

Walkability: Why We Care

For the biggest single investment of their lifetime, more buyers are voting with their feet

By Amy Albert and Jennifer Goodman



Another Kind of Walkable
Pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods like South Main in the town of Buena Vista, Colo., are in places other than urban cores.

Urban

The more you talk about walkability, the clearer it becomes that it's a vast subject, involving health, community, the environment, demographics, and economics, to name a few. "It's so complicated, and it's so simple," says Carson Looney, principal of Looney Ricks Kiss in Memphis, Tenn. In the end, he says, "walkability is common sense."

Having designed walkable places in urban, suburban, and rural locations, Looney is quick to add that walkability doesn't have to be synonymous with urban core. Vibrant city neighborhoods are wonderful, but "only a segment of the population gets to experience that," he says. "It's about creating a better place, a destination, an experience."

Walkability is also a business opportunity. Oft-cited studies by economist Joe Cortright and by developer Christopher Leinberger (both nonresident senior fellows at the Brookings Institution) confirm that homes with access to goods and services by

foot perform better economically. "The typical working American pays as much for transportation as housing," says city planner Jeff Speck, principal of Speck & Associates. "Home builders need to realize that when they build a home where people don't need to drive, they should be able to charge more."

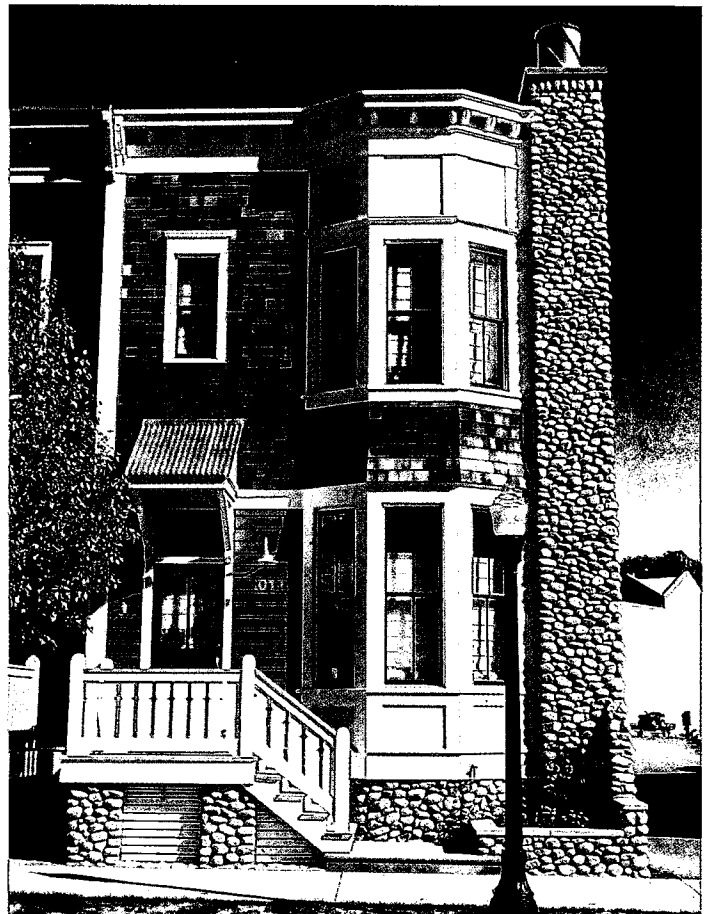
Millennials are a big force in the demand for walkability, and they're opting for the city in droves, says Speck in his latest book, *Walkable City*. "The biggest population bubble in the last 50 years" wants to live in places with excitement and buzz. How to create that where it doesn't exist? "If we're talking

