

The Art of Walking: Seven Improvisations on a Theme

Ellen Vanderslice

Abstract

Walking is unique to the human species and fundamental to its evolution. Yet after four million years as a superbly successful adaptive strategy, walking has, within a century, become endangered. How did we get here, and where are we going next? The author examines the ecology of walking in the urban and suburban United States through seven vignettes that explore the intersection of walking with urban form, history, consumerism, public health, civil liberties, the arts and spirituality.

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Ellen Vanderslice is an architect and urban designer from Portland, Oregon, who has been a transportation reform activist for more than thirty years. She is the president of America WALKs, a national non-profit coalition of local walking advocacy groups from across the United States, and currently serves as its president. In 1991 she helped found the Willamette Pedestrian Coalition, an organisation working to improve conditions for walking in the Portland metropolitan region, and in 1995 helped start PedNet, the international Internet mailing list for the discussion of pedestrian issues. Since 1994, Ms. Vanderslice has been a featured speaker on walking issues at nearly two dozen conferences and events across the United States and in Canada and the U.K.

In 1994, Ms. Vanderslice joined the staff of the City of Portland's Pedestrian Transportation Program, where she was a project manager for five years. Her principal projects were the Portland Pedestrian Master Plan and Pedestrian Design Guide, which received a Places Planning Award from the Environmental Design Research Association in May, 2000, and the Barbur Boulevard Streetscape Plan. Today, as a consultant, she provides technical assistance in action planning for citizens and transportation professionals interested in pedestrian issues.

Ms. Vanderslice enjoys a concomitant career as a jazz composer and vocalist, and has released three compact discs.

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Introduction

Walking is unique to the human species and fundamental to its evolution and competitive advantage. Walking allowed the development of the versatile hands, and the hands in turn fostered large brains, the use of tools, self-conscious thought and language. Once on our feet, human kind spread to most of the habitable parts of the planet by walking there (although we did not, apparently, walk to Australia).

Yet after some four million years as a superbly successful adaptive strategy, walking has, within a single century, become endangered. It has been displaced by an interrelated complex of cars, roads and the sprawling urban form that the road/car system requires for its successful deployment.

Walking is not by any means the only thing to be lost as our streets have become motorways. As Appleyard so eloquently showed (1981), there is a direct correlation between heavy traffic volumes and diminished neighborliness. Automobile travel per capita continues to rise each year, severely degrading our quality of life while putting intolerable stresses on the environment.

How did we get here, and where are we going next? I will attempt to explore these questions using a form borrowed from the world of jazz, improvisation on a theme. Through seven vignettes we will examine the intersection of walking with urban form, history, consumerism, public health, civil liberties, the arts and spirituality.

The Personal is Political: Genesis of a Radical Pedestrian

“Notoriously, Americans tend to extremes. They have been more exuberantly committed than any other people to whatever is thought of as modern -- whether it be gadgets, clothes, or even social manners. And walking tended to be more completely outmoded here than anywhere else.” (Joseph Wood Krutch 1964)

I was born into the post-war boom of the automobile age, in 1953. My family moved constantly when I was growing up, sometimes across town and sometimes across the country. I was a walker from a young age, independent and insatiably curious.

In most of the places we settled, however briefly, there was a thriving street culture of children. My two brothers and I would have the run of our neighborhood. Usually the action was all in the front yards, on the sidewalk, or in the street.

When I was in high school, we moved to a different kind of place, a suburb outside New York City where everyone drove everywhere. We lived on a busy street and no one played outside. I felt the difference and took note. It was 1969, and the experts said we

would run out of gasoline by 1990. Based on the way things were going, it didn't seem that anyone really believed this.



Figure 1. Stop, look and listen before you cross the street: the author sets out for kindergarten, Trenton, New Jersey, 1959.

The way things were going, though, the world was going to run out of charm before it ran out of gasoline. As Joni Mitchell sang, "They paved paradise, put up a parking lot." I became 'exuberantly committed' to alternative transportation. I married, and we lived without a car. I studied architecture, and argued with my professors about strategies for urban renewal. I had two kids, and learned to walk all over again.

