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The Social Costs

Trekking New York City for Answers

When I was in grammar school in the late 1960s, 50 percent of kids biked to school; today less than 1 percent do. Somewhere in that thirty-five-year span, Americans stopped feeling comfortable moving through public spaces. They came to prefer their cars, homes, offices, indoor exercise rooms, and organized daycare centers. Each weekday morning fewer than one in eight school-age children set off for class on foot, even though the majority live within a mile of their public school.

Of course walking eight to ten blocks at a moderate pace doesn't burn off many calories so I'm not sure how much this cultural change has directly contributed to the rise in obesity, but it does reflect a general drift toward a more sedentary attitude and has had profound *social* consequences.

By the time I was ten, I confidently navigated my neighborhood alone, enjoyed hours of free play each day near a local stream, and regularly shopped in stores without adult supervision. My teenage daughter does walk around a local mall with her friends on occasion, but has yet to experience anything remotely like the moments I once had around Trout Brook in Connecticut. This delayed exposure to unfettered movement in public areas has definitely hurt her social development. She's a better student than I ever was, but lacks the confident independence I had acquired by fifth grade.

I blame the way American society constantly gets in the way of children's physical freedom. The lack of pedestrian traffic in most areas, especially suburbs, makes the streets seem like hollow tubes. The emptiness encourages more emptiness and fear.

Families will agree to carpool but not bike-pool because the local roads lack safe bicycle lanes. On several key stretches of the three-mile journey between my house and my daughter's former middle school, there are no sidewalks. I'm so passionate about getting Americans moving again that I spent three years writing this book, but I *still* had to drive my child to middle school. The local landscape and culture make it very difficult to choose any other option. When we slash physical movement out of our daily commutes, we interact less with the general community. We see the people we choose to see and who look the most like us. When my daughter rides in my car to school, she sees the back of my head and the front lawns of her well-to-do neighbors.

I spent a week observing children leaving local elementary and middle schools in Alexandria and Arlington, Virginia. I knew Arlington, in particular, had won an urban planning award after spending millions of dollars on improvements that made the areas between neighborhoods and public schools more pedestrian friendly. I saw the speed bumps, new sidewalks, slower speed limits, and better signage. But I'm afraid that even in Arlington the overall average is about two walkers for every ten kids. The Arlington County website claims that at some of the elementary schools 100 percent of the kids walk home, but what they really mean is that 100 percent of the kids **COULD** walk, since they live a mile or less from the school. Measuring the number of kids who **ACTUALLY** walk is an altogether different story.

To really understand the social consequences of our physically confining lives, I needed a place where more people move around by walking through their local landscape. Many travel magazines and organizations, like the American Podiatric Medical Association, publish lists of "The Top Ten Most Walkable Cities." Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, generally rank in the top two, but I knew I needed something bigger, grittier, and more spontaneous. I knew I needed New York City. And who better to lead the way than a native of the New Jersey-New York border and a national expert on getting people back into public spaces, Sharon Roerty.



Despite her slight build and soft brown hair, I see her immediately when I exit the Newark train station after a four-hour ride from Washington, D.C. She's leaning against her black Volvo, which has two bicycles on the roof.

"Ready to ride?" she asks, with a smile and a wave.

I had forgotten that she wanted to do a short bicycle tour of the waterfront in New Jersey before we set off for Manhattan the next morning, but I'm happy for the chance to loosen my back and right hip.

We drive through a stressed neighborhood in Newark strewn with broken things and clumps of edgy men on corners. I feel conspicuous in our station wagon with bikes, but Sharon looks completely unfazed. As program director of the National Center for Bicycling & Walking, she regularly travels to precisely these kinds of down-and-out places to talk about how to get healthier and more vibrant traffic on the sidewalks. More eyes, less crime; less crime, more business; more business, less trash and busted buildings. It's a pretty simple equation in her eyes.

