

## Q&A

### **Why did you write this book?**

J: The short answer is that I love great streets and I wanted to share the knowledge of how to make them. The longer answer begins with the fact that as more and more Americans choose to live in walkable cities and towns instead of auto-oriented sprawl, we need to rediscover and reemphasize the qualities that make streets places where people want to be. Walkable cities and towns require walkable streets. *Street Design* shows how easy it can be to make a good street, and shares the secrets to making great streets.

V: Humans have been building spectacularly great streets for many centuries, so it seems like it should come easily to us by now. But it usually doesn't. Despite best intentions, the many overlapping bureaucracies involved with streets tend to put design last, as if it's something extra one can add after all the technical decisions are made by specialists who focus on only one issue at a time – traffic flow, or drainage, or the like. Good urban designers spend their whole careers struggling with public works departments, DOTs, and city engineers just trying to get permission for the simple, basic, agreeable street designs that people love. That's what prompted us to produce a book that leverages the power of precedents. It's mildly subversive: We want the mayor or the planning director or the developer to be able to open the book, point to one of the case studies or photos, and ask, why can't *we* have a street this good?

### **How does street design relate to the revival and regeneration of our towns and cities?**

J: A hundred years ago, when the large majority of Americans still lived in walkable places, cars began to compete for control of our streets. What we now call Organized Motordom kicked the pedestrian to the side of the road and claimed the roadway for the automobile, so that cars could more quickly go from Point A to Point B. Over time, approximately three-quarters of the public space in our towns and cities was given primarily to the use of the automobile. This damaged the walkability of our towns and cities and made them less desirable places to live and work. America is beginning to repair that damage, but we all grew up in the Age of the Automobile, and it can be difficult to see how many of our ingrained practices are bad for walkability. Now, many Americans want to at least level the playing field. Cities that make streets where people want to get out of their cars and walk are cities that attract Millennials, Baby Boomers, the Creative Class, and many more. Today, America's most walkable towns and cities also have the strongest economies.

V: Before the sprawl spread everybody out across the horizon, people had been coming together in towns and cities for millennia for commerce, security, convenience, and because we are social beings. It's a principle of the new urbanism, of smart growth, and of good planning generally that this closeness – the tightly wound city, with that magnetic attraction to its center – makes for a sound economy, is efficient to operate, speeds the flow of ideas and innovation, and protects the crucial farmland and wilderness. That said, the more compact city has to be a place people enjoy even more than the big yards of the *Ozzie and Harriett* era. That means good street designs aren't luxuries. They're essential equipment for revitalized cities.

**What makes a street livable and walkable? What are the most important elements? What are the easiest, fastest or cheapest solutions for making a walkable street?**

J: On the whole, America doesn't have the squares that many European cities have, so our public life takes place mainly on our streets. To foster public life, these streets must feel safe and comfortable, they must be interesting, and they must be beautiful. Too many streets in America are dominated by the car, and the first step is to rebalance the place of the car and the place of the pedestrian, along with other forms of transportation, like bicycles and streetcars. Planting street trees that make canopies over the street and shape the public realm is another great fix. Trees can make streets that are too wide feel just the right size, trees provide shade and beauty, and trees even fight pollution and climate change.

V: I talk about five essential features: First, streets must be *shaped*, spatially, by the buildings and trees into three-dimensional public space that feels agreeable. Second, they must be, as John says, *comfortable*—which means they're adapted to the climate. For instance, the trees make for a shady walk in hot weather, or the awnings on storefronts offer relief from glare or rain. Then they must be *safe*, which means both that you aren't afraid you'll be run over by a car, because the speed is under control, and you aren't afraid of being mugged, because the street is faced by the doors, windows, storefronts, balconies, or porches that produce what Jane Jacobs called "eyes on the street." Fourth, pedestrians like streets that lead somewhere! The good street scenes are always *well-connected* to the rest of the town's network of streets and blocks. Last but far from least, *beauty* is crucial. Pedestrians are a demanding species. Their preferred habitat is always beautiful and memorable. As for the easiest changes that make the most difference for the least cost, I advise planting street trees and promoting cycling. It's amazing how many cities cut down more street trees than they plant, in any given year. Few cities have any budgeted annual program for planting new street trees at all, despite the studies that show how much their property values and tax base could be boosted by the tiny investment. Trees take a while to grow, of course, so some town elders aren't inclined to bother with them. Show them the photographs in our book, and pick a number of trees to plant this year – even if it's small – and get started. People

will notice. They'll notice cyclists, too, when they start appearing on your streets in larger numbers, and the whole psychology of the place changes when they do.