They are aloof teenagers now, but when my children were tiny, we would often walk together to the neighbourhood park. At one intersection, there was so much traffic on our local street we could hardly cross. I ended up on a traffic committee, and our neighbourhood ended up traffic calmed. Along the way I learned how to work effectively as a group of volunteers, how to run a meeting, how to testify at City Council -- how to conduct oneself as an advocate.

The moment that made me a radical pedestrian came when I was crossing the street with my infant daughter strapped to my chest and my toddler son by the hand, and a motorist cut us off. I bopped the back of his car with our diaper bag, and he was so threatened by this that he stopped and offered to beat me up. Astonishing, that he could have so little regard for the safety of a mom and two babies, and so much for the sanctity of a steel box!

I was ready to be a radical pedestrian activist, but I couldn't do it alone. Fortunately, over the years, I've had the good fortune to fall in with terrific people who share this peculiar interest in walking and pedestrian rights.

Over the years, too, I've had other raw exchanges with motorists, usually after I struck their car with some handy item, such as an umbrella, because they failed to yield the right-of-way. But I've come to the conclusion that mixing it up with motorists is not a fruitful way to move our society toward a more civil intercourse.

"Whoever acts with respect will get respect. Whoever brings sweetness will be served almond cake," wrote the Persian poet Rumi in the twelfth century (Barks 1995). I know I won't be served almond cake anytime soon, but I am trying to bring sweetness to the street these days.

The Morphology of American Cities

Why are some places walkable and some not? The location and shape of cities is profoundly influenced by the transport that was in vogue when they were developing. Many American cities are located where there is good access to navigable water, because that was the most practical way to move goods before there were railroads.

The form of American cities can be roughly divided into three types, the walking city, the streetcar city and the automobile city. Most American cities are a blend of two or all three forms.

The walking city is a form that abounds in Europe and other parts of the world where settlements long pre-date the automobile. In the U.S. it is found at the core of the cities that began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Boston is an example, as are lower Manhattan and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Many American cities, particularly in the West, got their start in the streetcar era of the nineteenth century. Los Angeles and Portland are examples, with many square kilometres of pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods that grew up around streetcar lines.

But Americans retain a vestige of the agrarian ideals of our past in the form of a strange ambivalence toward cities. The automobile city of the twentieth century is really an anti-city of strictly segregated uses connected by the road/car complex. Tucked away on dead-end streets are arrays of characterless homes, each a surrogate on its tiny lot for what James Howard Kunstler (1996) terms the “homestead in the natural landscape.” On the artery is the suburban shopping mall, or in more recent years, the “big box” store, where you drive and park to walk a kilometre through the parking lot and then another kilometre, in a stupor, along brightly lit aisles filled with incredible quantities of tacky stuff that is not what you’re looking for.



Figure 2. Walking America's wide-open spaces.

The forces that produce this soulless suburban form are well entrenched. The good news is that the paradigm has shifted on many fronts. Whether it's called smart growth or pedestrian oriented development or new urbanism, there is a movement afoot. Even the realty industry is beginning to understand that there is a latent demand for innovative 'products' that are not in the standard development menu. Banks are finding ways to finance mixed-use developments that, a decade ago, could not be built for want of capital.

There has been a change, too, in the kinds of transportation projects that are funded. The passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act in 1991 has had a slow but measurable impact on the patterns of federal transportation spending.

Downtowns are enjoying a new renaissance. Cities that prudently took steps to reverse the decline of their inner core areas in past decades have seen it pay off in development

and economic success. New compact neighborhoods, urbane and walkable, are giving people the choice to live car-light or car-free (Alvord 2000).

As Peter Calthorpe notes (1993, pp. 16-17.), at the core of the alternative to sprawl is the pedestrian. "Pedestrians are the catalyst which makes the essential qualities of communities meaningful. They create the place and the time for casual encounters... Without the pedestrian, a community's common ground -- its parks, sidewalks, squares, and plazas -- become useless obstructions to the car."

