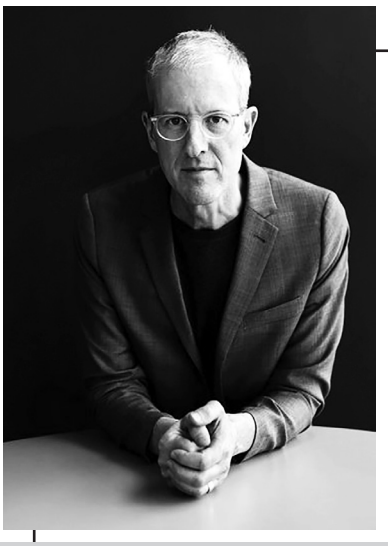
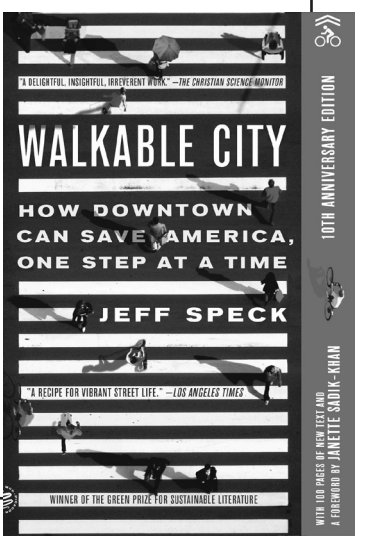
The New Urbanism: Reframing Idea(l)s of City Walkability

Jeremy Bryson &
Jeffrey Montague



A Conversation with Jeff Speck



Jeff Speck is an author, city planner, and advocate for better urban design. His book Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time *(2012) transformed urban planning practices by demonstrating the vital benefits that accompany cities designed around walking instead of automobiles. The book became the best-selling city planning title of the past decade, and its continued relevance is demonstrated by the recently-published and updated tenth anniversary Edition, wherein Speck shows how the principles of walkability continue to apply to today's urban challenges. In addition to his work on walkable cities, he is the co-author of* Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream *(2010) as well as* The Smart Growth Manual *(2009). Throughout his career, Speck has continually pushed the boundaries of planning thought and practice. He helped establish the New Urbanism movement as director of Town Planning at DPZ & Co. As Director of Design at the National Endowment for the Arts, he oversaw the Mayors' Institute on City Design and created the Governors' Institute on*

Community Design. Since 2007, he has been a founding partner of Speck & Associates, now Speck Dempsey, an international design firm serving municipalities, non-profits, and private developers. Speck Dempsey's project portfolio includes numerous downtown master plans, transit-oriented developments, and new towns, including Utah City, a 300-acre development on Utah's urbanized Wasatch Front. Following his keynote address at the Intermountain Sustainability Summit at Weber State University in March, 2024, Jeff Speck participated in the conversation that follows. It has been edited for clarity and length.

Jeremy Bryson (JB) *For more than a decade, your* Walkable City *book, and really the ideas and concepts behind walkable cities, have had continued and important relevance in the planning profession. What makes walkability so special?*

For me, the big accidental discovery that's now my story, and I'm sticking with it, has been to reframe good city planning through the window of walkability because it's a more effective way to communicate good planning. But also, to my surprise, when I adopted that framework and went back to doing planning jobs, I found it made me a better planner, to think of things through that window. So, we first called this concept "neo-traditional town planning," but that title turned off the liberals. And then we called it "New Urbanism," which turned off the conservatives. We still call it "New Urbanism" because it has been an effective moniker. It's really just "best practices in city and regional planning," but when you call it "walkability," people can associate it better with their own lives. People may have different opinions about how car-centric or conventional they want their planning to be, but everyone likes walkable places. Everyone. Then, it has the bonus outcome of forcing planners like me, in doing our daily work, to always ask the question: will this proposal make a place more or less walkable? And when that's the question you're trying to answer in the affirmative, you end up making better choices. And that's where I could get into some of the details of the books, which discuss the useful, safe, comfortable, and interesting walk. How meeting the mandates of each of those four categories simultaneously is the only real path to making a place walkable, and how, for example, thinking about the mandate of truly achieving something like an interesting walk has caused me in my planning to make certain decisions I would have not necessarily made had I not used that framework. For example, you don't want people to be bored, so let's introduce demise lines. A demise line, as covered in one of the rules in ***Walkable City Rules*** (2018), is a trick to making a giant building look like multiple smaller buildings, so that you're not walking past the same thing for 600 feet. I don't think I would have been suggesting something like demise lines if I hadn't thought about that concept of the interesting walk in my work.

