



On June 13, 2018, America Walks hosted the webinar, “A Good Investment: The Benefits of Walkable Communities”, where we explored the financial and economic benefits that come to individuals and communities when we take steps towards walkable and livable places for all ages. Panelists took a deep dive into the calculations of re-imagining their local main streets and downtowns, while digging into the resources and data needed to make it happen. The webinar featured Charles Marohn, a Professional Engineer (PE) licensed in the State of Minnesota and a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP), Founder and President of Strong Towns, Director of Research for the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Research and Policy Lab, Dr. Michael Powe, who researches the contributions that existing buildings and blocks offer communities, and James F. Sallis, Ph.D, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Family Medicine and Public Health at University of California, San Diego and Professorial Fellow at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, whose research interests are promoting physical activity and understanding policy and environmental influences on physical activity, nutrition, and obesity.

America Walks received many questions and comments from attendees. Michael Powe took time to offer his expertise, to continue the conversation and provide further insight on the economic and financial power of walkable communities and how to use the information to make your case for safe, accessible, and enjoyable places to walk and be physically active.

Why did you pick the cities you mentioned?

In our Older, Smaller, Better study, we chose Seattle, San Francisco, and Washington D.C., because we were interested in cities with very active real estate markets, where there is great pressure on older, smaller buildings and a real threat of demolition replaced by newer, larger construction. In our Partnership for Building Reuse projects, we chose Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, and Detroit because we sought cities with strong Urban Land Institute District Councils, a wealth of old buildings, and an appetite to tweak codes, regulations, and incentives to better leverage older buildings. Our Atlas of ReUrbanism project included just about every large city where we could get the necessary data.

How do we promote walkability in divested communities without promoting gentrification?

Good question! I think one way is by being pragmatic and modest in approaching sidewalk and streetscape improvements. Doing things like painting crosswalks or fixing cracked sidewalks can make an appreciable difference, but loudly touting those changes can have create undue interest and spur a sense of broader neighborhood change. I'd also point to the early notions of "Equity Planning" from Norm Krumholz and Cleveland in the late 1960s. Krumholz argued that cities ought to promote "a wider range of choices for those Cleveland residents who have few, if any, choices." Applied here: Walkability improvements ought to be initially focused in those areas that are least walkable. [You can read more about this here.](#)

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Does the value of repurposing old buildings apply in more suburban settings (i.e., vacant strip malls with massive parking lots)? Maybe at a smaller scale?

Jane Jacobs might say that old buildings aren't valuable because of their older character, but because they require the least "economic yield." That's why you might notice more local businesses and family-owned businesses in older strip malls in some suburban settings. From an environmental perspective, reusing a building is a better response to climate change than tearing it down and replacing it with something new (especially if it's not offering greater density or intensity of use). But if a building is ugly, inefficient, and vacant, it's likely not altogether lovable and maybe not a good place to launch a new focus on building reuse.

What role can zoning play in preserving these walkable characteristics and older areas are redeveloped? What are your thoughts on the best zoning approaches?

Form-based zoning codes attempt to leverage the strengths of older buildings, including the walkability they cultivate, and encourage new development to be compatible and similarly oriented to the street and sidewalk. But form-based zoning codes have limits, too. I think the best zoning and regulation capitalizes on the "original design intelligence" of older buildings without being restrictive or deterministic. [The Los Angeles Adaptive Reuse Ordinance may present some ideas](#) that planners may find novel.

Do you have information for walkability in small towns? I live in a town of about 8,000 that is not very walkable.

I would just encourage efforts to promote walkability to start where the work is needed but also where it will take root. I think most of the time you can find that in the oldest commercial strip in a town or small city. Then integrate those oldest commercial blocks with the adjacent neighborhoods, then go from there.

In Barcelona, Catalonia (Spain), we are seeing how cities are now in transition to put people first (walkable and bikeable towns) and increasing road diet. Are we walking to the post-car city? What's your point of view on how the automobile industry is having a new rebirth of the car: electric and autonomous. Is just greenwashing?

I hope we're walking to a post-car city, but folks in Barcelona are likely further ahead than folks in many U.S. cities and towns. I think there may be great potential in autonomous, electric vehicles as a way for fewer people to own their own cars. Could reduce the need for parking, which would then open space once used for parking as space for more productive use by people, bikes, and small businesses.

Many of the new developments in this country are not in cities, but there is often the expectation that they will eventually be incorporated into cities.,How are walkable communities fostered in those areas? What about the role of developers and banks?

I'd encourage efforts to promote walkability to start where the work is needed but also where it will take root. I think most of the time you can find that in the oldest commercial strip in a town or small city. Then integrate those oldest commercial blocks with the adjacent neighborhoods, then go from there. Creating more nodes of activity in small cities, towns, etc., can support walkability. I

think banks and developers follow precedents. If it's worked elsewhere, they'll consider trying it out. We can push small-scale developers, credit unions, and co-ops to lead the way at times. Can also try nudging progress along by spotlighting successes from other cities you'd like emulated in your own city or town.

What's the role of Metropolitan Planning Organizations in funding walkability and complete streets projects long-term and using federal funding?

This is pretty far outside my area of expertise, but I know that metro / regional planning organizations do support this work. For instance, I'm fairly certain the Metropolitan Washington (DC) Council of Governments funded a pretty extensive walkability analysis some six or seven years back.

How much of the value is left on the table by focusing primarily on downtowns, city centers, main streets, without making the neighborhoods where people live and start their journey from walkable too? What's the cost of drive-to-walkable-areas? Is it sustainable?

I think there is some logic to focusing walkability efforts where you see the most people, and sometimes, but certainly not always, you find such concentrated activity in downtowns and city centers. I also think there's something to be said for building on success and boosting walkability where there are people likely to walk. On the other hand, I understand that focusing in a downtown or city center shouldn't come at the expense of any walkability in neighborhoods. There's a balancing act there.