Sprawl Makes Us Fat: Walking and Public Health

Bad news. Even though we've finally started to build neighborhoods instead of suburbs, people are driving more and more, and walking less and less. We are getting fat, and we are dying. Physical inactivity and unhealthy eating are risk factors that contribute to at least 300,000 preventable deaths each year in the U.S. (McGinnis and Foege 1993)

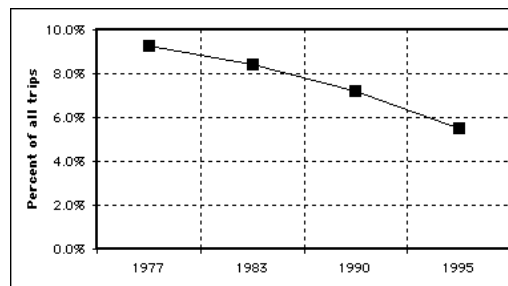


Figure 3. U.S. Walk and Bike Trips, 1977 to 1995
(*Nationwide Personal Transportation Study 1997*)

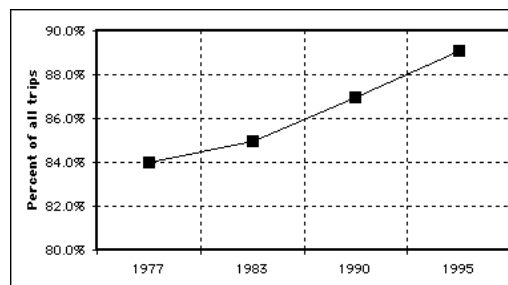


Figure 4. U.S. Automobile Trips, 1977 to 1995
(*Nationwide Personal Transportation Study 1997*)

Today's children are at greatest risk of contracting preventable chronic diseases within their lifetime. Kids don't walk and ride bikes as much as they used to -- in fact between 1977 and 1995 walking and biking declined 40% for 5- to 15-year-olds (*Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey 1997*).

The simplest and most accessible form of physical activity is walking. Chronic disease prevention specialists and physical activity promoters have woken up to the notion that the physical environment has become a serious barrier to more walking, and they are inserting themselves into transportation decision-making processes. Across the U.S. health professionals are teaming with transportation practitioners and advocates to promote "Active Community Environments." (CDC 2000), places where people of all ages and abilities can easily enjoy walking and bicycling.

In the past, there has been no significant revenue stream related to walking that would allow a public ad campaign of any magnitude to promote more of it. Compare walking with driving -- more money is spent on advertising automobiles than any other product in the world. The cost of ignoring the current epidemic of inactivity is so high, however, that perhaps money can be found. We in the U.S. have the most sophisticated marketing system in the world, and maybe it can be used to make walking totally cool.

We Are Made to Walk

What could the message be for an ad campaign? Maybe it's the magic of walking. Walking on two legs -- without a tail for balance -- is something that only humans do, and it's a bit of a miracle. Rebecca Solnit (2000) rhapsodizes, "The animal kingdom has nothing else like this column of flesh and bone always in danger of toppling, this proud unsteady tower.." Sussman and Goode (1980) describe it in terms of its mechanics: "...walking is nothing more than a series of stumbles caught in the nick of time, a continuous, rhythmic loss and recovery of balance."



Figure 5. We are made to walk.

That continuous rhythm of walking uses nearly every muscle in our bodies. It makes us breathe deeply, in time. And it makes our brains work in a way that no other activity can match. Walking is good for your mental health, not just your physical well being. After twenty minutes of steady walking, you hit your stride and the weight of the world rolls off your shoulders -- unless you happen to be wearing uncomfortable shoes.



Figure 6. Never be caught in shoes you can't walk in.

Walking grounds us. To walk in a place over time is to know it intimately. We need some connection to nature, we need the occasional long view and the element of charm. All this is ours, for free, when we walk.

Travelling by car, or by train, or by plane, we are disembodied. The journey is like a stainless steel tube and we are a projectile that enters at one end and is discharged at the other. Walking, we find the world presents itself at the rate our brains evolved to decode.

People tell me they don't have time to walk, but I believe that, paradoxically, taking time to walk puts more time in my day.

Crossing the Street: an Unequal Contest

Whether you walk or travel by bus, bike or car, sooner or later you are likely to become a pedestrian crossing the street. Most days, it is the most dangerous thing you will do, and even more dangerous if you have any kind of sensory or mobility impairment.



