

BOOKS

cities walkable, he says, is *fabric*. “Yet fabric,” he observes, “is one of several key aspects of urban design that are missing from the walkability discussions in most places.”

The bulk of the book is organized around “The Ten Steps of Walkability,” as follows:

- *Put Cars in Their Place*: “The automobile is a servant that has become our master.”

- *Mix the Uses*: Placing the proper balance of activities within walking distance of one another is fundamental; “most downtowns have an imbalance of uses that can be overcome only by increasing the housing supply.”

- *Get Parking Right*: The book draws skillfully from UCLA planning professor Donald Shoup’s authoritative volume, *The High Cost of Free Parking*.

- *Let Transit Work*: “Walkable neighborhoods can thrive in the absence of transit, but walkable cities rely on it utterly.”

- *Protect the Pedestrian*: This prescription contains many moving parts, including block size, lane width, signalization, roadway geometry, and other factors that together determine a car’s speed and a pedestrian’s likelihood of being hit. “Most streets in most American cities get at least half of these things wrong,” Speck reports.

- *Welcome Bikes*.

- *Shape the Spaces*: “Perhaps the most counter intuitive discussion in planning, this may be the step that is most often gotten wrong,” Speck says. “Too much green or gray—parks or parking—can cause a would-be walker to stay home. Public spaces are only as good as their edges.”

- *Plant Trees*: Most cities know that trees are good, but few, so far, have been willing to pay properly for them.

- *Make Friendly and Unique Faces*: Pedestrians need to be entertained. City design codes that focus on use, bulk, and parking have, Speck says, “only begun to concern themselves with creating active facades that invite walking.”

- *Pick Your Winners*: “With the possible exception of Venice, even the most walkable cities are not universally walkable: there are only so many interesting street edges to go around.” Some streets will remain mainly automobile-oriented, but, Speck asserts, “cities must make a conscious choice about the size and location

of their walkable cores, to avoid squandering walkability resources in areas that will never invite pedestrians.”

Speck is not afraid to voice opinions. Of bus rapid transit, he notes that on the one hand, BRT lacks the built-in permanence of a rail line, and on the other hand, “the more permanent the BRT infrastructure feels, the more ugly it usually looks. BRT buses, and the constructions that support them, just don’t evoke many feelings of comfort in the fragile human bodies they serve.”

Walkable City is an energetic, feisty book, one that never contents itself with polite generalities. Sometimes breezy and anecdotal yet always logical and amply researched, this is one of the best books to appear this year. Speck deserves the widest possible readership. ♦

Philip Langdon is author of the new book The Private Oasis: The Landscape Architecture and Gardens of Edmund Hollander Design (Grayson Publishing).

Human Transit: How Clearer Thinking about Public Transit Can Enrich Our Communities and Our Lives

By Jarrett Walker

Island Press, 2012, 244 pp., \$70 hardcover, \$35 paperback

REVIEW BY WILLIAM LIEBERMAN

Once in a while, a book comes along that summarizes most of what’s important about a particular subject, and it does so in a way that’s lucid and effortless. One such book is Jarrett Walker’s *Human Transit*. A couple of hours spent with this slim volume will give anyone the basics on the theory and practice of public transportation planning. For new urbanists, this is more important than most will admit. All too many of us are designing transit-oriented developments with only a vague notion of what transit really

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Photo by Joe Szurszewski

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needs to be effective. As a result, TODs have been built in places that are very expensive for transit to serve, and street networks have been created that just don't work well for buses or rail.

There have been attempts in the past to convey the subtleties of transit to new urban audiences. When CNU was young, there were no break-out sessions at the first Congresses; every session was plenary. This forced architects, planners, engineers and designers to listen to each other. We all learned things that we might otherwise have dismissed as peripheral to our primary interest. As a result, we became better educated on matters affecting us indirectly (or, perhaps, more directly than we had realized). Over time, however, a greater portion of each Congress was dedicated to specialized breakout topics. Attendees were largely those already involved in these specialties. The value of Walker's book is that it offers the opportunity for those not in the transit professions to pick up

a lot of knowledge of this topic with a very short investment of time. Most of what a new urbanist needs to know is here. It's even a valuable resource for seasoned planners like me, who have struggled to explain the needs of transit to lay audiences for years. These audiences, be they residents of a community or members of a governing board, can have a big influence on whether or not a transit proposal is approved and how effective it will be.

Those familiar with Walker's blog of the same name will immediately recognize his style and subject matter. In fact, *Human Transit* takes as its source much of the material that has appeared in the blog. But the book is able to go further than the blog can, because it has assembled this material in a systematic way and expanded upon much of it.

I especially liked Walker's explanation of common errors in thinking that can lead a potentially good transit proposal astray. One of these is the

"motorist's error." Those who aren't regular transit riders (or who may never have used transit) tend to think about mobility based on the form of travel they know best: driving a car or being driven in one. As a result, they often value the attribute of speed over frequency. They don't realize that when transit service is infrequent, waiting time at the stop can be high, making the whole trip longer. In reality, ridership is often raised more effectively not by increasing the speed of buses and trains but by increasing their frequency. Anyone whose experience is restricted to automotive travel is generally oblivious to this basic tenant.

