



Build a Better Burb

SPRAWL RETROFIT TOOL

HOW TO INCREASE AWARENESS

ABOUT URBAN DESIGN

HOW TO INCREASE AWARENESS ABOUT URBAN DESIGN

This document is one of a series of created for Build a Better Burb, CNU's Online Journal of Suburban Design. The series emerged from the Build a Better Burb Sprawl Retrofit Council in Miami, Florida, in March, 2016—an event aimed at expanding transportation choice, sense of place, and sustainability of the Suburbs.

The Problem

People are attracted to walkable places with good urban design, but the layperson doesn't have the vocabulary to know how to specifically ask for it. In addition, resources often flow towards measurable problems, and urban design quality has been considered unmeasurable.

Discussion

When we build a sidewalk that is sandwiched between a 40 mph street and a parking lot, we invite humans into a world designed for fast-moving machines, and most people aren't comfortable with such an awkward invitation. Humans are smart. We pick up on dozens of cues and hints from the world around us. We intuitively know if an environment is designed for walking or driving, but we often have a hard time explaining why. The good news is that we're getting better at not only explaining why, but actually measuring what makes people

choose to walk.

The things we measure tend to be the things we focus on, and the things we focus on tend to be the things we improve. For decades, traffic engineers have focused predominantly on measuring auto traffic. Traffic engineering has become a science in which traffic congestion is forecast with precision. There are standards which state that certain levels of congestion are unacceptable, creating the impetus for investment in wider, faster roads. Because delay can be measured and forecast, it's easy to set standards and communicate how well the facility is performing relative to those standards.

Imagine if we could provide standards and score streets on how attractive the walk environment is. What if we scored the walkability of streets and flagged the blocks that are below an acceptable standard? We'd create the impetus for investment in the walkability of the street. We could also highlight blocks that score well so that others could use them as an example.

A Solution

Measuring Urban Design: Metrics for Livable Places by Otto Clemente and Reid Ewing outlines a procedure for quantifying the urban design, and therefore, the walkability of a street. This methodology breaks urban design into five elements that have been proven to impact one's willingness to walk: Imageability,

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Enclosure, Human Scale, Transparency, and Complexity. Each of these elements is measured, rated, and aggregated into an overall urban design score for the block.

The Wasatch Front Regional Council (WFRC) has used this methodology to score streets throughout the greater Salt Lake metropolitan area. There has been a recent push in the region to encourage walking and biking and to improve air quality. In addition, the region has been implementing a regional, grass-roots vision, known as the Wasatch Choice Vision. This Vision identifies specific locations where local governments want to create or enhance walkable, mixed-use centers. By measuring the urban design of these streets, we are supporting this effort.

To view the story map of this tool, click [here](#). The map displays the scores of over 1,200 blocks throughout the region. We focused our efforts on the centers and corridors identified in the Wasatch Choice Vision. The scoring methodology uses an assessment that looks at and counts crucial physical features, observes proportions, and creates a numerical score. The assessment looks at the street from building face to building face, one block at a time. The story map has a variety of tabs, which walk you through the methodology, display the five elements of walkability, and provide an aggregate score. A “Tools and Resources” tab is also included, for those who want to dig into the resource even deeper.

Together, we can expand the definition of

streets beyond the needs of just traffic, to include the needs of pedestrians. People are drawn to walkable streets. They are good for communities, good for the environment, and good for business. City leaders are trying to respond accordingly, but often don't have the expertise or technical resources to describe what it is that they are after. Our goal is to educate and empower them with real, quantifiable data.

More Information

Many resources are available for suburban communities seeking revitalization and diversity in their built environments, including the websites for Build a Better Burb (buildabetterburb.org) and CNU (www.cnu.org), in addition to books such as *Retrofitting Suburbia* and *Sprawl Repair Manual*.

<https://wfrcgis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=7d1b1df5686c41b593d1e5ff5539d01a>

http://activelivingresearch.org/files/FieldManual_071605.pdf

<http://wasatchchoice2040.com/>

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Sustainable Better Burb Retrofits require a multi-generational fiscal dynamic depicted in the reinvestment cycle (pictured above).