

Making Cities More Walkable

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, political science, and sociology.

Today's topic is Making Cities More Walkable.

Our speaker is Jeff Speck who is the author of the classic book now in its 10th edition entitled Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time. I want to learn from Jeff why some cities are more walkable and what design changes can radically improve city life. Why bike lanes and active pedestrian traffic make cities more vibrant and speedy cars are so problematic.

Buckle up.

Jeff please begin with your opening six minute remarks.

Jeff Speck:

I'm a city planner and trained as an architect. We need to make cities more walkable. Epidemiologists, environmentalists, and economists, all have their own reasons for why walkability is so important in our communities.

I will talk about my general theory of walkability. It asks the question, particularly in America in which driving is so easy and so cheap, how do you create an environment in which people will walk? The answer is that the walk has to be as good as the drive. It needs to be useful; it needs to be safe; it needs to be comfortable, and it needs to be interesting and satisfying.

The useful walk is typically only possible in our downtowns and main streets where there's already a good amount of commercial because it's pretty easy to add residential uses to places that are principally commercial. Doing it the other way around is hard.

In America, we have the unusual condition of downtown areas that have lost their housing and need to get it back to have that proper balance. Jane Jacobs talked about this in 1960 when she observed that Wall Street received 400,000 people every day, but it did not have one good restaurant or one good gym because it lacked what she called time spread that evening clientele as well as the lunchtime clientele that makes those things possible.

Let us move on to the safe walk, the typical street in America is not designed to be safe. That is not a uniquely American flaw, but our engineers in this country excel at creating streets that welcome speeds in excess of the speed limit. And the question is, what are the things we can change in our streets to cause drivers to go the speed limit and is safe for pedestrians? And those include the number of lanes, the width of the lanes, the direction of travel, whether it's two-way or one way in multiple lanes. The presence of signals versus stop-signs, the presence of even center lines. There's about dozen factors that all play in the comfortable walk.

Evolutionary biologists tell us that all animals, human among them, are simultaneously seeking prospect and refuge. We need to feel that our flanks are covered from attack or we do not feel comfortable in a space. So creating a space with good edges, with good street walls, with that sense of enclosure is essential to making those outdoor living rooms that attract people to walk through them.

And then there is the interesting walk. Variety and not the same building repeated over and over down the street because as Jane Jacobs said, no one will walk from sameness to sameness and repetition to repetition.

And finally, surface parking lots up against the sidewalk edge, whether they're undeveloped sites or simply the way to access a store. Those are not only uncomfortable in terms of pushing the buildings away from the street that eliminates that sense of outdoor living room. They're just dull and boring. So we make every effort to hide parking lots behind buildings to make sure the parking is at the rear.

You need to really do all four of those things in one place for it to be truly walkable. We look for the low hanging fruit. It's typically in our downtowns and main streets where only a limited amount of effort needs to be made to accomplish that. And that's the focus of my practice, but also in what I try to teach the communities that I visit.

Three of those four things, the useful, comfortable, and interesting walk are principally the responsibility of the private market, which cities can influence through grants and through zoning. But those are long-term influences. In the short term, cities can become more walkable by working in that safe category because they own most of the streets.

Larry Bernstein:

Jane Jacobs said that the best community to emulate was Greenwich Village because of its narrow and short streets.

Jeff Speck:

Where she lived.

Larry Bernstein:

The short streets and frequent intersections allow pedestrians to randomly choose different routes across town. This increases the demand for retail on the ground floor. She also thought that the old ladies on the stoop could monitor the neighborhood reducing crime.

Jeff Speck:

Jane Jacobs called it the need for small blocks. Back then safety was much more about crime and eyes on the street and observation. These days, we do not focus on that as much because it is statistically a much lower threat than moving automobiles. But if you make a place walkable, you do end up with more eyes on the street and crime issues are satisfied as well. In her famous book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, there are only three drawings. I believe she drew them. They're in this chapter called the Need for Small Blocks. And they show how businesses thrive or fail based on people walking past them and that people are much more likely to walk past more businesses when the blocks are smaller, and you have more choices about what direction you're going in.

