Walkable Communities

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the topic of walkability with you today. My expert status on this topic is now precisely 72 hours old as that is the amount of time I had to collate my thoughts after spending the better part of the past two weeks reading the seminal works of the experts in the field of walkability. And I can tell you, I learned a great deal. I realized I had some very wrong misconceptions. And hopefully you can benefit from what I learned.

My approach today is to first give you a broad, yet brief, overview of the 'big thinking' on this topic by the three leading 'experts' in this field: **Jeff Speck, Dan Burden, and Jan Gehl**. What is interesting is how they each have strengths and weaknesses, yet taken as a whole, I think Speck's approach is a good balance between Dan's on the street approach, and Gehl's urban planning view. Moreover, Speck's book is now a mainstay among Main Street circles.

But the best benefit I can hopefully provide you today is a set of practical applications of their insights on a scale that is applicable to most of our SC Main Street cities and towns. Moreover, if we treat the recommendations section of this presentation as more of a conversation than a presentation, then I also believe that together we can craft some truly thoughtful solutions to this issue that has a zillion quality of life benefits to our communities.

Why Walkability?

Can the "walkability" of your Main Street district translate into dollars and cents? We know that enhancing the pedestrian orientation of Main Street communities does more than keep your design committee volunteers occupied; it creates a cohesive atmosphere, improves safety for motorists and pedestrians, builds foot traffic for businesses, encourages interaction in public spaces, and adds vibrancy to the street. And in a new report by Joseph Cortright for CEOs for Cities, walkability is also linked to higher property values.

Luckily for Main Streets, the urban design of traditional commercial districts is inherently walkable. Streetscaping projects that reconfigure roads, improve parking, introduce traffic-calming measures, and add pedestrian amenities leverage existing walkable assets. While the value of commercial building prices wasn't measured in this study, commercial areas thrive with increased walkability, and the many financial and health-related benefits make pedestrian-oriented initiatives well worth the investment. — Andrea Dono, 'Walkability and Wealth Downtown''

Walkable City: Jeff Speck

The conventional wisdom used to be that creating a strong economy came first, and that increased population and a higher quality of life would follow. The converse now seems more likely: creating a higher quality of life is the first step to attracting new residents and jobs. —Speck

<u>10 STEPS OF WALKABILITY</u>: **How to make America's cities more walkable, one step at a time**

1. Put the cars in their place: Put an end to "autocentric" city planning.

2. Mix the uses: Residents should be able to work, shop, eat, drink, learn, recreate, convene, worship, heal, visit, celebrate, and sleep downtown.

3. Get the parking right: There should be less parking that costs more.

4. Let transit work: Make public transit more convenient and comfortable.

5. Protect the pedestrians: Shorter blocks, narrower traffic lanes, and two-way streets favor pedestrians.

6. Welcome bikes: Make cyclists safe and welcome.

7. Shape the spaces: Get the design right.

8. Plant trees: Judiciously planted trees confer numerous benefits.

9. Make friendly and unique (building) faces: Features like awnings & outdoor dining are crowd pleasers.

10. Pick your winners: Be realistic about what will really attract.

General Theory of Walkability

To be favored a walk has to satisfy four main conditions: it must be **useful**, **safe**, **comfortable** and **interesting.**

<u>A. The Useful Walk</u>

1. Put cars in their place

"*Traffic studies are bullshit.*" Jeff believes that a car-first approach has hurt American cities. This is in part because traffic engineers too often have failed to acknowledge that increased roadway traffic capacity can lead to more, not fewer, cars on the road. The resulting phenomenon of "induced demand" results in unanticipated consequences not only for traffic on freeways but especially in neighborhoods and downtowns, where streets are sometimes treated not as critical public spaces for animating city life but as conveyances for motor vehicles.

2. Mix the uses

"*Cities were created to bring things together.*" The research shows that downtowns with a diversity of uses – places to walk to – have significantly more walking than those that don't. The best question to ask is: What do humans do? The answers are work, shop, eat, drink, learn, recreate, convene, worship, heal, visit, celebrate and sleep. They should be able to do all those things without leaving downtown! Jeff makes the point that, for most American downtowns, it is **housing** – places to walk from, if you will – that is in particularly short supply. He also points out, quite correctly, that for most (still-disinvested) downtowns, affordability is not much of an issue, because relatively affordable housing is all there is. Part of the issue is the relationship of downtown housing to (often sub-par) downtown schooling options. If you want Main Street to succeed, we must be committed to supporting our local/downtown schools.

