

# Walkability or the Ability to Walk

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So you want to design your commercial project for “walkability”, huh? Let’s start by getting a good understanding of what it means to be “walkable.” There is a profound and distinct difference between “walkable” and the “ability to walk” within a place. Granted, some places do not even provide the ability to walk from place to place without playing vehicular Frogger.

According to a [Brookings Institution Study](#), by **Christopher Leinberger** and **Mariela Alfonso**, “real estate values increase as neighborhoods became more walkable, where everyday needs, including working can be met by walking, transit or biking.”

The study references a “five-step ladder” used to rate areas from the least to the most walkable. “On average, each step up the walkability ladder adds \$9 per square foot to annual office rents, \$7/ square foot to retail rents, more than \$300 per month to apartment rents and nearly \$82/ square foot to home values. “

I won’t belabor this post too much, as much of it has already been discussed on my [personal blog](#) as well as in a “[blog off](#)” that I participated in with other Urbanist bloggers across the country. Check those sites for a detailed look into different conditions of walkability.

I want to talk about the characteristics of walkable mixed-use and/or commercial places and a list of quantitative things to look for:

## **Right-of-Way Dedicated to Automobile Travel (excluding on-street parking)**

I like to use the consideration that, at the maximum, 50 percent of a right-of-way shall be dedicated to the conveyance of the automobile. Anything more than that and the right-of-way becomes a maintenance liability and traffic sewer. This ratio isn’t to say that the remainder of the space must be dedicated to sidewalks. Sufficient sidewalk widths are critical in creating a truly walkable place, but other amenities are also important such as landscape, bicycle infrastructure, benches, and other street furniture.

## **Street Enclosure**

A ratio of 1:3 is the desirable ratio for an effective mixed-use walkable street. What does this mean you ask? It works in tandem to the right-of-way item above.

If you have an 80-foot ROW, the building height on each side of the ROW shall be 1/3 the ROW width, or 26 feet in this case. This will provide a nice feel. Some places provide this but cheat the system by providing a false façade for the last 10 feet in lieu of a second floor. This takes away the authenticity of the place. If the market doesn’t demand a second floor at first, the structure shall be provided for it to be finished in the future.

## **Building Adaptability**

The adaptability of a building is also important; a walkable street or district is only effective if the building uses are successful. Once a building’s use becomes obsolete, if the building cannot adapt, it will sever off the street and the surrounding buildings/uses will suffer. It’s understandable that most developers desire the safe route in the interim, which is building what everyone else builds — small-, medium-, and big-box retail.

Chains adamantly request it and only the savviest and most persistent developers can overcome the demands and



poker faces of the chains. Finding the middle ground is crucial and asking for the things that matter are incredibly important, but many make the mistake of requesting the artificial components typically found in design guidelines (colors, fonts, banners, façade materials), and, oftentimes the bones of the future are not requested nor put in place.

Some of the bones include:

1. A façade that can be divided into the contextual increment for future smaller shops.
2. Appropriate Floor Heights: The first floor in particular should be no less than 14 feet in height, ideally 16 feet.
3. Fenestration: The sweet spot, [according to Steve Mouzon](#), is to have 70 percent glass for the façade at eye level.

### **Connectivity**

This is perhaps the most important characteristic because if you fail on this one, the place will not be walkable, perhaps not even walkable from place to place. It's important to not only connect the individual commercial elements together in a safe manner for pedestrians, but also to connect the adjacent land uses (residential, office, parks, other commercial areas, etc.) too.

Sidewalk widths in a mixed-use district shall be at least 8 feet in width, but ideally more, with ample space for the amenities associated with the area (trees, parking meters, newspaper boxes, benches, etc.).

### **Maximum Parking**

This is a sticky issue with the chain stores. They all want to have enough parking for their busiest day of the year. Typically the chains will demand more parking than the local jurisdiction sets as a minimum. Parking needs to fit the needs of a place on a typical day, however designing a lot for the 100-year storm of traffic is excessive and it will negatively affect the overall development.

On-street parking should be incorporated and surface parking lots shall be minimal and tucked behind the building, and parking structures should be used where density warrants it. Topography can assist in solving many parking issues by tucking a parking deck beneath the building, and provide an additional use for a retaining wall that may be needed.

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Several other things come into play, so this list is certainly not the end-all, but it provides a basis for walkability. The Pikes Peak region includes several areas where walkability is high, typically in downtown districts, notably **Old Colorado City**, **Historic Downtown Manitou Springs**, and **Downtown Colorado Springs**. We need to continue to foster these areas and consider walkability as future development expands in the region.

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