



Can 'New Urbanism' Bring Health to Your Neighborhood?

There's a movement afoot to make America's neighborhoods healthier. Help yours with these five tips.

By Rachel Pomerance Berl, Contributor June 7, 2012

CONSIDER FOR A MOMENT the land of 1970s children's TV, where "it's a beautiful day" in *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. Won't we be his neighbor? Of course, we will! On *Sesame Street*, that halcyon hub where humans live alongside puppets, we encounter friends on their stoops and joyfully discover our neighbors: "They're the people that you meet, when you're walking down the street. They're the people that you meet each day!"

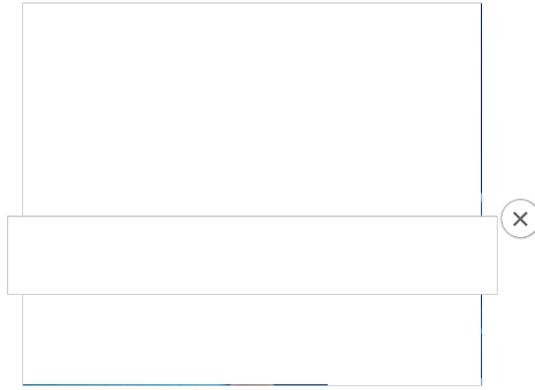
These shows introduced us to the world through the neighborhood, a place brimming with a sense of community and belonging. Trouble is, many of us live in a world that doesn't even come close to this ideal. Instead, much of America lives in areas circumscribed by sprawl. Whirring cars and long, sidewalk-less routes make traveling by foot a risky proposition even as Americans face the twin threats of inactivity and obesity.

Researchers are increasingly pointing out the health hazards of these environments, where sedentary, isolated lifestyles have made us fat, lonely, and depressed.

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That, along with the expense and inconvenience of sprawl, has led to soaring demand for urban living and the mixed-use, high-density developments that have gained popularity in suburbs. In either case, it's about living amid convenient goods and services and the intangible spirit of a vibrant community. At the forefront of the movement is the Congress for New Urbanism, a nonprofit organization that promotes restoring cities and reworking suburbs into walkable and sustainable communities. But the desire for these places is largely driven by two burgeoning populations—Millennials and baby boomers.

"Young people have seen the rat race," the long commutes endured by their parents, says Richard Jackson, host of the current PBS series *Designing Healthy Communities* and chair of environmental health sciences at UCLA School of Public Health. "We boomers don't want to be mowing the lawn or taking care of a great, big house anymore."



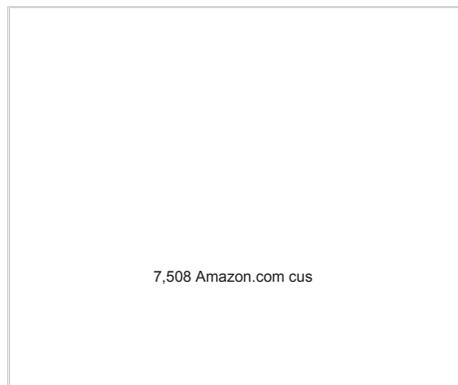
A former pediatrician, Jackson addressed toxic environmental conditions as director of the National Center for Environmental Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While there, he realized the broader web of issues at hand. "What really matters most to people in terms of their environment is where they live, where their kids live, where their parents are growing old," and those places "can make us depressed, lonely, overweight, and unfit, or [they] can reverse all those things."

Rattling off several morose U.S. statistics—like the doubled rate of diabetes in the last 15 years—Jackson describes a "profound decline in the fitness of Americans," and blames, in large part, the environments we've created. "In many ways, it's because we've taken people's legs away from them," he says. "Most people can't buy a carton of milk without getting in the car."

[See: [In Pictures: 10 Fattest Cities in America](#)]

Of course, walkability is just one part of the recipe for a healthy community—which requires green space, safe streets and buildings, and access to fresh food and public transportation.

The good news: These places are coming. The last 30 years have seen walkable urban neighborhoods go from some of the least-valued real estate in America to among the nation's most desirable places to live, says Christopher Leinberger, visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, where he recently coauthored a study showing a direct relationship between a neighborhood's walkability and the value of its commercial and residential properties.



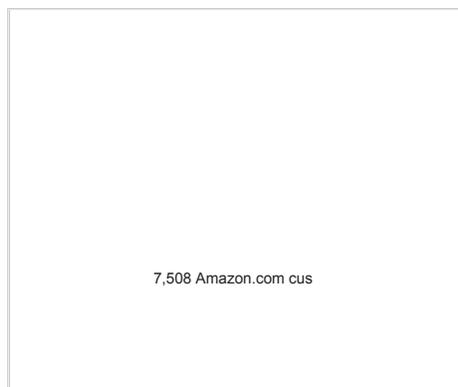
"This is a signal from the market that there is significant, pent-up demand for walkable, urban places. The converse, of course, is that we've dramatically overbuilt suburban places, and that is the reason for the [economic] crash," says Leinberger, a founding partner of Arcadia Land Company, a Pennsylvania-based real estate group that builds walkable communities.

