



SERGIO RUIZ FOR SPUR



Walk This Way

A new urban lifestyle is afoot

By Renee Brincks

Within a five-minute walk of my San Francisco studio apartment, I cross five bus lines, two cable car routes and valuable parking spaces reserved for car-share vehicles. A 20-minute stroll takes me to the city's waterfront and Market Street, the main downtown thoroughfare. In an hour or less, I can walk to baseball games at AT&T Park, hiking trails in Presidio National Park or Caltrain passenger rail service south to San Jose.

Walking wasn't an option where I grew up, on an Iowa farm off a gravel road 10 miles from the nearest town. But when I arrived in San Francisco seven years ago, I sold my car, invested in comfortable shoes, and became a member of the demographic group currently bringing in-city life its greatest popularity in a century. The demand for car-free living drives today's urban design and development plans in many cities, explains Bruce Wright, vice president and principal with San Francisco's SB Architects.

◀ SPUR is a nonprofit group that promotes walkability in the San Francisco Bay Area's many cities.

"In cities like San Francisco, Oakland, Portland and Seattle, there's a real focus on living and working in locations where you can



RENDERINGS PROVIDED BY GBD ARCHITECTS (2)

▲ These renderings of Hassalo on Eighth depict a four-block Portland community currently under development.

▶ The lobby in Hassalo's new Elwood Building.



ride your bike and use alternative forms of transportation. The idea is even finding its way into metro areas like Los Angeles and Orange County," he says. Wright cites his firm's mixed-use developments in San Francisco's Mission Bay neighborhood, along with efforts to convert the former El Toro Marine Corps Air Station in Irvine, California, into walkable neighborhoods where trails and parks link houses, shops, schools and offices.

A 2015 Urban Land Institute (ULI) study measuring attitudes toward housing, transportation and community notes that 52 percent of American adults would like to live in a place where they rarely need a car. Thirty-eight percent would like more convenient local options for walking and outdoor exercise. And 32 percent rank public transit as a high priority.

"Nationally, we're seeing a resurgence of urban living," says Ed McMahon, ULI senior resident fellow. "For the first time in 50 years, a majority of American cities seem to be growing faster than their surrounding suburbs."

A decline in manufacturing jobs accounts for some of that shift, coupled with new opportunities in health, technology, education and professional services. Demographics and changing attitudes also play a role. Many young professionals want to live, work and play in the same place, McMahon explains. They prefer culturally vibrant, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods to long commutes and big yards. And, as members of the millennial generation choose downtown high-rises over suburban homes, companies are following.

"Businesses used to locate where there was low-cost labor. Now, it's about attracting and retaining

AMERICAN HOUSING ATTITUDES

The Urban Land Institute's "America in 2015" survey examined U.S. attitudes on housing, transit and community:

- ▶ 48 percent of American adults say they are somewhat or very likely to move within five years.
- ▶ Among millennials ages 18 to 36, 73 percent expect to move within five years.
- ▶ 50 percent of Americans list walkability as a top or high priority when they consider where to live.
- ▶ 78 percent of Americans prefer communities where residents are a mix of ages.



REFINEMENT WAGNER, TMT DEVELOPMENT

talent. Employers are returning downtown because that's where the talent is," McMahon says.

Earlier this year, a Smart Growth America study identified nearly 500 companies that have expanded or relocated into downtown districts during the past five years. That list includes Amazon, which continues growing its campus in Seattle's South Lake Union neighborhood; Weyerhaeuser, currently building a new headquarters in Seattle's Pioneer Square; and Expedia, which plans to move to Seattle's downtown waterfront in 2018.

▲ Portland's Park Avenue West will open downtown next year with retail, office and residential space.



SERGIO / @ILOVEANCHORAGE INSTAGRAM

◀ Outdoor concerts at the Anchorage Museum exemplify the city's new, walkable urban lifestyle.

DOWNTOWN SEATTLE ASSOCIATION



▲ Pedestrians on Pine Street illustrate the walkability of downtown Seattle.

More than a third of downtown Seattle's 65,000 residents work in the city center, and the district has added an average of 25 new jobs per day since 2010, says the Downtown Seattle Association (DSA). The nonprofit economic development organization representing 12 downtown neighborhoods also reports a corresponding uptick in residential construction. New structures range from traditional apartments to mixed-use developments such as Via6, which dubs itself a "vertical neighborhood" with restaurants, bicycle storage, car-share vehicles and entertainment spaces for

residents' use. Revitalization projects at nearby Westlake and Occidental Parks—food trucks, free fitness classes, children's activities, even Ping-Pong tables—provide additional buzz.

