Evaluating new towns from a transportation planner’s perspective.

When the concept of neotraditional development, which later evolved into new urbanism, emerged on the planning scene, the great hope was that it would help to solve our transportation problems. The idea was certainly catchy: Creating walkable communities will decrease driving and the problems associated with it. Recognizing that potential, the Environmental Protection Agency accepts land-use policies as a transportation demand measure in regional air quality plans.

Today, there’s a new hope: that new urbanism will help to solve our obesity problem by encouraging walking. The Guide to Community Preventive Services, a resource developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, supports certain community design elements as strategies for increasing physical activity.

But it’s not that simple.

It’s true that a growing body of research, including some of my own, shows a strong correlation between neighborhood design and travel behavior. Residents of neighborhoods with higher densities, more mixing of land uses, and shorter distances to potential destinations—in short, traditional-style neighborhoods—walk more and drive less than residents of conventionally designed suburban neighborhoods.

Few studies examine new communities specifically designed according to the principles of new urbanism, but the results for traditional neighborhoods suggest that residents of new urbanist communities will also walk more and drive less.

Some surprises

Now comes the first caveat: The differences tend to be greater in magnitude and of greater statistical significance for walking than for driving. This suggests that neighborhood design may have a greater effect on walking trips than on car trips. In fact, some studies show that the additional walking trips in traditional neighborhoods do not entirely substitute for driving trips—that the decline in driving is less than the increase in walking.

When a town center is nearby and the streets have sidewalks, residents may walk more because they can. They may make trips that they wouldn’t have bothered to make if they didn’t have the option of walking to their destination. If that’s so, new urbanism would appear to be more of a solution to public health problems than to transportation problems (so long as residents aren’t walking to the corner Starbucks for a 490-calorie caffe mocha).

One factor best explains the greater impact of traditional design on walking than on driving: scale. Because we can cover the same ground so much faster in a car than on foot (assuming the absence of gridlock), our driving trips are influenced by possible destinations that may be well beyond the neighborhood.

Driving is less dependent on neighborhood design than walking is, but more dependent on the opportunities found throughout the rest of the metropolitan region. Walking is a neighborhood-scale mode of travel, but driving is a regional-scale mode. That fact points to the need for a regional approach to community design—not just the design of individual neighborhoods, but the structure of the entire region. To get people to drive less for activities found beyond the neighborhood, we need to provide alternatives that are competitive with driving.

That’s not an easy task, but it’s possible that high-quality transit (not necessarily rail) with concentrations of development around stations can provide such an alternative. Such a vision is part of the new urbanist concept, yet it often gets less attention than the principles of neighborhood design even though it may ultimately be more important for transportation purposes.
Do New Urbanists Walk More?

By Susan Handy

Biking, although underemphasized in new urbanist principles, might also have more of a role to play in providing alternatives to driving beyond the neighborhood.

Now for the second caveat: Almost all of the research on this topic is cross-sectional; that is, the studies compare the driving and walking of residents of different neighborhoods at one point in time. These studies tell us that residents of traditional neighborhoods walk more and drive somewhat less than residents of conventional suburban neighborhoods.

But that association doesn’t mean that changes in neighborhood design (e.g., redesigning a suburban neighborhood to look more like a traditional neighborhood) will necessarily lead to a change in walking or driving. It is quite possible that residents will continue to go about their lives just as they did before, especially if they weren’t hoping to be able to walk more or drive less.

People who prefer driving and are uninterested in walking may choose neighborhoods designed for easy driving, while those who prefer walking and would rather drive less may consciously choose neighborhoods designed for easy walking. In other words, they may “self-select” into neighborhoods that support their preferred transportation mode.

Indeed, new research suggests that preferences for walking or biking may explain why residents of traditional neighborhoods walk more and drive less than residents of conventional suburban neighborhoods. If that’s true, the role of new urbanism becomes more complicated.

In the short term, neighborhood design may facilitate walking for those who like walking, but it may not have much of an effect on those who don’t. Is it possible that over time neighborhood design could change those preferences, turning nonwalkers into walkers (assuming we can get nonwalkers to move into traditional neighborhoods)? We don’t yet have the evidence to say.

Choice is the goal

Although this may sound odd coming from a researcher, I often ask myself if we really need absolute proof that new urbanism increases walking. I strongly believe that as planners we have an obligation to give the residents of our communities choices, in particular choices that are healthier for us as individuals, for the community as a whole, and for the environment. New urbanism is one way to do that, although not necessarily the only way.

Good evidence would help to make the case for better design (and would help us understand what makes for better design). But if better design expands choices—about what kind of community to live in or what mode of travel to use—that may be enough.

Not all new urbanist developments expand choices to the same degree. Developments in greenfield locations are the most problematic, based on my rather informal observations. The key, I believe, is to tie these developments into the larger regional fabric, thereby providing choices not just within the neighborhood but also beyond.

One of my favorite examples is a development called the Crossings, in Mountain View, California, which replaced an abandoned 1970s mall (where my high school friends and I used to go to the movies on weekends). Built with relatively high residential densities (closely spaced single-family homes, three-story town houses, apartment buildings), the project sits on the Caltrain line linking San Jose with San Francisco and next to existing (albeit strip-mail-style) retail areas. This kind of development expands choices.

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