

# DESIGNING



Photo by Larry Rippel

## A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

*Residents of pedestrian-friendly and bike-friendly neighborhoods are, indeed, more likely to walk and bike. And not just for exercise, but also to get to work, to school, to the store and to the homes of family and friends.*

**Pittsburgh Hill District Healthy Community Design: A Case Study**  
a project of the Built Environment and Public Health Sub-Committee  
Childhood Obesity Regional Strategy Committee

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# OVERVIEW

**It's no secret that Americans are getting fatter and fatter, despite constant reminders to eat less and exercise more. And over the past two decades, many of us have tried to change individual behaviors, with diets, vows and workout schemes.**

Now there's a new angle: City planners and public health workers have recognized that individuals' physical environments — in other words, the layout or "built environment" of their neighborhoods — can affect how much exercise people are fitting in to their daily lives.

Residents of pedestrian-friendly and bike-friendly neighborhoods are, indeed, more likely to walk and bike. And not just for recreation and exercise, but to get things done: Their walking and biking constitutes "active transportation," and gets them to work, to stores or to the homes of friends and family.

What does a "walkable neighborhood" look like? Broadly, neighborhoods that follow traditional, pre-World War II layouts are more walkable. These neighborhoods typically have sidewalks, grid-pattern streets, safe street crossings, and destinations (like stores, parks and transit) within a half-mile from home.

On the other hand, the suburban style of development that followed World War II assumed driving for most — if not all — trips. This assumption blatantly overlooked kids, elders, people with disabilities and those who can't afford cars — and it contributed to sedentary lifestyles.

How can one's own neighborhood be made more walkable? Researchers have observed and documented several discrete characteristics, detailed below. Many of these features can be built into new developments, as well as revived in older communities.

Pittsburgh's Hill District, a classic inner city neighborhood, is in several ways the story of urban America. Its evolution toward healthy community design begs case analysis. First settled in the mid-1700s, the Hill was designed (by default) as a traditional neighborhood. However, the trends of the 20th century — many driven, pun intended, by the automobile — have frayed its urban fabric. Still, the Hill has an incredible history, worthy of national recognition, and the Hill's residents and supporters are persistent in their creative ideas for community rejuvenation.



Photo by Mary Ann Eubanks

*Miller Elementary fifth graders finishing a community-design activity sponsored by Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation. (1998)*

## CURRENT PROFILE

Over two-thirds of American adults are overweight and one-third are obese.<sup>1</sup> With grown-ups setting this kind of example, is it any wonder that kids are also overweight? Although they aren't as fat as adults, health advocates are concerned that early exposure to this risk factor could lead to adulthood obesity and its attendant health problems. At mid-century, about 5 percent of kids were overweight; now, nearly 20 percent are.<sup>2</sup>

Though obesity and overweight affect every part of American society, the obesity epidemic is having a greater impact on ethnic minorities and lower-income groups. This disparity affects adults and children alike. For instance, African American and Hispanic children 6-11 years old are nearly twice as likely as Caucasian children to be overweight.

Obesity is a genuine health concern. An analysis by A Lewin Group health care cost analysis demonstrates by condition the costs that may be directly attributable to obesity. For instance 30 percent of heart disease costs, and 45 percent of the cost to treat gallbladder disease, to name just two examples.<sup>3</sup> Some of these conditions, which were once thought to only afflict adults, are beginning to surface among overweight youth, especially type 2 (a.k.a. "adult-onset") diabetes.<sup>4</sup>

Eating too much is a problem, but fat also comes from calories not burned off. Fortunately, no showy athletic feats are necessary to help control weight and promote health – just 30 minutes of moderate physical activity each day for adults, and 60 minutes of fun, vigorous activity for kids. Unfortunately, only half of American children reportedly get that much exercise.<sup>5</sup>

What's more, kids and adults are not only sitting on the couch – they're also sitting in cars. At the same time as Americans have been gaining weight, opportunities for what could be called "incidental exercise" – things that fit into everyday life like walking, biking and active play — have vanished, thanks to auto-oriented community design.

## THE HISTORY OF CAR COUNTRY

### How we went from typhoid to traffic

One hundred years ago, both the public health and city planning professions were growing up in the same neighborhood – the crowded immigrant tenements of unregulated, industrial America, from the 19th Century to the first few decades of the 20th.<sup>6</sup>

Undoubtedly compact and walkable, these neighborhoods were also hazardous. There was real danger from diseases like

tuberculosis, typhoid fever and cholera, which were spread through overcrowded housing, polluted and insufficient drinking and cleaning water and a lack of sanitary-sewer facilities.<sup>7</sup> Pittsburgh, then a major industrial center and immigrant magnet, epitomized this moment. One of the nation's worst communicable-disease outbreaks happened here in 1849 and is still remembered today in Cholera Day mass at St. Adalbert's Church on the South Side.<sup>8</sup>