We pull into Jersey State Park. A firm breeze stirs up waves on the Hudson River and catches me in the face. The fine spring Sunday afternoon has brought out all sorts of boat traffic on the river and human traffic on the boardwalk, which is about ten feet wide, flat, and right along the water's edge. I settle into the bicycle Sharon has brought for me and follow her at a slow roll as we move through the stream of people: Africans, Indians, Latin Americans, Asians. The backside of the Statue of Liberty comes into view, and we laugh about the fact that people in Jersey get to see the statue's ass.

Ellis Island comes up on our right.

While we pass several signs that warn, "Hazardous Waste Keep Out," in general the state has transformed this former marsh and rundown industrial park into an impressive recreational area. There's a large playground, lots of green fields for free play, and a fantastic view of the river. I love the loose mood of the place (no organized sports games going on here) and of my guide, who, despite her work for a national bicycling organization, is not a fanatic who needs to ride 100 miles a day. Sharon's not motivated by cool equipment, competitive races, or a desire for six-pack abs.

“It’s all about getting movement into the flow of everyday life,” she tells me.

As we continue our Jersey Park tour, she talks about cycling this area and the city as a kid.

“I had friends who were bus-route friends and others that were biking friends or walking-distance friends. My bus-route friends would stick their hands out the window and wave at me so I’d know what bus to take.” Sharon laughs. Her face still has a girlish flair to it, especially her smile. I laugh with her and think about how she built a layered social life by varying the way she moved through the cityscape, something kids today would have trouble understanding.

We pull onto another boardwalk and ride past a rusted steel girder, now part of a 9/11 memorial, which came from the fallen World Trade Center Towers that once stood directly across the Hudson River. Trees line that section of Manhattan’s waterfront now. We stop.

“I watched all of the stages of [construction] of the Trade Center Towers,” she says. “My dad brought us to see the huge hole they dug [for the foundation], and later we went back several times so we could watch it being built. My dad loved all forms of moving around—by boat, tunnel, train, on foot. He tried all varieties. Maybe that was a factor in my getting interested in transportation. ‘Today let’s go by tunnel,’ he’d say. Next time it might be the rail. He showed us all the different ways you could move around.”

He died ten years ago, but she mentions him often during our tour.

Sharon, who normally projects enormous amounts of positive social energy, becomes subdued as we look at where the World Trade Center Towers once stood. But just as quickly she shrugs off the feeling, swings her bicycle back into action, and continues an upbeat monologue about Jersey City, her relatives who came through Ellis Island (and made it no further than across the river), and her cravings for chocolate milk when she was pregnant.

I see now the spirit that sustains her when she travels to cities like Baltimore and St. Louis and faces tremendous skepticism when she talks about all the ways even the most blighted neighborhoods can improve foot traffic on sidewalks and in public parks. She preaches all over the country about the importance of adding movement into the flow of the average American life,

which, in turn, will dramatically enhance the social connections of people in communities; sometimes only a handful of locals show up to listen. But in her mind, all she needs is the ear of one engaged person and she's made an inroad into a new place.

We close our bicycle ride at the parking lot and drive to Sharon's house in Maplewood, New Jersey, where her two teenage kids and husband await us for dinner. Tomorrow we head to Manhattan, this time on foot.

The next morning, we strap on our pedometers, which measure the number of footsteps a person takes in a day, and head out for the train. As we stride through the established residential neighborhood, lined with old trees and houses with porches, we follow the same path to the station that her son and daughter walk each day to school. She takes great pride in the fact that they travel on foot most days.

Maplewood itself is a thriving small town complete with several blocks of locally owned businesses (no chain stores here), a large public park, and a classic turn-of-the-century train depot. More than forty people have parked their bicycles outside, a good showing in a town of 22,000 (there's fewer than a dozen bikes most days at my metro station in Alexandria, a town of 140,000).

Inside the train station, we join a racially diverse but economically homogenous line of commuters waiting to buy tickets. People must have good jobs to live this close to New York in such a quaint and walkable town. I think back to the section of Newark we drove through. Clearly living near safe public spaces is increasingly becoming a privilege for the affluent and few, not a communal right.

Once on the train, Sharon points out the center of South Orange as we roll past.

"They used to have four lanes of traffic, and people used their cars just to cross the street," she says. But Sharon and other urban planners worked with the local government and had them widen the sidewalks, narrow the street to two lanes, and impose much lower speed limits. Pedestrian traffic increased dramatically.

