

Walkability: Elements for Creating a Walkable Downtown

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Thriving downtown areas are a combination of successful retail stores, various attractions, destination restaurants, live-work accommodations, and of course an inviting atmosphere. A downtown of this type, not only carries a city's economy, but also significantly contributes to a city's identity. It is natural to want to create positive qualities and character when in the planning stages of development. Certain architectural and site design objectives can contribute to this sought after atmosphere, when implemented in conjunction with other successful planning and design methods.

The idea of walkability, or the ease and comfort of walking instead of driving is one multi-faceted goal to creating vitality within a community. Walkability can take on many forms and specific design elements. Encouraging pedestrian traffic and alternative transportation affects all contributors in the development of a site, from the traffic engineer, to the project architect, to even building tenants. A bustling downtown flourishes when people get out of their vehicles and browse through shops, stop to have a bit to eat, and interact with their fellow community members. Integrating this walkable nature into a development design is arguably one of the most important ideas and has proved difficult to achieve in certain redevelopment area due to varying existing conditions.

Walkability in urban areas has been researched in several studies and put into place in general plans and recommendations. The San Diego area has proved to be at the forefront of the walkability movement by including a section in their City's Urban Design Element about how to create a walkable neighborhood. There are several elements of a walkable environment, including street improvements, streetscape design, and public interest in the surroundings. A review of some of these strategies is covered below.

Street improvements can significantly impact the nature and feeling of a neighborhood, especially because pedestrian safety is crucial. Increased pedestrian travel will occur if they feel safe alongside vehicular traffic. By using common traffic calming devices to slow vehicle speeds, pedestrians will become more comfortable around larger and wider streets. Lane width reductions can assist in slowing down vehicular traffic by crowding the driver into a narrower lane. Adding a bike lane to the street layout can also reduce vehicular speeds and make pedestrians and cyclists feel safer. In addition, installing a bike lane will further encourage bicycle travel and maintains a buffer between the roadway traffic and walkers on the sidewalk.

Using bulb-outs at curb returns are another traffic calming measure that assists in making pedestrians feel safer by giving them more visibility to oncoming traffic. Bulb-outs are curb extensions that narrow the street at the corners, allowing pedestrians to safely venture further into the roadway, giving them a shorter crossing distance. The downside to this method is the readily available extra space bulb-outs take, which is usually designated for street thoroughfares. Bulb-outs also compliment on-street parking--another successful is another traffic calming device. Adding crosswalks, possibly with

flashing LED sensors, can also facilitate a more walkable environment. Simple adjustments to signal timing will allow more time for pedestrians to cross, thus making crossing large intersections less intimidating. In situations with wider streets that cannot use traffic calming devices, pedestrian refuges or islands can be used for pedestrians to make it safely to the middle of the street and wait for another green signal.

Besides making design improvements to the street itself, similar actions can be taken to improve the streetscape, or the area between the buildings and street. Making this area pedestrian-friendly can give the space a real street presence. One of the best investments is to plant trees and other vegetation. Besides providing shade to pedestrians, street trees are also a way to slow down vehicular traffic. By bringing a bit of greenery into a downtown, the street begins develop individual character, making it more inviting to the pedestrian. Other applications of greenery can be combined with storm water management techniques to handle runoff requirements. Use of landscape buffers between traveled ways and sidewalks will beautify the street while separating pedestrian and vehicular traffic, allowing both to coexist in a safer environment.

Other thoughtful design criteria can contribute to walkability such as the addition of pedestrian facilities and amenities. Benches, trash cans, newspaper vending, and drinking fountains intended for use by pedestrian are excellent additions and demonstrate a pedestrian-friendly atmosphere. Benches can give pedestrians the opportunity to stop and enjoy the downtown environment. The simple design of wider sidewalks can provide for larger volumes of pedestrian traffic, while creating a nice open place to walk. Sidewalks made of decorative concrete can also contribute to increased walkability. Adding patterns and texture to an otherwise plain surface can add to the ambiance, helping to create a sense of place.

When designing a streetscape, keep scale in mind. Signage, street lights, and other design considerations should be in human proportion. Large signs and industrial size lights geared towards vehicular traffic, can be unsuitable for a walkable, more pedestrian-friendly street. Signage can be both beneficial to the pedestrian and driver, to help them anticipate interactions between vehicles and pedestrians. Since safety is a key consideration when planning for walkability, proper signage and warnings are needed to create a safe environment. Street lighting plays a part in creating a safe place for pedestrians as well. It is important to have uniform lighting, without any dark areas. A well-lit street can encourage more pedestrian activity, especially if in a downtown area where night life is likely. Using decorative street lights can add charm without much additional cost while providing necessary security.

The creation of a flourishing downtown area requires connectivity over multiple blocks, linking several types of building into one continuous boulevard. Concentrating activity along the street front will allow people to gather and engage in local commerce. Making the street an active one entails bringing the interest to the ground floor through several design elements for building renovations as well as new construction. Using a zero setback requirement will allow storefronts to be adjacent to the roadway and sidewalks, enticing pedestrians to browse in stores and have easy access to their intended

destinations. The proximity to the active street maintains the “eyes on the street” method for police to help prevent criminal activities, by having complete views while on patrol. It brings doorways and entries directly to the street, further achieving a sense of openness and proximity. Including outdoor dining areas at restaurants and bistros will continue to connect people with the street environment. Plazas and walkways interconnecting various attractions and stores facilitate pedestrian access and create the opportunity for gathering places. The addition of public art can act as a focus for a streetscape, while building character and bringing people together. Water features can also add to the ambience of the street by incorporating visible attractions nearby. Both public art and other attractions, such as fountains can create a center for a downtown, where special celebrations and events can occur.

Buildings facades can also help create a place. By breaking up exterior facades of larger stores, the illusion of smaller, quaint shops can offer a home-town feeling. Large, transparent windows at the front of buildings can open up streets to include store fronts and window displays, allowing continuity between the street shoppers and retailers. Fully utilizing the street frontage with stores, restaurants, and other shops will maximize pedestrian exposure, increasing familiarity and ultimately increasing revenues. Locating parking lots and structures in pockets behind storefronts will take full advantage of street fronts while maintaining close parking access. Building architecture can truly inspire an area’s character and charisma. In conjunction with site layout, architecture is probably the most instrumental component in creating a successful downtown.

When engineers, architects, and planners come together and become “place-makers”, there is much more to consider than just the design of the buildings, streets and sidewalks. Careful consideration of design elements that encourage walking and biking can really create a wonderful place for people to walk and enjoy. Walkability in areas that are semi-developed or that have difficult existing conditions can be more complicated, but are more in need of the benefit of a walkable place.

Bringing economic vitality to an area thru development or redevelopment can revitalize a city. Walkability makes stores and areas more accessible by everyone-- bus riders, drivers, walkers, bicyclists, etc. Creating equality and equal opportunity in an area is a sustainable development quality, in which walkability can contribute to its success. Inclusively grows cultural diversity and community development. Getting people out of their vehicles, brings people closer together and will make them better friends, neighbors, and citizens. This momentum can grow and grow, making the city or town a better place to live. A small element to this new energy could be implementing a walkability plan or requiring new development to embrace pedestrian-friendly designs. Overall, encouraging walkability in downtowns and neighborhoods can only be an advantage now and in years to come.