



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time

By Jeff Speck

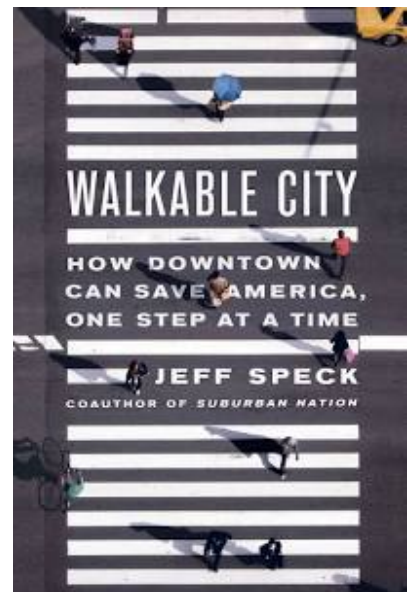
The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on May 7, 2025 to discuss *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time* (10th Anniversary Edition). Jeff Speck is a city planner who specializes in walkable places and was one of the pioneers in the New Urbanism movement of the 1990s.

This is a book about why cities should create and grow walkable places, and how it can be done. Walkable downtowns and neighborhoods, the book argues, are the key to healthy, prosperous, affordable and appealing cities. They make other urbanist goals, like transit, mixed uses, bike lanes, and density possible.

The book offers a sweeping vision and a guide for urbanists. If you're looking for a single book that explains urbanism, sets forth its primary elements and explains how these elements fit together, this may be the one.

Careful, though. While the vision and strategies are easy to grasp, the tasks are difficult to accomplish in places like Urban Atlanta, which were built around the automobile. This is why the word "downtown" is in the subtitle of *Walkable City*; it is in downtowns that Speck thinks the earliest and most important victories for walkability and urbanism will be won.

In our discussion, we focused on the lessons urbanists should take from Speck's book and where car-friendly Urban Atlanta might get started in building walkability.



Four Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are four big ideas drawn from *Walkable City* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. Walkability is the core strength of cities. It makes other good things in cities possible.
2. As the book explains, there are four qualities needed for walkability. Walks must be interesting, safe, useful and comfortable. We have much work to do in Urban Atlanta in meeting these conditions.
3. We have starting points, including downtowns in Atlanta and in suburbs like Decatur, Roswell and Suwanee. But there are older neighborhoods such as Inman Park and the Old Fourth Ward that could also be made more walkable. There are other opportunities. They include major developments like the Gulch in downtown Atlanta and the redevelopment of South Downtown. And in the suburbs are office districts and shopping malls that could become mixed-use areas. All could be made walkable places.
4. To create walkable places, we must put cars in their place. This involves finding ways of sharing streets with pedestrians and cyclists and taking back some of Urban Atlanta's glut of parking.

Why Do These Things?

We think Urban Atlanta could benefit from creating more walkable places. Here is why we think it's worth the effort:

- Walkable cities are healthier and wealthier, more sustainable and equitable.
- We have opportunities, not only in traditional downtowns and older neighborhoods, but in single-use districts, like declining shopping malls and office districts, that may turn to mixed uses. If they do, walkability must be part of the design.
- Atlanta's expanding pedestrian infrastructure—from greenways and trails to the Beltline—shows us that people want and need walkable places.
- We need to make Urban Atlanta more environmentally sustainable. Walkability is a key way of doing this.
- Walkable places are more welcoming of mixed-income housing.

What Are the Obstacles? What Are Our Strengths?

Even the most worthwhile efforts create opposition. So our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- The public mindset is a major obstacle. Most of the Atlanta area was built around the car. It will be hard for many to see the value of walking in such a car-dependent region.
- Many fear walking in Urban Atlanta. They do not believe the streets are safe.
- Atlanta's homeless issues make walking less appealing.
- Walkability will require local government support. We don't have it in some cities and counties.
- People who live in car-dependent areas may actively oppose efforts to create walkable places.