Reformers toiled to bring light, air and clean water to the city's crowded industrial quarters, partly through planning efforts that would reduce overcrowding and introduce sanitation infrastructure. From this dire public need grew both the public-health profession and urban planning. However, the two fields soon diverged. With the advent of germ theory, public health began targeting specific pathologies, shifting focus from overall sanguine living conditions.<sup>9</sup>

Planning, meanwhile, was diverted after WWII by two trends: Keeping up with the nation's automobile infatuation as well as modern architecture's disinterest in street life and traditional neighborhood design.<sup>10</sup> By combining drivers' demands for "free-flowing" traffic with the idealized aesthetic of uncluttered spaces, mid-century America seemed to be moving into the future. However, increasing mobility in cars meant decreasing mobility on foot – which meant less everyday exercise. Further, these trends led to a profound structural change: As urban land was increasingly occupied by freeways, wider roads and parking lots, hardly anywhere you would want to go remained close enough to reach by foot.

### Nowhere to Run To (or Walk To), Baby

Once, it seemed natural to walk to the corner store for milk – now, there may be no such store within walking distance. Kids often have no reasonable walking route to school. In commuting to work, adults often don't walk to a train station or bus stop, let alone all the way to their jobs.

#### *Streets that aren't interconnected*

#### *discourage pedestrians, who want to*

#### *walk the most direct route.*

Suburban-style development may have taken off in the 1950s, but it's decidedly still with us, so much so that it's gotten its own name: "sprawl." Grant Ervin, local policy director for the smart-growth-promoting nonprofit 10,000 Friends, describes the dilemma of his childhood friend:

"My friend John lives in Ross Township, in a townhome on a cul de sac development, and he loves Sheetz MTO sandwiches" — the "Made-To-Order" meals from the Sheetz convenience chain. "There's a Sheetz a quarter-mile from his house, but he has to drive because, in his view, he can't walk. There are no sidewalks, and no connectivity."<sup>11</sup>

It doesn't take a geographer to conclude that neighborhood-based, "incidental" exercise is a challenge in the sprawl. Obstacles thwart the would-be walker at every step:

- There are no sidewalks. If you walk, you walk in the road.
- Houses and destinations are spread far apart, not built compactly. By the time you complete a quick 15-minute walk, you might've only made it to the access road.
- Uses are not integrated. Offices, shopping and residential areas are deliberately kept separate, adding to the distances between them. This, in turn, increases their parking needs, so a pedestrian's getting into a store is likely to include a tedious march across a parking field.
- Streets loop off from high-volume arterial roads, rather than connecting to each other in a grid-like pattern. This frustrates and discourages pedestrians, who have a natural impulse to walk in the most direct route.
- These high-volume arterials handle nearly all of an area's through traffic, at high speeds. Therefore, the main roads are often unpleasant for pedestrians, with speeding traffic, heavy pollution, no sidewalks, few crosswalks, road-raging drivers, and multiple, wide, hard-to-cross lanes of travel. Sometimes, pedestrians and bicycles are actually prohibited.
- Because everyone perceives that driving is the "normal," rational mode of transportation, pedestrians are treated as aberrations, if they're seen at all.<sup>12</sup>

This may offer a challenge to a true adventurer: If John actually did undertake such an adventurous journey for a Sheetz MTO, he'd likely raise his heart rate! Still, most people don't want their sandwich run to be a personal version of reality TV, i.e., *Suburban Survivor*.

People's intuitive sense that this design layout is unhealthy was vindicated in a 2004 study by Lawrence D. Frank of the University of British Columbia. Tracking 10,500 Atlanta-area residents, Frank and his study team found that every half-hour in a car translates into a 3 percent greater chance of being obese. An average white man living in a compact community with nearby shops and services can be predicted to weigh 10 pounds less than a similar white man living in a low-density, residential-only cul-de-sac subdivision.<sup>13</sup>

## The Suburban City

The worst part about the auto-dominated development style is that people who never left their traditional, once-dense, once-compact city neighborhoods suffered diminished walking, biking and playing options, too.

Suburban-style design became so pervasive that it found its way into cities, too, and examples of it can be spotted in almost every urban neighborhood, especially those that were "renewed" in the 1950s-80s. Suburban development features diminish a street's human vitality in several ways, but the two that most pertain to physical activity are:

- a) Barriers: Large traffic-moving roads are unwelcoming to pedestrians and cyclists, creating barriers to their movement. To bring suburban commuters downtown, huge highways were bored through urban areas (I-279 North in Pittsburgh is an archetypal example), taking urban properties and segmenting the established "urban habitat." Also, to accommodate this traffic, surface streets were widened or made one-way, making them less safe and pleasant for cyclists and pedestrians, further hindering movement.
- b) Distances: Wide roads, parking lots, and large institutions with no street-level interactions take up space that could include useful, walkable destinations. In some cases, ambitious "Urban Renewal" projects — like the Civic Arena in the Hill and Allegheny Center Mall on the North Side — created these large-scale spaces. These and other projects were attempts to make the city compete with the suburbs. Usually, the city couldn't out-'burb' the 'burbs.

