Doable City Reader

CHAPTER 4: WALKABILITY

www.8-80cities.org/doablecity/
Summary:

The healthiest, wealthiest, most sustainable and vibrant communities in cities around the world are unique in many ways. But there is one factor above all others that these communities have in common: they are, nearly without fail, highly walkable places. There is good reason for this.

Every day, every one of us is a pedestrian. No matter where we are going or how we choose to get there, every journey begins and ends with a walk. But by creating places that are built for walking, we flick a switch that unlocks the best our cities can offer us and creates communities that are healthier and richer in every way.

In this chapter you’ll read about solutions that will help you:

Learn about and communicate the impacts of walkability on health, economy, environment, and equity in your community: It’s no secret that many of our cities are facing major environmental and social problems. Many of them stem quite directly from the way our cities have been built and how they are shaping our lives. Learn how, by building more walkable communities, we tackle many of these problems all at once while creating vibrant and beautiful places to live.

Measure the walkability of your city: There are many tools for measuring and understanding the walkability of different neighbourhoods in your city. Find resources to help your community determine where walkability is working, and how to help where it isn’t.

Up the walkability of neighbourhoods overnight for almost no money: Many surveys have shown that one of the key barriers stopping people from walking more often is distance. This resource shows how guerilla wayfinding projects are helping towns make quick steps towards walkability by showing them “it’s not too far.”

Retrofit car-oriented neighbourhoods to be more walkable: When it comes to walkability, one of the biggest problems with the pattern of most suburban development is the lack of connectivity between streets that a traditional urban grid offers. Learn about the hybrid design solution that Canadian neighbourhoods are trying out with the hope of having the best of both worlds.

Get kids walking to school again: If a child walks to school, as 48 per cent of children did in 1969, they are guaranteed at least some exercise five days a week for most of the year. With only 13 per cent of children and youth walking or biking to school today, it’s not surprising that the numbers correspond with skyrocketing obesity rates. Learn how North American schools are starting to change that.
Walkability:
Creating great cities by putting pedestrians first

Walkability is both an end and a means, as well as a measure... After several decades spent redesigning pieces of cities, trying to make them more livable, and more successful, I have watched my focus narrow to this topic as the one issue that seems to both influence and embody most of the others. Get walkability right and so much of the rest will follow.

– Jeff Speck

The healthiest, wealthiest, most sustainable and vibrant communities in cities around the world are unique in many ways. But there is one factor above all others that these communities have in common: they are, nearly without fail, highly walkable places.

There is good reason for this. Every day, every one of us is a pedestrian. No matter where we are going or how we choose to get there, every journey begins and ends with a walk. But by creating places that are built for walking, we flick a switch that unlocks the best our cities can offer us and creates communities that are healthier and richer in every way.

WHAT IS WALKABILITY?
Simply put, a walkable community is one where residents can reach a wide range of amenities — grocery stores, doctor’s offices, restaurants, drug stores, parks and schools, safely and easily by foot. It is also, importantly, a place where the built environment — the collection of streets and buildings and public spaces that make up the city’s landscape — encourages them to do so.

The built environment can do this in many ways, and there are various guidelines for what walkable design means. You’ll see some of these discussed below. But Jeff Speck, author of Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time boiled it down to the simplest principles when he wrote that a walkable place is one where a walk is four things: useful, safe, comfortable, and interesting.

Walkability is a term that we’ve created because we’ve made our nation so un-walkable. It’s a word that shouldn’t exist, and when we finally get our senses we’ll drop the word from our vocabulary.

Essentially walkability is allowing people to do what the human body was designed to do in the first place: to go places without having to get into some mechanical instrument.

– Dan Burden, Walkability Expert, the Doable City Forum
That means that walkability is about more than just building sidewalks so that people can walk (although yes, sidewalks are important too!), it’s also about creating places where people want to walk.

“
Aesthetics matter. We walk further when streets feel safe and interesting. People who live in New York or London typically walk between a third to half a mile to go grocery shopping. Even in Montreal, with its freezing winters and sweat-soaked summers, people report walking about a third of a mile (six to eight minutes) between shops, bags in tow. The numbers are almost as high for people arriving at enclosed shopping malls, which mimic the downtown experience, at least once you’re in the building. But dump us in a vast parking lot surrounded by big-box outlets, and our inclination to walk evaporates. Even when people are equipped with shopping carts, they won’t endure so much as a three minute stroll between retailers. Researchers observed that a third of the shoppers at one Canadian power centre actually parked their cars three or more times during one visit. They just hated trudging across the asphalt desert. It felt ugly, uncomfortable, and unsafe.”

