University of New Hampshire.

■ A study of 3,200 overweight adults, published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, found that a healthy diet, combined with walking two-and-a-half hours a week, reduced their risk of developing diabetes by 58 percent. Participants 60 and older experienced a reduction of 71 percent.

■ Fewer young people are driving. According to the Federal Highway Administration's National Household Travel Survey, people from ages 21 through 30 accounted for just 21 percent of all miles driven in the United States in 1995. Despite population growth within this age group, its percentage of overall miles driven dropped to 14 percent in 2009.



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