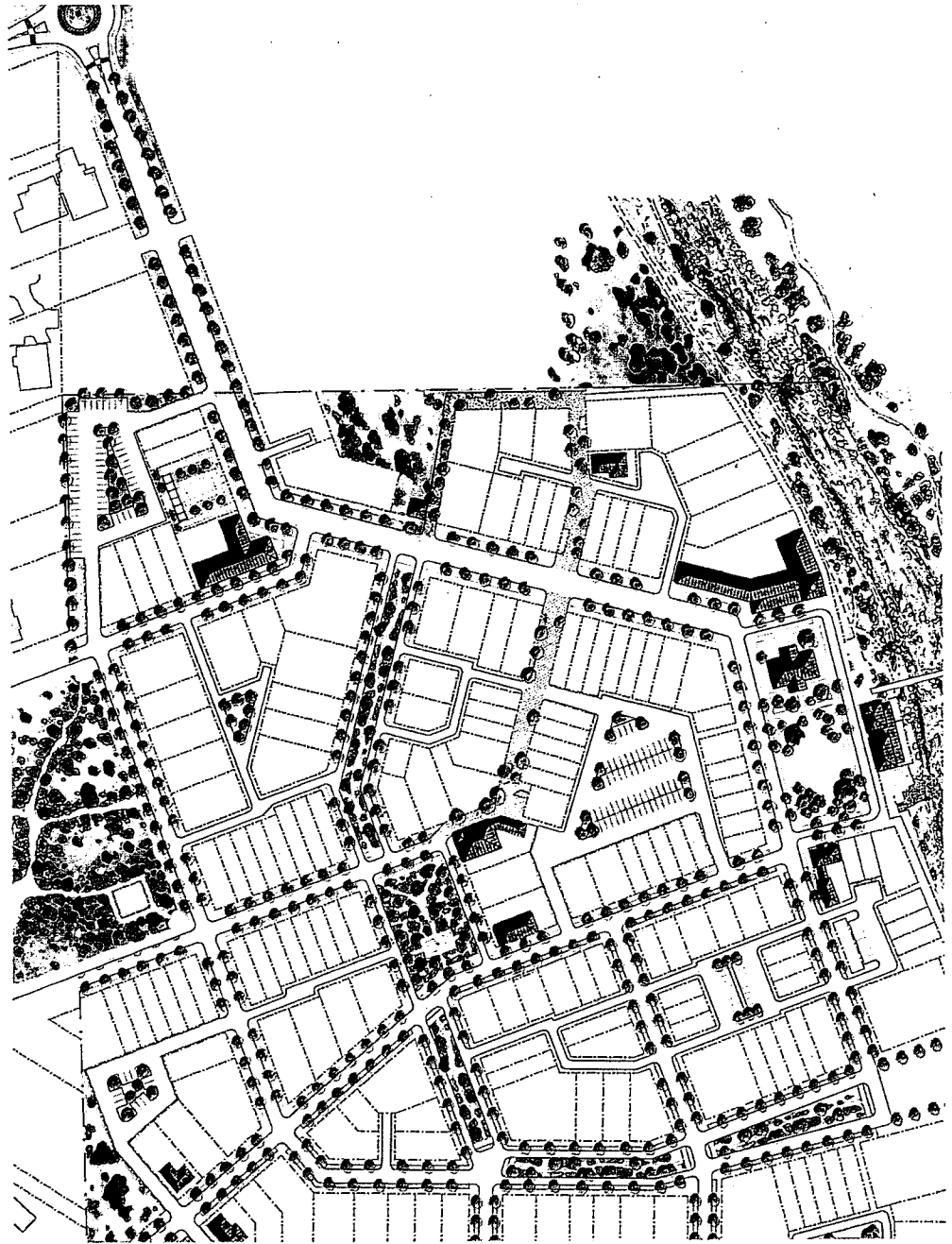
about new communities, the only answer is mixed-use and walkability," Speck says.

Millennials, though, are just part of the picture. As baby boomers get older, many are opting to live in places where they don't have to drive as much to get to services and where they can age in place. Walk Score, a metric that's the current darling of the real estate market, is a basic measure of services within a certain radius. However, it doesn't take into account the quality of the walk to get there—a gritty quarter mile along an underpass being vastly different than a tree-lined three-quarter mile with interesting



Live/Work, Old Style
Housing types vary at South Main, from old-style flats above retail establishments (left) to rustic single-family townhomes (right).





BACK TO THE FUTURE

South Main Buena Vista, Colo.

DEVELOPERS Jed Selby and Katherine Selby Urban, Buena Vista

BUILDER South Main Building Co., Buena Vista

ARCHITECT Craft Design Studio, Buena Vista

WALK SCORE 52

METROSTUDY SAYS
The project is unique to the area, and it's definitely walkable. The town center is less than a 15-minute walk away.

DU/ACRE About 11

CONSTRUCTION COST
\$215 to \$270 per square foot (including land)

SIZE OF UNITS 800 to more than 5,000 square feet (live/work unit)

Nestled at the base of Colorado's Collegiate Peaks, the new homes and shops of South Main mimic the aesthetics and attitude of the neighboring town of Buena Vista. The mixed-use development adheres to the principles that were in place

when the mining town was settled in the 1880s: Residents can walk or bike to restaurants and shops and can even live just a few steps from work, thanks to six live/work buildings that serve as retail storefronts and offices below second-story apartments. The commercial space fronts directly onto

a wide sidewalk lined with trees and protected from traffic by abundant on-street parking. About 40 residential units are now complete with a goal of 300, says design director Kenny Craft. The look of the

neighborhood is modeled on the pattern-based approach of architect Steve Mouzon, who consulted on the project. The result includes steeply pitched metal roofs, exposed stovepipes, and lots of local river rock. "We took our clues from the local context," Craft says.

houses and shops along the way. Still, Walk Score is a start, so the numbers are included in the projects profiled here, as well as market data from Metrostudy, Hanley Wood's research arm.