Where the city has been misunderstood and sections demolished, a downward spiral of undesirability and even abandonment sometimes occurs. In *Root Shock*, Mindy Fullilove coined a shorthand phrase for this phenomenon that suggests its community-health implications: "contagious housing destruction."<sup>14</sup>

In addition, safety from crime is sometimes cited as a reason for not walking in the city. Some areas do have crime problems, but crime is as likely due to emptiness as crowds. Failing to draw sufficient law-abiding pedestrians to an area reduces the witnessing "eyes on the street."<sup>15</sup> After all, what's scarier after dark, a desolate parking lot or a street filled with people and commerce? Even if that commerce is poor and shabby by some standards.

Disinvestment in the urban core isn't only bad for central neighborhoods. The cost of constantly building new sprawl and neglecting older communities undermines the region as a whole. Although the economic blow of sprawl doesn't have

a direct health or obesity impact, certainly dissipating our economic advantages can't put us in the best position to improve our public health. The economic inefficiency of sprawl was described at length in a 2003 Brookings Institute report, "Back to Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania."

Returning to health concerns, the poorest residents in metro areas are often still living in traditional neighborhoods – neighborhoods that were once lively and walkable, if sometimes careworn. Yet mid-century auto-oriented development trends drained many of the walkable destinations from these places, making their street grids mere skeletons of their former hearty selves.<sup>16</sup>

## A LONG WALK HOME

### Back to Neighborhood Basics: Traditional neighborhood design

There's a new collaborative task for planners and health care providers. Cholera is under control, but our waistlines are not. The challenge is now to prevent the chronic diseases associated with inactivity and obesity, conditions that affect nearly every American family.

Recently, a new strategy has emerged among health advocates: Make a neighborhood's layout more conducive to walking, and it might be easier to get individuals to exercise.

The connection between community design and health has emerged at the same time as a revival of traditional neighborhood styles among urban planners, architects and developers. New Urbanism, sometimes called neotraditional design (i.e., traditional neighborhood shape, not exclusively traditional buildings), is a movement seeking to address the two biggest drawbacks of American suburbia: massive traffic congestion, which leads to long commuting times, and profligate land consumption, which has led to environmental and social problems in metro areas.

The New Urbanists' method is to reintroduce design features that would support more active transportation, as were found in pre-World War II neighborhoods:

- sidewalks,
- short blocks and interconnected streets so pedestrians can take the most efficient route
- lively street life and worthwhile destinations that are either useful or fun, ideally both,



Photo by Richard Feder, Port Authority

*When the Port Authority transit agency extended the East Busway along the historic Pennsylvania Railroad corridor to Swissvale, they cooperated with borough officials to simultaneously create a "linear park" along the rapid-transit line.*

- placing garages and utilities in alleys,
- integrated land uses (residential and small commercial nearby),
- transportation planning,
- pedestrian and transit accessibility, and
- nearby parks and recreation.

Though some conventional suburban housing developers were skeptical, sales have been strong. Polls conducted by the Congress for New Urbanism identified unmet demand for more such neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup> The revival has also contributed to a renewed appreciation of the surviving "urbanist" features in old city neighborhoods.

Much has been written about the efficiency, ecology and social benefits of compact, traditional neighborhood design. However, the health benefits are just beginning to be documented in the planning literature.

Says Grant Ervin of 10,000 Friends, "We could see obesity as a byproduct of poor land use and poor neighborhood design. Investment in Pennsylvania's older communities is a solution to the obesity epidemic. The ways communities were constructed 100-200 years ago, even 50 years ago, are more conducive to walking and biking than today's communities."

Indeed, planning researchers have been able to consistently demonstrate that pedestrian-friendly design clearly leads to more active transportation among residents. The link between that and lower obesity rates is less pronounced, but often



Photo by David Wohlwill, Port Authority

*Squirrel Hill's dense "main street" business district on Forbes Avenue features wide sidewalks, a variety of businesses and upper-story apartments and offices.*

statistically significant. (Still, a walker who's overweight will likely be healthier than an overweight non-walker will.)<sup>18</sup>

Even controlling for self-selection (i.e., that pro-walking people purposely move to compact neighborhoods), walkable neighborhoods were found to promote more active transportation.<sup>19</sup>

Supporting health through design is most urgent in older, low- and moderate-income neighborhoods. As has been noted, obesity has hit more people among low-income groups, African Americans and Hispanics, and those with less education, prompting several researchers to suggest that low-income areas receive priority for design and health interventions.