3. Get the parking right

"*Ample parking encourages driving that would not otherwise occur without it." "Any place worth visiting has a parking problem."* As do many progressive city thinkers, Jeff points out that we have a huge oversupply of underpriced parking, in large part due to minimum parking requirements for buildings and businesses. A side effect is that adaptive reuse of historic properties can be discouraged, because there isn't sufficient space to create parking required for the buildings' new uses. Jeff recommends consolidated parking for multiple buildings and businesses and higher prices, especially for curb parking, and shares a number of successful examples. He also argues for some rather stringent, tiered pricing of parking that is likely too ambitious for all but a few, large SC towns like Charleston.

4. Let transit work

"***While walkability benefits from good transit, good transit relies absolutely on walkability***." While this won't be an issue for most of our SC towns, he makes one incredibly obvious point that many of us fail to remember: "ALL transit trips start and end with a walk!" Therefore, regardless of the mode of the transit: bus, car, train, trolley, subway, etc. make the walking trip to and from there as useful, safe, comfortable and interesting as possible.

<u>B. The Safe Walk</u>

5. Protect the pedestrian

Quiz Answers: 1) lane widths; 2) block size; 3) curbside parking; 4) trees; 5) crosswalks; 6) sidewalk width

"*The safest roads are those that feel the least safe*." Here again, it comes back to driving. Jeff asserts that roadway "improvements" that facilitate car traffic – such as wider lanes or one-way streets – encourage higher speeds and less pedestrian safety. Pedestrian safety facilities are then installed as an add-on – crosswalks, bollards, occasional flop sign or flashing light – giving drivers a psychological encouragement to ignore walkers except for special, short-lived occasions. Thus, we should instead use narrow lanes and two-way streets. Intriguingly, he argues – as have other new urbanists – for stripping some roadways of signage and mode delineation. The idea is that, if drivers feel they might hit someone or something, they really will slow down or change routes. Jeff supports, as I do, on-street curbside parking, because it buffers the sidewalk from moving vehicle traffic. The NMSC estimates that for every curbside parking place removed, it costs the adjacent business $9-10,000.

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6. Welcome bikes

"*In Amsterdam, a city of 783,000, about 400,000 people are out riding their bikes on any given day*." This step is only minimally about walkability, except for the point that bike traffic slows car traffic and that calms everything down for the pedestrian. It's all about making cities more hospitable to cycling, which many U.S. cities are now doing. Although the drivers complain, both the research and my personal experience as a driver suggest that car traffic isn't really inconvenienced much if at all when the addition of cycling infrastructure is thoughtful.

C. The Comfortable Walk

7. Shape the Spaces

"*Get the design right and people will walk in almost any climate*." This chapter is mostly about providing the sense of enclosure we need to feel comfortable walking. And, once again, the main villain is the car, this time in the form of surface parking lots along the walkway. But Jeff also takes some shots at blank walls (correctly) and look-at-me architecture that fills a space rather than defines space [show my three slides about this here]. He believes, as I do, that the amount of density to support good city walkability does not necessarily require tall buildings. The bottom line is that design does matter: aesthetics – getting the look and feel of a street right is important if you want to encourage walking in a city. People don't like walking too far in a featureless environment, whether it's blank walls or wide open spaces or sheer dreary pointlessness.

8. Plant trees

"*It's best not to pick favorites in the walkability discussion— every individual point matters— but the humble American street tree might win my vote*." Even though street trees correlate with fewer automobile accidents, many public transportation agencies seek to limit them because they believe they interfere with visibility. But Jeff points out that, in addition to contributing to auto safety, trees provide myriad public benefits, including natural cooling, reduced emissions and energy demand for air conditioning, and reduced stormwater pollution. Most of the best urban walking places have good trees. Pop Quiz: Name one of your favorite walkable cities that does NOT feature a robust tree canopy? 'Nuff said.

D. The Interesting Walk

9. Make friendly and unique (building) faces

"*Pedestrians need to feel safe and comfortable, but they also need to be entertained*." Of the ten steps, this is the one most about design, or at least the most about design of things other than roadways. For me, it evoked Steve Mouzon's wonderful theory of ''walk appeal,'' holding that how far we will walk is all about what we encounter along the way. [Compare/Contrast Rome's walkability with suburban America] Cities need to be engaging and enlivening. Stores and businesses with street-level windows help (meaning that most banks and drugstores don't), as does disguised or lined parking, vertical building lines, and architectural details.

