

Plan On It

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Creating 'Sticky' Environments:

How to Integrate Walkability into Community Design

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Think about the last time you visited New York City. How much did you walk? Probably a good three to five miles (or more). Now think about your daily life in Dutchess County. How much do you walk on a typical day? A mile? Half mile? Less? Why is that?

New York City has a lot of 'sticky' environments that make it easy to walk. Every street has a sidewalk. Buildings are right up at the sidewalk line. There is always something interesting around the corner to keep you going. Most of our communities, on the other hand, are not sticky. We often have large parking lots with buildings set way back, and few, if any, sidewalks.

This article summarizes key strategies from a presentation on building health through community design by walkability guru and national public health, planning, and transportation consultant Mark Fenton¹ at the 2016 Walk Bike New York symposium in Syracuse.

What is a 'Sticky' Environment?

Programs that encourage people to exercise are great, but they're usually not 'sticky'—once they're over, people revert to their old habits. Rather than slogging through a workout at the gym or trying to carve out dedicated time for exercise, sticky environments make physical activity an easy choice. Once they're built, people naturally walk (or bike) because it's convenient and integrated into the activities of daily life.

But we don't need to become New York City to have walkable communities. Every community can be sticky in its own way. Mark Fenton outlined the following three strategies to creating sticky environments:

Strategy 1: Walk Audits

A great way to gauge the stickiness of your community is by conducting a walk audit. This entails identifying a key area to focus on, and organizing a group of people representing various constituencies: older adults, kids, persons with disabilities, business owners, residents, local institutions, and municipal leaders and staff. It is helpful to use a walkability checklist to guide the group discussion. Fenton recommends the [Active Neighborhood Checklist](#) (see More Information below for other links).

Why is 'Stickiness' Important?

According to the latest statistics from the CDC, two-thirds of Americans are overweight. And for the first time in history, our kids have a shorter life expectancy than we do. Diabetes and obesity are on the rise, particularly among children. Reversing these trends requires building communities that make it easy to be physically active, in particular by creating walkable environments.

Use the walk to identify locations that should be improved to make the community more walkable (and bikeable), and discuss specific strategies for improvements: things like crosswalks and curb extensions, new or improved sidewalks, and bus stops and shelters, as well as outdoor seating, bike parking, street trees and landscaping.

Fenton showcased a walk audit in the commercial district of Brockport, NY, west of Rochester. The group identified a priority location for a new crosswalk and curb extensions, and also discussed adding bicycle lanes on Main Street. Both of those projects were eventually constructed, with ongoing advocacy from the [Walk Bike Brockport](#) Action Group.

For a more in-depth assessment, the Poughkeepsie-Dutchess County Transportation Council (PDCTC) can assist a community with a sidewalk study. These studies include a GPS-based inventory of sidewalks and other walking infrastructure, and a series of prioritized recommendations for improving sidewalk conditions and connections. These plans require active involvement by a local task force to guide the study and help the municipality implement the recommendations.

Strategy 2: Demonstration Projects

An increasingly popular way to test out various street designs is through a demonstration or pilot project. These can be as simple as a curb extension using paint and planters, or more complex, such as conversion of a one-way street to two-way using temporary striping and signals. These low-cost experiments allow you to test ideas and get feedback from the community and other stakeholders. Invite the fire department to drive their truck through a temporary roundabout or curb extension. Ask business owners how the temporary bike lane affects access and parking for their business. Feedback can then be incorporated into a modified final design.



New bike lanes and crosswalk with curb extensions on Main Street in Brockport, NY. (Photo Credit: Mark Fenton)



Temporary protected bicycle lane in Whitefish, Montana. (Photo Credit: Mark Fenton)

Fenton showed several examples of demonstration projects at various scales. One was a temporary curb extension created by striping the pavement, moving a STOP sign out from the corner, and adding flags to highlight the sign. A slightly more permanent curb extension was made by striping an outline of the extension, filling it in with a textured pavement surface, and installing flexible bollards around the perimeter. In another example, a temporary walkway was created through a parking area, protected by curb stops on one side and large planters on the other.