**What do you think of recent studies that say Millennials are not interested in owning cars?**

V: On my sixteenth birthday, like every other kid in my high school, I marched down to the DMV and got that driver's license. Those were the waning years of the golden age of the automobile. Perhaps even in the late 1970s, permission to drive still symbolized freedom, flexibility, and fun. But now the connotations are different. To the new generation, driving means cost, danger, being stuck in traffic, and the tedium of searching for parking spaces. It's a great shift, from a suburban youth culture obsessing over chrome and horsepower to an urban one that's in love with fixed-gear bikes and thinks cities are cool.

J: American Millennials grew up in a world where Soccer Moms and school buses drove them everywhere. They want places where they don't have to drive, and they see that problems like climate change and our national obesity epidemic are improved by decreasing our dependency on automobiles. They know the generation after them is the first generation of Americans that will live shorter lives than their parents, and they know the boredom that can come from hours of driving around in sprawl.

**More than 600 jurisdictions across the country have adopted "Complete Streets" as a policy to ensure that roadways are designed for all users in mind – bicyclists, public transportation vehicles and riders, private vehicles and pedestrians of all ages. How can *Street Design* take this from concept to reality? What types of streets should have priority?**

V: "Complete Streets" is one of the best bumper-sticker phrases ever; city planning history is not known for having many of those. John and I consider ourselves complete-street enthusiasts, and applaud the movement's work. But we know our take on the topic will be controversial in some circles. We challenge the Complete Streets movement to demand more than slapping highway-like paint and arrows and flashy signs on the old corridors to make them look like cyclists and pedestrians are theoretically welcome there. We say, if it's not beautiful, it's not yet "complete."

J: Barbara McCann's Complete Streets Coalition has had enormous success with policy and legislation, and we now have new streets where pedestrians and cyclists have a legal right to the road. The next step is to make roads and streets where pedestrians and cyclists want to be. Towns and cities that want walkability need to widen sidewalks, narrow streets, slow cars, allow mixed-use development and enough density that distances between destinations are walkable, with safe and interesting streets along the way. In the long run, places that want bicycle use need

to make streets and cycle lanes where children can safely ride. Many European cities, and some South American cities, have that condition, but American towns and cities lag far behind.

**In your book you state that the most important factor for retrofits is political will. What regions in the U.S. are doing better or worse and what trends do you see?**

V: I see success all over, including in some unexpected places, too. The Texas Department of Transportation adopted the newest manual for “Walkable Urban Thoroughfares” for use statewide. Texas! Think of Texas, and you might just think of big oil and big sprawl and car culture, but they’ve quickly picked up on the importance of street design. Florida has been busy, too, working to get off those awful lists of the states Least-Safe-For-Walking or Most-Hostile-To-Cyclists. Remember the old saw about how necessity is the mother of invention? In these places you can feel a genuine urgency about upgrading streets. In these states, it’s a matter of life and death. In Texas and Florida, we have a lot of improving to do, but then again, that means we have the makings of dramatic before-and-after stories.

J: In the late twentieth century, places that had the worst sprawl were where New Urbanism had the greatest success. The parts of the country that had the best old urbanism were the last parts of the country to adopt New Urban ideas. Similarly, when the United States Environmental Protection Agency mandated that states appoint pedestrian and bicycle specialists in the early 1990s, much of the early work was along the least walkable suburban roads and corridors, so that is where one can find the most Complete Streets projects. In the twenty-first century, however, old urban centers like New York, Washington, Chicago and San Francisco are often where the next step in the evolution of better roads and streets are taking place. These places highlight the differences between places where people can walk and places where there are reasons for them to walk.

