

# The Necessity for Sidewalks

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It may seem odd to make an argument for sidewalks but the development of certain neighborhoods seems to prompt such an effort. Like an endangered species or a broken thumb sidewalks will be overlooked until they are gone or cannot be used.

The design of affluent neighborhoods today usually does not include sidewalks. This is important to note because these types of designs establish trends that will be followed in lesser developments for years to come. River Crest, located in the near-west side of Fort Worth, is an example of an older affluent neighborhood that includes sidewalks - at least along the portion just east of the golf course. River Crest fits in nicely with the more modest adjacent neighborhoods and the sidewalks do not detract from the identity of the development.

It may be good to remember that our property does not extend to the street but is typically ten feet or so back in from the curb. The space between our property line and the property line of the neighbor across the street is referred to as the Public Right-of-Way and it is no accident that this is where streets and sidewalks are located. Sidewalks are that edge between public street and private property that permits the poorest and the richest to stroll past each others worlds and property with impunity. Though front yards, porches and front doors each signal increasing degrees of privacy, sidewalks are a constant reminder that we are part of a larger agreement to live together.

But there is a personal history that most people carry with them of sidewalks that is also instructive. Sidewalks may be a symbol of the collective but they are also the place where individual experience can unfold. Sidewalks are where little ones learn to ride tricycles and bicycles; where older kids race and skateboard. It is where budding egos travel, teddy bear in one hand and a jar of peanut butter in the other, when they have run away from home; where brooding teens storm. Fitful babies are best strolled along sidewalks. Puppies pull at the leash there. Mailmen and trick-or-treaters are conspicuous for not using sidewalks but no-one seems to care. Sidewalks are where the bewildered middle-aged can safely walk out their frustrations. Now that curb ramps are mandatory the disabled can travel from neighborhood to neighborhood and the elderly can use the sidewalks for gentle strolls. What a wonderful parade of humanity! It seems obvious - the necessity for sidewalks. So why would anyone, costs aside, not include them in the development of a neighborhood?

If air-conditioning made the front porch superfluous and if the television made the living room a mere shadow of itself then it may have been the car that made the

sidewalk obsolete. The car is an expression of the individual and the sidewalk is an expression of public interaction.

Many post-war developments have contributed to the alienation of neighbor from neighbor. An orderly grid of house next to house, row upon row, was seen to be an anathema. The individualistic freedom symbolized by the car on a twisting road was the new thing. These curving, segmented neighborhoods were often created in the name of topographical sensitivity but are often poorly planned developments. The sudden popularity of gated communities soon followed. These too indicate a fear of public interaction – of, perhaps, being part of a collective. What is so troubling about revealing our lives, or at least a part of them, on our porches and sidewalks where anyone might see? There have been, for a long time, bedrooms and back yards where more private transactions can occur.

There is too much fear in our hearts of what we may see or hear or smell on sidewalks. But these encounters are the only way that we can know what is going on in the broader community. No form can replace, even in the public setting, the face-to-face meeting where the averted eyes or the direct gaze, the whisper of a smile or the furrowed brow communicate so clearly. You cannot see a man's eyes tear with emotion unless you are face-to-face. There are risks inherent in anything of value but consider what a small risk a sidewalk presents for the opportunity it brings. These opportunities serve as admonishments for the young and reminders for the old. See, young man, what it will be like to shuffle along with a cane? Remember, old woman, what it was to wiggle into balance a brand new bike? What, but a few events and imbalances, separates each of us from the muttering stumbling homeless person?

The City Council of Fort Worth recently decreed that sidewalks must be included in all commercial and residential developments. This is a laudable decision. But there should also be the confidence to keep places for public interaction - to stand near one another. This is the opportunity to see and be seen. Sidewalks are one of only a few places in the city where memory and accountability connect us to each other.

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