We chat about the ultimate guru of walkable communities, Jane Jacobs, who died in 2006 at age eighty-nine. Jacobs' hugely influential book, *The*

Death and Life of Great American Cities, which came out in 1961, aggressively challenged the tendency among urban planners of the 1950s and 1960s to level old sections of cities to make way for glossy high rises and open, dramatic spaces, like the Lincoln Center. She led an exhausting but successful fight against New York kingpin builder, Robert Moses, who wanted to put an expressway through the residential neighborhood now commonly known as SoHo. Jacobs, who lived on Hudson Street in Greenwich Village at the time, got so emotional at one point that she and several others stormed the podium at a City Planning Commission meeting. A few years later she got herself arrested for “criminal mischief” because she disrupted another public meeting about the construction of the highway, which, thanks in part to such antics, never got built.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs talks about the importance of eyes on the street, on the casual but regular contact of strangers in public spaces, on living in neighborhoods that sustain a human scale. In many ways, her book celebrates the role casual *physical* activity—walking, biking, lounging at the local café—plays in people’s *social* lives.

In the obituaries I read about her, I learned that Jacobs loved to “talk” out loud to Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin everyday and used her conversations with the two men to help her wrestle ideas to the page. (Personally, I’d favor Jefferson.) She never finished college and worked variously as a secretary, candy factory worker, and freelance writer. She used her pen to break out of her confining life and to carry her ideas to some satisfying conclusions, a quest I can relate to as I sit next to Sharon and discuss city and suburban landscapes in America.

In recent decades, urban planners have carried many of Jacobs’ ideas to the extreme under the rubric “New Urbanism,” which itself morphed into something called “Smart Growth” (an oxymoron in my dictionary). In an effort to stop sprawl, Smart Growth advocates pushed for dense development zones in places like Portland, Oregon, and Arlington, Virginia (outside of Washington, D.C.). The idea was to cram as many people as possible around subways and bus routes instead of in sprawling suburban communities that rely too heavily on the car. On many levels it makes sense, but in terms of crafting more inviting public spaces it does not. All around me in Northern Virginia I see huge stands of high-rise apartments (with the same, flat-faced boring brick

design) dominating city streets that may have sidewalks, but so little genuine human culture and life that it's no fun to walk there.

I feel the same way about contrived small towns like Reston, Virginia, where developers plopped a town green, sidewalks, and small shops into a box-shaped plan surrounded by parking lots. They think they created an old-fashioned neighborhood, but whenever I go there, I feel as though I'm walking through a movie set.

I don't mention any of this to Sharon. It's just white noise in my mind as we sit in silence. But it does bring home to me how complicated it can be to undo the damage caused by sprawl and to craft landscapes that people will want to return to in a physical sense.

Our train passes through the Meadowlands and Sharon begins talking about something called SAFETYLU. She spells it out for me, and it's actually SAFE-TEA-LU, an abbreviation for a new federal government program that has allocated \$612 million for Safe Routes to Schools (SRS) programs across the country.

"It's really about youth mobility," she says.

What incredible news. The federal government has decided to throw tax dollars at something as abstract as getting kids to physically move through their communities again. Wow. I want to hug Sharon and bang on the seat in front of me, but I just nod my head. Sharon herself will be involved with how New Jersey spends its share of the SRS money, which will include building trails, bicycle lanes on main roads, more sidewalks, and traffic "calming" measures. In the sample pilot program in Marin County, California, the percentage of kids walking to school shot up 64 percent in just two years.

Of course walking a mile isn't going to make a ten-year-old physically fit, but it could make her more confident about navigating things on her own, get her parent's car off the road in the morning, and get her blood moving before school starts, which will help her concentrate.

Sharon and I debark at Penn Station and catch a subway to the first neighborhood on my list: the Lower East Side, which was the most densely populated area in the western world at the turn of the century. Largely known as a center for Eastern European Jews, the neighborhood actually had waves of different groups, starting in the early nineteenth century with Germans, then

Irish, and, later, Italians. Today there's a sizable Dominican population and, of course, still many Jews.

