

FOR WALKABLE CITY

...ant and entertaining book reminds us that, in America, the exception
...ome the rule. Mayors, planners, and citizens need look no further for
...chievable vision of how to make our ordinary cities great again."

—JOSEPH P. RILEY, mayor of Charleston, S.C.

...urban development are phrases almost guaranteed to bore and con-
...ole. Which is weird, given that cities are the least boring places on
...y, Jeff Speck is a deeply knowledgeable, charming, and jargon-free
...ndly pragmatic person brimming with common sense everybody can
...eir own lives as well as their towns and cities. If Jane Jacobs invented
...Walkable City is its perfect complement, a commonsense twenty-
...s manual."

—KURT ANDERSEN, host of *Studio 360*
and author of *True Believers*

...re of the human race, and Jeff Speck knows how to make them work.
...he persuasively explains how to create rational urban spaces and
...f life by containing the number one vector of global environmental
...automobile."

—DAVID OWEN, staff writer at *The New Yorker*
and author of *Green Metropolis*

...d disarmingly candid, Jeff Speck perches on your shoulder and gets
...mmunity with fresh eyes. He gradually builds a compelling case for
...essential distillation of a vast trove of knowledge about urbanism and
...case he makes has you both nodding at the intuitive and seemingly
...resented, and shaking your head at why those basic principles of
...ve eluded us for so long."

—HARRIET TREGONING,
founder of the National Smart Growth Network

...ands a key fact about great cities, which is that their streets matter
...ldings. And he understands a key fact about great streets, which is
...o walk along them matter more than the cars that drive through
...y is an eloquent ode to the livable city and to the values behind it."

—PAUL GOLDBERGER, Pulitzer Prize-winning
architecture critic and author of *Why Architecture Matters*

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WALKABLE CITY

JEFF SPECK



WALKABLE CITY

HOW DOWNTOWN CAN SAVE AMERICA, ONE STEP AT A TIME

JEFF SPECK

COAUTHOR OF *SUBURBAN NATION*

STEP 10: PICK YOUR WINNERS


Urban triage; Anchors and paths; The lesson of LoDo; Downtowns first

The previous nine steps embody a comprehensive strategy for creating walkable places. As I have stressed throughout, following all these steps, rather than just a few of them, is essential if we are to convert a large segment of drivers into walkers. But following these steps everywhere would bankrupt most cities. Moreover, the universal application of walkability criteria is simply not in keeping with the way that cities actually work: great swaths of any significant metropolis are necessarily dedicated to activities that don't and shouldn't attract street life. To give an obvious example, a container depot is not a place to encourage sidewalk dining.

URBAN TRIAGE

But it is the less obvious examples of this phenomenon that require our attention, or rather, our concerted disregard. A shockingly large amount of money is currently being spent adding walkability enhancements to streets that will never attract more than the occasional stranded motorist hiking for gasoline. In half the cities I visit, I am given a tour of some newly rebuilt street, often the main corridor out of downtown, that has been dolled

up with the latest streetlights, tree grates, and multicolored pavers, as if these modifications will create walking in a place where there is almost nothing to walk to. The corridor has been made more attractive for driving, certainly, but at a much greater cost than if that had been the goal.

 This error points the way to the first question to ask before investing in walkability: where can spending the least money make the most difference? The answer, as obvious as it is ignored, is on streets that are already framed by buildings that have the potential to attract and sustain street life. In other words, places where an accommodating private realm already exists to give comfort and interest to an improved public realm. Most cities have their fair share of streets like this, where historic shopfronts and other attractive buildings line sidewalks that are blighted only by a high-speed, treeless roadway. Fix the street, and you've got the whole package, or close to it.

In contrast, there is little to be gained in livability by improving the design of a street that is lined by muffler shops and fast-food drive-thrus. When you're done, it's still the auto zone and not worthy of our attention. Let it go.

This more mercenary approach to urban revitalization is what we have come to call *urban triage*, an apt moniker for a technique initiated in the battlefields of World War I.* In pedestrian crises, as in combat, the worst off must sometimes be sacrificed for the greater good. Here, the categories of patient are slightly different: first to receive care are the "A" streets that are best poised to benefit from it. Second are the "B" streets that might present a bit of a tougher win, but are needed to tie the best streets together into a proper network—more on that in a minute.

*Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation*, 162. The phrase was coined, like so many, by Andres. Battlefield triage involves withholding care from those patients very likely to either live or die and focusing resources principally on those whose fate could go either way.