Here's what's important when you're thinking about building good places that are walkable.

LOOK TO THE PAST

The past is a great source of ideas that work, says Donald Powers, principal of Union Studio Architecture & Community Design in Providence, R.I. "Density and adjacency increase sociability," he says. Mid-block alleys, "a staple of residential planning from the 1920s and 30s," says Powers, lessen emphasis on the car. Small setbacks can help houses relate to the sidewalk, and courtyards encourage interaction. Corners are important, says Looney, and houses built on them should play to the street. "Give 5 more feet to the corner lot and let the porch wrap," says Looney. "The house is just one element, not *the* element."

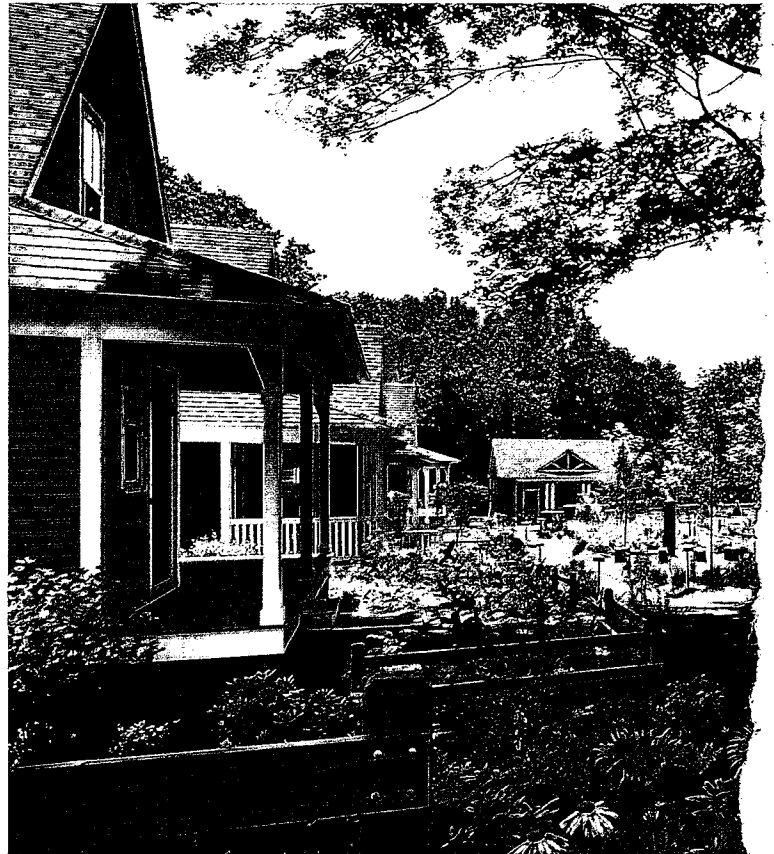
TAKE THE LONG VIEW

"Built with craft and care, well-designed places that people want to spend time in never lose their luster. They remain vital and continue to appreciate in value," says Stefanos Polyzoides, principal of Moule and Polyzoides in Pasadena, Calif., a firm that has brought walkability to unlikely places such as Orange County, Calif., Tucson, Ariz., and El Paso, Texas. A big part of that is ensuring there's interest and variety in the streetscape.

Appealing neighborhoods are a long-term proposition. Forest Hills in Queens, N.Y.—widely seen as one of the most successful master planned communities ever—started 100 years ago; it earned that inviting patina over time. "Once upon a time, the trees were little twigs," Powers notes. So, what about that artificial feel that some new communities are criticized for? "Fifty years from now, people will say Kentlands was the Forest Hills of its time," says Powers of the Gaithersburg, Md., community developed in the late '80s. "One of the goals is to create a pattern that will be picked up on and connects the new with the old," instead of erecting buffers between them.

BE STREET SMART

"Four-foot sidewalks aren't wide enough for couples to stroll, or for people to stop and talk and a baby carriage to pass by," says Looney, who notes that 4½ feet is a good



A CONNECTED COMMUNITY

Concord Riverwalk Concord, Mass.

