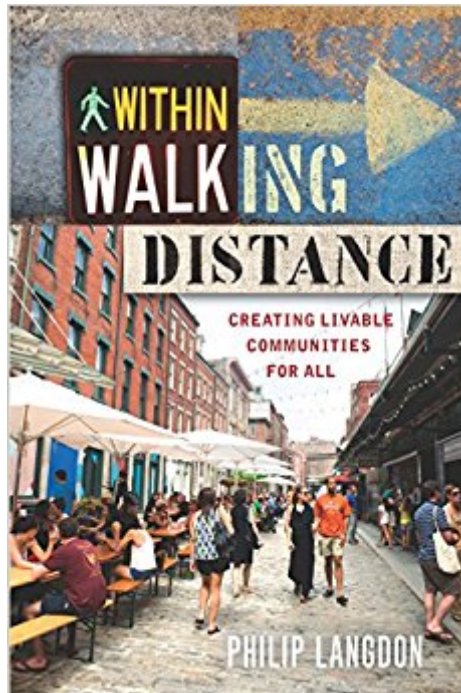




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Within Walking Distance: Creating Livable Communities For All



Synopsis

For five thousand years, human settlements were nearly always compact places. Everything a person needed on a regular basis lay within walking distance. But then the great project of the twentieth century—sorting people, businesses, and activities into separate zones, scattered across vast metropolises—took hold, exacting its toll on human health, natural resources, and the climate. Living where things were beyond walking distance ultimately became, for many people, a recipe for frustration. As a result, many Americans have begun seeking compact, walkable communities or looking for ways to make their current neighborhood better connected, more self-sufficient, and more pleasurable. In *Within Walking Distance*, journalist and urban critic Philip Langdon looks at why and how Americans are shifting toward a more human-scale way of building and living. He shows how people are creating, improving, and caring for walkable communities. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Starting conditions differ radically, as do the attitudes and interests of residents. To draw the most important lessons, Langdon spent time in six communities that differ in size, history, wealth, diversity, and education, yet share crucial traits: compactness, a mix of uses and activities, and human scale. The six are Center City Philadelphia; the East Rock section of New Haven, Connecticut; Brattleboro, Vermont; the Little Village section of Chicago; the Pearl District in Portland, Oregon; and the Cotton District in Starkville, Mississippi. In these communities, Langdon examines safe, comfortable streets; sociable sidewalks; how buildings connect to the public realm; bicycling; public transportation; and incorporation of nature and parks into city or town life. In all these varied settings, he pays special attention to a vital ingredient: local commitment. To improve conditions and opportunities for everyone, Langdon argues that places where the best of life is within walking distance ought to be at the core of our thinking. This book is for anyone who wants to understand what can be done to build, rebuild, or improve a community while retaining the things that make it distinctive.

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Customer Reviews

In my suburban Texas neighborhood, to get to the closest restaurant is a mile walk on a street with no sidewalk. The nearest grocery store is closer to two miles. Don't get me wrong; I like our quiet street, the lake across the street, and the woods behind us. But it sure would be nice to have some shopping and dining options within a few minute's walk from my front door. That is the dream that Philip Langdon writes about in *Within Walking Distance: Creating Livable Communities for All*. Better said, that is the reality that he writes about, leading people like me to dream about living in a walkable neighborhood. Langdon gives a detailed case study of 6 walkable communities around the United States, examining what makes them unique and what other communities might learn to become more walkable. He defines the reference point of walkability as follows: "Building a city or town at the scale of the pedestrian meant that any able-bodied person could navigate the full range of local businesses, homes, institutions, and attractions without relying on anything more than his or her own power." That's the ideal, and some of the homes in some of the neighborhoods he surveyed fit this description. Walkability is a wonderful ideal, and can be a factor for many people looking to relocate. While the communities he profiles--and countless others--are walkable, Langdon doesn't sufficiently address some of the questions and barriers that prevent neighborhoods from being walkable. Each of his profiled communities arguably have factors that predispose them to being or becoming walkable: proximity to a major city center and the jobs found there, proximity to a major university, a location that draws tourism and seasonal residents, or ethnic roots that presume deep community ties. It also seemed that the communities he describes are destination locations.