Third, and off the table, is what remains: the automotive city. These "C" streets should not be allowed to go to seed; by all means, fill the potholes and pick up the trash. But don't worry about sidewalk widths, street trees, or bike lanes—at least, not in this decade.

PORTLAND &
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The second category above, streets that connect, requires the greatest amount of thought, along with—dare I say it—some design. Because, in any city's downtown, there is a network of walkability, sometimes hidden, that is waiting to emerge. Coaxing it to the surface requires some careful observation and then a decisive design effort. At its heart is the concept of anchors and paths.

Say what you will about shopping malls, you have to admit that in their heyday they did certain things very well. One of these was the almost scientifically determined placement of stores in relationship to each other to encourage maximum spending, which included separating the anchor tenants by a certain distance in order to get people walking past the smaller shops in between. Creating pedestrians in front of the in-line stores was so important to the design of the mall that the anchor tenants were often welcomed rent-free.¹

In a downtown, the anchors are few and fairly easy to identify: major retailers, large parking structures, movie theaters, and any other use that generates significant foot traffic on a regular basis, such as a performance hall or a baseball stadium.* An already-walkable street network is also a type of anchor, as it creates pedestrians who are willing to stroll farther afield if that walk is rewarded. Sometimes these anchors are quite close to

*Baseball needs to be distinguished from football, in which games happen so rarely that a stadium is much less effective at spurring revitalization.

each other, but almost nobody walks between them because of the poor quality of the connection. Beyond the conditions of the roadway itself, this street may suffer from a lack of well-defined, active edges that puts it firmly in “B” or even “C” territory. If this stretch is short enough and opportunities exist for its development, it might make sense for the city to spend money to fix it quickly.

Let’s say we are faced with a situation in which two walkable neighborhoods are located a few blocks away from each other. One holds a convention center, hotels, and an arena. It is full of people but few walk very far. The other neighborhood contains restaurants, bars, galleries, and is surrounded by working-class housing. It has tremendous character but needs a bit of a lift. Conventioneers and arena visitors would love to visit it, but few ever do, because the short distance between the two neighborhoods is utterly uninviting. What’s a city to do?

This was precisely the scenario in Columbus, Ohio, where the city’s convention center and arena were cut off from the gritty Short North neighborhood by a below-grade interstate highway, reamed through in the sixties. Getting from one side to the other meant crossing a barren, windswept bridge, complete with chain-link suicide screen. When it became necessary in 2003 to reconstruct this bridge, the city and state did an unusually smart thing: instead of building a one-hundred-foot-wide bridge, they built a two-hundred-foot-wide bridge, creating two retail pads on its flanks. They gave these pads to an enlightened developer, who built a modern-day Ponte Vecchio, lining the sidewalks with shops and restaurants.

For an additional public cost of \$1.9 million, this novel bridge performed an act of magic: it made a highway disappear. Now conventioneers regularly visit the Short North, and the difference to businesses there is described as “night and day.”² Two walkable districts have been unified into one, and an entire sector of the city has changed its character.

Many cities contain depressed highways and railways, and some of these places are contemplating caps like the one in Columbus. But these are an obvious example of what can be a much subtler situation, in which a few parking lots or lube joints sever what would otherwise be a walkable connection between anchors. Stitching this fabric back together can be even less expensive than the Columbus effort, and just as impactful, but doing so requires an explicit act of identification.

For this reason, when I do a walkability plan, it is a multistep process. First, I study every street that has a chance of being walkable and I grade it in terms of its urban qualities. I ignore the street’s traffic characteristics, since they are simple to fix, and look only at comfort and interest: spatial definition and the presence of friendly faces. This effort produces a map in which the streets are colored from green through yellow to red based on their potential to attract pedestrian life. From this map, a pattern emerges, in which certain streets that are good enough come together to form a clear network of walkability. I then supplement this network with the additional streets that are necessary to connect it to the key anchors that it almost reaches, including other pieces of itself.

The result is an urban triage plan: streets are either in or out. This plan mandates the pattern for both public and private investment over the next decade. Only the “in” streets are to receive walkability improvements like safer traffic patterns, street trees, and better sidewalks. Only the “in” street properties are to receive city redevelopment support, whether that means money or just expedited permitting. And the “missing teeth” within this network—especially along the key severed connections—get the full front-burner treatment. Ideally, the entirety of the city leadership, both public sector and private sector, comes together around a simple understanding: Build These Sites First.

THE LESSON OF LoDo

The plans that emerge from this process can have some surprising features. For example, a neighborhood can be eminently walkable and still contain many unwalkable streets. In fact, many great downtowns alternate good streets with bad ones. All that matters is that the good streets connect into a continuous network so that, while you may have to walk across a “C” street, you never have to walk along one.³ This phenomenon occurs in every American city that is graced with rear alleys.