Smaller blocks lead to smaller streets which are safer and better for walking on. Portland Oregon has famously 200-foot blocks and the typical street in Portland is about two lanes. Salt Lake City has about 600-foot blocks. Salt Lake City is known for being rather un-walkable and the typical street in Salt Lake City is five or six lanes. Block density or what we call the intersection density, how many intersections per square mile is one of the clearest indicators you can find of how walkable a place is going to be.

Larry Bernstein:

The UK uses the roundabout. It's relatively uncommon in the U.S. except for places like DuPont Circle. Does the roundabout improve the pedestrian experience?

Jeff Speck:

The different classifications of roundabout, there is the big old New England Rotary, which is essentially a highway going around a circle, which we have in Massachusetts. There's the DuPont Circle style circular square, which has signals at every intersection and functions more like a collection of streets in a normal way that just happens to be round. And then there's the modern roundabout that came from Europe that now is starting to proliferate in the U.S. It is low speed the way it functions if properly designed, pedestrians are truly safe, bicyclists are truly safe if bicycle accommodations are included in the design.

I do not like roundabouts as a main intersection in a shopping street because they still feel like an automotive environment. They're a dynamic environment. Everyone's moving quite slowly and injury crashes are not occurring, but it's still not a place of comfort. I'm a much bigger fan of the

stop sign. In the U.S., when you signalize an intersection that could be a stop sign, you increase the number of pedestrian injury crashes by more than double.

Larry Bernstein:

During COVID the use of public transportation collapsed. What needs to happen to bring us back to pre-COVID levels?

Jeff Speck:

Public transport is coming back. It will continue to resuscitate. And the main problem is understanding that transit subsidy is transit investment. And investing in highways tends to invite more congestion, whereas investing in transit results in more transit ridership, healthier lifestyles. The typical transit rider who switches from being a driver loses six pounds immediately, but also takes people off the streets to allow the wealthier people who make the choice to drive to have a better time of it.

The number one thing we could do is stop underfunding our public transit systems because the externalities of driving are so much greater than the amount of subsidy that goes to transit.

Larry Bernstein:

Retail is in trouble. Big malls in Chicago like Water Tower are struggling. On Michigan Avenue in the heart of Chicago's retail district, the Disney store closed and was replaced by a store that sells only sugar cereals.

Jeff Speck:

Like miracle of a mile almost.

Larry Bernstein:

Northbrook Court is a major mall located near where I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago. It was spectacular when it was built in the 70s and it is now almost completely vacant. How does the demise of the mall relate to your desire for an interesting pedestrian experience?

Jeff Speck:

Well, the good news is that no one's going to miss them. These are real estate products that exist as just one more exit off the freeway, and they have no real conception of placemaking or destination aside from the shops that were in them, which is why so many malls are dying. A very small minority of the existing malls in the US are expected to last out the decade. It's largely because retail has bifurcated into convenience/affordable retail, which you're either going to Walmart or to Amazon and then into experience retail. And people now want authentic experiences, which except in rare places, the mall does not count towards an authentic experience.

Brick and mortar retail stores that are going to survive are going to be those that are offering an enhanced experience. The main thing that distinguished a mall from a main street is that there was nothing there but shopping. And so it never became more than the sum of its parts, its parts were shops. It could never be beloved because no one ever lived there. You can only really love a place if you live in it. Main streets that are part of residential or mixed-use neighborhoods that are more occupied because people are working close to them. Those are social centers that people will always value and will care to do their shopping in as opposed to when they are just trying to be convenient or safe or cheap. I do see long-term resuscitation of many of these main streets, but there is no reason to see a mall come back unless it is remade into a mixed-use town center that might just happen to have a roof over its main street but includes a ton of housing and workplace so that it becomes a real community, not just a real estate product.

Larry Bernstein:

Major European cities are very walkable. These city centers were built before the automobile and they are great to walk around but problematic to drive. What can we learn from the European experience?

Jeff Speck:

Jan Gehl, the famous Scandinavian planner, he said, we learned in the second half of the 20th century that cars essentially behave like water. This pertains to Europe in particular, those cities that gave them more space filled and those cities that gave them less space to fill appeared in less numbers because driving is a free good. You pay so little for it compared to its actual cost to society that the smart thing to do is to do it all the time. If you own a car, the smart thing to do is to drive it all the time.