Demonstration projects can be useful for community events as well. In Whitefish, Montana, a 'pop-up' protected bicycle lane was installed for Bike to School Day. This consisted simply of a line of flexible bollards. To ensure safety, volunteers bicycled with groups of students to school, monitored the route, and helped organize bicycle parking at the school. These experiments can open people's eyes to various possibilities and may lead to more permanent changes in the future. BetterBlock.org is a great resource for more ideas.

Strategy 3: Site Design

Mark Fenton collects photos of Walgreens drugstores. Why? Because they illustrate the power of local planning and zoning boards. These stores exist everywhere, but can look surprisingly different from place to place. Contrary to popular opinion, a big-box drugstore does not have to be an island in a sea of parking. Communities across the country have required very different designs—with buildings built up to the street, parking in the back, sidewalks, pedestrian-scale lighting, attractive landscaping, and many windows.

One example he shared was of a Walgreens in Reading, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. The building is situated on a corner. Sidewalks with street trees line both streets. Parking is behind the building in a shared lot, screened by a white fence, as well as on a short frontage street. An attractive plaza with benches, bike parking, trees and landscaping is in front. This is a far cry from the typical drugstore that we see in our strip malls. But if we want sticky environments that promote walkability and health, we need to demand better site plans. National chains, more than many other applicants, have the resources to be flexible and respond to community needs.

Local Demonstration Project: City of Poughkeepsie's Market Street Connect

A demonstration project was held October 7, 2016 along Market Street in the City of Poughkeepsie. Part of the [Market Street Connect](#) project, the demonstration was done to test various elements that might be incorporated into a re-design of Market Street. These included installing temporary curb extensions, reducing the street width from three to two lanes, and adding outdoor seating areas.



Stay tuned for info on a **second demonstration** (Spring 2017) to test additional ideas for improving the design and function of Market Street. **Plan to check it out in person!**



Walgreens in Reading, MA. The building is located along the sidewalk, with plenty of storefront windows to engage people walking past. Street trees, awnings, pedestrian-scale lighting, and rear lot parking all add to the walkability of this site design. (Photo Credit: Google Street View)

What If You Don't Live In a Village, Town Center, or City?

Your community may not have the density for a large commercial area. That's fine. But you can still start integrating stickiness into a small area. Maybe it's a one-block stretch of Main Street. Or maybe it's a connection between a local trailhead and a corner market or farm stand. Even these short connections add up—in terms of benefits to our health, and in creating communities that are more walkable, one piece at a time.

And if you, like most of us, drive to do your shopping and errands, you still benefit from stickiness. Are you able to park once and walk between shops and services? Sticky. If not, what could be changed to make those connections possible?

Think about stickiness the next time you're walking around your community. Where is it fun and interesting to walk, and where does it feel like a chore? What is it about the land uses, buildings, street, and other features that make it walkable, or not?

Now it's time to take action. Try a walk audit, test out ideas with a demonstration project, and encourage developers to be creative. We all benefit by making our communities a little 'stickier.'

¹ Mark Fenton was a national team racewalker in the 1980s. He studied biomechanics at MIT and conducted research at the Olympic Training Center. He is currently an adjunct professor at Tufts University, as well as an author, consultant, and frequent lecturer on public health, planning, and transportation issues—all focused on creating walkable and livable communities. He works with communities through strategic planning, workshops, walking audits, and Safe Routes to School/Walkable Communities programs.

More Information

Walk Audits:

[Active Neighborhood Checklist](#)
[Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center](#)
[America Walks: Getting the Community on Board](#)

Demonstration Projects:

[Market Street Connect](#) – part of the Poughkeepsie City Center
Connectivity Project
[America Walks: Getting Started](#)

Greenway Guides:

[Walkable Communities](#)
[Commercial Strip Redevelopment](#)
[From Congestion to Circulation](#)

eNewsletters:

[Rhinebeck Village: Worth Walking](#)
[Health Benefits of Active Transportation](#)
[Driving Less – It's Not Just About Your Commute](#)

PDCTC Sidewalk Studies:

[Pine Plains Pedestrian Plan \(2014\)](#)
[Hyde Park Town Center Pedestrian Study \(2013\)](#)
[Village of Rhinebeck Sidewalk Study \(2011\)](#)

General:

[Better Block Foundation](#)
[Mark Fenton](#)
[America Walks](#)

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