Every benefit that increasing walkability may cause for the general population takes on a greater importance when considering working-class and poor segments of the population. First, walking is the predominant form of exercise in low-income groups.<sup>20</sup> It's possible that without walking opportunities, community members who don't have active jobs may be sedentary. Second, the importance of being able to get exercise "incidentally" may be even more important for the working poor, who must often work multiple jobs at unpredictable hours, and for single parents, parenting grandparents and elders' caretakers, who have time-consuming family responsibilities.

Still, even when individuals live in a compact, "walkable" environment and are indeed active, they may not report much "exercise walking." They may or may not be inactive. They might walk very little because there are few destinations to walk to. However, surveys typically ask about "recreational" activity and may underestimate active transportation and the physical demands of tiring jobs, notes researcher Kristen Day.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Day argues that better understanding is needed to sort

out which of many possible factors — for example, food quality and stress, to name only two — might account for the disparity.

## CREATING WORTHWHILE WALKS

**How can a neighborhood — old or new — be enhanced to make it more walker-friendly, cyclist-friendly, and kid-friendly?**

### Design

As noted above, the most recognizable hallmarks of walkable urban design are:

- sidewalks,
- short blocks and interconnected streets so pedestrians can take a quick, efficient route
- lively street life and worthwhile destinations that are either useful or fun, ideally both
- placing garages and utilities in alleys,
- integrated land uses (residential, commercial and public/recreational close by),
- transportation planning,
- pedestrian and transit accessibility, and
- nearby parks and recreation.

Also as noted, some of the obstacles in contemporary suburban design concern the wide distances, or lack of compactness, that make "calorie-driven transportation" impractical.



Photo by David Wohlwill, Port Authority

*The Negley Avenue station of Pittsburgh's East Busway, a rapid-transit link through the city's eastern neighborhoods and suburbs.*

Since a mile's separation from a home to, say, a store, can't be made shorter, the job of urban planners and developers is to introduce additional residences or public/commercial destinations where needed. Although some new development is in the New Urbanist style, "in-fill" — a.k.a., filling in — development offers a chance to fit something fresh into a unique, authentic setting. In traditional neighborhoods, top priority is to preserve the native compactness.

Here are some ways this can be done:

- **Transit-oriented development.** Concentrate businesses and dense housing around rail stations and major bus stops. In Pittsburgh, the Eastside development — which began with the construction of Whole Foods, and will include Borders, Starbucks, Walgreen's and other businesses — has been built next to the Highland Avenue East Busway stop in East Liberty and the stops of several major bus lines.
- **In-fill housing.** One of many examples is a plan in the works for the Middle Hill by Macedonia Church, designed by Perkins Eastman.
- **Avoid extensive surface parking lots.** Parking is best placed on the compact business streets themselves, in small lots and in parking structures, so valuable land isn't wasted.
- **Shared uses.** The time-honored tradition of retail below and apartments and offices above is a great way to integrate uses. On a more grandiose scale, Pittsburgh's South Side Works — a redevelopment of the former J&L steel plant on the South Side — has achieved valuable mixed uses. The 123-acre redevelopment contains shops large and small, restaurants, a movie theater and many new townhouses and apartments. The design mirrors the old street grid, with public streets continuing into the development from the surrounding neighborhood. Parking is provided along the street and in a parking garage; South Side Works is also served by several frequent bus routes and a bike/ped riverside trail.

The other limit on bike and pedestrian access is, generally, things that get in the way — in other words, barriers. Some improvements that reduce barriers are:

- **Dedicated bike paths or on-street bike lanes.** These should be essential in any new development, but in older neighborhoods,



*Where a street isn't wide enough for dedicated bike lanes, pavement markings sometimes nicknamed "sharrows" formally indicate a bike route and shared-use lane.*

civil engineering standards say that most of the streets are too narrow. Recently, some municipalities (Portland, for one) have been testing "shared use" roadbed markings. The City of Pittsburgh is currently considering placing shared-use marking through the Bloomfield business district on Liberty Avenue.

- **Pedestrian and crossing improvements.** Opportunities for improvement on this front are vast. Many roads, particularly in suburban areas, don't have crosswalks, walk signs, or even sidewalks. The next step is to make sure that sidewalks are maintained and that motorists respect the "walk" signs and yield when turning. There are even nicer improvements available. In Oakland, for instance, a busy university, hospital and residential neighborhood, the Oakland Transportation Management Association (OTMA) has been awarded funding to increase the level of pedestrian service and amenities at 11 busy intersections on Forbes and Fifth avenues, including new "Pedestrian Interval Signals." The new signals work like this: After cross-traffic stops, the "walk" signal turns on before parallel traffic gets the green. This provides pedestrians with a three-second head-start into the intersection. This makes walkers more visible to motorists, hopefully making them less likely to cut pedestrians off when turning.
- **Mitigating freeway impacts.** Among the worst pedestrian barriers are limited-access highways that cut through urban areas. Ample pedestrian bridges and well-lit and maintained underpasses can reduce their damage somewhat.

