

URBAN DESIGN

Take a Walk

Walkability is much more than a buzzword

By Mark Schnell



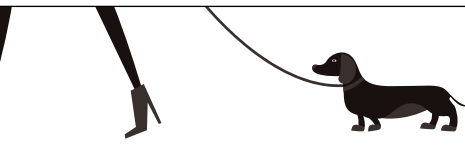
I've spent so many years designing, praising, and advocating for walkable communities that I'm almost tired of talking about it. At the very least, there are moments

I would be happy to find something else to talk about in my professional life. Maybe I could find another angle on these urban design problems, or a different way to reach the same goals. But I keep coming back to walkability, in large part because a walkable place is often a great place, and I'm not fond of designing or living in mediocre places. And there are some nice places that are not very walkable, but very few of them are truly great, or anywhere I would want to live.

Just when I get tired of getting on my walkability soapbox, something always seems to happen — usually something that might seem small and insignificant — that reminds me of exactly why I've been talking about this so often, and for so long. And it reminds me of why I remain on the right track.

In this case, I couldn't cross the street.

My wife and I recently sold our house of eight years and moved to a new house located across a relatively busy street (County Road 395) but just three doors down. During construction of our new house — a renovation/addition in Old Seagrove — I crossed 395 on foot almost daily. Believe me, I have my share of lazy moments, but it would have been patently silly to drive the measly 350 feet to the new house (unless I was hauling something large or heavy).



I've been crossing 395 as a pedestrian for eight years, so this was not a new experience. I knew 395 had issues from an urban design perspective, and I was completely aware that it is not a pleasure to cross. Crossing 395 is a little like the old video game called Frogger. In that game, you play the part of a frog that attempts to hop across a busy street, dodging cars along the way. You "win" if you don't get hit and arrive safely on the other side of the street. It seems like a low bar, but yes, simply surviving is a form of winning on our streets. (The game was memorably celebrated in an episode of "Seinfeld," although I'm not sure those New Yorkers really understood the degree of Frogger we play outside of that very walkable city.)

Standing daily at the edge of 395, as car after car passed me at high speed rather than stopping to let me cross, was a "whack on the side of the head" (as an old favorite book described it). It was one of those moments when you see something very clearly.

Even my mother-in-law, Pam, who worked as the house manager while our new house was open to the public as a Coastal Living magazine Idea House, stopped trying to cross 395 on foot. She didn't feel safe. And she was right. Hearing that she gave up on crossing the street was another whack on the side of the head for this urban designer.

On one hand, it's simple: County Road 395 is not designed for pedestrian comfort or safety. But the real moment of clarity is this: You can't add enough crosswalks to make it safe. You can't put a flashing light and expect anyone to notice and stop. There's no amount of signage that will make this street comfortable to cross. If you really, actually, honestly want to make South Walton a walkable community, you need to do much more than these limited (although well-in-

tioned) forms of window dressing (or maybe "parsley on a pig"). You need to do many different things to make it walkable, and here are only a few of them: narrow the lanes in the street, reduce driving speeds, build sidewalks on both sides, provide pedestrian-scale lighting, add parallel parking that buffers pedestrians from traffic, require that buildings be close to the street and address the street, plant street trees for shade and to narrow the spatial feeling of the street, and so on.

None of this is rocket science, but some of it is counter intuitive. It's not in the engineering manuals and it's not getting implemented on a large scale. We continue to make the same mistakes. Every once in a while, it seems like the tide has turned, and maybe, just maybe, we are moving toward more walkable communities. Headlines say, "Millennials prefer walkable communities," but it's still not enough. It looks like I need to stay on my soapbox a little longer.

Seaside illustrates the difference. I can stand at the edge of any of Seaside's north/south streets in an effort to cross County Road 30A, and I won't wait long before someone stops and allows me to cross. It has similar levels of traffic as 395, but the exact same drivers behave very differently when they reach Seaside. This is not by accident. Seaside is designed to be walkable. Seagrove is walkable in some ways, but it breaks down in places like 395.

The property values in Seaside are also double that of Seagrove. Read that again: double. That's not an accident either. Walkable communities are consistently more valuable. People will pay top dollar, and there's so much demand that prices go up and up. That's in part because they are often beautiful places (and Seaside is definitely a beautiful place), but there's even more to the story.

Have I mentioned that the Centers for Disease Control and the Surgeon

General both recommend living in a walkable community for the health benefits? We have an obesity epidemic in America, and it's happening in part because we don't walk enough in daily life. It's actually a pleasure to spend part of your day walking (assuming you are in a walkable community). You can almost feel your blood pressure drop.

Did I tell you that walkable communities are good for the environment? On a very basic level, walking rather than driving for part of our daily needs (work, school, shopping, etc.) reduces energy use. That's good for the planet, as well as your pocket book (you spend less on gas). And the environment crosses over with health issues. Even China, which is literally choking under the dense smog of an auto-dependent society, is actively trying to create walkable communities for the quality of its air and the health of its citizens.

You don't need to completely stop driving. I don't want to do that, and I'm sure you don't want to do that either. But what if you could do even one daily activity (work, school, shopping, etc.) without getting in your car? Would you be healthier, spend less on gas, and help keep our air, land, and water clean? I think most people like that idea, but they don't live in a place that allows it to happen.

Walkability is not a radical idea. It's completely within reach. But first, we need to design 395 so we can cross it safely and comfortably. We need to design every street in South Walton to be walkable. Only then will we create the community we aspire to be.

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach. Learn more about his firm Schnell Urban Design at SchnellUrbanDesign.com.

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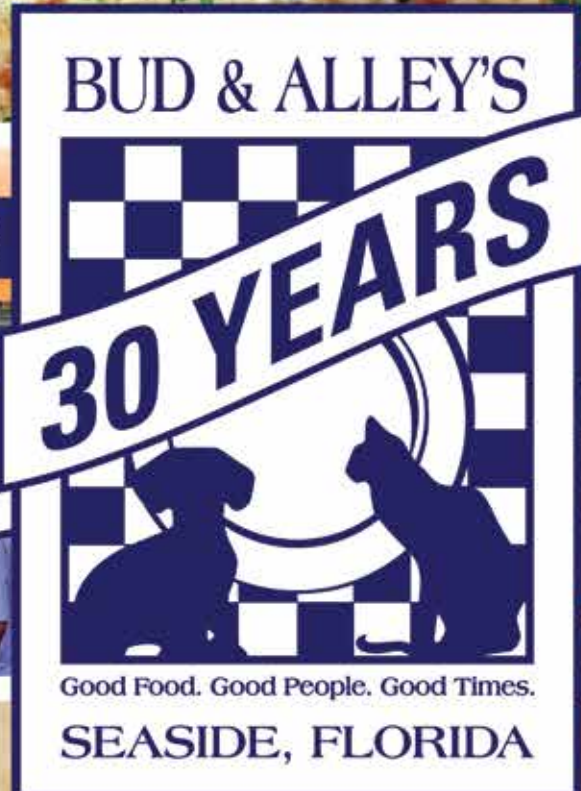


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