Jeffrey Montague (JM) *In an interview you did with Radio Boston earlier this year, you mentioned that it's a good thing that the book* Suburban Nation *didn't release in the 1990s because people were not ready for it then. What do you think has shifted in American culture that has people ready to discuss sprawl and walkability issues?*

I heard Andres Duany's talk that became much of ***Suburban Nation*** in 1989. I think I, and anyone else who heard that talk, was ready for it. And certainly, there have been diatribes against sprawl for almost as long as there has

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been sprawl, from the "ticky-tacky houses" onward. But I can say with some confidence that what I've witnessed—perhaps in part due to the labors of my colleagues and me, and thousands of people who've been doing this work now since the '80s—is that these concepts that were once outside or *outré* are now mainstream. And it's been rewarding and delightful to have lived through three decades of bringing these exact same ideas to city after city, and going from resistance and disbelief to not only acceptance and cooperation, but arriving on the scene where people already know what they're doing. And that's more the case in some professions than others; I think traffic engineering has lagged way behind. The big difference between 2000 and 1990 is the same as the big difference between 2010 and 2000, or between 2020 and 2010: namely, that these ideas have started to disseminate through the culture, and people don't stare at you quizzically when you share them anymore.

I showed up yesterday in Eden, Utah, and met with John Lewis, who developed most of the town. He has a plan for what's called Eden Crossing, which is going in a block from the main intersection that defines the heart of Eden. As I've done two hundred times, I sat down, the plan was placed in front of me, and I was asked to critique it. Well, I was able to make it better, but it was already a pretty good plan. It had rear alleys. It had parkable streets that were not thought of as parking lots because there were trees on the edge of the sidewalk between the building fronts and the edge of the road. It had a central square for farmer's markets. It had at least four different building types from commercial to single family—through the spectrum. It had a street network, it had pedestrian streets. Based on the history of what's built there, if a conventional developer in an out-of-the-way small city is, before I arrive, already making projects that are so much better than what was being done in the twentieth century, that gives me tremendous satisfaction. Partly because I may have played a role, but more because it's just an improvement in the standard of practice.

Now, I should say a million impediments still exist. Lewis's project is being fought by NIMBYs—people who categorically stand for "not in my backyard"— who don't understand that no growth is not a choice. They don't understand that the choice is between planned growth or unplanned growth. They're going to get growth eventually, and they need to understand that planned growth will be a better outcome than unplanned growth. Planned growth always looks worse because it's bigger. If you're going to plan a neighborhood, or town, or region, then it's naturally bigger than one person coming in with a Kwik-E Mart, but that's a message that needs to be better communicated. As a result, for example, of the neighbors' opinions—and I believe the planning board—the retail that is surrounding this town square—which is a broad square that needs buildings of some substance to hold its edges so that it is spatially contained and therefore an outdoor living room and therefore comfortable—is being required to be one story tall. One-story

buildings, no residential above, no balconies or windows to give eyes to the street or life to the street space. Socially, it's a disaster compared to what would happen if they were even allowed to go as tall as the nearby single-family homes, which are two stories tall. And so, there's as much frustration still as there is satisfaction that folks just don't understand that height can be a good thing.