One significant barrier is heavy traffic itself. Several traffic-calming techniques can be employed:

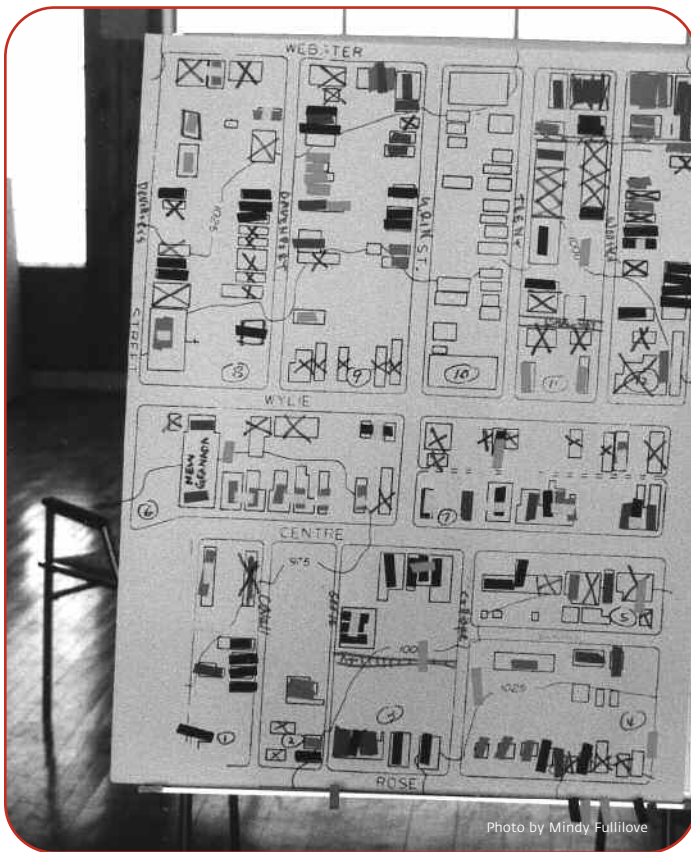
- Narrower streets and two-way streets prompt motorists to drive more carefully (i.e., slowly). In East Liberty, a four-lane, counterclockwise, one-mile-wide traffic loop (built in that neighborhood's 1960s urban redevelopment project) is being slowly reintegrated into the pre-redevelopment street grid and re-opened to two-way traffic.
- Anything that creates "sides" to a busy road seems to cause drivers to slow down: shade trees along the street, buildings that are close to the street, a row of parallel parking.<sup>22</sup>
- "Bulb outs" to make wide curves into sharper right angles.<sup>23</sup> This has recently been done with success at the corner of Forbes and Bigelow in Oakland.

In discussing ways to create walkable neighborhoods, it's worth noting that Pittsburgh enjoys more functioning, walkable neighborhoods than many mid-sized cities, especially those in the booming-for-now Sun Belt. These are examples of traditional

design that have survived. Preserving and reviving these city neighborhoods and riverside towns is more efficient than reinventing the wheel — and it provides rich historical, cultural and social benefits. When asked about local transit-oriented developments, Port Authority lead planner David Wohlwill noted that most of the city's neighborhoods were built to be "transit-oriented" — to streetcars, mostly — before that term became a buzzword. "The Pittsburgh region already has many of the types of communities which other areas in the country are trying to create from scratch," he wrote.<sup>24</sup>

This is a critical competitive advantage for Pittsburgh, as the Brookings Institute's "Back to Prosperity" study pointed out. A new slogan might be: Pittsburgh — so old-fashioned it's ahead of its time.

## Public Participation



Possibly the most important part of developing pedestrian-friendly, bike-friendly and kid-friendly neighborhoods will be public participation. Pedestrian and bike infrastructure that works depends on the micro-geographical, first-hand knowledge that only residents — especially resident walkers and bikers — can provide.

Such knowledge can be gained by directly interacting with and observing individuals "enacting" a neighborhood's street life. Structured community-design workshops (or "charettes") can be another way to gain information and to allow citizens to participate directly in the design process. Such techniques were used in the Hill District's Centre Food and Find the Rivers! projects, described below.

Likewise, if the target user group includes children — and as children are mandatory walkers and cyclists, it should — methods to solicit kids' and teens' input should be developed (or at least improvised!). Currently, the Hill House is working on a proposal to fund a new playground and natural space, designed, in part, by children themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, active, participatory projects can get individuals and families involved where "boring" meetings fail. Community gardens, nature/ecology programs, recreational sports leagues and teen-build home remodeling training are a few possibilities. Volunteers could also get exercise by actually assisting in the planning and design process, by mapping their neighborhood, inventorying housing and collecting other geographical data.

## Policy

Obviously, designers and preservationists will find developing and reviving pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods much easier if they have government support.