Even more surprising is how small a network of walkability can be while still giving the impression of a walkable city. Some smaller cities that are known for their walkability, like Greenville, South Carolina, owe much of their reputation to just one great street. Less important than the size of a walkable district is its quality. This was a lesson that we were taught most convincingly by Denver.

In 1993, the city-planning world was abuzz with stories about Denver. “You’ve got to get to Denver,” people kept telling us. “It’s amazing what they’re doing there.”

So we went to Denver, and what we found there was not Denver, but Denver’s Lower Downtown, LoDo. In fact, it wasn’t LoDo, really; it was just a few blocks of LoDo, blocks that happened to hold John Hickenlooper’s Wynkoop brewery, pool hall, and comedy club, across the street from the (empty) beaux arts Union Station, surrounded by some industrial lofts that had just begun to attract urban pioneers. The urbanism wasn’t perfect, but it was close enough, although only a few acres of it showed much promise at all. Most of the district was unchanged from decades prior when, according to sportswriter Rick Reilly, “it was full of druggies and brutes and three-toothed thieves. And those were the women.”⁴

But those few almost-perfect blocks were enough. Like us, other people were hearing these stories and had begun investing

in LoDo and in Denver at large. Within ten years, the whole city was experiencing a powerful renaissance. Denver’s population has grown 28 percent since 1990.

Did all those people come to Denver because of the Wynkoop brewery? Clearly not. But it only takes a few blocks to create a reputation. The lesson of LoDo is to start small with something that is as good as you can make it. That is the beauty of urban triage.

DOWNTOWNS FIRST

As much sense as it makes logically, urban triage can be a challenge politically. First, there is the name, which aptly conveys the presence of winners and losers and, for that reason, requires a lot of explanation. I am always quick to point out how the automotive strip can actually demand higher rents than Main Street, and that this is merely a discussion about walkability, not property value. That said, maybe the name *urban triage* needs to be replaced by something less trenchant.

Second, and a bigger problem, is the way that public servants think about distributing resources. Most mayors, city managers, and municipal planners feel a responsibility to their entire city. As a result, they tend to sprinkle the walkability fairy dust indiscriminately. They are also optimists—they wouldn’t be in government otherwise—so they want to believe that they can someday attain a city that is universally excellent. This is lovely, but it is counterproductive. By trying to be universally excellent, most cities end up universally mediocre. Walkability is likely only in those places where all the best of what a city has to offer is focused in one area. Concentration, not dispersion, is the elixir of urbanity.

This discussion is a loaded one, as it quickly raises questions of equity, and not just from street to street, but from neighborhood

to neighborhood. In most American cities, realistic planning for walkability starts downtown, where most of the key ingredients are already in place. But not many people may actually live there yet. So, who are the efforts for, and are they justified? This is one of the toughest questions a city planner can face. In Baton Rouge, it was phrased this way: "Why are you working on downtown, when it's in such better shape than where we live? Why aren't you doing a plan for our community instead?"

The answer to this question is simple. The downtown is the only part of the city that belongs to everybody. It doesn't matter where you may find your home; the downtown is yours, too. Investing in the downtown of a city is the only place-based way to benefit all of its citizens at once.

And there's more. Every relocation decision, be it a college graduate's or a corporation's, is made with an image of place in mind. That image is palpable and it is powerful. It is resolutely physical: a picture of buildings, streets, squares, cafés, and the social life that those places engender. Whether good or bad, that image is hard to shake. And, with rare exception, that image is downtown.

Each city's reputation therefore rests in large part on its downtown's physical attributes. If the downtown doesn't look good, the city doesn't look good. People won't want to move there, and it will be that much harder for citizens to feel good about the place where they have chosen to live. A beautiful and vibrant downtown, in contrast, can be the rising tide that lifts all ships. As in LoDo, a little bit of great downtown can help push a whole city into the great category. That is the place to begin.

As I ponder the concept of city image, there is one image in particular that I can't get out of my head. I am ten years old, gathered in front of the television with my parents and brother, and we are watching the title credits to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. In stark distinction to most American cities portrayed on TV at the time, Mary's Minneapolis is sparkling, lively, and brim-

ming with opportunity. A thirty-year-old woman has broken off her engagement and moved to the big city to start afresh. We don't know what awaits her, but share in her wide-eyed embrace of the infinite possibility of urban life. Surrounded by fellow pedestrians, she pirouettes joyfully in the street and lofts her wool cap into the air. We never see it come down.