(JB) *I was really pleased to hear during your keynote address today about the familiarity you have with Utah, Utah issues, and your broad sense of what's happening along the Wasatch Front and beyond. On that, we have a couple of questions about* Utah City*, the large urban development in Vineyard on the shores of Utah Lake. Your company, Speck Dempsey, was involved in the planning and design of that city. I'd like you to speak to* Utah City *as a large development, but also more broadly on other developments around the American West. For example, along the Wasatch Front you have* The Point*, a large development on the site of the former Utah State Prison site in Draper, and then there is the large development known as* California Forever*. So, I'd like to speak about Utah City, specifically, but also these large developments that seem to be popping up. How do these types of developments advance walkability in the American West?*

You have to think regionally. It's almost like what you learn when you put bike lanes in, in a downtown area. You can add a bike lane, and add a bike lane, and add a bike lane, but you won't fundamentally change the size of the biking population until you have a comprehensive, safe, low stress network. I always have to tell cities: don't be discouraged; don't give up, because you may not see that uptick in cycling. In fact, many of them *do* see an uptick in cycling, but you won't see that major uptick in cycling until a mom feels comfortable letting her kid truly get somewhere useful on the bike, which means a comprehensive, low stress system. Similarly, I'm sure the sustainability goal of the whole transit effort here in Utah has been about replacing the dispersed auto-oriented system with a more nodal transit basis. It's important to understand what the car does to the landscape, which is that settlement historically has always been nodal—it's always been based on transportation hubs, from the port of New York City to the Golden Spike in Utah. The transit nature of transportation lends

"Utah City Civic Plaza." *Utah City*, https://utahcity.com/about/#slider-4-6.

itself to nodal development around stops, which generates concentration and results in walkability. What the automobile does is, it equalizes the entire landscape, because anywhere you can paint a thin strip of asphalt all of a sudden becomes just as valuable as anywhere else, and that was the principal component in allowing us to disperse. Looking systematically at a place like the valley, as we are able to accrete more TOD [Transit Oriented Development] of true critical mass and mixed use around these stops, every one is going to help, but only when you have a significant population living in these communities who are able to park and ride—so that the one end of the ride is walkable—do you start to see the impacts on quality of life and therefore on climate that one is hoping for. But it's a long game. It's an important game. The only disconnect here in Utah is your simultaneous doubling down on the highway infrastructure, as money is potentially wasted on a train infrastructure that people won't take if driving continues to be subsidized in that way.

(JB) *So going back to* Utah City*, you've said that* Utah City *has more automobile parking in it than any other project you've worked on?*

Yes. For two reasons. One, it's bigger, and, two, the public and the municipality's greatest fear about the project was that it would not handle its own parking. Most of the talks I give around the country, and I give about one a month, are evening talks, and usually there's a dinner after the lecture for the funders, so maybe twelve people around a table. About half an hour into that dinner, I stand up and say: "Now can we talk about something besides parking?" Because, literally, my experience in Vineyard and everywhere is that we continue to ask the wrong question about parking. As Donald Shoup, the author of ***The High Cost of Free Parking***, says: "The question isn't, can we have enough parking. The question is, how can we provide, design, and manage parking in a way that our cities and neighborhoods will thrive?" And if you ask that question, you get an entirely different answer than if you ask, can we have enough parking? And of course, the answer is Shoup's three-legged stool of eliminating the onsite parking requirement, pricing parking in line with its value, and creating the parking benefits district, which is the political step you need to take to get merchants and others to support the other two legs of the stool. What I'm pleased about in Vineyard is that the zoning that we've managed to wrangle with the city requires us to start with a good amount of parking, but as

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experience demonstrates that we need less, we can reduce the amount that's provided.

(JM) *How does parking function in walkable design?*

In walkable design, all the parking lots are hidden from the street, typically behind a thin crust of residential buildings or some other use. If my plan is followed with any faith whatsoever, there will not be a single surface or structured parking lot visible from a public street or paseo. However, what they're doing in the short term to make it affordable to build and gain an audience is leaving one of the many super blocks (that consist of three or four blocks of housing and other uses) vacant and offering, temporarily, cheap parking on surface until the time, hopefully soon, when they can replace that surface lot with a hidden, structured lot. But when you go there in the next couple years, you're going to see some surface parking. My clients insist that it's temporary, and I insist they not be lying to me.

