

Measuring Walkable Urbanity



by Dom Nozzi

What are the benefits of Walkable Urbanity?

A community fortunate enough to contain walkable urbanity is a community to cherish, celebrate and protect. A walkable place is lively, physically and financially healthy, fashionable, affordable, sustainable, sociable and safe. It is, in other words, a crystal clear sign of a high quality of life. Almost by definition, an attractive community is walkable and an unpleasant community is unwalkable.

Walkability exists when there is **convenient access**. The home is so close to a park, a grocery store, a movie theatre, places of work, nightlife and civic institutions that it is an easy, short walk to nearly all of life's daily destinations. Car ownership must be optional if a walkable lifestyle is to exist.

Ironically, in the 20th Century, travel by car was seen as the most convenient form of travel. Increasingly, however, we are coming full circle and realizing that past civilizations were right. That easy, quick access by foot, not car, is the key to convenience. And, importantly, living a rich, joyful life.

A walkable lifestyle is the most sustainable, low-impact, convivial way of living. Achieving and sustaining a walkable community is the most effective way to promote a high quality of life. More walking -- not just for recreation, but also for trips to work, to school, to shops -- is an ideal way to:

1. **Improve one's health**, by warding off obesity and a host of chronic illnesses.
2. **Increase affordability**, by substantially reducing travel costs.
3. **Get to know your neighbors**, because the serendipitous experience of bumping into those who live on your street frequently occurs when one walks, but nearly vanishes when one drives a car. Healthy neighborliness is a necessary ingredient if a sense of community is to be achieved.
4. **Promote travel independence and travel choice**, because children, a large number of seniors, the disabled, and many low-income people are unable to use a car and are unable to travel on their own when a car is mandatory. Indeed, approximately one-third of all Americans are unable to drive a car.
5. **Reduce air & noise pollution**, as motor vehicles are a prime source of nearly all forms of noxious discharges to our skies. Indirectly, the compactness required for walkability reduces energy consumption per capita, which effectively reduces regional air pollution. The largest source of noise in most cities comes from car travel

6. **Promote a human-scaled neighborhood**, because the existence of pedestrians leverages provision of modest sizes, speeds and dimensions. Very little is more effective in creating a quality of life.

7. **Reduce stormwater & "heat island" problems**, because a reduction in use of motorized vehicles results in a reduction in petroleum products being released to surface- and groundwaters, and a reduction in the amount of impervious surface that must be provided. "Heat island" problems decline because of the reduction in needed impervious surfaces

8. **Reduce injuries and deaths**, because motorized vehicle travel results in tens of thousands of injuries and deaths each year.

9. **Increase the feasibility for smaller, locally-owned businesses**, as larger pedestrian volumes are a necessary ingredient for the establishment and survival of smaller, neighborhood-based shops and services.

10. **Increase citizen surveillance**, as larger numbers of pedestrians on sidewalks increases the "eyes-on-the-street" phenomenon (also known as "citizen surveillance"), which increases public safety.

A walkable urbanism featuring convenient access is a powerful way for a community to attract and retain Richard Florida's "Creative Class", the young, smart citizens that communities depend on for a health economy and healthy overall community. "Brain Drain" is most likely to occur in placeless cities which lack the character, vibrancy, "hip-ness" and attractiveness provided inherently by a walkable community.

Ironically, despite all of the talk of the need for "sustainability," improving the local economy, and improving neighborhood quality in America today, walkability is rapidly vanishing as a lifestyle choice throughout the nation.

Measuring Walkable Urbanity

Ann Breen and Dick Rigby (InTown Living, 2004) provide what I believe are clear, accurate criteria that describe the essential elements of walkable urbanity. They list five characteristics, which they point out should be present, to some extent, in all places that wish to be considered "urban." Besides the obvious "walkability" criterion, they list

- * Density
- * Diversity
- * Hipness
- * Public Transit

I would add "Human Scale" to the list, although this can be considered to be implicit within the

"Walkability" criterion. Properly modest building heights (no more than 5 stories, ideally), modest lot sizes, modest lot widths and building setbacks from streets and intersections, as well as modest dimensions for street widths, block lengths and intersection turning radii, are indispensable elements of urbanity (streets should also be connected, instead of cul-de-sac'd, to reduce walking distances).

A crucial scaling mechanism for creating a human scale pertains to off-street parking. If such parking is in front and pushes the front of the building far back from the street or intersection, all semblance of human scale is lost.

Human scale sends the powerful message that a neighborhood or street is designed to welcome pedestrians rather than cars. The ambiance is one of safety, peacefulness, dignity and neighborliness. Walking is welcomed, and the character created promises that the stroll will be delightfully interesting, thereby ensuring frequent walks.

BIPSM

While walkability "guru" Dan Burden lists his own criteria for walkable places on his web site, I really like this from him in April 2006: "...a powerful new way to measure the walkability and livability of a community..."Bump Into's Per Square Minute." (BIPSM)

BIPSM measures how many friends or acquaintances one bumps into per minute of walking on a sidewalk. A superb measure of the level of conviviality and sense of community.

A Comparison of Walkability

The National Resources Defense Council (Environmental Characteristics of Smart Growth Neighborhoods: An Exploratory Case Study) compares two neighborhoods in Sacramento, California with dramatically different densities, to show how density plays a profound role in creating walkability.

	Metro Square (20 dwelling units/acre)	North Natomas (6 dwelling units/acre)
Distance to:		
Convenience Store	815 feet	15,388 feet
Supermarket	1,941 feet	14,458 feet
School	1,962 feet	17,181 feet
Bus Stop	666 feet	11,055 feet

Parks	347 feet	702 feet
Jobs in One Mile	29,266	0

How Many Businesses Are Within Walking Distance of Your Home?

A powerful way to assess the walkability of your home location or a location you are considering moving to is to determine the number of businesses within a one-mile walk of your home. A quick and easy way comes from Alan Durning (an author who wrote the superb book, *The Car & the City*). With this tool, you can, within seconds, find out how many businesses you can walk to from your home.

The method:

To get a count of businesses within a mile of your home (your "walkshed"), go to the Qwest online phone directory: <http://www.dexonline.com/#>, select the business listings, type "all" in the category field, click "near a street address," type in your address, and choose "1 mile." The Qwest site will rapidly list how many businesses there are within a one-mile walk of your front door, as well as their name and address.

My house has 148 businesses within a one-mile walking distance. Not bad, but homes within a big city downtown are usually within a mile of several THOUSANDS of businesses. But still, the number near my home is a lot better than the suburban home I grew up in when I was a boy. That home has a score of 0.

Durning goes on to point out that more than one quarter of car trips in the United States are shorter than one mile. That is a LOT of trips that could have been walked. (In my opinion, most of these short trips are by car rather than by foot because for at least 98 percent of all car trips that Americans take, there is a free parking space at the destination, which BEGS us to arrive by car.)

Durning also indicates that "realtors provide detailed information to prospective home buyers on schools and resale values. They could as easily report the Walkshed Index--high scores translate into thousands of dollars of potential savings in fuel and car payments."

Back to the [Walkable Streets](#) home page.