Does Urban Atlanta have strengths that could help us with some of the obstacles? We discussed Urban Atlanta's strengths as well. Here are some:

- As mentioned earlier, we do have starting points, places that could be made walkable with commitment and effort.
- There is progress. Downtown Decatur is one of Urban Atlanta's most walkable places. Older neighborhoods like Inman Park and the Old Fourth Ward are also benefiting from more people walking.
- The Atlanta Regional Commission's Livable Communities Initiative has emphasized walkability for decades.
- Urban Atlanta is a college town. Having so many college students creates demand for walkable places, and the campuses give us what Speck calls "anchors" that are necessary for walkability.

- Another benefit of colleges: They are creative institutions. They may be able to help us find unexpected solutions to walkability.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles and some impressive strengths. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers, using our strengths:

- We need better advocacy, which means building organizations that can explain the value of walkability to government leaders and citizens.
- And not just explain, but show. We need events that will allow leaders and citizens to see and explore the walkable places we have now and imagine new ones.
- Finally, we need advocacy that explains the benefits of walking. How does having greater access to things on foot or by bike improve life for residents? How does it make neighborhoods—and existing housing—more valuable? How does it affect the health of residents? How does it make children safer?

A Synopsis of *Walkable City*

Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time (10th Anniversary Edition) is 362 pages, including a prologue and 22 chapters. The chapters are in three sections, including a 2022 addition of nearly 100 pages that includes its own preface. There is also an introduction, acknowledgments, notes, a bibliography and an index.

Jeff Speck is a city planner who worked with the pioneering architectural and planning firm, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., in Miami. He is a principal today at Speck Dempsey, which specializes in planning walkable places. He is co-author with Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk of a 2000 book, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*.

As mentioned above, the book is about how cities can create walkable places, and why they should do so. The biggest reasons: Having many walkable areas improves the health of citizens and makes cities more affordable. These places make cities more appealing and reduce pollution. They make it easier for children to safely explore their neighborhoods.

But reversing a century of car dependency is not easy. This is why Speck suggests starting with downtowns.

Most downtowns were created before cars took over U.S. cities, and while most downtowns may be choked with traffic today and hollowed out by parking lots, they retain “most of the key ingredients” of walkability, Speck writes. Those ingredients include street grids that reward walking. Downtowns also have “anchors” (basically, businesses or institutions that attract people who might walk a few blocks if given good reasons). With some effort, cities can create walkable “paths” (streets, sidewalks, bike lanes, trails, parks, etc.) that tie these downtown anchors together—and give people reasons to walk.

And more: Downtowns are highly visible places that most people are comfortable visiting. If you can make your downtown more walkable, it could serve as “the rising tide that lifts all ships.” Translation: It could inspire neighborhoods and other commercial districts in your city to give walkability a try.

You can see how this works in Urban Atlanta. Some of our region’s most walkable places are in suburbs like Decatur and Roswell. But what about our largest downtown? For all the investments made in downtown Atlanta since the 1970s, it still suffers from too many cars and too few pedestrians.

Speck's advice: Start with a portion of the downtown and build from there. He has an example: Denver's Lower Downtown, called "LoDo."

When Speck was introduced to LoDo in the early 1990s, it was a long and uninteresting walk from the commercial and government centers of downtown Denver. It did have some interesting assets, including a well-regarded craft brewery (owned by future mayor, governor and senator John Hickenlooper), a comedy club, a beautiful but empty train station, and a few loft apartments. But that was about it. "The urbanism wasn't perfect," Speck writes, "but it was close enough, although only a few acres of it showed much promise at all."

Within a decade, LoDo was transformed into a popular, walkable urban area, with a restored transit hub at Union Station, a major-league baseball park and a stream of visitors and residents who come and go on foot or by transit. Could Atlanta's downtown benefit from a similar strategy? If so, South Downtown might be the place.

