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*Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and
the Decline of the American Dream*

(coauthor with Andres Duany
and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk)

The Smart Growth Manual

(coauthor with Andres Duany)

WALKABLE CITY

HOW DOWNTOWN CAN SAVE AMERICA,
ONE STEP AT A TIME

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NEW YORK

PROLOGUE

This is not the next great book on American cities. That book is not needed. An intellectual revolution is no longer necessary. What characterizes the discussion on cities these days is not a wrongheadedness or a lack of awareness about what needs to be done, but rather a complete disconnect between that awareness and the actions of those responsible for the physical form of our communities.

We've known for three decades how to make livable cities—after forgetting for four—yet we've somehow not been able to pull it off. Jane Jacobs, who wrote in 1960, won over the planners by 1980. But the planners have yet to win over the city.

Certain large cities, yes. If you make your home in New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Portland, or in a handful of other special places, you can have some confidence that things are on the right track. But these locations are the exceptions. In the small and midsized cities where most Americans spend their lives, the daily decisions of local officials are still, more often than not, making their lives worse. This is not bad planning but the absence of planning, or rather, decision-making disconnected from planning. The planners were so wrong for so many years that now that they are mostly right, they are mostly ignored.

But this book is not about the planning profession, nor is it

an argument for more planning per se. Instead, it is an attempt to simply delineate what is wrong with most American cities and how to fix it. This book is not about why cities work or how cities work, but about what works in cities. And what works best in the best cities is walkability.

Walkability is both an end and a means, as well as a measure. While the physical and social rewards of walking are many, walkability is perhaps most useful as it contributes to urban vitality and most meaningful as an indicator of that vitality. After several decades spent redesigning pieces of cities, trying to make them more livable and more successful, I have watched my focus narrow to this topic as the one issue that seems to both influence and embody most of the others. Get walkability right and so much of the rest will follow.

This discussion is necessary because, since midcentury, whether intentionally or by accident, most American cities have effectively become no-walking zones. In the absence of any larger vision or mandate, city engineers—worshiping the twin gods of Smooth Traffic and Ample Parking—have turned our downtowns into places that are easy to get to but not worth arriving at. Outdated zoning and building codes, often imported from the suburbs, have matched the uninviting streetscape with equally antisocial private buildings, completing a public realm that is unsafe, uncomfortable, and just plain boring. As growing numbers of Americans opt for more urban lifestyles, they are often met with city centers that don't welcome their return. As a result, a small number of forward-thinking cities are gobbling up the lion's share of post-teen suburbanites and empty nesters with the where-withal to live wherever they want, while most midsized American cities go hungry.

How can Providence, Grand Rapids, and Tacoma compete with Boston, Chicago, and Portland? Or, more realistically, how can these typical cities provide their citizens a quality of life that makes them want to stay? While there are many answers to that

question, perhaps none has been so thoroughly neglected as design, and how a comprehensive collection of simple design fixes can reverse decades of counterproductive policies and practices and usher in a new era of street life in America.

These fixes simply give pedestrians a fighting chance, while also embracing bikes, enhancing transit, and making downtown living attractive to a broader range of people. Most are not expensive—some require little more than yellow paint. Each one individually makes a difference; collectively, they can transform a city and the lives of its residents.

Even New York and San Francisco still get some things wrong, but they will continue to poach the country's best and brightest unless our other, more normal cities can learn from their successes while avoiding their mistakes. We planners are counting on these typical places, because America will be finally ushered into "the urban century" not by its few exceptions, but by a collective movement among its everyday cities to do once again what cities do best, which is to bring people together—on foot.

While battle was never declared, many American cities seem to have been made and remade with a mandate to defeat pedestrians. Fattened roads, emaciated sidewalks, deleted trees, fry-pit drive-thrus, and ten-acre parking lots have reduced many of our streetscapes to auto zones in which pedestrian life is but a theoretical possibility.