If you don't reside in a mixed-use, high-density village that lets you work where you live and walk to your farmer's market, don't fret. Short of gutting your neighborhood or moving, there are plenty of steps we can all take to enhance our communities.

Here are five tips to nurturing health in your neighborhood:

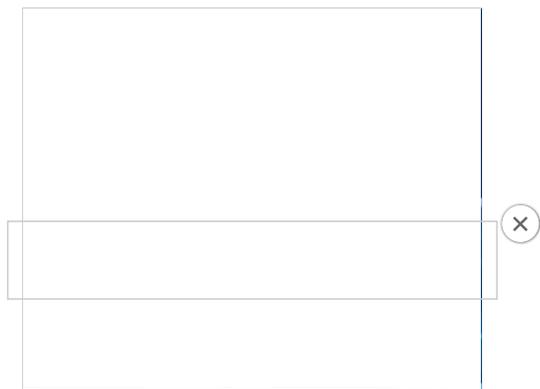
1. Start with your youth. If you're going to spur sweeping cultural change, your best bet is to start with kids, Jackson says, noting that adults tend to be more set in their ways. The move toward healthier school lunches, for example, found greater success with elementary school kids than with high schoolers, he says. "Every sensible person would agree that children need to be in healthy environments, need to have healthy food, need to be able to explore the world that they're in" for proper development. Additionally, "schools need to be health centers," that measure kids for fitness and ensure proper nutrition, Jackson says. "Very few adults would want to eat what is supplied in a school cafeteria in America."

2. Rethink your transportation options. "Half of the trips that Americans take are under three miles, so those are actually a lot of trips that we could think about taking by other means," says Geoff Anderson, president and CEO of Smart Growth America, a coalition promoting safe, affordable neighborhoods, among other things. For example, some people have begun to employ the "granny cart" to let them do their grocery shopping by foot. "Nobody has to move or create a new community," says Anderson.



3. But if you do move, consider your lifestyle. Factor into your decision, for example, the nearby amenities and available transportation options. "Basically every public transportation trip starts and ends with a walking trip," Anderson says. "When you have public transportation, you invariably have walking." And that's good. For example, a study of residents using a new light-rail system in Charlotte, N.C., found that over the course of one to two years, they lost an average of 6.45 pounds and reduced their risk of obesity by 81 percent. "Less-vigorous forms of physical activity are more likely to be sustained over time, making it easier to meet exercise goals through the promotion of walking as a basic change in one's daily routine," according to the 2010 report, published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

4. "Complete the neighborhood." Galina Tachieva, author of *Sprawl Repair Manual* and a partner with the architecture firm Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, which is steeped in the principles of new urbanism, spoke to *U.S. News* from Utah, where she was attending a workshop to convert a mall into a town center to achieve that desirable mixed-use, accessible environment. That's one approach to revamping where you live. But Tachieva also recommends small-scale solutions to "complete the neighborhood." For example, she suggests a cul-de-sac makeover—turn it into a "neighborhood center" with a post office, restaurant, hair salon, and recycling center, where artisans could create crafts and profit. This hub could also host residences for seniors to age in place.



5. Use your power. Press for improvements through your local governing boards and home associations. Adding sidewalks and bike lanes, for example, are relatively inexpensive ways to make a big improvement, according to Anderson. Ultimately, Jackson says, healthy communities will come about through "professional expertise and the wisdom of the community."

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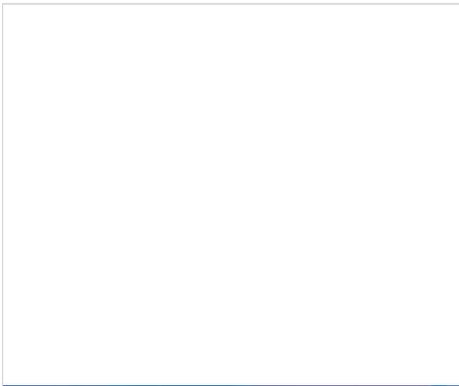
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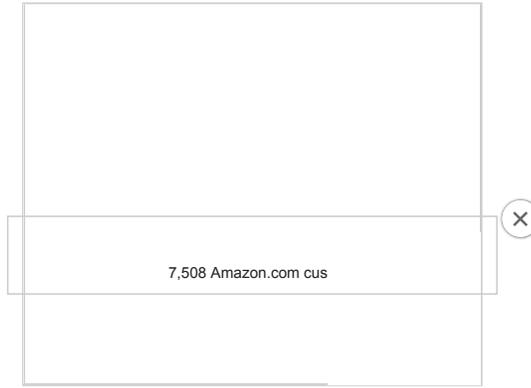
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