– Charles Montgomery, Happy City: Transforming our lives through urban design

For centuries, when our feet were our main form of transportation, cities were naturally walkable places. However, for the past several decades our cities have instead been built around and for the automobile and the vast distances it can travel in a short amount of time (at least in theory — in reality today, they are likely stuck in traffic!) Now, cities have spread to the point that most day-to-day destinations are too far, too disconnected and too unpleasant for us to traverse them on foot. Walkability is about intentionally re-thinking how we are designing our communities to put the pedestrian first.
When considering walking distances, it is important to consider the actual walking distance on the network, rather than measuring as the crow flies. For example, you can see in the image above on the right hand side that someone might live only 175m from a grocery store or a transit stop but would need to walk 1000m, or 12 minutes, around winding and disconnected streets to get there. In contrast, in the neighbourhood on the right, someone might live the same 175m from the grocery store or the transit stop but because there is a fine-grained network of well-connected streets and pedestrian paths, they only need to walk 265m, or 3 minutes.

As seen in the maps below of two neighbourhoods in Atlanta, Georgia, these patterns deeply impact on how much of a neighbourhood is within reach or accessible to someone on foot.
There is no single recipe to create communities that are more walkable. There are, however, a few key common attributes. Some of the basics include:

**A fine-grained network of well-connected streets.**

Where block sizes are big or where the street network is made up of discontinuous cul-de-sacs, as seen to the right, it often takes too long and is just too inconvenient to walk anywhere on a regular basis.

**People-friendly urban design, which includes safe, comfortable, direct and attractive walking routes separated from motor vehicle traffic.**

In addition to the quality of the walking infrastructure itself — sidewalks that are even, continuous and sufficiently wide — the surrounding street environment plays a major role in encouraging or discouraging walking. Things such as shade and weather protection, good lighting, benches, bus shelters, street trees and public art make the street more attractive for walking. Streets lined with many doors and windows, as opposed to long, blank façades, keep the walk interesting and engaging. This encourages people to walk further. They also provide “eyes on the street,” as they were dubbed by famous urbanist Jane Jacobs; people looking out their storefronts or front windows can keep an informal eye on the neighbourhood and deter criminal activity.

**A rich diversity of amenities, such as groceries, child-care, libraries, gyms, dry-cleaning and restaurants, located within close proximity to each other, along with high employment and population density.**

The more people and jobs that are located closely together — especially in neighbourhoods with that rich mix of amenities — the more destinations will be within walking distance for more people.

**Good cycling and transit connections.**

Walking, cycling and transit are mutually supportive modes of transportation that need to work together to create more walkable communities. These modes help to extend the reach of people on foot and reduce the need to drive. (See the Networks chapter for much more on this.)
There are plenty of examples of neighbourhoods with some, but not enough of the elements of walkability to make them truly walkable. For example, a neighbourhood might have wide tree-lined sidewalks and attractive parks that make for pleasant walking. If there is no mix of shops and services nearby however, there is nothing of note for people to walk to outside of taking recreational strolls.

A great example of this is Laguna West (photos on the left), a master-planned New Urbanist community in California. As you can see on the map on the left, Laguna West was built with slow streets and wide sidewalks intended to encourage walking. However, it was originally built to be serviced by light rail into Sacramento. When that investment didn’t come through it was rendered, in the words of famous urbanist Sir Peter Hall, “as completely power-dependent as any track suburb you could find.”

Likewise, a higher density neighbourhood of townhouses or towers might be located right next to a major regional mall with plenty of shops and services. However, if the street network is not well-connected, distances may still be too great for most people. If that mall is on a busy road with narrow sidewalks and surrounded by large-surface parking lots, most people will find it unpleasant or unsafe to walk, even if they do live nearby.
A great example is this tower development directly next to Square One Mall in Mississauga, Ontario, (see top right images) (Towers can be seen on the east and south side of the mall, as well as the north, across the highway, made more visible by their long shadows).

Ultimately, there is no one magic bullet or secret ingredient to creating more walkable communities. Instead, all of these ingredients need to work together.

