

THE PEDESTRIAN WAY TO GOOD HEALTH



ly. Automobile-oriented environments hinder inclusivity, lack character and are accident prone. The number of two, three and four wheelers are exploding; public parking is grossly insufficient and residents park their vehicles unauthorisedly on roads. Our roadways are overcrowded and chaotic.

“The highest average speed in Indian cities during the day is just 18 kph.” Footpaths are often too high from the road level, and climbing on and off a sidewalk proves so difficult it is easier for most people to walk on the roads. Pavements gradually shrink in width, and there are many ‘curb cuts’ (gaps in the footpath for vehicles). Slowly they are encroached by open urinals, small shops or vendors, and our public spaces are lost forever. So the biggest urban casualty in our congested cities are the footpaths — in many cases there maybe none!

A good sidewalk is characterised by just a few sign posts, utility poles, electrical boxes or transformers. Trees planted with drip irrigation, with ring guards to protect them against impact and root guards that permit rainwater to percolate. Preservation of the roots of trees gives them strength to withstand cyclones. They provide shade and support the ecosystem. Well-lit and properly maintained footpaths improves safety and automatically encourages walking.

As a student I would stroll along the streets of New York and enjoy latte at a cafe on the Hudson! I wish Chennai was a walkers haven and we didn’t have to travel so far to enjoy the pleasures of “new pedestrianism”! Maybe we could actualise this dream in a lifetime?

By 2020, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation estimates the number of Indians heading overseas for business and leisure travel to be about 50 million! A health app or pedometer may perhaps record then, an enjoyable walk to a London garden or a Roman plaza. Remember, it takes a lot to weave such programmes into city life.

How pleasurable it is even today to achieve the 5,000 to 7,500 daily steps required for a healthy life in such cities! One may lament on returning home that “it is too hot here anyway” or “walkability is not really important in India.” However, walking has health, environmental, and economic benefits that far surpass mundane apologetic reactions.

Walkability in cities is an important component of sustainable urban design. Factors influencing walkability in-

cludes intermodal connectivity, quality of footpaths, pedestrian rights-of-way, traffic and road conditions, land use patterns, buildings’ accessibility, and safety among others.

The World Cancer Research Fund and American Institute for Cancer Research declared that new developments should be designed to encourage walking as sustained and modest exercise prevents cancer. Good walking conditions have a beneficial impact on the Body Mass Index (BMI). A welcome side effect is that walking reduces our reliance on fossil fuel, improves air quality and decelerates global climate change.

While planning large campuses or gated communities I prefer the time taken to walk between buildings or zones as a measure of optimal design. I have found that pedestrian-oriented streets mirror local culture and heritage, which make them vibrant and robust, aesthetic and friend-



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