While residential space is there, specialty stores, restaurants, street fairs and other entertainment, open-air markets, parks and the like draw many non-residents. So, yes, it's walkable for the residents, but the viability of the area depends on attracting non-residents to patronize local establishments. I don't see this as a problem, but I think it's worth pointing out that the walkable communities Langdon describes and promotes are not necessarily self-sustaining communities. They are surrounded by more common suburban tracts or dispersed homes, whose residents hop in their cars to go to a walkable neighborhood for shopping, dining, entertainment, or recreation. What would it take for my neighborhood and others like it to become walkable? Lots of little stores and restaurants popping up in close proximity to one another. Why doesn't that happen? Because little stores and restaurants tucked away in walkable neighborhoods have great difficulty making a profit. Does it happen? Yes, happily, sometimes they survive. But the reality is larger stores and restaurants on prominent thoroughfares draw more traffic and make more money. Economies of scale are hard realities. One other thing: with the population density of a walkable neighborhood, homes tend to be much smaller and much more expensive. In my city, I can live in a \$200,000, 1875 sq. foot home and drive everywhere, or I can move downtown to some more walkable neighborhoods and pay that for a one bedroom with 1/3 the square feet. I am not willing to make that trade off. I enjoyed reading about the neighborhoods in *Within Walking Distance*. Someday if I don't have kids at home and have a lot more money, living in a neighborhood like that would be nice. For now, it's a model for a select demographic. Thankfully we live in a country that is diverse enough geographically and economically that highly concentrated, walkable neighborhoods can exist alongside their more spacious, less densely populated neighbors, sometimes in the same city. Thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for the complimentary electronic review copy!

Philip Langdon's wonderful book lets us walk up close to and then walk around six resurgent yet profoundly different communities where walkability ignited and sustained changes for the better. He demonstrates how in each place • Center City Philadelphia; Burlington, Vermont; East Rock in New Haven; the Little Village in Chicago; the Pearl District in Portland, Oregon; and the Cotton District in Starkville, Mississippi • that when walkability was reestablished and protected, a virtuous cycle of improvements was sparked, where better human physical and psychological health was achieved, where the beauty, utility and pleasure of these places was increased, and where the community's capacity to manage both new adversities and larger civic endeavors was enhanced. All of us who love cities and towns and who work to make them better, know that bringing common sense into the political and

economic processes that determine urban form is the crux of the challenge and the basis of any success. The ingenuity and resourcefulness of these different communities in meeting these challenges is something to admire and learn from. And while we are gaining these important insights, we are treated to Mr. Langdon's eye for telling detail – both architectural and human. We are given a chance to join him in honoring people living especially productive and joyful lives – like the Mexican-American vendor dreaming-up corn ice-cream, or Vermonters making a festival of strolling heifers on Main Street, or an artist of urban form creating rare and new beauty in a little corner of Mississippi.

Within Walking Distance is very refreshing and accessible. The great variety of neighborhoods described across the nation provides valuable lessons for both professionals and regular folks, without the jargon or codifying so often seen (mostly the fault of us 'professionals'). The book is also a bridge between communities which have walkable areas and those that don't; there are 'lessons to be learned'. I was particularly struck by the ideas for making streets and other features better for walking at both the large and smaller scale. Phil Langdon also describes recent and current urban concepts (form-based zoning etc) in a way which is understandable and links them to what's really on the ground. While the introductory and summary chapters are highly readable, one has only to open the book to almost any page to find useful ideas. The everyday nature of the photos, many by Phil Langdon himself, as well as the maps and sketches, reflect the concept of making accessible pathways and places for all of us. Within Walking Distance is a book for everyone and keeps alive the discussion of how we can make our environment healthier and happier. Jim

Hotaling, architect-planner (ret.) Saranac Lake, NY

Phil Langdon does a remarkable job in not only talking about the design elements that make for a vibrant walkable neighborhood for all but also the invaluable contributions of community organizing and how those efforts bring about change and improvements. With sharp insight, Phil describes how walkable communities – by physically linking us to others – bring to mind the purposes that enrich and deepen our lives. He is astute at incorporating the points of view of urban planners, community residents, and historians to expand his storytelling. Within Walking Distance is an exceptional contribution to the catalog of literature regarding community, urbanism and neighborhood. Dottie Jeffries

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