"We're really trying to create an experience. Downtown is not just where you go to work. It's a place to discover and really enjoy," says DSA Vice President of Advocacy and Economic Development Don Blakene. He sees millennials moving in, but empty nesters and young families also are taking up residence in Seattle's urban core.

North of downtown, the Ballard neighborhood offers a less dense, pedestrian-friendly alternative to the city center. This historic area bordered by Salmon Bay and Puget Sound feels more like a small town, with shops, galleries, cafes, breweries and waterfront recreation. Ballard Avenue

retains much of its early 1900s architecture, but nearby, large new apartment complexes have been rising near the neighborhood's existing single-family homes. The new Vik condo complex typifies the trend—117 stylish units, \$269,900 and up, half of them sold before the formal opening this fall.



STEPHANIE JENSEN

▲ Seattle's Ballard neighborhood features many cafes and taverns with alfresco seating.

"The demographics of Ballard are changing. It's getting younger, and many of those young professionals work downtown. They choose Ballard because it has an interesting, eclectic, neighborhood vibe," says Ballard Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Mike Stewart. "You get the sensibility of living in an established neighborhood, but with the ability to quickly get downtown."

Population growth boosts local economies, but also strains public transit sys-

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tems. Neighborhoods often need new schools and bigger public safety budgets to serve new residents. Urbanization frequently triggers affordability concerns, as well.

“We have to make sure that the city

grows together and that we don't displace folks. Affordability is a huge issue,” says Blakeney. He sees new market-rate and below-market-rate housing as part of the solution, and DSA is working with mayoral task force members to create additional fixes.

“People inherently want to walk. You just have to give them somewhere to go.”

“Affordability should be a key component of walkability,” agrees Allison Arieff of SPUR, a nonprofit planning, housing and transportation group active in the San Francisco Bay Area. While cities with fast-growing housing markets can't always predict the challenges ahead, Arieff says thoughtful planning helps mitigate problems. “You can't just decide to stop growing. You do need to grow and adapt, and ideally you can put policies in place so people aren't driven out.”

Residents often find that the amenities of mixed-use neighborhoods mitigate higher rental costs. Not owning a car, for example, means no bills for auto insurance, repairs or fuel (a fact I've enjoyed for years). Renting also curbs expenses related to home maintenance and property taxes.

“When you look at the bigger picture, it's not more expensive. It's just the lifestyle that you're choosing,” says Stephanie Shaffer, senior residential asset manager for American Assets Trust in Portland. “While rent might seem higher, you're also getting more for your money.”

Shaffer oversees Hassalo on Eighth, a four-block residential development in the city's Lloyd District. Millennials, families and retirees live in the community's three towers, which house more than 650 apartments and include amenities such as fitness rooms, private event spaces, bike repair services, dog lounges and retail shops. Developers incorporated environmentally friendly features throughout Hassalo on Eighth, from sustainable hardwoods to rainwater-harvesting gardens to efficient appli-

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REAL ESTATE

ances that reduce renters' utility bills. An innovative water reclamation system called "NORM" (Natural Organic Recycling Machine) also diverts 60,000 gallons of water from the city sewer system every day. Treated residential wastewater instead irrigates native plants, flushes toilets and helps operate heating and cooling equipment.

Like Hassalo on Eighth, Portland's Park Avenue West tower was built to U.S. Green Building Council Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum sustainability standards. The downtown structure, which will open early next year, combines offices, retail space and residential units serving what Ed McMahon of the Urban Land Institute calls a "sleep upstairs and shop downstairs" clientele. The appeal of walkability, he adds, today extends beyond metropolitan centers.

"This phenomenon is taking place in virtually every city of any size in the country," says McMahon, who lists successful downtown revitalization efforts in Boise and Salt Lake City as examples.

In the Turnagain neighborhood, southwest of downtown Anchorage, Alaska, new loft-style apartments built adjacent to the popular Rustic Goat bistro have sparked a similar interest in walkability. Though the city doesn't have the urban density of Seattle or Portland, mixed-use developments in the city's Mountain View neighborhood and a proposed retail and residential revamp of a former downtown theater confirm the demand for affordable urban housing.

"When it comes to walkability, I don't think you have to convince anybody," says Jon Bittner, vice president of the Anchorage Economic Development Corporation. "People inherently want to walk. You just have to give them somewhere to go." ▲

Renee Brincks is based in San Francisco.

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