10. Pick your winners

"*Where can spending the least money make the most difference?*'' [Does that sound familiar? Here is my quote from the last training I did with you all in Hartsville!] The subtitle here could well be, "in the real world, you can't do everything." True enough. Jeff argues for focusing on downtowns first, and on short corridors that can connect walkable neighborhoods. Therefore, my application would be to start with vibrancy grants and amenities that make downtown ''sticky'' and infuse it with interest.

My Overall Assessment
Strengths:
- Incredibly thorough, addressing virtually EVERY issue that has direct or indirect impact on walkability

- References to external documents are amazing…and most, if not all, are available as FREE downloads!
- Engaging stories and compelling statistics
- Best one volume resource available on the topic of walkability

Weaknesses:

- The content is geared primarily to large cities. While most of the principles can be interpolated down to our typical small-to-medium sized SC Main Street towns, it will take some effort to do so.
- There's a subtext to the book that I am not entirely comfortable with but that comes through strongly: if we just stop making driving so convenient, easy and inexpensive, people will do less of it and walk more. Put another way, making driving less convenient, more difficult, and more expensive will be good for walkers and for cities. Sure, there are more politically skillful ways of phrasing it, but I think it's undeniable that there is a sort of ideology and, in some circles, even hostility forming around this belief ("Cars suck" was the way one of my Facebook friends put it. "Has a place ever been made better by making it easier to drive to?" chimes another, rhetorically.) There are losers as well as winners in this approach to walkability.

Dan Burden: Ten Keys to Walkable Communities

Dan Burden is a nationally recognized authority on bicycle and pedestrian facilities and programs. He has had 25 years of experience in developing, promoting and evaluating alternative transportation facilities, traffic calming practices and sustainable community design. He served for 16 years as Florida DOT's State Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator, and he presently works as Executive Director of Walkable Communities, Inc., a non-profit corporation helping North America develop walkable communities. Dan takes a 'man-on-the-street' descriptive approach to walkability. While less precise than Speck or Gehl, no less correct in his recommendations.

1. **Compact, Lively Downtown** (or many compact villages in larger towns or cities). Buildings frame streets; block lengths are short. Merchants take pride in their shops' appearances. Great varieties of stores offer local products and services. Significant housing is found at downtown or village center sites. There is unique and distinct personality or character to the place.

2. **Many Linkages to Neighborhoods** (including walkways, trails and roadways). People have choices of many routes from their homes to the center. The most direct paths are walking routes. All sidewalks are five feet wide, or wider, and most are buffered from streets by planting strips, bike lanes or on-street parking. Well-maintained sidewalks are found on both sides of most arterial and collector roadways. Bike lanes are found on most principal streets. Most streets have good ADA access to and from each block in all directions.

3. **Low Speed Streets** (in downtown and neighborhoods - 20-25 mph common). Most motorists behave well in the downtown or village center, and near schools, waterfronts, historic neighborhoods, parks and other public areas, yielding to pedestrians. Motorists make their turns at low speed.

4. **Neighborhood Schools and Parks**. Most children are able to walk or bicycle to school and small nearby parks.

5. **Public Places Packed with Children, Teenagers, Older Adults and People with Disabilities**. Many services and facility designs support and attract many children, teens, people with disabilities and senior citizens to most public spaces. Public restrooms, drinking fountains and sitting places are common in many parts of town, especially downtown.

6. **Convenient, Safe and Easy Street Crossings**. Downtowns have frequent, convenient, well-designed street crossings. Pedestrians using these areas rarely have to walk more than 150 feet from their direct lines-of-travel to reach crossings.