THE SHAPE OF THE NETWORK

There are lots of meaty discussions in *Human Transit*. Walker offers explanations of how the shape of a transit network—something that few of us ever think about—can influence its operating costs and its attractiveness to riders. He includes some excellent discussions on the pros and cons of transfers. He also explains routing configurations that can help or hinder a bus or rail line. Of particular importance to developers and urban designers, Walker points out the challenges created by boulevards, new towns, and streetscape designs. When these are directed by professionals ignorant of transit's needs, earnest attempts to encourage transit ridership often fall short.

Walker provides an illuminating case study of bus service planning for a greenfield suburb in Canberra, Australia. The original plan proposed operating buses on a corridor directly connecting Canberra's government center with the new suburb. Walker explains that the direct route would have required it to branch when it reached the suburb in order to reach all the populous areas. This would have resulted in lower frequencies on each branch, which would be less attractive to the riders there. He also points out that the government center generated trips primarily during the peak hours, with very little off-peak demand. This, in turn, would have resulted in low off-peak service levels. The better solution was to create a bus route that was less direct than originally proposed but would serve many more places that people wanted

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to access. This, in turn, would encourage more ridership that could justify greater frequency of service, particularly off peak. Greater frequency would, in turn, encourage even more ridership. This strategy seems counter to the common-sense notion of providing direct service on a shorter route. However, it's one of several examples of how frequency can trump directness in many situations.

If there is a flaw in Walker's book, it may be his candor in pointing out the shortcomings of some recent developments. Several of these were designed by fellow new urbanists. To be sure, real world problems generally offer more effective lessons than theoretical ones. Nonetheless, potential allies may be turned off by his critiques, which would be an unfortunate outcome. Given the task we face in transforming this auto-centric nation of ours, we all need to pull in the same direction. I would hope that those criticized would take it on the chin and learn to avoid similar mistakes the next time around.

This is an easy read. You can go through the whole book in a few hours. That makes its lessons more likely to be absorbed. *Human Transit* will serve you well as a source you can turn to for reference in the future. It will also make you a better new urbanist. ♦

William Lieberman, AICP, is a transportation planning coordinator with CHS Consulting Group in San Francisco.

UPDATE

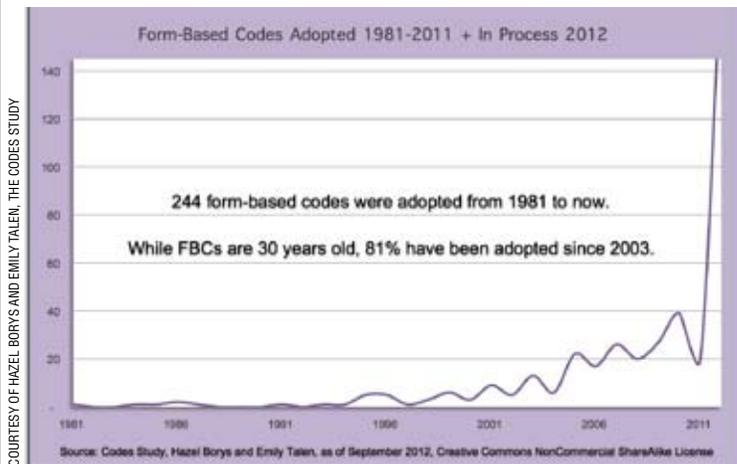
■ An update to the **Codes Study** by Hazel Borys and Emily Talen finds 420 form-based codes (FBCs) worldwide — 244 have been adopted and another 176 are in the works. Most, 396, are in the US. If US FBCs were all adopted, they would apply to areas with nearly 34 million people, although some are optional (with parallel conventional codes). FBCs focus on urban form and promote compact, mixed-use communities as opposed to conventional zoning, which mostly separates uses and restricts density. The update shows 11 new FBCs adopted since earlier this year. Most of the codes are quite new — approximately 81 percent have been

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approved since 2003 (see graph below). Big city adopters include Miami, Dallas, Denver, El Paso, Memphis, Baltimore, Nashville, Tulsa, and Portland, Oregon. Florida is the state leader, with 54 FBCs adopted or in process covering 8.3 million people. California, Texas, Virginia, Maryland, and Tennessee all have codes covering more than a million people. Internationally, Scotland and United

Arab Emirates have adopted nationwide FBCs.

■ EPA and other nonprofit organizations are accepting applications for **EPA's Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities program**. The program, which began in 2011, provides technical assistance to about 50 communities a year on specific topics related to smart growth — such as launching a



Form-based codes adopted over time. Of 244 US codes, 80 percent have been adopted since 2003.

COURTESY OF HAZEL BORYS AND EMILY TALEN, THE CODES STUDY

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