**Funding.** It's important that urban planning advocates, public-health advocates and smart growth/sustainability advocates be organized (along with the public) to support funding decisions that align with "walkable neighborhoods" goals, such as the design intervention and public-participation activities described above. Public transit funding must also be maintained. More people in cars and fewer in buses and trains would likely lead to more demands for wider roads, more parking and more urban freeways.

Meanwhile, advocates will have to oppose valuable public dollars being spent on projects that undermine walkability and smart-growth goals. In a pattern of public-private collusion excellently described in *The Power Broker*, the exhaustive biography of New York's "master builder" Robert Moses, many private powers-that-be are likely to be invested — perhaps literally — in enormous public projects that translate into contracts (construction, engineering, design, legal work, bond issues) for their companies.<sup>26</sup> While these behind-the-scenes alliances may be unstoppable, the public can still demand that these lucrative contracts be a part of smart-growth, not sprawl, projects.

Locally, smart-growth organization Sustainable Pittsburgh is promoting and gathering signatures of support for their Transportation Funding Initiative, which forwards an agenda supporting transit and fixing old roads in established communities before building new roads to undeveloped areas.

**Big-picture planning and zoning.** Finally, high-quality “big picture” plans and policy are needed in government.

Suburban-era zoning actually prohibited traditional urban design for many years, even in cities that were literally made of traditional design and little else. In Pittsburgh, the city had been working with a 1958 code, built on suburban-style goals. However, nearly every current use and every desired renovation was “nonconforming.” Thus, hours of staff and citizen time were wasted in long zoning hearings. The new code recognizes Pittsburgh’s indigenous traditional design and encourages multi-use, dense neighborhoods. It also reduces parking requirements in “main street” business districts, further supporting density.<sup>27</sup> This, in turn, supports vibrant,

pedestrian-friendly street life.

Unlike the City of Pittsburgh, the outlying areas of Allegheny County don’t have 250 years of brick-solid, somewhat immovable settlement to make a claim on any non-sprawl reality. To the contrary, Allegheny County is consuming undeveloped land gluttonously, despite a stagnant population.<sup>28</sup> If the trend continues, the cul de sacs will be leapfrogging into neighboring counties, taking their tax base with them, but continuing to drive on — and demand larger — county roads. To manage this trend, the County has begun work on a comprehensive plan. The planning consultants, who have named the plan “Allegheny Places,” solicit residents’ stories about their “favorite place,” and present five comprehensible development scenarios that citizens can mix-and-match or vote on.<sup>29</sup> Such plans commit to paper the public priorities for what type of development should go where.

While it’s true that planning hasn’t always prevented auto-oriented development, it’s also true that, without official planning,

## HILL DISTRICT CASE STUDY

### Profile and History

Pittsburgh is a city of hills — Polish Hill, Spring Hill, Troy Hill, Observatory Hill and Squirrel Hill, to name a few. But only one place is “The Hill.” The Hill is so historically and geographically central to Pittsburgh, that it doesn’t need to say which hill.

As Pittsburgh grew eastward from its original downtown, the Hill was the first height scaled — as early as the 1780s — to escape the smoke of the town’s riverboats and early industries. By 1830, about 500 African Americans had settled in a part of the Lower Hill then called Arthursville, where they provided a stop on the Underground Railroad.<sup>30</sup>

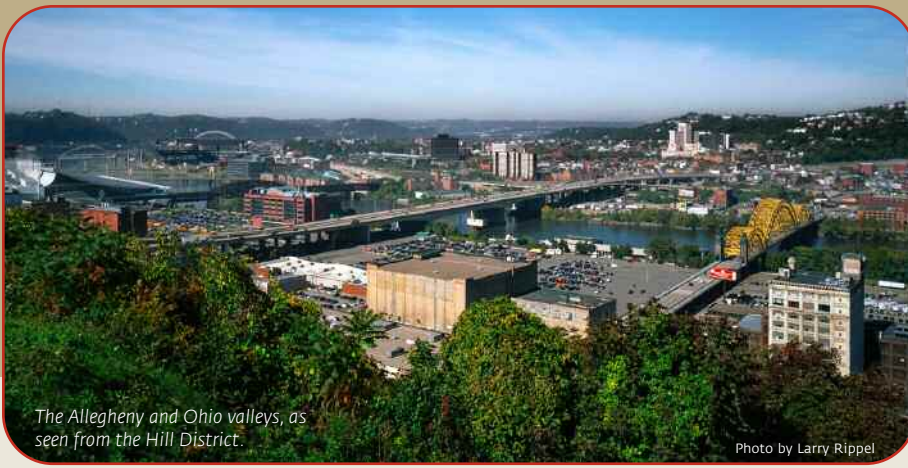
The Hill soon became an immigrant melting pot, at times home to representatives of 25 nationalities, including Italians, Syrians, Greeks and Poles, as well as sizable Jewish populations and thousands of African Americans who came north during the Great Migration era.<sup>31</sup> From about 1930-50, the Hill nurtured a storied and vibrant jazz scene. The era’s biggest names stopped in Pittsburgh to play with the locals, while the city produced notable jazz talent of its own, like Art Blakey, Mary Lou Williams, Earl Hines, Billy Strayhorn and others.

