

This article originally appeared in [Utne](#) on April 30, 2004.

## Pedestrian Paradise

By Jay Walljasper

One of the local characters in the small city where I grew up was Judge Green. A giant man, probably 6 feet 7, he was widely admired around town, in part because he had been star of the only Urbana High School team ever to make it to the championship game of the Illinois state basketball tournament. I remember him as a cheerful man who greeted everyone with a smile. But he had one trait that made him seem a bit peculiar: He walked to work every day. If you drove down Broadway Avenue at certain hours, you couldn't miss his towering figure striding along the sidewalk.

One day, home from college and already an ardent environmentalist, I was walking uptown myself when it dawned on me that Judge Green's home was only a few blocks from the courthouse – hardly more than half a mile. I was shocked. The man many folks thought eccentric (and I thought heroic) for not driving to work each day was covering a distance that would be nothing to pedestrians in Europe, or most other places outside the United States. How sad, I sighed. There really is no hope that Americans will ever get out of their cars if a half-mile walk looks to them like an Olympic endurance event.

Walking, in many ways, is still viewed as an exotic and slightly odd habit. Try this experiment some time at a party or other gathering: Announce that you are walking home. I'll bet you, two-to-one odds, that someone will offer a ride, even if you live just three blocks away and it's a sunny 80 degrees outside. This is a generous gesture, of course, seen by most folks as similar to giving a glass of water to someone who says they're thirsty. Why walk if you could go in a car?

But the answer to that question is becoming more complicated than it used to be. The net effect of two hundred and fifty million Americans always taking the car results in polluted skies, congested roads, global warming, burgeoning obesity and a growing sense of isolation in most American communities.

Our decision to drive made over and over again, has eliminated the option to walk in many places. Many kids, old people, poor people, and disabled people are living under a form of house arrest, unable to go anywhere without finding someone to chauffeur them. Sidewalks are seen as an unnecessary luxury in most suburbs, and 60 years of traffic "improvements" on America's streets have rendered many other communities unfit for pedestrians. The simplest human acts – buying groceries, going to school, visiting friends – now depend upon climbing into a car. People today even drive somewhere to take a walk because the streets around their homes feel inhospitable.

Yet one thing has changed for the better since I was a kid in the days of cheap gas, open roads, and plentiful parking. Increasing numbers of Americans – seeing a future of traffic jams, soulless sprawl, and never-ending wars for oil – are looking for ways to get out of the driver's seat. Even at a time when politicians in Washington are allocating billions for another round of mega-highway construction and pop culture celebrates the sexy

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supremacy of Hummer drivers, there is an emerging movement to reclaim our right to take a walk.

All across the land, people are speaking up, organizing meetings, fighting city hall and, in some cases, working with city hall to make streets safer and more pleasant for pedestrians. They've gotten crosswalks painted in some places, streets narrowed in others, stop signs and speed bumps installed, zoning ordinances changed to promote pedestrian-friendly development, and plans created to help kids walk or bike to school.

These issues reach deep into the heart of people's lives. Two neighbors bump into one another on the sidewalk and start talking about planting more flowers along the street, turning an empty storefront into a coffee shop or lobbying the city council to add bike lanes to that busy road. In small but important ways, these people are changing the face of America block by block.

This is a classic grassroots movement, with no clearly identifiable leaders. But a number of the people most active in the cause have been inspired by a former seminary student, magazine editor and window washer from Brisbane, Australia named David Engwicht. Marked-up copies of Engwicht's books, *Reclaiming Our Cities and Towns* and *Street Reclaiming* (both New Society Publishers), are passed from hand to hand at community meetings and potlucks across North America.

Engwicht's message is as simple as it radical. For nearly all of human history, he declares, streets belonged to everybody. Kids played there, dogs slept there, people stopped there to flirt or gossip. But over recent decades, beginning in Detroit and spreading over much of the world, streets have been seized for the exclusive use of cars and trucks. Most communities have never recovered from this theft. Deprived of our neighborhood gathering spots, we've retreated to the backyard or indoors to avoid the noise, smell and danger of speeding traffic. In the process, we've withdrawn from one another.

Engwicht admits he didn't realize all this until one day when he attended a public meeting about the widening of a road near his home in a Brisbane suburb. At first, he was persuaded by city officials' arguments in favor of a wider road, but he changed his mind after listening to neighbors talk about how it would affect their lives.

Although he was up to his neck in starting a window-washing business, Engwicht decided to write a rebuttal to all the assertions thrown out by the "experts" who wanted to widen the road. "Because I didn't have any background in traffic engineering or urban planning, or even environmental activism, I had a fresh view," he explained to me in an expansive interview at a St. Paul brewpub during a break from the last ProBike/ProWalk conference, an bi-annual gathering of activists sponsored by the National Center for Bicycling and Walking.

In his research, he discovered how neighbors in the Dutch city of Delft outwitted speeding motorists by strategically placing old couches, tables and planters in the street.

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Cars could still pass, but only by slowing down. When police arrived, they immediately realized the value of these illegal actions to make the streets safer. Soon city officials were devising their own ways to slow cars and "calm" traffic.

