

# Governing Magazine

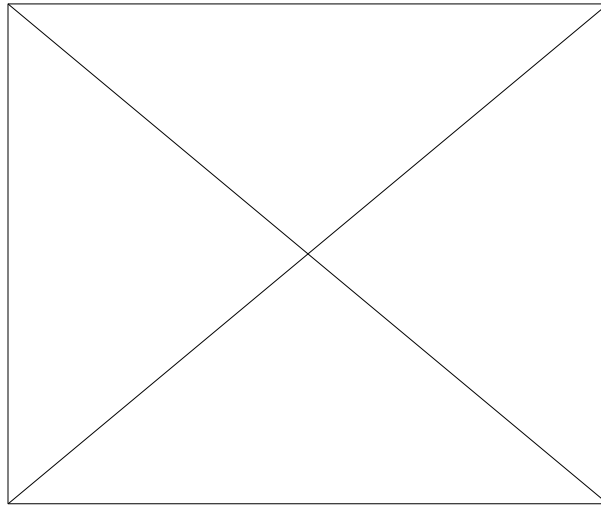
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ASSESSMENTS  
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## The Walkability Revival

Will more people who can afford suburban privacy be attracted to the noise and bustle of the urban street?

The late geographer John B. Jackson, in lectures he gave on life in cities around the world, would talk in vivid detail about where to find the best urban walking. He'd cite Naples, Barcelona, Istanbul — cities where on a warm summer evening, the entire population seemed to be out in the street: strolling, gossiping, indulging in the simple habits of old-fashioned pedestrian life.



And then he'd throw the audience a curve. "You know why those people are out there?" he would ask. "Because it's hot and crowded and uncomfortable inside. They go into the street for relief." Jackson believed that whenever housing conditions improve, almost anywhere in the world, with more family space and controllable temperatures inside — vibrant street life begins to decline.

Jackson wasn't happy to see people move indoors. He loved street life, and he loved walking. But he felt there was no way to escape a central truth: As much as people may romanticize the virtues of an urban life lived in the streets — even seek it out on vacations — they don't choose it when they have an option.

It's hard to argue with that as a description of life in this country in the last quarter of the 20th century. But is it an immutable principle or just a phase in the evolution of Western society? Is it possible that, in the current century, significant numbers of people who can afford suburban privacy will be attracted to the noise and bustle of the urban street?

Well, not in the old-fashioned way, no. Memphis is not going to morph into Old Istanbul anytime soon. People in this country will never go back to spending large portions of their leisure time rambling aimlessly outdoors.

But if you ask the question a slightly different way — Will many more of us be drawn toward a style of life that involves some form of walkable daily routine? — then I think you get a different answer. You begin to suspect that demographics and personal preferences are reshaping the American city toward street life and sociability in ways nobody would have expected even a short time ago.

Admittedly, there is room for skepticism. New Urbanist planners and theorists have spent the past decade preaching the virtues of pedestrian friendliness, neo-traditional development, and higher levels of urban density overall. In spite of their preaching, cul-de-sac suburbia has spread further into the countryside in every metropolitan area of the country. In most of them, it continues to do so.



But in the past year or two, it seems to me, something has changed. It's not just the New Urbanists who are talking the language of walkability now. It's developers, Realtors, chambers of commerce, transportation agencies. Market forces are sending signals that none of them can afford to ignore.

Where should we start? How about in lower Manhattan, around Wall Street and the territory near Ground Zero, on an ordinary Saturday morning. It's not the number of people on the sidewalk that's striking; this part of New York is bound to attract tourists. It's the number of children's strollers. The lower Manhattan streets are dense on weekends with families out for a walk, going to the park, going to the grocery store. It's not Istanbul, but you can't help noticing it. Watching it all, you'd almost think that lower Manhattan was becoming a residential neighborhood.

In fact, that's what it IS becoming. In the six years since September 11, 2001, this area of Manhattan has witnessed a massive increase in the number of new residential units, some of them from office-building conversion, some from the construction of brand-new glass towers. It has happened so fast that it's hard even to get a grip on the numbers. But one estimate is that the number of people living south of the World Trade Center was about 15,000 in 2001, and that it is close to 50,000 now. At the current pace, it's not unreasonable to predict that in 2015, the bottom of Manhattan will essentially be a condo and apartment district with a modest residual presence of financial corporations where some of the residents are employed.