The causes of this transformation are sometimes surprising. In Miami, for example, people wonder why intersections in residential neighborhoods are often so fat: two relatively narrow streets will meet in a sweeping expanse of asphalt that seems to take hours to walk across. The answer is that the firefighters' union once struck a deal that no truck would ever be sent out with fewer than four firemen on it. That's good for safety and even better for job security, but the only truck that seated four was the hook and ladder. So, for many years, one-story residential neighborhoods in Miami had to be designed around the lumbering turning radius of a truck built for tall-building fires.¹

The above anecdote is far from unusual in today's landscape of disassociated professions and special interests that determine the shape of our communities. The modern world is full of experts who are paid to ignore criteria beyond their

professions. The school and parks departments will push for fewer, larger facilities, since these are easier to maintain—and show off. The public works department will insist that new neighborhoods be designed principally around snow and trash removal. The department of transportation will build new roads to ease traffic generated by the very sprawl that they cause. Each of these approaches may seem correct in a vacuum, but is wrong in a city.

If they are to function properly, cities need to be planned by generalists, as they once were. Generalists understand that consolidating parks means that fewer people can walk to them. Generalists understand that infrastructure organized in service of big trucks is not always inviting to small people. And generalists, finally, are coming to understand that more lanes usually just lead to more traffic.

Most significantly, generalists—such as planners and, one hopes, mayors—ask the big-picture questions that are so often forgotten among the day-to-day shuffle of city governance. Questions like: What kind of city will help us thrive economically? What kind of city will keep our citizens not just safe, but healthy? What kind of city will be sustainable for generations to come?

These three issues—wealth, health, and sustainability—are, not coincidentally, the three principal arguments for making our cities more walkable.

THE TEN STEPS OF WALKABILITY

THE USEFUL WALK

Step 1: Put Cars in Their Place.

The automobile is a servant that has become a master. For sixty years, it has been the dominant factor in the shaping of our cities. Relegating the car to its proper role is essential to reclaiming our cities for pedestrians, and doing so requires an understanding of how the car and its minions have unnecessarily distorted the way that design decisions are made in American communities.

Step 2: Mix the Uses.

For people to choose to walk, the walk must serve some purpose. In planning terms, that goal is achieved through mixed use or, more accurately, placing the proper balance of activities within walking distance of each other. While there are exceptions, most downtowns have an imbalance of uses that can be overcome only by increasing the housing supply.

Step 3: Get the Parking Right.

As Andres Duany puts it, "parking is destiny." It is the not-so-hidden force determining the life or death of many a downtown. Parking requirements and pricing determine the disposition of more urban land nationwide than any other factor, yet until recently there was not even any theory on how to use parking to a city's benefit. That theory now exists, and is just beginning to affect policy nationwide.

Step 4: Let Transit Work.

Walkable neighborhoods can thrive in the absence of transit, but walkable cities rely on it utterly. Communities that hope to become the latter must make transit-planning decisions based upon a number of factors that are routinely neglected. These include the often surprising public support for transit investment, the role of transit in the creation of real estate value, and the importance of design in the success or failure of transit systems.

THE SAFE WALK

Step 5: Protect the Pedestrian.

This is perhaps the most straightforward of the ten steps, but it also has the most moving parts, including block size, lane width, turning motions, direction of flow, signalization, roadway geometry, and a number of other factors that all determine a car's speed and a pedestrian's likelihood of getting hit. Most streets in most American cities get at least half of these things wrong.

Step 6: Welcome Bikes.

Walkable cities are also bikeable cities, because bicycles thrive in environments that support pedestrians and also because bikeability makes driving less necessary. More and more American cities are making big investments in bicycling, with impressive results.

THE COMFORTABLE WALK**Step 7: Shape the Spaces.**

Perhaps the most counterintuitive discussion in planning, this may be the step that is most often gotten wrong. People enjoy open spaces and the great outdoors. But people also enjoy, and need, a sense of enclosure to feel comfortable as pedestrians. Public spaces are only as good as their edges, and too much gray or green—parking or parks—can cause a would-be walker to stay home.

