

# In conversation with Ben Rossiter.

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I interviewed passionate walking advocate Ben Rossiter to understand how walkable environments could reshape new communities, improving the health, wellbeing and connectedness in growth areas.

**Who should we be designing walkable environments for?**

We've got to be careful that we're not designing people out of community.

*“I think the overarching vision should probably be designing by the seven and 70 or the eight and 80 rule, if you design for them, you design for all.”*

25% of Australian children are regularly cared for by grandparents, so if we want to design for young families, then we've got to design for older people as well.

**What are the greatest barriers to walkability?**

We know that focusing on just building roads... creating car-based communities will ultimately make us fatter, poorer, and sadder. Fatter because we'll be on our asses, stuck in cars, in traffic, poorer because we'll not be able to afford to run these cars, and sadder because we spend so much time sitting on our butts in cars, away from our family and communities.

We know that building roads to solve congestion is like smoking to cure your lung cancer. It doesn't work. It makes it worse. So I think there is a desire, but it's a question of what's realistic for people to be able to do now, because they're going for cheaper housing. That's our challenge.

**How does the planning and design of our environments impact walkability?**

We should be planning for walkable urban design as the absolute default. There might be some economic reasons to justify not doing certain things, but put walkable design as the fundamental principle.

We tend to deal with walking and cycling together. This really doesn't work, particularly for walking. In fact, a lot of active transport approaches can work against walking. We know that shared paths are a barrier to seniors. 39% of seniors surveyed as part of a research project on barriers and enablers to seniors walking, put shared paths as a moderate to major barrier to their walking.



Ben Rossiter



Image 01 New Road shared streetscape with seating, by Gehl Architects, Brighton UK

However one of the big things for us is designing cities for lower speed. Part of that is dropping speed limits, but really what you need to do is design for lower speed so people can't drive fast. Then you'll have a lot of the by-products of lower speed, such as more social connections, which are really critical to liveable communities.

If we want to get people walking, we have to think about how we're designing a road network that gives the cues they're going into a walking space. If we're talking vulnerable pedestrians, we have to reduce the complexity of crossing situations.

Things like roundabouts and slip lanes, if we're putting them in right from the start, from the walking perspective, you might as well say, "Don't walk," because they're the sort of things which make it difficult to walk. Roundabouts are places where feet have no priority; the beauty of course when you're driving is you only have to look one way. We know that 5% of senior pedestrian crashes happen on roundabouts and 7% for senior women.

### How does walking strengthen a sense of community?

Kids walking to school, seniors walking in the neighbourhood, it's an indicator of a healthy community; I think one of the best.

It's a bit like the canary in the coal mine. If you ain't got kids on the street, you got a dead community. It's unhealthy. So that's what should be the indicator. If you're visualising

what sort of community we want, I'm saying that's one of the indicators.

If you think of Europe or places where they have high instance of kids walking to school and playing in their neighbourhood, it's generally not about walk-to-school programs. It just happens because they get the design right. So I think that's part of that visioning phase.

Mixing bikes with walkers undermines the purpose of the footpath network. I think people often think of a footpath network as a transport route or mode. Providing for cycling is really important but that's not the same as designing for walking.

“*Footpaths are for feet and walking, but they're also for talking, loving, living, learning, playing, and forming the basis of our public and community space.*”

That's how we have to treat footpaths.

If you think of the best walking places you will go, anywhere in the world, one of the key factors are you want to stop, to sit down, talk, watch the world go by. All other transport modes are about the flow of getting from A to B, but walking is also about the presence of everything that happens in between. Walking is a journey.



Image 02 Raised and coloured pavings work as traffic slowing devices at Soho Development by ClarkeHopkinsClarke, Point Cook VIC

### How can we encourage walking in growth areas?

If you build roads people are going to be driving. If they drive, then you start the circle of, "We've got to have the shopping centre car parks so they can park," all these things adding up together, from the speed of traffic, the size of the roads, the car parking undermines walkability. So if you've got low density straightaway you're not going to get much walking.

To try and change behaviours over a long period of time it would have to come down to going back to the kids' stuff which is linked to destination and density. We know that across the network, 60% of people get to train stations on foot. It will not be happening out at newer train stations, because they're surrounded by a sea of car parking. You'd be lucky if you get 6%. These areas don't have that sense of walkability.

So that's a really critical

*“We know people that catch public transport to work get an average of 41 minutes of physical activity a day, where people who drive get eight minutes.”*

thing to understand the role public transport plays in physical activity.

If you haven't got a range of shops and services, you're unlikely to get people walking for transport. If you have to walk for 800 metres but you've got three things you can do on the way around, you're much more likely and it actually might be quicker because you're doing multiple things on the trip.

Laurimar for example has got the primary school right near the town centre. That sort of stuff, to me, just makes so much sense. You've got a chance if mum's at home and she wants to walk with the kids to school, she can go off to the shops or whatever in the one trip.

Image 03 Dandenong Plaza provides a pleasant walking environment with seating and shading, by BKK Architects





Often we provide recreation areas, sports reserves, but you must get there by car. Imagine if we could actually think in terms of having greener corridors and more appealing spaces that people will be drawn out to walk.

If we really want people to walk, we have to reduce the distance they need to get across roads. I would like to see an emphasis on intergenerational community spaces, not so much segregated children's playgrounds that are invariably the plastic playground, , but natural play spaces that draw people of all ages.

From a health and community strengthening perspective, purposeful everyday walking is

“*I think intergenerational community space is really critical to healthy communities.*”

really where we need to get to. So that means building the infrastructure, the density, the destinations and the public transport.

I would like developers to consider the design of *park-and-walk* routes for people living outside the area. One of the key things we advocate councils and developers do is build principle pedestrian networks like the networks we do for all other modes.

Walkability is a major selling point. Property prices are higher where there are more trees and better landscaping, or where it's easy to walk to places. There's a definite correlation between walkability and property prices.

**If you could change one thing about the way we currently create communities, what would it be?**

A solid, complete, and absolute urban growth boundary. If we had a boundary in every area and we said we are not going past here, and we had genuine staging of development to make land within the boundary last. That would force governments and developers to be creative, and they would look at all

the issues we want, density, public transport services, shops, approaching it like land was actually scarce and we are building the last developments on the edge.

Image 04 Pedestrian connectivity from the town centre to the Primary School at Laurimar VIC



Image sources - 1. <http://www.landezine.com/index.php/2011/04/new-road-by-landscape-projects-and-gehl-architects/>; 2. ClarkeHopkinsClarke; 3. John Gollings, <http://www.archdaily.com/412359/lonsdale-street-dandenong-bkk-architects/5201627be8e44efff200006a-lonsdale-street-dandenong-bkk-architects-photo>; 4. ClarkeHopkinsClarke