(JM) *So, because it's 2024 and we're in the United States, I'd like for you to speak to your sense of the politics of walkable cities. What political challenges and opportunities have you seen, or do you foresee, in regards to creating more walkable cities?*

So, I've been very disappointed to see only recently the red/blue divide manifesting itself in city planning on the national political scene. I hadn't seen that happen before Trump. I made my reputation in red cities in red states, or at least blue cities in red states. My most impactful project early in my career as an independent practitioner was Oklahoma City. It's very easy to sell walkability on a pro-business platform. I've been on a private beach in Michigan with some billionaires, and they get it. They understand that walkability is good business, and they also like the free market to be able to function. You've probably seen in the recent literature a lot of libertarian support for eliminating single family zoning and for eliminating arbitrary parking requirements and allowing the market to function. There's also the whole Strong Towns movement, which comes from a more libertarian and right-wing perspective. Chuck Marohn, the leader of the Strong Towns movement, is a good friend of mine. I claim he's not truly a libertarian because any sort of planning is to guard against the "tragedy of the commons," which is something that libertarians don't seem to grasp. What the tragedy of the commons is, is that if everyone allows their cows to graze as much as they want on the commons, eventually there will be no food for anyone. Planning exists for that reason. What Trump and his colleagues did with the MAGA movement, and I guess it probably characterized the Tea Party as well, is that there has been an overt embrace of automobility, an overt embrace of "rolling coal," of fighting electrification, and then Trump claiming: "suburban housewives, I've saved your single-family lot." Urbanism, which from a planning perspective is about walkability and livability at the city, town, village, and hamlet scale, has come to be or continues to be associated with urban environments as in cities, which tend to be blue and diverse. And now that you have a right-wing agenda, which is openly anti-diversity, anti-immigration, and in some cases outright white nationalist, there is a clear political divide between the "poorly managed Democrat cities" (which, by the way, have lower crime than most red states) and this right-wing rural ethos that unfortunately has come to associate good urbanism with diversity. I'm working right now in a town in Indiana, another red place, and the city council actively says: "we don't want apartments because apartments bring Democrats." So, yes, it's become very politicized, and it's unfortunate because everyone still loves walkability. That's another reason to call it walkability and not New Urbanism. The latest

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preposterous QAnon theories surrounding fifteen-minute cities are a prime example of how off the rails these conversations can go. I've been at public meetings where people show up, almost in a tinfoil hat, handing out literature about how we're trying to lock people in their homes by somehow making a place more walkable. But that's just the crazies.

(JB) *The original* Walkable City *came out in 2012, with a 10th anniversary edition coming out in 2022. So, looking forward to a potential 20th anniversary edition, what are the emerging topics that you're expecting to address? What do you see on the horizon?*

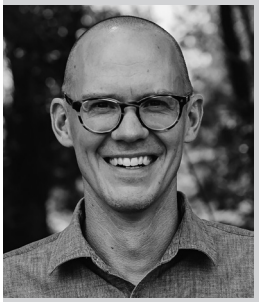
There are no new topics, because the 10th anniversary edition is only one year old! The main point I would make when asked a question like this is that the fundamentals do not change. It's like Jarrett Walker—the notable transit planner—talking about transit, but I don't want to talk about your rolling stock. The rolling stock will change, but the fundamentals, geometry, and math, do not change. Having a lot of people in a vehicle on an efficient route, doesn't matter whether it's a BRT (Bus Rapid Transit), or a light rail, or something else. Similarly, there's going to be a lot of unexpected developments in the next decade—like Covid and Zoom—but they will not change the fact that cities exist for a reason, that we come together at higher densities because it makes us more productive. The bigger the city you come from, the faster you walk, and the bigger the city you are in, the more patents per capita, not period, but per capita. There are fundamentals about what it means to be human, about being in the presence of other humans—physically and not just on Zoom—that mean that the theories we share will be just as relevant. I do want to say, if you ask me what's next, that you'll find in the back of *Walkable City* the concept of the Planner's Pledge. My colleagues and I, Emily Talen and Anne Phillips, along with a lot of helpers, are about to launch the Planner's Pledge as a national movement. It's become much more instrumental and less nitpicky. It's no longer directed as a critique at the American Planning Association, but in six months it will be out there for anyone to sign trying to create the equivalent of a Hippocratic Oath for planners. I find it fascinating that planners have existed as a profession for centuries, and as a certification for many decades, but while there's always been a heavy emphasis, appropriately, on ethics, there's never been any kind of *design* ethic. Now we know as planners that designing around the automobile is not healthy or sustainable. And yet, planners aren't asked to acknowledge that in any way in their work. We know that the history of the planning profession has been a history of