Step 8: Plant Trees.

Like transit, most cities know that trees are good, but few are willing to pay properly for them. This step attempts to communicate the full value of trees and justify the greater investment that they deserve in almost every American city.

THE INTERESTING WALK**Step 9: Make Friendly and Unique Faces.**

If evidence is to be believed, lively streetscapes have three main enemies: parking lots, drugstores, and star architects. All three seem to favor blank walls, repetition, and a disregard for the pedestrian's need to be entertained. City design codes, focused on use, bulk, and parking, have only begun to concern themselves with creating active facades that invite walking.

Step 10: Pick Your Winners.

With the possible exception of Venice, even the most walkable cities are not universally walkable: there are only so many interesting street edges to go around. As a result, however well designed the streets, certain among them will remain principally automotive. This is as it should be, but cities must make a conscious choice about the size and location of their walkable cores, to avoid squandering walkability resources in areas that will never invite pedestrians.

STEP 6: WELCOME BIKES

*...the way to go; Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Portland, and other foreign
... Hey! I'm bikin' here!; How safe is safe?; I run afoul of the vehicular
... cyclists; Bike lanes, separated paths, and shared routes; Advanced
cycling; Don't get greedy*

Perhaps the greatest revolution currently under way in—only
—American cities is the dramatic rise in biking. This has
not happened by accident. New York City recently saw a 35 per-
cent jump in ridership in one year alone, thanks specifically to its
commitment to an ever-improving bicycle network. Al-
most every American city is currently well stocked with would-
be bike riders who are only waiting for an invitation to hop on
the saddle, and it is likely that those cities that invest now in
(relatively inexpensive) biking infrastructure will have a mean-
ingful advantage in attracting the next generation of new resi-
dents. Millennials routinely cite biking as an important motivator
in location choice, and today's seventeen-year-old is a third
less likely to have a driver's license than a baby boomer was at
that age.

To anyone who lived in New York during the eighties, it
might seem a bit odd to advocate for bicycles in a discussion of
pedestrian safety. The only cyclists at that time were reckless
messengers who broke every traffic law and took out pedestrians
with alarming frequency. But visit the city now and it's hard to
spot the messengers among the throngs of civilians, most of
whom do a pretty good job of sticking to their newly minted bike
lanes.

Not that there aren't exceptions.* In a heart-stopping aerial video, "3-Way Street," by Ron Gabriel,¹ one can witness some more adventurous Manhattan cyclists weaving through multiple lanes of oncoming traffic to surprise hapless pedestrians in crosswalks. Clearly, some people have yet to get with the program. After a few minutes of the video, it becomes apparent that these bikers probably pose the greatest danger to themselves, so we can only assume that Darwinism will cull the herd. Every evolution involves growing pains, and these daredevils hide a deeper truth, which is that cities with more bicyclists are considerably safer for both bicyclists and pedestrians.

Take a step back and it's easy to see why. A street with bikes, once the drivers get used to them, is a place where cars proceed more cautiously. And a city with bikes everywhere is a different kind of city. As bike lanes have been added along New York's avenues, injuries to pedestrians have dropped by about a third. Indeed, on Broadway and on Ninth Avenue, reported accidents and injuries to all users were cut in half,² outpacing even the advocates' expectations.

A BETTER WAY TO GO

Safety is but one of many reasons why our cities need more bicycles. As anyone who has taken advantage of a good biking city will tell you, cycling has got to be the most efficient, healthful, empowering, and sustainable form of transportation there is. Using the same amount of energy as walking, a bicycle will take you three times farther.³ Bicycle commuters enjoy about double the

*Indeed, it is in some of the most advanced biking cities, like Amsterdam and Berlin, where I have had my closest calls with speeding bicyclists. In both cases, though, I was firmly at fault, strolling mindlessly in well-marked bike lanes, just off the plane and not yet adjusted to the eminently logical and well-marked street divisions. And one close brush was all it took to correct my course for the remainder of my visit.