

WALK THIS WAY



This week, the National Post Ideas page is presenting a five-part series on the suburbs. In today's fourth instalment, American urban planning expert Christopher Leinberger argues that city dwellers need to do more walking and less driving.

CHRISTOPHER LEINBERGER

As an American who has been active in real estate development for 25 years, I am somewhat hesitant to lecture Canadians about my favoured theory of "walkable urbanity."

Canada has some of the best urban places in the world, such as the downtowns of Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal and Quebec City. About 15 years ago, a survey of the world's downtowns — applying a broad set of criteria — ranked these four Canadian cities in the top 10. The highest American downtown on the list was Boston, ranked 36.

Rather than focus on quality downtown areas, the United States has led the world in low-density, car-dominated suburban communities. Indeed, for half a century, U.S. governments have promoted and subsidized sprawl.

This policy has been costly. In the suburbs, it is common to have only two houses per acre — as opposed to 30 units per acre or more downtown. As a result, building and operating infrastructure — whether the public sector does it, as with roads and sewers, or the regulated private sector, as with electricity or telephone — is between nine to 20 times greater for low-density sprawl than for in-town, high-density development,

on a per house basis. This cost has been borne either by taxes or, worse, by fees generated from in-town projects. As a result, American city dwellers are consuming land at a rate that is 10 to 15 times the rate of population growth.

Even so, an amazing turnaround of American downtowns is underway. Fifteen years ago, at the time of the above-mentioned worldwide survey, only four major downtowns in the United States were seen as vital, economically viable communities: Manhattan, San Francisco, Chicago and Boston. Outside of these four, few American downtown cities were attracting residents who had a choice of where to live.

But this has changed in recent years. Cambridge, Mass., and San Diego, Calif., for instance, have recently become attractive places to live. Other cities, such as Denver, Baltimore and Chattanooga, Tenn., are heading in the same direction. In Portland and Seattle, the quality of life is so high that they qualify as Canadian.

What has led to the revitalization of these downtown areas? The answer is important, because I believe the same factors are key to the livability of other communities, including suburbs.

Throughout humankind's 8,000-year history of city-building, the concept I call "walkable urbanity" has been a key driver of urban success. "Walkable" means that every destination is ultimately reachable on foot — even if there are other ways to get to and around a downtown, such as car, train, subway, bus and bike.

In this regard, human behaviour has obeyed a constant rule of thumb: The distance people are generally prepared to walk in order to perform daily tasks is about 1,500 feet, which translates to an area of about 160 acres, about the size of most of the world's great downtown centres, give or take 25%.

This area also happens to be the area of a super-sized regional mall, if you include the 80% of the property taken up by asphalt for parking and roads. No one in their right mind would happily walk from one end of a mall park-

ing lot to the other. So why would anyone walk the same distance downtown?

The reason millions of North American pedestrians do so every day is that there are so many things to see and do along the way, attractions and amenities that bring a vast diversity of people into the city at all times of the day or night, weekday or weekend, work week or holiday. Every time you take to the sidewalks of a vibrant city, the experience is different. It can be the frenzy of rush hour; the buzz of Friday night art gallery openings; the elegance of the opera; the mystery of early morning fog; the grittiness of a hot, humid day; the thrill of a public protest or the in-

seams and grand houses up Woodward Avenue. Sixty years later, the city's downtown is deserted: Everyone with the money to do so has moved to the suburbs. Or consider that Los Angeles had the longest commuter rail system in the world in 1945. All of this is long gone, sacrificed on the altar of cars, trucks, highways and oil.

Yet this lost art is coming back. Ironically, the revival was sparked by Jane Jacobs and her 1961 masterpiece, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, just as sprawling development patterns were getting into high gear.

Much as I love Canada and Canadians, I am extremely angry that you stole Jane Jacobs from us. (She has been living in Toronto since the 1970s). While Peter Jennings, Michael J. Fox, Celine Dion, Wayne Gretzky and Emily Carr have all enriched American life, I would trade them all to get Ms. Jacobs back.

Fortunately, some of her ideas are finding a following in her native country. In spite of zoning laws and a real estate industry that are geared to produce a disposable environment, walkable American downtowns are beginning to make a comeback. Consumers have become bored with homogeneous homes and the alienation brought on by car culture. Research has shown that between a third and a half of the households in U.S. metropolitan areas (where 80% of Americans live) want the convenience and pleasures walkable urbanity brings.

Because there is little supply, the price of properties in walkably urbane places — condominiums, townhouses and other high-density structures — has risen rapidly in recent years. The same is true of walkable suburban downtowns, including resorts such as Seaside, Fla.

Television shows demonstrate the pent-up demand for walkable urbanity. In decades past, the most popular TV shows were *Leave it to Beaver*, *Dick van Dyke* and *The Brady Bunch* — all set in the idealized suburbs. But over the past decade or so, the most

popular shows have been *Friends*, *Seinfeld* and *Sea and the City*, shows that celebrate a social clique that operates within a small urban area, and whose members visit one another on foot, often bumping into each other randomly on the street.

We Americans need Canadians to continue to show us how to build walkable downtowns and suburbs. Nothing sells people on the joys of walkable urbanity better than the experience itself, which Canada offers in abundance.

Unfortunately, Canadian cities are sprawling, too, though not nearly as much as their American counterparts. Low-density, fringe development is perfectly acceptable in itself; much of the market wants it. But the government shouldn't subsidize it, as American governments have. Canadian policy-makers should make suburbanites pay their own way. This will encourage the trend of increasing housing density in the suburbs, thus bringing some of the walkable urbanity enjoyed by downtown dwellers.

If subsidies are to be applied, better to apply them toward great downtowns, including suburban downtowns, built around high-quality transit systems. Don't let Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal go the way of Detroit.

National Post

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Tomorrow: Richard Harris concludes the series with a defence of suburban living.

The distance city-dwellers are prepared to walk — 1,500 feet — has remained constant throughout history

nocent excitement of tourists. The range of experience in an attractive urban area is unlimited.

Contrast that to the climate-controlled, enclosed, privately secured, could-be-anywhere regional mall — the only public experience an increasing number of suburban Americans have.

The art of walkable urbanity was lost in the United States in the last 50 years — replaced by the paradigm of simple, formula-driven, car-dominated sprawl. This has killed not only some of my country's finest cities, but also what was once the greatest rail-based transit system in the world.

Consider, for instance, the grandeur of downtown Detroit in 1945, with its elegant commercial and public buildings and the mu-