government-enabled and subsidized white flight and segregation. If you read Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, you know that whole story. The first person I'm going to ask to sign the Planner's Pledge is Richard. We're already in communication, but I haven't officially asked him yet because it's not ready. I think that if planners can't in their work, or don't want to in their work, as a personal statement, say that they will encourage and discourage certain types of planning, then they shouldn't be planners. And we're very careful to use the words "encourage" and "discourage," because when we were shaping this concept at the last Congress for New Urbanism, a number of municipal planners stood up and said: we love this, we agree with it, but actually we would lose our jobs if we were compelled to comply with many of these pro-pedestrian measures. So, the language has become not compulsory, but is at least providing an ethical direction that will add meaning to the title of being a professional planner. So, I'm excited about that.

(JM) *What role do you see students and young professionals playing in the development of a more walkable America?*

That question is irrelevant to me because, wherever you are in your career or age, you have a voice. It doesn't really matter whether someone's a student or not, or young or old. And in that context, I'll say that one of the trends I've seen in public meetings that has delighted me to no end in the last few years, or really the last decade, is that we used to have just two types of people showing up at public meetings when a developer needed approval to do a whole bunch of housing, for example. There were the FoDs, the friends of the developer, who either had some family, friendship, or financial interest in supporting the project. And then you had the NIMBYs, who—whether or not the project was the right thing for the city and the region—believed that it was the wrong thing for them and their neighborhood, and they might have been right because there might have been localized impacts that caused them to suffer, while the society as a whole improved. And the question was, was the city council strong enough and confident enough in their next election to do what was best for the city, as opposed to what everyone was shouting in the room, which still happens today, every day. In my experience, over the last decade, particularly within the last five years, there's a third group that shows up at these meetings which has neither a connection to the neighborhood or the developer and wants to see more equity in the community, wants to see more diversity in the community, wants to see more housing in the community, wants to see more multimodal transportation in the community, and they are often the voice that sways the council. You have people with personal interests on either side duking it out, and all of a sudden this disinterested but very interested group of people show up, and the city council acknowledges that this is a movement, and that someone has to speak for the people who can't afford to live in the neighborhood, people who might be displaced from the neighborhood, all of that in a way that's compelling.

(JB/JM) *Thank you for your time and this insightful conversation.*



Jeremy Bryson (PhD, Syracuse University) is a professor in the Department of Geography, Environment & Sustainability at Weber State University. His research and teaching explore environment-society interactions in urban places. He values collaborating with undergraduate students and has recently published articles with these emerging scholars on topics such as planning efforts to protect dark skies, the place-branding strategies of Utah's technology corridor, and the challenges of urban wildfire smoke in an era of changing climates.

Jeffrey Montague recently graduated from Weber State University with a BS in geography with an emphasis on environment and sustainability, as well as urban planning. He is now working as a planner for the city of Layton, Utah. In this role, he seeks to facilitate socially responsible development within the community. As he continues his career, Jeffrey hopes to participate in shifting American city planning toward more sustainable practices that prioritize human and environmental health.