Figure 7. Crossing the street can be tough when motorists fail to yield.

In the U.S., finding good interventions that can change the odds for pedestrians has been a slow process, stymied by a bitter debate about the efficacy of marking crosswalks as well as a propensity to blame pedestrians for getting hit.

Here is a recipe for making safer crossings, boiled down to its barest essentials:

- Reduce the number of lanes to cross
- Shorten the crossing distance
- Slow the traffic
- Illuminate the pedestrian properly

Median refuge islands are one good tool, cutting the number of lanes to cross in half. A refuge when you're crossing a two-way road means you need a gap in only one direction of the traffic to make it to the refuge. Curb extensions or bulb-outs can help shorten the crossing distance. Narrower roadways mean slower traffic. All of these measures are about recasting the street from an automotive to a human scale.

Passionate Pedestrians: The Rise of Walking Advocacy

Crossing the street is even harder when motorists pay no attention to the law. In the spring of 1994, I helped to organise a series of Pedestrian Actions in Portland for the Willamette Pedestrian Coalition. These were mass demonstrations in which sign-wielding pedestrians quite legally crossed the street together to educate the motoring public about their duty to yield to pedestrians in the crosswalk.



Figure 8. "Pedestrians are not targets," 1994.

It was a heady experience. The demonstrations were successful; they attracted new members to the coalition; we were on television month after month, getting our message

out; and no one got hurt. (And, as it turned out, the demonstrations were very photogenic, and I've been dining out around the world on my slide shows ever since.)

Successful pedestrian advocacy is, of course, more than just demonstrating in the street, as exciting as that may be. The bulk of the work is not photogenic. Tasks such as attending public meetings and reading reams of policy documents and plans and making sure that they include pedestrian interests are really only exciting in the doing to those in the thick of the issues. It must be done, but it doesn't make a good sound bite.

Perhaps the most important element of advocacy is connecting with others. The internet has been a key element in organised pedestrian advocacy in the U.S. Without that inexpensive way of communicating, it would be much more difficult for shoestring grassroots groups to form a national coalition like ours. Since we formed in 1996, our coalition has grown from four groups to seventeen, with new groups coalescing in communities across the country.

Of course it's important to have gatherings once in awhile. The internet is no substitute for the cues and information and energy we get from each other in face-to-face meetings.

Pedestrian advocacy is not confined to local grassroots groups. The Partnership for a Walkable America is a broad coalition that includes advocates like ourselves, several federal agencies, professional organisations, WALKING magazine and many others. In 1997 the Partnership established National Walk Our Children to School Day. Last year, more than 300,000 children, parents and community leaders across North America participated (*Walking with a Mission* 2000). This year events will be celebrated internationally.

Coalitions and partnerships between advocates, professionals and agencies in widely varying fields can be extremely effective as agents of change. Look for expansion in this area in the future as we find more common ground with other specialties.

Concluding Vignette: Discovery and Delight in the Right-of-Way

“Cross-country walks for the pure delight of placing one foot before the other were rare before Wordsworth. I always think of him as one of the first to employ his legs as an instrument of philosophy.” (Morley 1918)

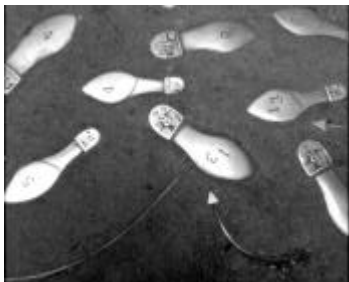


Figure 9. Bronze dance steps on a Seattle corner.

Wordsworth wrote his poetry when he walked; I write my songs then. Walking unlocks the spirit and the creative centre. I love to walk in the wild; Oregon has many naturally

beautiful places that can be reached on a day's hike. But my real passion is for exploring a new city, discovering its odd quirks and byways.

The public right-of-way should contain some variety and incidental delight. It should celebrate the diversity of places, and commemorate their histories. There should be cafes and vendors on the sidewalk and art on the streetcorners. Sometimes, the streetscape should make you laugh, and, once in a blue moon, it should make you dance.

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