7. **Inspiring and Well-Maintained Public Streets**. Streets are attractive, balanced, colorful, with sidewalks, planter strips, medians, (when appropriate) and handle a diversity of needs. Many streets feature on street parking and larger volume streets have bike lanes. Homes and buildings are brought forward, relating to the street. There is little or no off street parking. Sidewalks are centered and surrounded with attractive edges, a planter strip to the street side, and an edge or attractive transition to the private property. [Show 'Design Soup' imagery here]

8. **Land Use and Transportation Mutually Beneficial**. People understand and support compact development, urban infill, integral placement of mixed-use buildings, and mixed income neighborhoods. The built environment is of human scale, with attributes that invite positive interaction and compliment the surrounding neighborhoods. Heritage buildings and places are respected. People understand that small, local stores help create community as well as convenience. Residents desire and find ways to include affordable homes in most neighborhoods. Transit connects centers of attraction with schedules so frequent that times need not be posted. All residents feel they have choice of travel modes to most destinations. Most people live within walking distance - 1/2 mile (with the majority within 1/4 mile) - of 40% of the services and products they need on daily or weekly basis. These services include small grocery, pharmacy, hardware, bank, "doc-in-a-box" medical services, day care, dry cleaning, post office and other essential services.

9. **Celebrated Public Space and Public Life**. Streets, plazas, parks and waterfronts are fun, festive, secure, convenient, efficient, comfortable and welcoming places. Suitable places exist to host parades or give public speeches; and many people take part in community parades, festivals, outdoor concerts and other public events. Public space is tidy, well kept, respected and loved. Many of these favorite places are surrounded by residential properties, with many eyes-on-the- streets to add security and ownership of these spaces. These areas have many places to sit. Few or no buildings have large blank walls, and few or no open parking lots exist off-street. Any existing parking lots have great edges and greens.

10. **Many People Walking**. Many diverse people are walking in most areas of town. The community has no rules against loitering. Lingering in downtowns, village centers, schools, city hall, civic centers, waterfronts and other public places is encouraged and celebrated. Street musicians and entertainers are welcomed. Children rarely need to ask parents for transportation, especially to school, parks and downtown.

Jan Gehl: Cities for People

Jan Gehl is a Danish architect and urban design consultant based in Copenhagen whose career has focused on improving the quality of urban life by re-orienting city design towards the pedestrian and cyclist. He is a founding partner of Gehl Architects. His primary emphasis is on "Making Cities for People" and he makes his point this way:

- All cities have traffic departments and statistics concerning traffic and parking. Moreover, the car is very visible and ever-present in the urban planning process.
- We have architects to look after the buildings
- We have landscape architect to look after the landscape
- **But WHO looks at the "People Landscape"…the human dimension…the City at eye level?**
- **Q: Do you know if any official city department for pedestrians and public life?** By contrast to cars, traffic and parking, hardly any city has statistics and data concerning the people who use the city. The PEOPLE in the City tend to be very INVISIBLE and poorly represented in the planning process!
- For the record, I think **MAIN STREET** is perfectly suited to fulfill that role! :-)
- Therefore, Gehl advocates for these qualities to ensure our cities are for people: **Lively, Attractive, Safe, Sustainable, Healthy**

Practical Recommendations: Randy Wilson

What can we do practically (scaled to MSSC communities) and affordably?

1. **Vibrancy Grants**: Artificially introduce interest, vitality, animation and stickability to downtown.
2. **Downtown Housing**: Upper floor; infill development; pocket neighborhood (key element is quality of downtown schools!)
3. **Plant More Trees**
4. **Smaller Block Sizes**: Mid-Block Crossings; Mid-Block Landings/Amenities
5. **Parklets**: Protect the pedestrian; add vitality; expand sidewalk; create good congestion; activate sidewalks

6. **Balance Pedestrian/Auto Interests**: Minimize right on red; install 'State Law' signs; 'enforce' jaywalking

7. **Add Bike Lanes**: But only if can do so without widening road. Use cars to protect walkers (and cyclists): A relatively easy way of protecting pedestrians and cyclists is to move the parking lane away from the curb and use parked cars as a barrier to protect a new cycling lane. A lane of parked cars also makes pedestrians walking on the street or sitting in cafes feel safer — and thus more likely to walk.

8. **Hide the Parking**: Buffer surface lots and conceal structures. Especially garages, but buffer surface lots as well to create visual interest for pedestrians passing by.

9. **Roadway Treatments**: Road Diet and Remove One-Way Pairs: Shrink downtown streets and make them two-way: the more lanes a street has, the more drivers focus on jockeying for position and finding the "fast lane" rather than on their surroundings. Speck advocates for "road diets" that can remove lanes and slow traffic speeds without reducing throughput. He advocates 12-foot lanes being reduced to 10-foot lanes, in large part because they promote slower driving speeds that result in a reduced likelihood of death in the event of collision.

10. **Walkability Plan**: Create and prioritize your walkability plan; stay the course; celebrate implementation success.