A tribal mentality governed the place; whole villages from places like Belarus relocated to a specific street or even a specific group of houses. With so little personal space within the tenements, everyone had to circulate in public.

We emerge near Delancy Street. Most of the five-story, narrow homes have been sandblasted clean. Instead of strong smells and loud chatter from street vendors, we see flower pots on fire escapes and a Starbucks.

"There goes the neighborhood," Sharon says with a light smile as she points out the coffee shop. Of course she's not entirely serious because the tight streets, old homes, and general lay of the neighborhood still provide a glove-like intimacy. I can just see neighbors shouting across to each other from the upper-story windows. After all, Starbucks—the only chainstore I see—is a coffee shop where people gather.

High rents have transformed this area. Jews still dominate the cultural scene, but we need to head to Chinatown to fully feel the "teeming masses" of immigrants moving through New York City streets.

As we travel west, the pedestrian traffic thickens and the smells become more pungent, like a musky greenhouse. Starting in the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of Chinese—again, whole villages—immigrated to the U.S, which helps account for why Chinatown now threatens to swallow everything around it, including Little Italy and portions of the Lower East Side. I hear clips of conversation, probably in Cantonese or Mandarin (perhaps even Fujianese).

Something other than crowded living spaces pushes these people into the streets. They brought with them certain habits with regard to public areas, such as a common well or village square, which made them comfortable mingling outside, a quality most Americans have lost. (In fact, even the word "mingling" seems so dated.) Dozens of slight Asian men work steadily to move huge wooden plats loaded with bags of onions or potatoes. Mothers sit by their baby carriages in the local park. Old men lean on burlap sacks watching the street scene. I see signs for dozens of noodle shops: Hung Kai Noodle, Wing Kei Noodle. Many people here never leave this place or learn to speak English or ever own a car. This is most certainly not Reston, Virginia. There's no parking lot in sight.

Sustaining a brisk walking pace, Sharon and I pass over into Little Italy. After Chinatown, it feels cleaner but more touristy and less authentic. We press on, a bit tired from the street noise, the endless stream of people that somehow pass us but rarely bump, and settle down for a cup of coffee on a bench in SoHo, close by Jane Jacobs' old neighborhood.

So this is what she saved: blocks and blocks of splendid five-story apartment houses with cast-iron fire escapes out front and a necklace-like strand of local restaurants and funky stores interspersed throughout. Some critics claim that the place has become a gentrified tourist and yuppie haven and no longer has the neighborhood soul that Jacobs' so celebrated, but the scale for the pedestrian is ideal. I'm happy to pause here. The slant of sunlight from above enhances the intimacy of the space. I see lots of motorized scooters and tube-tire bicycles locked up on various side streets. I don't see any chainstores, and there's plenty of foot traffic; not as dense as Chinatown, but steady and vibrant.

Sharon sips coffee and tells me that she plans to retire to Manhattan.

"I want to grow old where I can walk even if I don't know anyone. When I get out I want to feel part of something; to be in the flow of people." Her own mother lives in subdivision isolation somewhere in Texas, which stresses Sharon to no end.

"I gotta get her out of there."

We move on through the Greenwich Village area, past landmark bars, like the Red Lion and the Bottom Line, where artists like Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan first made their names. This feels more like fraternity row, which makes sense since New York University sits just across the way. We settle down again at Washington Square Park, where Sharon begins to open up about her work and her feelings about movement and community life in America.

"We need to remind people what they like. They forget. They like sharing open spaces and seeing neighbors." She brings up her mother again, who spent most of her adult life in urban places like Jersey City and New York, but now lives down in Bush country in Texas. "People need something besides the weather to talk about. It's so sterile. [We] need a little mischief around to feel alive."

We both look at the "mischief" going on around us in this typical New York City park, complete with curved sidewalks that encourage people to sit

on the benches rather than walk a straight line through the space. Kids play behind a fenced-in playground. Lots of students study while sitting on the grass and listening to their iPods. An old woman observes people.

