City planner, author, and TED Talk presenter Jeff Speck makes a compelling call for citizens and local officials to align their convictions and reflect on their built environment to focus on walkability. It is a motivating message justified by a thorough examination of design, social capital, health, and safety on the streets of America.

Is this a call to stop traffic? Not at all. Speck knows better than to make fanciful pleas for abrupt societal change; instead he shrewdly employs healthy doses of reality and practicality in his missive. In this easily digestible, engaging, and concise piece of work, he takes a hardnosed stance by starkly illustrating the consequences of building our society around the automobile. He calls on over 25 years of professional experience and research, including his collaborative efforts on the highly influential Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream and The Smart Growth Manual, to challenge traditional urban planning theory. He manages to do so through a witty and balanced approach, capable of resonating with a range of readers, from metropolitan Planning Directors to small-town Mayors to the average suburban resident. He delivers his message effectively through the use of objective, exhaustively researched, and intimately germane facts.

Speck puts forth eye-opening statistics on widely shared areas of concern: personal finance and health, commute times, and national security, to name a few. While some readers will already be aware of these general trends, their dramatic scale and what can be done to correct them may be less well understood. Portland is Speck’s flagship example of a city that identified the ills associated with automobile use, their scale, and the feasibility of mitigating their effects. He cites urban growth boundaries, large-scale investments in public transit and bicycle infrastructure, and creative urban design initiatives like the Skinny Streets program as instruments in Portland’s urban public policy portfolio intended to produce “Walkability Dividends.” He skillfully deploys this term – which refers to the social and economic benefits Portlanders enjoy thanks to the implementation of policies that defied the urban planning zeitgeist of the late 20th century – to make the reader cognizant of why we must endeavor to make our towns and cities more walkable.

Speck also uses Portland to show the advantages associated with forecasting generational preferences and applying them to the built environment. College graduates
moved to Portland at a rate five times the national average during the nineties. He contends this demographic trend occurred because Portland met the desires of millennials, 64 percent of whom move to a city before finding a job and 77 percent of whom want to live in a walkable urban core. He argues that these trends are only increasing with younger generations, and a growing percentage of the older population who seek walkability as they ditch the car and “retire in place” or move to Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs).

At the end of the day, the brilliance of Speck’s labor is in the effective organization of the book. It sets the stage with his own expertly defined General Theory of Walkability, which mandates four critical conditions a walk must satisfy: useful, safe, comfortable, and interesting. These conditions are then used as a way of thinking about a sequence of specific rules organized into the Ten Steps of Walkability. This is a tailored list of progressive planning initiatives, from “Mixing the Uses” to “Getting the Parking Right” to “Welcoming Bikes,” which Speck uses as a roadmap for the last three-quarters of the book. With the General Theory of Walkability as the foundation for implementing the Ten Steps of Walkability, Speck believes he has provided a comprehensive prescription for making cities more walkable. He never promotes his ideas as a panacea for correcting all of the ills created by an auto-favored built environment; Walkable City is simply a vehicle for us all to see the need to make the places we live more pedestrian-friendly and less auto-centric.

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