It is simple economics. Given those circumstances, you can't ever satisfy the demand. Since the equilibrium is based on the amount of traffic that people are willing to put up with, and that if you reduce congestion, you invite more trips. Essentially you are dealing with a constant. So when you look at these European cities that give very little room for automobiles, at least the ones I know aren't suffering in any way because of it, because people have adjusted their behavior and they still rely principally on other modes of transportation or they live closer to home. And the typical European city is much smaller. Even the large cities are much smaller than ours with green belts surrounding them. It's a much more sustainable way to develop the land.

Larry Bernstein:

If you build more lanes, travel time in rush hour is unchanged, but the number of drivers goes up a lot. After all It is a bigger road.

Jeff Speck:

Yes. But if you had made that same investment in another mode, particularly transit, although I would say walkability, if you can get more people living downtown, if you get more people who don't even have to move, who don't even have to commute, because God knows the demand for downtown housing is so much higher than the supply. It's the most productive, effective way to provide new housing is in a downtown core where people snatch it up immediately and then you've just reduced the number of people that need mobility.

Larry Bernstein:

In Chicago, there is a major multi-year construction project on the Kennedy Expressway. Traffic is awful. It is so bad that going out Saturday night from the suburbs to downtown is not worth it. Better to find an alternative in the suburbs. Yet, when you see the trains to the city, they are relatively empty on Saturday night. The schedule is infrequent, and the train destinations are in the business district which is far from the nightlife.

Jeff Speck:

Chicago is far from the worst offender. In most cities housing and most work is so far flung and poorly organized that you can even have a wonderful transit system, but you get off on either end and then the last four miles is a real problem. So, what you are pointing out is a much more holistic challenge, and as we design new cities, it's very clear how to avoid those issues. But when you're looking at the typical American city, the Scottsdales or the Hendersons, those are the cities where you really have to scratch your head and accept a principally automotive transportation system and then ask, what can we do to marginally impact people's quality of life aside from telling them to move somewhere else.

Larry Bernstein:

Tell us about the urban traffic catastrophe known as Los Angeles.

Jeff Speck:

Los Angeles is a city that has great neighborhoods that follow all the rules of great neighborhood design. But the problem is that most people in LA want to have access to all of LA and they might have friends in all these different parts, be it Silver Lake or Manhattan Beach, and getting between them is not easy. The nice thing though, is that most of these older downtowns are transit ready. That presents much better bones than a Scottsdale or a Henderson for introducing effective transit between communities. It's very clear that LA is a city that a real commitment to express bus lanes that connect the walkable centers to each other could fundamentally improve the quality of life.

Larry Bernstein:

Is congestion pricing equitable?

Jeff Speck:

Congestion pricing helps absolutely everybody on average. Having tolls on highways that reflect the demand on those highways at different times that vary in relation to that demand, they improve traffic flow dramatically.

Let's say a highway has 10,000 cars on it right now, and none of those cars are moving. If you could have 8,000 cars on that highway that are all moving, then the utility of that highway skyrockets. And what congestion pricing does is it gets the 10,000 not moving, helping no one, down to the 8,000, all moving, helping everyone, and people are willing to pay if you can change your commute. Even if you're working class, if you can change it from 90-minute commute to a 30-minute commute and pay 10 bucks for the privilege, you're making more than 10 bucks an hour, right? There's a real logic there that is wrapped up in other political considerations that are as much cultural as economic.

Larry Bernstein:

Manhattan is considering congestion pricing below 61st street. What will happen to traffic as you approach the congestion street border?

Jeff Speck:

These systems tend to adjust more collectively. For example, when a bike lane was put on Prospect Park West in Brooklyn, reducing that street by one lane, everyone presumed that the throughput of that street would drop, and the congestion on the parallel roads would increase. Neither of those things happened. The street carried as many cars as before and no traffic was shifted onto other streets. It's very hard to understand these things systematically. What people need to get through their heads about New York City is that the number of cars in New York City is exactly a function of the number of lanes in New York City. People have adjusted their behavior to the number of lanes available, and they will adjust their behavior again to whatever changes. The key point to make is that there's no way to change the equilibrium around the amount of traffic that people are willing to put up with every day except one, and that is to make the cost of driving more in line with the value of driving, and then the economics begin to function. The reason why every new lane is taken up by new trips is because driving is what economists call a free good. If you make driving not a free good, if you make the laws of economics work by allowing the free market to function by pricing things relative to their value, then suddenly you have people making proper choices about whether to drive or not, and you would have flowing traffic.