The end of World War II saw an infusion of federal money into America’s cities with the intent of modernizing urban America and addressing deteriorated tenement conditions with “urban

renewal” programs. But the auto-oriented redevelopment went too far in rejecting traditional community forms — and not far enough in respecting traditional communities. In 1956, “urban renewal” demolition began on 1,300 homes and business — 95 acres — in the Lower Hill, to be replaced by the Civic Arena. Over 8,000 people were displaced, including 1,239 black families and 312 white families.<sup>32</sup>

Former Pittsburgh City Councilor Sala Udin, who was a boy when his own family was displaced from the Lower Hill, later described the sweeping action as an “amputation.”<sup>33</sup> The massive demolition was the beginning of a population loss that took the Hill from about 50,000 people in 1940 to just 11,822 today. As one of the country’s earliest federally funded urban-renewal projects, few protections and little compensation were afforded residents. (More protections were later awarded to other displaced citizens by the courts.) Many couldn’t purchase or rent homes similar to those they lost; 35 percent went to the new public housing developments.<sup>34</sup>

However, the Hill has more buying power than it’s usually credited with. A Carnegie Mellon study finds that the Hill District market, still relatively dense, spends \$45.8 million annually on retail goods and \$25.2 million on grocery store goods. In fact, the Hill’s 15219 ZIP code ranks 25th of nearly 375 ZIP Codes in metro Pittsburgh in expenditures per square mile.<sup>35</sup>



The Allegheny and Ohio valleys, as seen from the Hill District.

Photo by Larry Rippel

*Pittsburgh is a city of hills. But only one place is "The Hill." As Pittsburgh grew eastward from its original downtown, the Hill was the first height scaled.*

The Hill remains a historic example of a classic urban neighborhood. And there's still vibrant community life, too. Residents shout greetings to each other across Centre Avenue at midday, happy to slow traffic a little for sociability, and young people pause to chat with elderly ladies waiting for the bus.

Despite the challenges of recent decades, the Hill's residents and supporters are persistent in putting forward creative ideas for rejuvenating their community.

### Health is one of the Hill's challenges

One of the Hill's challenges is health. As in many American neighborhoods, especially communities with a high proportion of low-income and African-American residents, overweight and obesity is an all-too-common health threat.

To get more adults and kids walking and biking in the Hill, activists are working to make the built environment walkable, attractive, convenient and safe. Also, efforts can be made that will build individuals' capacity for being active, like the "Don't Sit Still on the Hill" walking promotion and the planned expansion of the Healthy Black Families project of the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Minority Health.

### Ingredients for a more "walkable" Hill:

**Compact destinations, population density and interesting street life.** Retail, service, employment, recreational and natural destinations within walking distance encourage residents to walk. Kids may be enticed by parks and playgrounds, while adults may be more attracted to business destinations. One exciting, all-ages destination is the planned brand-new building for the Hill's branch of the Carnegie Library. Construction is hoped to begin in late 2006 on the site at the corner of Kirkpatrick and Centre.<sup>36</sup>

Even compact housing creates some potentially walkable destinations, as people come and go from their homes and visit one another, while also creating street life by putting more people around, period.

Two of the recent housing redevelopments in the Hill have helped stabilize and even increase the population. In the 1990s, the Crawford Square mixed-income development went up on land that had been intended for housing in the old Civic Arena plan but had sat idle as surface parking for decades.<sup>37</sup> Another recent project was the redevelopment of the **Bedford Dwellings** public housing project. What's noteworthy about Bedford is that the tenants were able to involve themselves effectively in the project and successfully demand that new housing be built nearby before they were displaced in renewal efforts, thus maintaining their community intact, in the Hill.<sup>38</sup> A smaller, but also noteworthy, project is the planned **Louis Mason Jr.** apartment building at Elmore Street and Wylie Avenue, whose design features elements that honor the Hill's jazz history. The building will also include retail space.<sup>39</sup>

**Safety.** Some parts of the Hill have real or perceived crime problems. And as observers of urban life have long noted, perceived crime will inhibit pedestrians (especially children) as much as actual crime.

***Because the only everyday food sources in the Hill are convenience stores, Hill residents either have to spend time and money to travel across town or make do with snack foods.***

Other parts – especially Fifth and Forbes avenues in Uptown (also called the Bluff or SoHo) – are inundated with traffic, noise and pollution on crosstown thoroughfares.

**Connectivity.** Though its traditional grid connects streets in the Lower, Middle and Upper Hill sections, large thoroughfares on the Hill's borders create barriers between the Hill and other neighborhoods. These roads need pedestrian-friendly interventions.