‘GET IT RIGHT, AND THE REST WILL FOLLOW’

It’s no secret that many of our cities are facing major environmental and social problems. Especially in North America, diseases of inactivity like obesity and diabetes have reached crisis proportions; municipalities are going bankrupt; housing markets have crashed; we continue to pollute our air and are already feeling the dire effects of climate change; and we’re more disconnected from our neighbours and communities than ever before. While all of these problems are complex, many of them stem quite directly from the way our cities have been built and how they are shaping our lives. By building more walkable communities, we actually tackle many of these problems all at once, while creating vibrant and beautiful places to live.

HEALTH

Low impact, appropriate for all ages and free of charge, walking is a particularly accessible form of physical activity. Walking one mile in 20 minutes burns about the same number of calories as running one mile in 10 minutes, and has been shown to significantly reduce the risk of becoming overweight or obese.
And when it comes to all other elements of our health, walking is a wonderdrug. While the typically recommended daily dose is a minimum of 10,000 steps, or about 30 minutes, benefits can be seen well below this limit.

Studies have found that moderate amounts of walking lead to a significant reduction in heart disease, cancer, lung disease, diabetes and pain from arthritis. It reduces stress, anxiety and depression, and improves sleep, creativity, memory and cognitive performance for children as well as older adults.

The problem is that we just don’t do it enough anymore. Over 80 per cent of Americans today commute to work by car, compared to three per cent who walk, and under one per cent who bike. In 1969, 48 per cent of children walked or biked to school, compared to 13 per cent in 2009, a decline that has contributed to more than a ten per cent increase in obesity rates amongst youth.

The built environment can have a significant effect on this. Many studies have shown that the more walkable a community is, the more people will walk.

A study published by the University of British Columbia’s Active Transportation Collaboratory shows that residents living in highly walkable neighbourhoods are half as likely to be overweight than residents of unwalkable neighbourhoods.

In fact, every additional grocery store within a one-kilometre distance from an individual’s residence corresponded with a whopping 11 per cent reduction in the likelihood of being overweight. Proximity to public transportation, a key element of walkability, has been found to have similar results.
Highly walkable neighbourhoods are not only healthier — they are wealthier. Studies have shown that land and house value is not only higher in walkable neighbourhoods, but also retains its value considerably better than housing in places that are more auto-dependent.

Economist Joe Cortright found that even minor increases in walkability had an enormous effect. Every one-point increase a property had on Walk Score, a now-standard walkability rating system in North America and Australia which rates walkability on a scale of 1-100, was associated with a $700 to $3,000 increase in value.

That means that a ten-point increase in walkability, the difference between a neighbourhood where some errands can be accomplished by foot and a neighbourhood where most errands can be accomplished by foot, could add $30,000 to the price of a home.

Those homes’ values also maintain consistency, and are more resilient to market fluctuation. In Arlington, Virginia and the District of Columbia, for example, houses in urban neighbourhoods lost only about 20 per cent of their value during the 2008 crash, compared with houses on the suburban fringe which lost about half.

This shouldn’t come as a surprise when we consider that the average cost of automobile ownership rings up to about $9,122 (USD) per year. The more we drive, the more we pay. Walking on the other hand, is free. While housing may appear cheaper in less walkable places, when we factor transportation into the calculation, those who live in walkable places typically pay considerably less in combined costs.
The H+T Affordability Index paints a vivid picture of the true cost of living in automobile-oriented communities by comparing the cost of housing alone to the combined cost of housing and transportation.

In the map of Minneapolis on the left, you see that housing costs alone, pictured on the top, are more affordable on the suburban fringes (yellow = < 30% of average annual income, blue = 30%+).

When the costs of transportation are factored in, however, as they are in the map on the bottom, only the denser downtown core remains in the realm of affordability (yellow = <45%, blue = 45%+).

The H+T Affordability Index allows you to punch in any location in the United States to see similar data.
This savings on transportation translates directly to a wealthier city overall.

In one of Cortright’s research papers, The Green Dividend, he explains how the residents of Portland collectively saved more than $1 billion by living in this highly walkable and bikeable city — disposable income which was considerably more likely to flow directly back into the local economy.

Walkable neighbourhoods, where blocks are lined with small-scale storefronts rather than auto-centric big-box supercenters, also net as much as ten times tax revenue per acre for municipalities.