**How should communities balance the needs of commuters versus residents when designing streets?**

J: This is a common question, but because the streets in every American city and town are so biased in favor of traffic flow over placemaking, it’s a bit of a straw man. To tackle the economic, environmental and social problems brought about by the American way of driving, we need to change the way we look at streets in the towns, cities, and neighborhoods that want to be more walkable. As we move ahead, each community needs to develop a local vision. Their problem will be changing the way we build streets today enough to put pedestrians on an equal footing.

V: Some of the so-called “arterial” streets in growing metro regions are indeed congested, but here’s the catch: they will remain congested from now until the end of time. No amount of road widening or highway building will solve it. So why not

get on with the business of making great places, the kinds of places that inherently capture trips and absorb travel demand, and concentrate the major transportation dollars on things that will actually make a long-term difference, like rapid transit and walkable streets? Every time we transform a street into a place that encourages biking, walking, and using transit, we're shifting trips that might otherwise have to compete for car capacity in that jammed regional road network.

**In *Street Design* you say that street parking actually improves walkability, which seems counterintuitive. How should communities think about parking?**

J: Cars parked between the sidewalk and the street provide a buffer zone that physically and psychologically protects people on foot from multi-ton cars and trucks rushing by on the street. On the other hand, too much parking can negatively affect street life when there is too much off-street parking. Contemporary planning has a bias towards supplying lots of free parking. However, free parking downtown creates traffic because if parking is easy and free, more people will drive. There is no great city that has “enough parking,” let alone uncrowded streets. Great cities are learning that less parking and more congestion leads to less driving and more walking and transit use.

V: Another way onstreet parking helps on Main Street is that it brings people to the sidewalks. As they maneuver into their spaces, the slight friction to traffic flow slows things down briefly and helpfully, and as they enter and exit their cars, the drivers and their passengers become part of the street scene. Rick Hall says, “onstreet parking brings pedestrians,” and I think he’s right. Street-oriented retailers need some convenient parking their storefronts can face, too, and onstreet parking provides just the right portion.

**Victor, you live in Florida, and John, you are in New York. How do the discussions about walkability differ in those areas? What is the top concern in Florida? In New York?**

J: Under the leadership of the Bloomberg administration and the New York DOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, New York City has been a leader in making better places for pedestrians and cyclists. After decades of practice, DOTs around the country have developed techniques for ignoring public concerns and doing virtually whatever they want with our roads. Sadik-Khan was perhaps the first DOT Commissioner to use this tremendous power to systematically improve the lot of the pedestrian.

Most notably, she had road crews that in selected places like Madison Square worked overnight to remove large parts of the roadway from vehicle use and turn it into plazas with tables and chairs. This was done with paint and lightweight furniture, setting up temporary plazas for New Yorkers and tourists to try out. In a nutshell, the plazas were overwhelmingly popular—not that you would always

know that from the comments Sadik-Khan has received. “There are not only 8.4 million New Yorkers, but at times 8.4 million traffic engineers,” she once said. “And we’re, you know, very opinionated.”

V: Florida’s been at the center of the national discussion about reinvigorating community planning at least since the founding of Seaside in 1980. We have a concentrated population of practicing urbanists, arguably because the need is so great. In the Sunshine State we have plenty to study – some of the best places, like Key West and South Beach, and some of the worst sprawl, where the statistics about car crash deaths and abandoned subdivisions keep making national news. The contrasts are astonishing. If you know where to look, you can visit an exquisitely simple street makeover like the one recently performed on Worth Avenue, in Palm Beach, and then drive just a few miles to see the ugliest, most dysfunctional commercial strip corridors, the ones that cry out for retrofit. We show both situations in the book. In one very encouraging piece of news, the state government recently assigned FDOT District Secretary Billy Hattaway – a card-carrying New Urbanist—the job of figuring out how to press the reset button on pedestrian safety. He’s certain to report back that we have to fix our street designs.