Sharon really opens up now and begins talking with feeling about her work. Staffers from the National Center for Bicycling & Walking only go into communities where they are invited. “We don’t get grants to spread the word of God,” as Sharon explains it with a laugh. “We go where they want us.”

They go in pairs to places like Baltimore. She describes the two experiences she had there, one in the city and the other in the suburbs in Baltimore County.

“I just loved the series we did in Baltimore City. I could see that the people were struggling. They talked about putting flowers on the streets and the kids would just ruin them. So I said, well, just move the flowers to the windowsills on the second floor. Leave the lights on. Add things that work to make your sidewalks a more inviting place. I understand their fears and know how to work with what they do have.

“But Baltimore County was dreadful to me. They thought they had pedestrian friendly places. They had a big brick plaza that had ‘No Loitering’ and ‘No Skateboarding’ signs all over it. It reminded me of the plastic covers on the furniture that some of the moms used when we were kids. Heavy plastic slip covers. I mean they had bumpy pavement, which is no good for bikes or wheelchairs, fountains that didn’t allow swimming. I sat in that room and only a few people from the community even bothered to come.”

So the struggling low-income crowd in the city had the personal commitment, but few resources and legitimate concerns about safety. The Baltimore County crowd had the cash and quiet, but no public will. But Sharon keeps on traveling to make her point and often has the most success in the most desperate areas because “it’s not about the money it’s about the commitment. Things are not that expensive. Streets have a ten-year life cycle so just put the changes into the master plan. If you’re going to repave anyway, then add bike lanes and wider sidewalks and make the local government, not just the engineers, help put the plan in place.”

We’re scheduled to meet my mother and stepfather, who are in their eighties, for lunch at a restaurant off 42nd Street, so we set out again; our

pedometers have registered 17,000-plus steps so far. Of course Times Square and the theater district are not neighborhoods as much as happening spaces. Everything is huge: the flashing billboards, the street traffic, the cost of T-shirts. We thread through a volume of walkers unlike anything I ever experience back home in Washington, D.C., which is a good-sized city in its own right, but feels like a plain white dinner plate next to New York's street fare.

My mother, a petite woman with green eyes and remarkably lush white hair, continues to thrive in her eighties in part because she's such an avid walker. She and my stepfather travel all over the world, and wherever she goes she engages in the local landscape by walking through it. She visits open markets, talks to strangers, strolls beaches, and visits offbeat shops. For many years, when they traveled to American Bar Association meetings across the country, she had a group of women from the ABA crowd who walked with her, but many became ill, had falls, or lost a spouse so stopped coming to events. Most of the time she walks alone now. I think of Sharon and how she wants to retire in Manhattan and think of how successfully my mother has sustained a thriving social life, even when walking alone, because each time she strikes out she inserts herself into the larger community—exactly what Sharon envisions for herself when she grows old.

After lunch we head out for the final leg of our Manhattan tour, Central Park, which a journalist once described as “the single greatest work of art in the city of New York.” It took twenty years and thousands of men to shape the 843-acre canvas into the remarkable public space visitors see today. Back in the 1850s, when city officials and residents began to first seriously talk about setting aside land for a public park, no other city in America had anything like what Frederick Law Olmsted, the park's superintendent, and his partner, English-born architect Calvert Vaux, presented in their proposed design, often referred to as the Greensward Plan. They didn't want an amusement park. They wanted an uplifting open space where city residents could go for quiet and stress-reducing open vistas and wooded glens. They wanted pedestrian traffic, not carriages, to dominate, and even designed dozens of small bridges that forced vehicle traffic overhead while walkers could stroll underneath.

Many of the city's laborers and immigrants favored an amusement park and playing fields for competitive games and felt the European flair of the

Greensward Plan catered to the wealthy and would discourage the average city resident from using the public space. The two sides argued in the newspapers and in the courts but, backed by many of the wealthy homeowners that faced the potential park (and would see their house values skyrocket), Olmsted and Vaux's plan won.

One of their counterarguments: the huge immigrant class would finally have somewhere else to go after work besides the bars. And they did come. By the 1860s more than three million people were visiting the park on foot every year and another four million by horse carriage.

