

## 7 Simple Ways to Make Every City Friendlier to Pedestrians

By [Jordan Golson](#)

San Jose is expected to grow faster than any city in the Bay Area in the next few decades. The local government is [working to meet that demand](#) with mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. To help it out, the non-profit San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) wrote a 67-page report looking at building and design techniques the city should encourage developers to use to better promote walkability—a fancy term that basically translates to *pedestrian friendliness*—and better use of mixed-use spaces.

For those who don't have the time and inclination to read through dozens of pages of case studies and design advice aimed at policymakers and architects, SPUR has drilled the piece down to seven principles that make for better urban design.

It's difficult to retrofit existing cities and suburbs if redevelopment projects don't present an opportunity to change up the infrastructure, but small-scale interventions can make a difference. "There are ways to get better. You don't have to go right from suburbia to Manhattan in one fell swoop," says Benjamin Grant, an urban design program manager at SPUR who helped write the guidelines. "There are steps you can take to improve the walkability of the environment in modest ways that have a real impact on the ground."

So here's what cities should be doing to make public spaces healthier and more navigable for their two-legged residents.

### 1. Create fine-grained pedestrian circulation

A quarter mile walk across a gigantic big-box store parking lot may seem daunting, but if that walk is instead down a sidewalk lined with shops and cafes, it becomes a much nicer idea. It's all about perception of distance. Cities should avoid taking up entire blocks with massive, impenetrable edifices, and partition streets into smaller chunks that feel easier to walk.

### 2. Orient buildings to streets

Rather than building a grocery store back from the sidewalk with a huge parking lot in front of it, the report suggests locating the main entrance right on the sidewalk, encouraging pedestrians to step in. Putting buildings on the street "creates a kind of coziness and sense of enclosure," Grant says. "It's a classic attribute of traditional, walkable cities where the streets are all lined with buildings." We humans tend not to feel comfortable in environments where we're exposed on all sides, Grant says, a residual instinct to watch for predators. Enclosed spaces, like a traditional European town square, make for more comfortable environments.

### **3. Organize uses to support public activity**

The best cities have bustling centers where people want to spend time. Grant says it's important to find a good balance between active spaces and retail outlets like an outdoor cafe or a grocery store, without setting aside too much square footage for selling stuff. "The world is full of empty ground-floor retail space," he says. A gym, outdoor climbing wall, or community meeting space can do a lot more to bring an area to life.

### **4. Place parking behind or below buildings**

If you put a building behind a parking lot, the pedestrian feels like a second-class citizen. So the report strongly recommends putting parking lots underground or behind a building. "There is no bigger driver of form in a suburban environment than parking," Grant says. How a developer treats where vehicles are stored (remember all those drivers become pedestrians when they step out of their cars) can do more for walkability than anything else. A large underground parking lot can deliver a more vibrant and functional walking community—if it's done right. Finding the right balance for parking across multiple use cases (commercial, office, residential) is tough to perfect. It also requires more money to build, and careful planning to ensure that entrances and exits for cars and pedestrians are logical and convenient.

### **5. Address the human scale with building and landscape details**

Buildings may loom over pedestrians, but effective signage and entrances can bring things back to the human scale. Grant says the Empire State Building is a good example of a massive structure that's well designed for ground level pedestrians. No matter how high a building is, frontage with street trees and small-scale signage and entrances can make a huge difference.

### **6. Provide clear, continuous pedestrian access**

Pedestrians should have easy ways to move through plazas, parks, restricted-access delivery streets, and other places cars can't go. Clear signage explaining how to navigate around a complex is important, especially for tourist-heavy areas.

### **7. Build complete streets**

"In the last 80 years," Grant says, "we have stripped our streets of every function except the movement of vehicles." Now, cities are looking to accommodate and encourage other uses. The premise is called [complete streets](#): Urban development that focuses on all the functions a street can serve as a social and commercial space, as well as a way to get around for bikes, public transit, and personal vehicles. Including places for people to get a cup of coffee, read the newspaper, or have an outdoor meeting next to a fountain can go a long way toward enriching a neighborhood.

More information on SPUR's Design for Walkability project is available [on their website](#) and in the much longer [Getting to Great Places](#) urban design report released last year.