That may not happen. Extrapolating is always dangerous. What really matters is that events like this are starting to transpire, in different ways, in many cities around the country. Atlanta is one of the most intriguing examples. It is not the place it was a few years ago, with a stagnant center surrounded by vibrant, auto-dependent suburban enclaves. Most of the suburbs are still doing all right, but it's the city itself, especially the area around Midtown, that is being transformed by residential

construction. The trigger was Atlantic Station, a massive \$2 billion mixed-use development on an old steel mill site surrounding a transit station that opened in 2005 and will eventually house more than 10,000 people.

In the Dallas area, one of the most interesting new residential projects is Legacy Town Center, an urbanist experiment whose promoters tell prospective residents that "the beat of the city surrounds you. You're in the know, everything is close at hand. You can walk, skate, or bike and find everything you need." The interesting thing about Legacy Center is that it's not in the city at all. It's in the suburb of Plano, 15 miles from downtown. The management has sold buyers on the notion of walkability in a place where hardly anyone has walked anywhere by choice for the past two decades.

Legacy Center isn't working out by coincidence: It's working out because it's located a few steps from the Plano rail station near the end of the Red Line on the Dallas transit system. And that brings up an interesting point about the whole resurgence of walkability. It's closely intertwined with transit, even in places where transit has never been a popular mode of transportation. Urban transit systems in this country face so many problems, both financial and political, that it's easy to lose sight of just how many new ones are being built, especially in areas of the South and West, such as Dallas, Phoenix and Denver.

Since 2000, Christopher Leinberger notes in his new book, "The Option of Urbanism," more than \$100 billion has been invested around the country in transit systems of many different sorts. When major transit projects have gone to the voters for approval, more than two-thirds of them have passed. Leinberger, a developer who teaches real estate at the University of Michigan, may be the boldest prophet of walkability anywhere. "The United States," he writes, "is on the verge of a new phase in constructing its built environment."

One may be forgiven for considering him a trifle hyperbolic. But he offers numbers, not just stories, to back up his point of view. He compares prices for comparable residential units in what he calls "walkable urban places" and "drivable suburbs" in the same metropolitan area. According to his figures, townhouses in the Lodo section of downtown Denver were recently selling for \$487 per square foot. A conventional detached suburban house in Highland Ranch, a few miles outside of town, was costing \$195 per square foot. The same ratio, more or less, existed wherever he looked.

The problem for walkable urbanism in the next few years, Leinberger says, won't be an absence of demand. It will be a shortage of supply. "The demand is so great," he insists, "that we are going to have a difficult time keeping up with it."

Leinberger believes that supply will be slowed down by two fundamental factors. One is zoning: Most urban zoning codes, even in cities where there is a demonstrated demand for walkability, still do not allow the degree of density that the most enticing forms of sidewalk sociability would require. Some of this has been addressed through "overlays" — smaller pedestrian-oriented enclaves within larger conventionally zoned districts — but there's little doubt that zoning has to be addressed in a more fundamental way if the walkability revival is to reach its full potential.

The other obstacle, Leinberger believes, is lending. In his view, Wall Street banks and other major institutional investors remain wary of walkable projects. These developments lack the uniformity lenders like, and they take longer to earn back the investment. This attitude may prevail, but I don't think it will prevail for long. Even banks are smart enough to respond to demand.

Just last year, as Leinberger notes, Toll Brothers, the country's largest developer of suburban luxury housing, formally created a "Walkable Urban Housing" division. Less conspicuous, but just as interesting, was the launch a few months ago of [walkscore.com](http://walkscore.com), a Web site that allows anyone to type in any address in the U.S. and come out with a number assessing just how walkable that location is, based on the proximity of stores, restaurants, parks and other urban amenities. What's intriguing about [walkscore.com](http://walkscore.com) isn't just the hits it's getting — it's the audience it's aimed at. Walkscore is a tool for Realtors to use in persuading potential buyers that a house has the financial advantages of a walkable location.

One could write millions of words offering reasons why urban walkability is finally close to the tipping point: high energy costs, reduced crime, aging baby boomers, the evolving preferences of Generations Y and Z. All of these contain a measure of truth. What matters in the end, though, isn't so much the sociological explanation. It's the fact that tens of millions of Americans are being given choices about where and how to live that they haven't possessed in the past generation. I can't imagine anyone arguing that isn't a welcome thing.