Also, some of the mid-century housing projects were built with looping streets that connect poorly to the main street

grid, which is particularly isolating for non-driving residents, including children and the elderly.

**Community planning.** Thorough, genuine community involvement in neighborhood planning is desirable anywhere, but it's especially important in the Hill. First, because residents have the firsthand, 24-7 knowledge necessary to inform the best decisions.

Second, successful planning efforts must overcome distrust created by the still-painful Civic Arena renewal project, as well as by later well-intentioned but unsuccessful efforts. As Terri Baltimore, Director of Arts and Neighborhood Development at Hill House, put it, "Designers, planners, architects have the potential — for good or ill — to affect people's lives," and the Hill wants designers "to come with respect, not 'Oh, this is such a poor neighborhood.'"

Third, when planning for walking, biking or outdoor play, the fine-grained lived experience of being a pedestrian, cyclist or kid (sometimes all three) provides a level of nuanced detail unbeatable by mere maps and statistics. There's a lot that's missed from a car.

Besides the projects already mentioned, several efforts that incorporate many of these touchstones are either underway or in the planning stages:

**Maphub** ([www.maphub.org](http://www.maphub.org)), a project based at Carnegie Mellon University, combines computer-based mapping with the interactive features of a community message board. Users can pick out a point on the map and mark it with a small, pop-up "speech bubble" that provides additional information or commentary about that point. For the "asset mapping" project underway in the Hill, for instance, users might mark a business, school, farm stand or historic site.

**Centre Food Project** is an interdisciplinary proposal for a community-oriented, nonprofit or cooperative small supermarket for the Hill District. Because the only food sources in the Hill are convenience stores, Hill residents either have to spend time and money to travel across town or make do with snack foods. Centre Food grew out of student Renee Roy's work at Carnegie Mellon School of Architecture's Urban Lab. In 2005, the proposal won a J.P. Morgan Community Development grant of \$25,000 for the Hill House to continue project planning. Centre Food proposes a two-story, 46,000 square foot mixed-use building at Centre Avenue and Heldman Street that would contain food retail, a prepared-foods café and rentable office/community programming space on the upper story. The proposal also includes analysis demonstrating Centre Food's financial viability.<sup>40</sup>

**Find the Rivers!** ([www.findtherivers.org](http://www.findtherivers.org)) uses community participation and urban/landscape design to radically suggest that there's economic and recreational development potential



*Hill District community members working on the "Community Burn Index" exercise, part of the research for Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It by Mindy Fullilove.*

in the Hill District's ecological resources. Radically, because, as a landlocked neighborhood with no regional parks, some would assume that the Hill had no ecological resources.

One of the project's most striking accomplishments was simple: to recognize and praise the Hill's incredible views of the Allegheny River, the Monongahela River, Downtown and the Strip, as well as the resource contained in the small but lush woodlands on the neighborhood's hillsides. When the Penn Incline at 17th Street ran down from Bedford Avenue to the Strip, the Allegheny view was seen constantly; Find the Rivers! suggests a new, modern funicular and an accompanying scenic river trail along the ridge.

Another Find the Rivers! proposal is a Kirkpatrick Avenue greenway and park that would connect the Hill to the Monongahela River and also up to the Allegheny ridge. Currently, the Kirkpatrick Park portion of the proposal has received funding for a detailed feasibility study. Co-convened by Baltimore and Denys Candy of the Community Partners Institute, Find the Rivers' core partnership includes the Hill District Consensus Group, Hill House Association, the Riverlife Task Force and the Carnegie Mellon University School of Architecture's Urban Laboratory.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, we'll leave the world of planning and proposals and see how walking affects community, and how community can affect a walker, in this street-level testimonial from Terri Baltimore<sup>42</sup>: "Three years ago, I lost 60 pounds, just walking up and down the hills, singing really loud. Once you build up your strength, the hills build up your strength even more. I'd walk to the Centre Avenue Y and back, and my Friday ritual was to walk from the Hill to East Liberty.

"I'd see the mailman on Wylie, and kids would recognize me. When I didn't walk, people were like, 'Where were you?' It was a way of building community."

# Footnotes

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- <sup>15</sup> A now-famous phrase first coined by Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. First published by Random House, 1961; Vintage Books edition, 1992.
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- <sup>18</sup> Scott Doyle, Alexia Kelly-Schwartz, Mark Schlossberg and Jean Stockard, "Active Community Environments and Health: The Relationship of Walkable and Safe Communities to Individual Health," also, Lawrence D. Frank, James F. Sallis, Terry L. Conway, James E. Chapman, Brian E. Saelens and William Bachman. "Many Pathways from Land Use to Health: Associations between Neighborhood Walkability and Active Transportation, Body Mass Index and Air Quality," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 72:1, Winter 2006.
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