**ENVIRONMENT**

The average North American vehicle emits nearly half a kilogram of carbon dioxide per mile. In most North American households, private vehicle use accounts for the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions — more than 60 per cent of household emissions in Canada, and nearly 25 per cent of all emissions in the United States.

So when Jeff Speck noted in Walkable City that moving to a walkable neighbourhood saves as much energy in a week as switching every light bulb in one’s house to an energy efficient bulb would save in a year, he wasn’t kidding.

There is also an inseparable link between walkability and air quality; one study in King County, Washington found that a 5.5 per cent decrease in air pollutants caused by motor vehicles corresponded with a five per cent increase in walkability.

**EQUITY, SOCIAL COHESION AND OTHER RIPPLE EFFECTS**

There are other less tangible effects walkability has on the overall well-being of a community. People living in walkable neighbourhoods see their neighbours more often, and are more likely to know and trust them, which corresponds to higher levels of health, life satisfaction and community engagement.
Compared to their counterparts in auto-centric neighbourhoods, they are more likely to vote or be otherwise politically engaged, and more likely to get involved in community groups; all of which leads to higher levels of community resilience.

Walkable neighbourhoods are also more equitable, meaning that those who can’t afford to own cars have better access to essential services such as health centres, and also to community centres, parks, public spaces and the many other riches the city offers.

“A growing number of researchers agree that social networks and community involvement have positive health consequences. Persons who are socially engaged with others and actively involved in their communities tend to live longer and be healthier physically and mentally. Social and community ties are key components of a more encompassing concept, social capital. Social capital is defined as the social networks and interactions that inspire trust and reciprocity among citizens. Individuals with high levels of social capital tend to be involved politically, to volunteer in their communities, and to get together more frequently with friends and neighbors. They are also more likely to trust or to think kindly of others. Social capital has been found to be linked to more than just good health; empirical linkages have been found among social capital, the proper functioning of democracy, the prevention of crime, and enhanced economic development.”

– Kevin M. Leyden,

HOW WALKABLE IS YOUR CITY?

The best known tool for measuring walkability, Walk Score, allows users to punch in any address in Canada, the United States or Australia and receive a rating, on a scale of 1-100.

Walkability expert Dan Burden also developed and advocates strongly for communities to partake in what he calls a walking audit, where groups go out and assess the walkability of a place themselves by looking at many elements of a place’s physical design. He produced a free walking audit toolkit and slideshow presentation for anyone wishing to conduct one in his or her neighbourhood.

Jane’s Walk has produced a similar checklist tool, and many others of varying levels of technical sophistication are currently in development.

But perhaps the best measurement of all is the simplest: whether or not there are people out walking in the street. If so, it is likely a place that possesses some, if not all of the elements of walkability. A walkable place, above all, is one where people walk.
Doable City Reader

CHAPTER 4: RELATED STORIES

www.8-80cities.org/doablecity/
Walk [Your City]: The guerilla wayfinding program helping towns take quick steps toward walkability

Many surveys have shown that one of the key barriers stopping people from walking more often is distance. The amenities they want to reach, they report, are simply too far.

Or so they think. While North American cities are ever more dispersed and distance is a genuine barrier some of the time, in many cases the distance may actually be a false perception. Studies show that city dwellers frequently overestimate the distance or time it would take to walk to where they want to go. So while improving walkability is, in most cases, something that must be fixed through design, other times all it takes is helping people understand that “it’s not too far.”

That’s why that phrase has become the tagline of Walk [Your City], an initiative that is dedicated to helping citizens understand the walkability of their communities more accurately. WYC is an online platform that enables any community to quickly and cheaply produce accurate wayfinding signs that can be temporarily installed to show residents and visitors how quickly they can walk to various locations in their neighbourhood.
It started DIY and then it scaled to be included in policy, and now it’s a full time business. I think a lot of that had to do with doing a lot of listening, a lot of asking of questions, a lot of documentation and a lot of follow-up with people who were replicating it and using it and understanding how it applied to them so that as it evolved we could better understand how it fit and how it could be more legitimate and help solve more problems and fill more needs.

– Matt Tomasulo, Walk [Your City], The Doable City Forum

It is an example of how a small, informal and temporary project can not only spark profound change in the mindset of a city’s residents, but also have a deeper impact within the formal city structure and policy.