The success of Central Park inspired other cities in the United States to set aside sizable portions of their landscapes for public parks on a grand scale, including Hartford, Connecticut; Baltimore, Maryland; Brooklyn, New York; and others. The New Yorkers pulled it off during a severe economic depression in the mid-nineteenth century, which just further underscores Sharon's point that commitment, not money, really lies at the heart of the matter. Indeed one of the biggest upgrades in the history of Central Park took place during the Great Depression in the 1930s. The more stressful city life became, the more the city government and citizens safeguarded their illustrious park.

Sharon and I travel down 7th Avenue past the Carousel (\$1.50 a ride) and watch a horse-drawn carriage cross over the bridge on Transverse Avenue. It's late afternoon on a Monday and the park is absolutely packed. We're headed to what Sharon likes to call the "urban beach," which is actually Sheep's Meadow.

The swirly sidewalks encourage a people-watching pace. Sharon snaps lots of pictures. A couple comes over and asks her to please remove the photographs of them from her camera because it violates their religion. Sharon doesn't miss a beat and shows them the digital file on the camera and deletes it. They smile; she shakes her head and they part. I can't help but think that all of her movement through public spaces in this area honed the social skills that made that scene no scene for her. She doesn't even mention it as we continue our walk, whereas most suburban kids I know would have felt really threatened.

We walk up a hill to a fence and a collection of basalt rocks that overlook Sheep's Meadow, a great green expanse crowded with mothers and their babies, workers taking a break, and college kids throwing Frisbees and footballs.

Actually Olmsted felt that people shouldn't even walk on Sheep's Meadow, just contemplate it while the animals grazed. The people won and the sheep are gone, but it still remains a free space, not confined by backstops for baseball fields or lines for soccer fields. No one needs a special permit to use this area.

Sharon mentions Baltimore County again. "They just don't get it," she says.

But mostly we're quiet. At this point our pedometers read nearly 25,000 steps.

I could never live in Manhattan; too over-stimulating. Yet my visit called up feelings of longing and restlessness. At the time I made this trip to New York City, I lived on a cul-de-sac within a mile of a metro, a park, and a historic commercial district, but it was still a social dead-end. Nine kids under the age of thirteen lived in a fifteen-house area, but none of them played in the common spaces (street, sidewalk, or front lawns). In New York, I felt my place in the stream of humanity; in Alexandria, I felt an aloneness that only dissolved if I deliberately sought out "mischief."

I would never want Alexandria to be a mini-Manhattan, but Sharon has become an expert at working with what's already on hand in communities. She understands she's really drumming up an *emotional* commitment to rebuild communal spaces through movement by challenging American's sedentary lifestyles. My cul-de-sac could easily have been as busy as Sheep's Meadow, of course on a scale that makes sense for nine kids.

On the way home we decide we want to stop for a beer at a bar in Maplewood where the locals like to go after snowstorms to spontaneously share a draft. Over dinner she observes that we never once had to climb over a highway barrier, wall, or cross a huge highway.

"The thing about New York City, especially Manhattan, is that it all works. It's not some Disneyland, made-up community. It's a string of real neighborhoods."

I agree but say little. For now I need to just sit back and think about it all.

But days later, when I am home by my stand-up desk, I come to a very surprising conclusion. Prior to my New York trip, I spent months reading books like Jane Jacobs' *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, *Asphalt Nation*:

How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back by Jane Kay, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-made Landscape* by James Kunstler, and *Downtown* by Peter Hamill. I researched online about Safe Routes to Schools programs and publications put out by the National Center for Bicycling & Walking. I educated myself about the history of urban planning, the general trends and problems facing suburbs and cities today. I interviewed experts.

But in the end, the most worthwhile insight came in an e-mail Sharon sent me a few days after our New York tour. she shared something inside of her that no book author or urban-planning specialist can measure, but which we all need if we hope to turn the corner and break free from the most damaging aspects of our sedentary culture.

She wrote: "I do what I do because I am afraid to live in a world without community life. I'm afraid to leave my children in a world with no sidewalks. I want you to promise me that the chapter that includes me is about people and hope and a love of community life."