

PRESS RELEASE

Why Walkability Matters

By Dan Burden, Dan Burden Consultants

Think back to when you were 8 years old, what was your walking range unaccompanied by an adult? In the 1920's it was often 6 miles. For the next generation it was only one mile, the next generation, one-half mile, and now, only to the end of our block. How did North Americans bleed out their ability to take a walk at early ages, and now at all ages? We not only gave up the range of our walking, but our links to nature, our ability to socialize, our choice of ways to go places, and even the number of friends that we have. We have whittled down our health and happiness. Sad, but correctable.

We lost our ability to be physically, emotionally, socially, and mentally healthy. We gave up walking, not because we were lazy, or stupid, but for another reason. We overdesigned our neighborhoods and cities for cars and for speed. We can reclaim much of this loss by returning to historic patterns, focusing on people and place. Many communities are taking the right steps, amping up their walkability, and hence their economic life, resiliency and even their sustainability.



“Walking is the exercise that does not need a gym. It is the prescription without medicine, the weight control without diet, and the cosmetic that can’t be found in a chemist. It is the tranquilizer without a pill, the therapy without a psychoanalyst, and the holiday that does not cost a penny. What’s more, it does not pollute, consumes few natural resources and is highly efficient. Walking is convenient, it needs no special equipment, is self-regulating and inherently safe.”

John Butcher, founder of Walk 21, 1999



Shown above, author Dan Burden shaking hands with Blue Zones founder, Dan Buettner (center). In 2004 the two Dans teamed up to build environments where walking and active lives come naturally. The story Dan Buettner wrote "*The Secrets of Living Longer* Is the third most read article in National Geographic's history.

Only 20-30% of how long and healthy we live is based on our genes. The other 70-80% is based on our lifestyles. We have a choice. We can move to a walking oasis by knowing walkability qualities that fit us, and make us fitter, or if we want to stay in place, helping reinvent the neighborhoods where we choose to live.

After 40 years of defining and helping 3,800 neighborhoods build for walkability (many in Canada), I moved to one that is already walkable, and now I work to make it more walkable, Port Townsend, Washington. Am I a harbinger of the future? By applying the patterns of the past, we make communities and ourselves whole and complete again. We shed pounds and build muscles naturally.

I am not alone in choosing walkability for health and personal economics. The U.S. based National Realtors Association tells us that 79% of home buyers want walkability. The percentage seeking this elixir to health is rising, and fast. In 1970, the term walkability did not exist back when we still had this quality. We lost many such walkable places, and now we want them back. Everything we built before 1950 had been walkable, but now not so much.

Why Walkability?

Walkable communities are healthier and more economical, but they also offer so much more—they are more diverse, resilient, sustainable, friendlier, and greener. These in-demand neighborhoods draw people from all income brackets and research shows that people who live in walkable neighborhoods and communities are healthier and happier, and by clear margins.

Walkability leads to physical, mental, and social wellness.

The average resident of walkable neighborhoods weighs less than someone who lives in sprawling neighborhoods. Walkability is associated with higher levels of arts organizations, creativity, and civic engagement. Communities with good public transit and walkable access to amenities promote significant added friendship and happiness.

Walkability is economic health

Higher walkability scores are linked to stronger neighborhood economic wellbeing. A one-point increase out of 100 in Walk Score [based on number of destinations within a short distance] is associated with between a \$700 and \$3,000 increase in home values, according to CEOs for Cities. And if you move from a suburban car dependent neighborhood to one that is truly walkable you can live car-lite, or with no car at all, allowing you to afford a nicer home, have more friends, a greater social life and naturally walk more. People living in Blue Zone researched communities lived 12 years longer, and with greater health.

Walkability is More than Walkways

I like to define walkability with the guiding words security, comfort, convenient, efficient, and welcoming. When in a place where we do not feel comfortable walking our spidey sense alerts us. In such places, traffic speeds and volumes are high, motorists are tuned out and rude, we don't see a diversity of other people walking, houses and buildings fail to watch over the street, they lack windows, and all homes look the same. In areas void of people walking, we experience starkness, which can lead to reduced walking. So, yes, our walking environment determines not only how much we walk, but the actual uplift and joy we get from our walking experience.

If we walk in joyful places, we feel better about ourselves. As I sit in people-packed places, I observe them and photograph them, and map the movements of people, I note the time they linger in place I find the answers of the key ingredients of walkability. Knowing these walkability qualities, we can change the design of new neighborhoods, bring back the life to blemished neighborhoods, and select better places to live healthier lives.

Above all, do not lose your desire to walk. Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness. I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it.

Soren Asbye Kirkegaard, Danish Philosopher 1813-1855

Here is my walkability and health-inducing list:

Create Destinations.

The term 15-minute neighborhoods define walkability. How many places can we reach by foot within a 15-minute walk? These attractions can be parks, schools, stores, services, places to eat, and often places of employment. On my first trip to Australia, I was able to walk from my hotel to a choice of 12 restaurants, all within one block, each small, cozy, varied and delightful. As cities create more mixed, compact land uses and diversity, we bring back walking, health, and vitality. Once we move to or restore our own neighborhood to a walkable scale and mix, we benefit from an abundance of cozy restaurants, with the added treat of stretching our legs and walking home replenished by food, our connection with others and natural easily found exercise. Oh, and as a bonus, a glass or two of wine with no worries since we are on foot.

Design for PEOPLE FIRST

Neighborhoods designed for people, not just cars, win. Always. Seriously, when a place behaves well, you no longer are aware of the movement of cars. This happens by inducing lower speeds and creating well distributed traffic. As we reduce the impact cars have on our habitat and lives, we not only walk more, but we also enjoy our neighborhood and city more. Donald Appleyard's famous 1955 study, *Livable Streets*, also revealed that low volume and speed streets increase the number of friends we have where we live from .9 to 3.1. Wow! If cars are moving through our neighborhoods at more than 30 kph, we lose not only the ability to have friends where we live, but in our comfort and sense of belonging. If driveways interrupt sidewalks, or large garages take over the fronts of houses we are uncomfortable. Walkable communities are designed with purpose to eliminate the dominance and many health impacts of cars.

Proximity of nature

Want to feel an added surge in your daily or weekly wellness score? A nature walk helps you restore. It's intuitive and it works. Nature walks speak to something deep within. You're not visiting an attraction—you're returning home. (*Portland Natural Garden*) A simple walk to and through a park amps up wellness. How close do you feel to natural things like light flickering as it filters down through the restful green of trees, a cascading stream, a pond filled with deep throated frogs, the sight of a fox scampering deeper into the woods, the warm afternoon aroma of a moss blanketed forest floor? Is there a migratory route through your neighborhood or town, and can you access these natural places by foot? Too often we privatized lands, cut them down, paved over. The irony of living in a neighborhood called The Majestic Brooks, where not a drop of water flows, except across hot asphalt. It is time to get natural places back with tree plantings, day-lighting streams when we can. By restoring nature, we truly restore ourselves.

The Final Step

When we finally get walkability elements back in place, all of them in combination, the word walkability will evaporate from our vocabulary. I look forward to the day when a word I helped popularize in the 1980's disappears from our vocabulary. By working together with purpose and drive we will reclaim every street, every brook, one step at a time. Take the next step now.