"Traffic Calming," the booklet Engwicht wrote to make the case against road widening, not only turned the tide in his hometown; it took on a life of its own. He expanded it into the book *Reclaiming Our Cities and Towns*, which inspired a group of neighbors and me to organize resistance to the proposed widening of an already unsafe street near our homes in Minneapolis. At a public meeting, we outlined Engwicht's ideas about traffic calming, quoting from the book and noting that streets could be redesigned so people and cars could share the space. Road-widening projects had been opposed around town many times before, but rarely stopped because city officials succeeded in branding opponents as "anti-progress." We, however, were able to win over the crowd by articulating a vision of what we were for, rather than just what we were against. The city dropped its plans to widen the avenue that very night.

Soon Engwicht's window-washing business was forgotten as he got offers from around the world to help people think differently about pedestrians, streets and communities. He delivers many talks and has been called in to help design people-friendly road projects in places from Honolulu's Waikiki Beach to Edinburgh, Scotland.

Engwicht suggests we treat the street as our "outdoor living room" and find ways it can be used for more than just transportation of people and goods. He now believes that traffic-calming efforts must encourage vital public life just as much as discourage speeding traffic. "Kids playing on the sidewalk or beautiful canopies of trees over the streets slow traffic more than speed bumps," he told me. "There are all kinds of fun things a neighborhood can do to accomplish this. When I get back home, I am going to put a bench in my front yard to get people to stop awhile, and maybe help kids on the block create scarecrows to put up along our street. Drivers will definitely slow down to look at that."

Anyone joining the burgeoning movement to make America more walkable soon discovers the key issue is not urban planning or transportation priorities but love. Places we love become places that we hang out, and those are always the best places for walking. Fred Kent, president of the Project for Public Spaces (PPS), means that almost literally. "If I had to summarize our work in one image," he says, leading me through a maze of Asian shops along Canal Street in New York, "it would be a couple smooching on a park bench."

Kent actually has thousands of pictures of people hugging and kissing on city streets on file among the hundreds of thousands of photos he has shot in 30 years as a tireless advocate for public places. His deep love for street life became apparent when I visited the PPS office last year. Every time we sat down to talk, Kent suggested we take a walk, so for several days I trailed him through the streets of New York as he snapped photos, pointed out favorite spots, and shouted answers to my questions above the hubbub of the city.

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"Isn't it fun when you don't know where you're going to wind up?" Kent asked with a grin as we wandered past an Italian bakery, antique toy store and guitar shop near the PPS office, stopping to talk with two well-dressed and slightly tipsy couples from Auburn, Alabama, who were enjoying their walk through Greenwich Village as much as we were.

Inspired by William H. Whyte, a noted journalist and author who invented a "smile index" to measure the quality of urban spaces, Kent founded PPS in 1975 with environmental designer Kathleen Madden and architect Steve Davies to draw attention to the importance of creating and preserving congenial public settings where people can walk, talk, and just enjoy themselves. The group gained international acclaim for its part in the revival of Bryant Park, the backyard of the New York Public Library, once overrun with drug dealers and now one of New Yorkers most beloved places to pass time.

With a staff of 24, PPS worked in 31 states and 11 countries last year, joining with local citizen groups, public officials, foundations and businesses to engage in what they call "placemaking." This means taking every opportunity to promote public life and pedestrian activity by careful attention to how streets, parks, buildings, transportation options and public markets work. Through workshops, seminars, a participatory "Place Game" they've created, and a book, *How to Turn a Place Around*, PPS offers a grassroots approach to help people make their communities more livable and lovable.

"Those who live in a place are the experts on that place," Kent told me. "They know more than architects, urban planners, traffic engineers, landscape architects, and real estate agents about what will make that place thrive. But often they are not even asked about their ideas."

The central point of PPS's work, everyone involved with the organization will tell you, is that projects need to be "place-driven." By that, they mean that any effort to improve a place should not be viewed strictly as a question of transportation access, or crime control, or economic development, or affordable housing, or architectural excellence. These are worthy goals, but they cannot be achieved if too little attention is devoted to creating a vital place where people will want to live, work, visit, or walk – a place they will care about, that they will love.

"The single thing that makes a place a good place is that it is interesting," Kent explained as we strolled down Fifth Avenue toward Central Park. "And that's the same with a good place to walk. I love to walk down this street not because of the fancy shops. I love it because there's always a surprise, a sense of serendipity, great people-watching, and moments of just pleasure."

"Of course," he added as we step into the Plaza Hotel to look over the elegant lobby and use the bathroom, "I like Chinatown more. It has all the life of Fifth Avenue but with different accents and price tags. And Mulberry Street in Little Italy – it's so nice and alive and messy. There is nothing you could do to make that place any more interesting."

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A few minutes later, as we headed up Madison Avenue to explore the Upper East Side, I looked over at Kent, his face shining with the energy and excitement of a kid on the first day of summer vacation, and thought, for the first time in years, of Judge Green back in my hometown. A reserved Midwesterner rather than an ebullient Easterner, Judge Green nonetheless had the same wide, sincere smile on his face as he strolled through the streets of Urbana. Then it dawned on me: The way to get people out of their cars, something I had been wondering about since college, is not to chide them about ruining the environment or shame them about being fat but to show them how much fun, and how much of life itself, they are missing by not walking. And how much more fun we'd all have if we created better places for everyone across America to take a walk.

*Jay Walljasper is editor of [Utne](#) magazine.*