WYC started as a DIY or guerilla intervention in Raleigh, North Carolina when landscape architecture and urban planning graduate Matt Tomasulo and his friends polled people in the city about why they don’t walk more often. Many of the people they spoke to felt that things were “too far to walk to,” but Matt knew this wasn’t true — he and his friends walked places all the time. So they went out one night and strapped 27 corrugated plastic signs to lampposts downtown. The signs stated the walking distance, in minutes, to various destinations — such as the rose garden, or a good cup of coffee.

Eventually the city took the signs down because they hadn’t been pre-approved. Recognizing their value, however, they were later reintroduced through a city-initiated pilot project where staff installed and maintained the signs themselves. The city has since written Walk [Raleigh] into their official pedestrian plan with a recommendation to expand the program to other neighbourhoods.

Matt and his pals have now launched a website that enables anyone, from a single citizen to a government agency or community group, to take on a similar initiative. On the Walk [Your City] website, groups can plan and design their signs and have them printed and mailed with all the necessary pieces for installation, including straightforward directions, materials, and tips to make the process smoother.

Cities have used these for various reasons. Mount Hope, a community in West Virginia, wanted to encourage walking on their main street for health purposes, but had limited financial resources to do so. A Walk [Your City] campaign was an affordable start. The North Hills neighbourhood of Raleigh used to be large shopping mall, and is currently transitioning to become a more walkable neighbourhood with mixed retail and residential development, offices and more.
However, due to its transitionary nature, the community core is disconnected from other areas of the new development, which created a mental barrier to pedestrians. The real estate company used a WYC campaign to try and break these perceptions. And it worked. Many residents of the community reported that they were surprised by how close destinations on different sides of the development were, and had begun to walk more often. One retired couple even reported that they had never realized the cinema was close enough to walk to from the grocery store — even though they were across the street from each other.

Credit: W[YC]

During the North Hills campaign an executive from the insurance agency Blue Cross Blue Shield walked from one big box store to another only because she learned for the first time via the WYC signage that it would take just ten minutes. That inspired Blue Cross Blue Shield to partner with WYC to expand the project’s technology and bring it to other communities in North Carolina.

Hear Matt speaking candidly with us at the Doable City Forum in Chicago, June 2014, about the process of going from staging a guerrilla intervention to getting Walk [Your City] officially recognized by the city in a video interview on the Doable City Reader website. Learn more about how to produce a Walk [Your City] campaign on their website: https://walkyourcity.org/
Plan B: How a community’s fight for a slower road brought their town back to life

In the mid 2000s, the New York State Transportation Department decided that in order to improve the main street of a little village called Hamburg they would narrow the sidewalks and add another lane of traffic. The economy of the rustbelt town (which, according to residents, once resembled It’s a Wonderful Life’s Bedford Falls) was already on the decline. Residents feared the road widening through the village heart would be its final blow.

So they gathered together and, with the help of walkability expert Dan Burden, put together an alternative plan for the street. The plan included narrowed vehicle lanes to slow traffic instead of speeding it up; bike lanes on either side of the street; new crosswalks with sidewalk extensions to make the crossing shorter; and more trees, not fewer, like the proposed state plan would have seen. When it came to a vote, the community chose the local plan four to one over the state’s.

And when they implemented it, something miraculous happened. Occupancy on the street went up: the number of building permits rose from 15 in 2005 to 96 in 2010. Property values along the strip more than doubled. Music festivals, outdoor movie nights, a soapbox derby and other lively public events started springing up and the street was placed on the National Registrar of Historic Places. The town came back to life. And at the same time, car crashes and injuries have dropped by over 60 percent. Hamburg, New York is just one example of many North American towns choosing a new path for their streets—and their entire communities. As one local resident put it to the New York Times: “If you build a place for cars, it will be a gathering place for cars. If it’s built for people, it will be a gathering place for people.”
Getting kids walking to school again with Safe Routes to School

It’s no secret that children in North America are less active and more unhealthy than ever before. In the United States, childhood obesity has more than doubled in the past 30 years. Amongst adolescents it has tripled, leaping from 5 to 21 percent. In 2012, more than one third of all American children and adolescents were overweight or obese. Similarly in Canada, overweight and obesity doubled between 1978 and 2007, from 15 to 29 percent amongst children and adolescents. Since most adolescents do not outgrow this problem, and often continue to gain excess weight, it is estimated that up to 70 percent of adults aged 40 years will be either obese or overweight by 2040 if current trends continue.