Walkable City is about more than starting points, of course. In it, Speck explains why walkability is important and how we lost it in the 20th century when automobiles muscled aside other forms of transportation. The results: a shocking rise in obesity, air pollution and climate change, a loss of human connections, and streets made unsafe for the few who walked or biked on them, including children.

This was not inevitable, nor is it desirable to many people. You can see it in the rising demand for walkable places. Today, people pay significantly more to rent apartments or buy homes in walkable neighborhoods than in places built around cars. One reason for higher rents: Transportation is cheaper, since families are spared the cost of cars or second cars (including payments maintenance, fuel, insurance and taxes). So, walkable neighborhoods are more desirable and may be more affordable as well.

There's more. Speck does a good job of describing what walkable places look like and what they need to get established. First, they need density, but not necessarily high-rise housing. The typical suburban subdivision has two to five houses per acre. If you increase density to 10 to 20 units per acre through two- or three-story townhouses, you have the density needed for walkability.

But if density is necessary, it is not sufficient. And this is where *Walkable City* becomes a guide. To have a truly walkable place, Speck writes, you must meet four conditions. The walks have to be "useful, safe, comfortable and interesting."

And how do you meet the conditions? Through 10 efforts, which Speck calls, not surprisingly, the "10 Steps of Walkability." Most are familiar to urbanists: limiting automobiles and parking, creating mixed uses, welcoming bikes and creating safe sidewalks and bike lanes. Some are less familiar: planting street trees and creating "well-defined edges" to public places.

All these things are needed to create walkable downtowns and neighborhoods, but the payoff is great: They result in cities that can grow without congestion, become more appealing and perhaps even more affordable.

There are three insights in *Walkable City* that should be of special interest to Urban Atlanta. First is Speck's warning that transit alone cannot save cities. In fact, he writes, sometimes transit systems can cause problems, mostly because leaders put too much faith in them.

He offers the example of Dallas, which built a well-regarded light-rail transit system in the 1990s and early 2000s, replacing a system that operated only buses. Result: Transit ridership declined, even as more stations opened.

What was the problem? The city invested in transit without a plan for redeveloping areas adjacent to stations. “As a result,” he writes, “you get off a train and . . . ? The likelihood that you can then walk to any destination of utility is preposterously slim.” The lesson: Don’t bring transit to a neighborhood or a commercial area until you have a plan there for walkability, density and mixed uses.

Urbanists have been disappointed by MARTA’s inability to reshape Atlanta, and this may be the reason. Transit alone cannot reshape cities. It needs places that are ready for transit, and this is the work of planners, city officials and neighborhood leaders. Otherwise, you get off a MARTA train and . . . ?

A second insight is Speck’s happy surprise at how “ascendant” cycling has become in many U.S. cities in the past decade. Once again, it’s not one thing that accounts for cycling’s growth but a combination working together: protected bike lanes, bike sharing and the rise of e-bikes.

He goes on about bikes: They extend walkability; they do not compete with it. They allow for density by reducing the demand for parking. Bike lanes do not cause gentrification and do not hurt stores and restaurants they pass before. (Studies of sales taxes and employment in a variety of cities have consistently shown revenues and employment *increased* after protected bike lanes were installed.)

Low-income residents are just as likely as affluent people to ride bikes, once bike sharing and protected lanes are in place, he adds. And poor families benefit disproportionately from not having to buy cars.

Final insight: As Urban Atlanta looks for ways of increasing economic opportunity and lessening poverty, Speck adds his voice to those who think mixed-income housing works. “Every city should have an inclusionary-zoning ordinance in place, and few currently do,” he writes, “because it has gotten the reputation of being a hidden tax on developers and an impediment to the free market.”

This is odd, he goes on, because “sophisticated developers seem to be just fine with it. This is probably because the affordable component can qualify a developer for federal or state subsidies that make projects more profitable.” As we look for ways of making Atlanta more affordable and increasing social mobility, this is important to remember. Good developers don’t oppose mixed-income housing. They welcome it.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn’t to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.