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URBANISM

Dallas' Challenge: Creating Walkable Neighborhoods Without Leaving Communities Behind

A study on the region's 38 "WalkUPs" puts data to the city's struggles toward adding affordable housing and efficient public transit to its most desirable neighborhoods.

BY SHAWN SHINNEMAN | PUBLISHED IN FRONTBURNER | MARCH 14, 2019 | 10:45 AM

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percent of North Texas' entire gross regional product. They fuel more efficient economies, and developers have taken notice. About a quarter of all of DFW's multifamily rental housing went into those 38 areas during the last real estate cycle. (Our Peter Simek wrote about the study previously.)

However, there aren't many urban areas that have managed to become booming economic engines without pricing out a significant portion of the populace. It's partly an issue of supply and demand—these are intensely desirable places to live and work, but they occupy just .12 of one percent of the region's land mass. This follows conventional wisdom about displacement in our city, too. These neighborhoods sport rents that are 37 percent higher than the regional average, making affordability difficult for many, concentrating those who can afford it. Building a more walkable future equitably becomes a trickier proposition that begins with a simple choice, says Chris Leinberger, a professor and chair of the Center for Real Estate & Urban Analysis at George Washington University, which conducted the study.

“The real issue is having the intention to do this,” Leinberger says.

Within the study, each of the 38 WalkUPs are grouped into tiers—platinum, gold, silver, and copper—based on both economic and social equity indicators. The equity groupings are a reflection of housing prices, transit accessibility, and the area's mix of rental and for-sale housing. Leinberger's team created an index to consider those factors as they relate to one another.

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social equity. Relative to the region's other WalkUPs, East Jefferson, in North Oak Cliff, performed best. Just four (Baylor University Medical Center in Old East Dallas, Magnolia/Fairmount in Fort Worth, the Bishop Arts District, and Lower Greenville) received a gold rating. That leaves a whole mess of development in the silver range, and two dipping into copper. Meaning prices are high and access to public transportation is poor.

“My personal interpretation would be there's something going on here—in terms of how housing and transportation are regulated and organized—that is a social problem,” says Tracy Loh, a senior data scientist with the center.

Several mayoral candidates have made displacement and transit access a key piece of their campaign platforms. But outside of lobbying our elected officials to make policy changes, how can the city produce more equitable urban development? It's easy to imagine shadowy New York-based real estate investment trusts shoving high-dollar developments in every neighborhood that's the least bit walkable to make a sure profit. But Loh says there are ways to partner with community members so that the existing community is not viewed as a commodity.

“There's a need for leadership and there's a need for leadership to be well-capitalized,” she says. “When you hear about a success story in these environments, it's never, ‘We all just wanted to do the right thing.’ It's, ‘We got organized, and we raised half a billion dollars.’”

The study identifies potential for more walkable urban areas

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downtown Dallas. Folks that live around Fair Park and south have a choice to either not participate in society or drive horrendous distances at great financial cost.”

And then there are the areas that have succeeded in becoming walkable economic machines but lag behind in the measures used to identify equity. In grouping the 38 WalkUPs into economic tiers, the study considers metrics like asking rent per square foot, place-level gross regional product, and total jobs per acre. So let's take Preston Center, the study's only platinum economic rating. When it comes to social equity, it's one of the two worst WalkUPs in the region, receiving a copper rating alongside Southlake Town Center.

Fixing that calls for creativity. Leinberger suggests inclusionary zoning, requiring 15 percent of all new housing units meet the federal standard for subsidized housing projects. Without diving into the way its calculated, a family making \$61,760 a year in DFW would spend \$1,544 a month in rent on what would be considered affordable housing. Leinberger also suggests developing public land for use toward cheaper units. And he suggests working toward a goal in which everyone employed in the city center would be able to afford living there.

The zoning around Preston Center is a particularly hot-button issue, one that drew former mayor Laura Miller out of public office retirement for a City Council run. (She'll debate sitting Councilwoman Jennifer Staubach Gates about the neighborhood and more later this month.)

Above all, making equitable changes in Preston Center starts

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He points to Amazon's prioritization of walkable urban space in its pursuit of a home for its HQ2.

“Nobody's saying that Dallas should forego the car, forego single-family housing, forego regional malls,” he says. “We're just saying add more arrows to the quiver.”

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Los_Politico • a year ago

I find your world view so fraustrating. It's really quite simple why we have little in the way of cheap mixed use communities- we don't have old buildings. Old buildings in undesirable areas are cheaper than new buildings in desirable areas. It's that simple!

Old buildings in desirable areas can fall anywhere on the cost spectrum and you won't find new buildings in undesirable areas without public intervention (ie the VA area). The solution is not to tell our communities that they should not expect to have more walkable buildings added to desirable areas. The solution is to let the builders overbuild and have prices at least stabilize like in the Nats Park area of DC.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Mavdog • a year ago

Newsflash: people do not want to all live in dense, urban neighborhoods. People enjoy the single family, suburban life of relative quiet. We can let the dog out and don't need to get dressed to walk them and pick up after their deposits. The kids can go outside without our supervision.

The issue of mobility is a serious discussion that needs addressing. The fact some households spend 1/4 of their gross income in transportation costs is a problem that must be corrected. However the answer is not more density in an urban cluster, the answer is lowering their transportation costs by more efficient transit and closer proximity of employment centers.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

PJCTX • a year ago

I guess I simply don't follow DMagazine's obsession with some of these topics. It's frankly weird. First, there is no entitlement for anyone to live in a walkable, desirable neighborhood. This "equity" argument about such things is manufactured and highly

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there is a movement in this magazine to claim that.

At the end of the day, it seems that there are 10-15 people in Dallas that support these things--unfortunately, they seem to all write for this magazine and/or link joke "studies" from citylab and other places claiming that walkable neighborhoods generate gazillion dollar local economies.

I personally love the dense, urban jungle and lifestyle. But a lot of these articles are just silly.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

C Newman · a year ago

Goodness.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Robert H · 10 months ago

So, Mavdog and PJCTX, did either of you actually read the article instead of reacting to the magic trigger words "walkable urban?" Here's the actual newsflash conveyed by the Shinneman: not everyone in greater Dallas-Fort Worth wants to live in sprawling suburbia on a half acre and drive everywhere. There is a growing market for neighborhoods with destinations dense enough to not require a vehicle to access; where the primary feature of the landscape is not big box stores in the middle of giant fields of asphalt laced with eight-lane arterials roaring with traffic lined with chains. It's not only meddling urban planners but also corporations such as Amazon that recognize the value of such an offering and seek it out in their investment plans.

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