The factors compounding these statistics are many. But perhaps one of the most poignant is the steep decline in the number of children who walk to school.

Screen time and unhealthy meals aside, if a child walks to school, as 48 per cent of children did in 1969, they are guaranteed at least some exercise five days a week for most of the year.

With only 13 per cent of children and youth walking or biking to school today, it’s not surprising that the numbers correspond with skyrocketing obesity rates.

To tackle this trend, many communities in North America are finding ways to get their students walking to school again. A Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program gives schools, teachers and parents a toolkit to help them decipher and overcome barriers, which often revolve around safety. These programs usually include developing dedicated walking routes that are given infrastructural improvements and traffic calming to improve safety; chaperoned walking or biking “school buses” that pick children up at stops along the route; as well as outreach, education and incentive programs.
The results from these programs can be striking. Take Alpine Elementary School in Utah, for example. When the school began a SRTS program in 2008, only 35 percent of Alpine students walked to school, even though 75 percent lived close enough to walk. At the start of their program, the Alpine SRTS committee walked along the community’s dedicated routes to school (the state of Utah requires each school to create a neighborhood access plan that identifies the safest routes for children to walk and bike to school) and noted safety issues that they worked with city engineers and planners to fix, including adding crosswalks, school zone signs, traffic calming and an off-road walking trail that led students to the back entrance of the school.

They created meaningful incentives: for every 10 miles that a student walked or biked, the school donated 40 cents to Alpine’s sister school in Kenya for a student lunch program (40 cents is enough to buy a week’s worth of lunches for one student), and the Alpine class with the most miles each month was treated to a lunch similar to what the Kenyan students were eating. The school also designated Walk to School Wednesdays (W2SW), where students were given extra encouragement to partake. On one occasion the mascot of a nearby university walked with students. That day, 528 of the 555 students who lived within walking distance walked to school, plus many students who regularly took the bus. Only nine cars arrived at the school that morning.

And the results stuck. Many students who previously took the bus began walking regularly. Of the 555 students who live within walking distance of the school, 451 walked or biked to school for the month of September, more than double the number that did before the program. In total, students, faculty and staff walked 26,748 miles the first year of the program.

Other schools have seen similar results. Teachers at a school in El Paso, Texas that started a SRTS program in 2007 found that students partaking in the program had better test scores and behavior on days they walked to school. Parents reported that their relationship with their children improved because they communicated more while they walked to school. A school in Windsor, Vermont, saw a sudden 20 per cent decrease in morning traffic outside the school, making walking immediately safer and prompting a positive feedback loop.

The American Safe Routes to Schools website has an enormous number of resources for communities wishing to create a program for their school that can apply to any city in any country. These resources include parent surveys, tip sheets, evaluation cards and other documents that any school can print and use, as well as an extremely comprehensive guide to building and sustaining a program. It also has a portal for schools to track progress and submit and find data in their states, and numerous resources on how to access funding (local, as well as
federal—the federal government has specific programs that fund SRTS initiatives) in the United States. http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/

The Canadian organization, Active and Safe Routes to School has a number of widely-applicable resources as well, including a very comprehensive guide to ensuring children's full and sincere engagement in the programs, webinars and downloadable powerpoint presentations for giving to various stakeholders. http://www.saferoutestoschool.ca/
The fused grid: a hybrid option that keeps traffic low and walkability high

When it comes to walkability, one of the biggest problems with the pattern of most suburban development is the lack of connectivity between streets.

The cul-de-sac street pattern that was originally intended to provide calmer, safer streets, has lead to neighbourhoods that actually put more cars on the street and prevent walking because the lack of connectivity forces people to walk far out of their way to get anywhere, as seen in the graphic on the left.

A handful of neighbourhoods in Canada are trying to change that by implementing a sort of hybrid model, dubbed by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation as the "fused grid." The fused grid mostly refers to a road network that looks somewhat like a typical suburban cul-de-sac pattern, but where the cul-de-sacs are connected to one another by pedestrian greenways that enable people to pass through.
While this concept does not necessarily solve the other issues that suburban neighbourhoods typically have such as low density (higher density makes other elements of walkability such as frequent and reliable transit options and retail more viable through sheer numbers of users), if such a neighbourhood were built with higher density and a variety of commercial uses and transit options nearby, it could accomplish considerably higher walkability while maintaining the aesthetic and traffic pattern of suburban streets.