Larry Bernstein:

There is talk that the congestion price that drivers will pay will be a function of income, does that make sense?

Jeff Speck:

Intellectually, it does not make sense because if you believe that poorer people deserve subsidies, then you should just give them subsidies. I'm not a fan of free transit and I'm not a fan of even giving people housing subsidies when we should just be giving them money. I believe in a society in which the poor get help, and they get help in a general way where they're able to make proper choices about how to spend their money. But the idea of identifying certain special aspects of life that need to be individually subsidized.

Theoretically, I'm against it, but practically I understand it because it's a way that our society can begin to level the playing field when it's not willing to do so in a more direct way.

Larry Bernstein:

I moved to Miami Beach which is a very walkable city. You used to live here as well, tell us about Miami.

Jeff Speck:

I lived in South Beach for 10 years. Miami is a city like Los Angeles that if you want to have access to all the best parts, you need a car because they're not conveniently connected by transit. Miami has its pre-war neighborhoods that are quite delightful: South Beach, Coconut Grove and Coral Gables. But they exist within a larger metropolis that is a driving metropolis and was organized principally after the rise of the automobile where people did not consider how to connect these neighborhoods in any other way.

Larry Bernstein:

Miami is booming and it is relatively new metropolis. Some say that if a city were new and booming then city planners could properly incorporate good public transit. What happened in Miami?

Jeff Speck:

Well, you got to follow the money. In Miami, it was the taxi owners who stopped transit from the airport to the beach, for example. Every American city that grew up principally after World War II, the car was understood to be not just an instrument of freedom, but a prosthetic device that you would need to live your lives. And it was taken for granted because it was fun and great to drive, and most of us could, and only later were all the externalities that are ultimately destroying our health and our planet known.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is bikes. When I walk around Manhattan, my biggest fear is the bikers and not the cars. Is that rational?

Jeff Speck:

Not following the rules of the road does indeed endanger pedestrians. The greatest risk to pedestrians is certainly statistically automobiles and not bikes and e-bikes. But it is definitely a problem, and it's very difficult to fix principally because policing of bicycles, has historically been very racist in its outcomes. And so before we knew this, it was very easy to say that this is an enforcement issue. But now the data make it clear that if you encourage the policing of bicyclists, that you're going to be disproportionately punishing people of color. And it's a real quandary that I don't know how to fix.

Larry Bernstein:

You should know that I have not received a motion violation ticket for my car, but I have received a motion violation for my bike.

Jeff Speck:

The typical circumstance you see is the cop that parks in the bike lane and then tickets you for leaving it.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about for pedestrians?

Jeff Speck:

I'm optimistic about what's happening in city after city. I see the biggest snowballing trend is probably the elimination of off-street parking requirements for real estate development. Minneapolis and Seattle and lots of other cities are getting rid of some or all of their requirements for developers to build or merchants to provide parking, which as parking guru Donald Shoup says, off-street parking is a fertility drug for cars. These arbitrary and often completely random requirements that cities impose on developers or shop owners or office owners to provide parking is a strong incentive for people to drive. The orientation we see in Massachusetts and now in California about orienting high density housing around transit and then the elimination of the onsite parking requirements in city after city are all optimistic trends that are happening.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Jeff for joining us today.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The podcast's topic was Using Storytelling to Teach Medicine. Our speaker was Dr. Ari Ciment who is the author of a new book entitled Breathless

Tales: Life, Laughter, and Lessons. Ari managed the COVID ward at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Miami Beach when I was a patient recovering from COVID in December 2020. Ari has spoken more times on this podcast than any other guest. Ari discussed how he uses stories to teach his medical students, his doctor colleagues, and his nursing staff. We talked about his experience in the COVID ICU, and why certain patients lived because of sheer will.

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Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.