BUILDER/DEVELOPER
NOW Communities LLC,
Concord

ARCHITECT Union
Studio, Providence, R.I.

WALK SCORE 40

METROSTUDY SAYS
This is the only new community within a mile radius of West Concord's town center—the river is on one side, and town is on the other. A similar home in a non-walkable development would sell for considerably less.

DU/ACRE 3

AVERAGE SALES PRICE \$400 per square foot

SIZE OF UNITS 1,340 to 1,760 square feet



Photos: Nat Rea/Courtesy Union Studio; Illustration: Courtesy Union Studio



In the Pocket

Sited among mature trees on a gentle slope adjacent to the Assabet River, the homes have expansive front porches that face a common park.



At Concord Riverwalk, cars take a back seat to pedestrians. The 3.7-acre enclave of 13 net-zero-possible houses invites residents to hoof it, with human-scaled elevations, large front porches that face a common park area, a community garden, and wide gravel footpaths. Cars are tucked in detached garages and

parking spaces that are clustered away from the living areas.

The two- and three-bedroom houses, located a pleasant half-mile walk from the shops and services of West Concord's town center, range in size from 1,340 to 1,760 square feet. Union

Studio expanded the initial master plan by pocket neighborhood master Ross Chapin while developing the distinctive look of the individual homes, which stay true to the character of New England cottages. Residents adore the neighborhood's old-fashioned vibe and don't mind carrying groceries from their car to the

kitchen, says Union Studio founder Donald Powers. In fact, Riverwalk's success "suggests there is an alternative market for housing besides single-family housing with an attached garage on its own lot," he says.



width, and 5 feet is even better.

"Each place is different," says Speck, but "home builders who are interested in long-term value will insist that all streets are lined on both sides by trees approximately 30 feet on center." Looney suggests going for "as many and as big as the budget allows, and mix them up, so that some are in full glory in the fall while others are blooming in the spring."

ENCOURAGE INTERACTION

Design public spaces as outdoor rooms with a sense of enclosure. Configure them so storefronts face each other, instead of being lined up strip-mall style. Include large front porches to help encourage neighborhood interaction while providing a buffer for private living spaces. Special care needs to be taken for porches that are very close to the sidewalk. Buena Vista, Colo., design director Kenny Craft took a cue from the playbook of urban planner Steve Mouzon and elevated these types of porches 3 feet or 4 feet to help homeowners feel comfortable with instead of vulnerable to action from the street.

BE PICKY ABOUT MIXED USE

"If you take the first tenant who comes along, you might end up with a cell phone store, a dollar store, and a liquor store," instead of a coffee shop, a bookstore, a clothing store, and a restaurant, Powers says. "Pick tenants that contribute to each other and to the public realm," he adds.

PUSH FOR CHANGE, BUT DON'T FORCE A VIEW

Admittedly, the federal government doesn't make it easy to get funding, says John Norquist, president and CEO of the Congress for New Urbanism, citing the 25 percent commercial cap imposed by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac for mixed use. The FHA recently raised the cap to 35 percent, and Norquist is lobbying for Fannie, Freddie, and HUD to follow the FHA's lead. Speck is hopeful that other groups will join in. "Wouldn't it be great if the power of the home building industry were also brought to bear?"

Though increased foot traffic is one of the chief goals here, Powers knows that delivering great options for home buyers remains essential. "We're not saying 'give up your car entirely,'" he adds. "Walkability is market-driven. It's about creating more choice and may the best man win." **B**

Q For additional walkable project case studies, visit go.hw.net/bol0314-walkability.

LIVELY AND LIVABLE DOWNTOWN

901 Jefferson Oakland, Calif.

BUILDER Johnstone Moyer, San Jose, Calif.

DEVELOPER A.F. Evans, Oakland

ARCHITECT Pyatok Architects, Oakland

WALK SCORE 95

METROSTUDY SAYS
The project is closer to the heart of Oakland and City Center than any

other new development. Other Oakland communities may have high Walk Scores as well, but 901 Jefferson is the closest to the action.

DUI/ACRE 150

SIZE OF UNITS 850 square feet



Close to transit, offices, retail, entertainment, and great food shopping in Chinatown, 901 Jefferson is a contemporary building that uses its moderate scale to bridge the transition between the Victorian houses of old Oakland and downtown. Architect Peter Waller, principal-in-charge of the project, says that one hurdle was convincing the community that street-level

retail wasn't a viable option. "We have too much street front retail in Oakland," he points out. Two-story apartments on the ground floor are slightly angled so they don't face the street straight on. They attract renters with lots of natural light, as well as raised planted setbacks and gated entries that provide transition from the street.