A couple of new suburban neighbourhoods are being built in Canada in Ontario and Alberta according to fused grid principles. Some of the same concepts can also be seen in more traditional grid neighbourhoods that have been retrofitted with traffic calming to prevent small local streets from acting as traffic thoroughfares.

Examples of this can be seen throughout Vancouver, especially in the neighbourhoods of Grandview Woodlands and Strathcona.


A pedestrian/cycle path connecting traffic calmed streets in Strathcona, Vancouver
Melbourne, Australia is home to one of the most renowned and vibrant street cultures in the world. But it wasn’t always like this. Up until the late 1980s Melbourne suffered from the same ailment many North American cities grapple with today. Suburban growth had hollowed out the downtown core, leaving it a deserted no-man’s land outside business hours. As famed city planner Jan Gehl once described it, “It was neutron-bombed, not a soul – not even a cat.”

The secret of the city’s rapid rebirth lies in the least expected of places: its unique grid of tiny, 10 meter-wide back alley laneways. Where they exist in other cities (albeit usually wider), laneways are rarely considered viable public spaces. More often they are associated with garbage disposal and drug dealing than pedestrian culture.

But Melbourne saw its laneways as an opportunity for transformation and, throughout the 1990s, developed them into a rich network of intimate pedestrian-only thoroughfares lined with small restaurants, bars and shops.
As a result, downtown Melbourne now boasts twice the number of evening pedestrians as it did in 1990, twelve times more outdoor cafes (in 1990 it had less than 50, now it has more than 600) and even, correspondingly, the highest ratio of street furniture per person in the world. Today Swanston Street draws more pedestrians per day than Regent Street in London.

A number of key policy changes led to Melbourne’s laneway revolution, including changes to the Central Business District that brought more jobs and permanent residents to the downtown core to frequent businesses; design rules prohibiting buildings from having long, blank façades, which led to more small-scale and diverse commercial spaces; and importantly, changes to the city’s liquor regulations that removed the requirement for bars to serve food and led to the creation of the considerably cheaper “small bar” licence. Melbourne’s laneways and inner-city streets hosted exactly the sort of small, low-cost spaces (originally the back of house for main street businesses) suited for these licences, which led to the proliferation of unique and offbeat niche venues.

Craig Allchin, a Melbourne architect and designer who opened one of Melbourne’s first and defining laneway bars on a lean $25,000 budget notes that the most important thing the city did was reimagine what the otherwise barely-used spaces could be: a place for small-scale pedestrian life and experimentation.

It’s a notion that cities can transfer to other parts of the urban fabric, although, as Allchin notes in an interview with Broadsheet, “you can’t cut and paste a solution from one city to another because all cities have different morphologies and politics.” He notes that in Sydney, which doesn’t have the same laneway grid, they applied the same concept to unused basement spaces, an example of the type of creative adaptation necessary to transfer good ideas to different contexts.

“[Developers] travel the world and say, ‘We like the plaza in Copenhagen so we’ll take some of that; we like the pier in San Francisco and the pedestrian mall in Vienna and we’ll take some of those too; and we like the Melbourne laneways.’ They throw it all together on a master plan, hoping to create a quirky, hip, and high-rent retail and pedestrian area. But the result doesn’t perform like any of the examples, and tends to feel like a regular mall, because it’s all under one ownership. The truth is, there is no absolute formula,” he says.
ABOUT THE DOABLE CITY READER

In 2014, 8 80 Cities took on the goal of helping people learn how to kickstart change in their communities. First they launched the Doable Neighbourhood Project in Ontario, an initiative funded by the Government of Ontario to support communities in developing practical and affordable neighbourhood interventions. Then in June, 2014 they collaborated with the Knight Foundation to bring two hundred civic innovators from around North America together in Chicago at the Doable City Forum to share and discover methods for rapid change making. The Doable City Reader is inspired by the rich conversations amongst presenters and participants at that forum. It is a resource for any and all people who want to make change in their cities and is meant to educate, inspire and empower anyone to do so.

For the full Doable City Reader, including chapters on Making Change, Hidden Assets and Network Connections, visit: www.8-80cities.org/doablecity/