

First Steps To Walking In The Suburbs



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It's easy to think of downtown streets and urban residential areas as the "natural habitat" of Jane's Walks. Suburban regions are often designed with cars, not pedestrians, in mind. They can be geographically distant from the rest of the city, and difficult to reach by bike or public transit. They have a reputation, perhaps unfair, for being boring.

But Jane's Walks can happen anywhere! Walking in the suburbs can be a great, fun way to challenge the dominance of the car, and to invite other residents to try walking where they might otherwise drive and to question why there aren't more sidewalks. Also, in many cities, the cultural rift between downtown walkers and suburban drivers can feed into larger political divisions between regions, damaging the city's ability to work as a whole. Including the suburbs in your Jane's Walk festival can be a small but meaningful way to help bridge that divide.

Walk Story: "Green Space Love"

Mississauga, ON, Canada

Located west of Toronto, the landscape of Mississauga, ON includes wide, strip-mall-lined main roads separating residential communities from each other. When Jess Taylor, Mississauga's City Organizer at the time, set out to plan a walk, the city's sprawling layout presented a problem. "The places I wanted to highlight or visit were too far apart. The walk would have taken about 5 hours, and would not be accessible to all people." "Mississauga lacks a downtown core, so there are seemingly no clear areas to promote a walk," Taylor notes. "However, it does have a couple of distinct neighbourhoods where people do walk and hang out—Port Credit and Streetsville are the most obvious."

Walk leaders stepped forward to lead walks in those neighbourhoods, but Taylor still wanted to explore the less-obvious parts of her city. Her solution: "Be more creative with what you want to highlight on the walk. Choose one thing (e.g., something historic, something in nature that is cool, neat architecture, etc.), and create a walk around that."

Taylor chose the hydro corridor, an underrated but useful green space. "I wanted residents whose backyards backed onto it to attend the walk, so that they could meet each other and discuss the challenges and joys of living next to a hydro corridor, so I printed out flyers and did about 50 door-to-door mailbox deliveries letting them know about the walk." Although only one resident actually came on the walk as a result of her flyering effort, there were 8 people total, and Taylor is confident that interest in Jane's Walk will grow in her city in the next few years. "As more people show up to walks and as the buzz gets going, you get to connect to more people."

How To Get Started

In the suburbs, locals may not hang out in parks and coffee shops as much as they do in the city, but they're still getting together! There are lots of ways to find out where the people are and start doing outreach.

- If you're not familiar with the area you're interested in, do a little research! Google it and find out if there are any famous buildings there, points of historical interest, or controversial infrastructure projects. Figure out how to get there by transit from downtown. Grab a friend, go out there on a Saturday afternoon, and walk around!
- Specific neighborhoods may have their own Facebook groups where locals can discuss community issues.
- A local BIA or Chamber of Commerce might be a good place to contact.
- Community and athletic centres often host soccer clubs, nature groups, or trail runner clubs. Find out and get in touch. These are likely to be people who like to walk!
- A major issue in many suburbs is a lack of space and resources for teens and young adults. One walk, "[A Teenage Nightmare](#)" took a humorous look at this issue in the Calgary suburb of Bonavista. Community centres or local municipalities may host youth drop-in programs—contact them and find out. You could also try reaching out to a local high school.
- Dog owners are usually walkers, even if they live in car country! See if you can find a local dog-owners' association. Try calling the local Humane Society and find out if there are dog-owners' clubs. Find out where people walk their dogs. Is there an off-leash dog park nearby? Look for local dog lovers who might want to lead a walk about this.
- When you're doing outreach in an area where walking and community festivals are not so popular, remember to clearly explain what Jane's Walk is. Many people will initially assume it's a fundraising or fitness initiative. Connect it to the interests of the person you're talking to. If you call a BIA, explain that a Jane's Walk can help locals learn more about businesses in their community (and how to get to them on foot!). If you talk to a community association, suggest a Jane's Walk that looks at pedestrian safety, or offers an opportunity for neighbours to talk about home ownership issues.
- Some more great potential suburban walk topics: police presence and surveillance; movies filmed in the suburbs; local bylaws on subjects ranging from community gardens to noise levels; holiday decoration walks; how to deal with neighbours; hidden architectural gems; accessibility issues; local politics; environmental issues.

Things To Bear In Mind

- As Jess Taylor points out in the Walk Story above, in regions that are designed with cars in mind, interesting potential stops may be too far apart from each other. The walk will probably have to focus on one point of interest.
- If the walk leader really wants to cover a large distance, they could try planning a bicycle Jane's Walk. They could even try incorporating public transit into the walk. This will be tricky to organize, but it could be interesting and spark some good conversations!
- When you, or your walk leaders, rehearse the walk, be mindful of the safety issues of walking in a pedestrian-unfriendly area—e.g., lack of sidewalks or crosswalks. Work around these issues: Plan to cross at major intersections, where there are lights. Plan to have stops at roundabouts or safe large spaces away from traffic.
- In residential suburbs, respect private property—don't walk on lawns or block driveways.

How Can Suburban Residents Benefit From Jane's Walk?

- Residents interested in making their neighbourhood more pedestrian-friendly will have a chance to meet each other and talk about possible next steps. Similar Jane's Walks have led to community initiatives such as a neighbourhood clean-up day to tackle a litter problem.
- Celina Agaton, a Jane's Walk organizer in Makati, a car-oriented district of Metro Manila, Philippines, notes that just integrating walking into day-to-day activities can have an impact. When she's arranging meetings, "I'll say 'Hey, can we meet and have a coffee?' and then throw in, 'Then let's walk over to the park.' At first, they look at me like I have a third head!" But once they get there, she says, the response is usually, "Oh, I never knew this park existed, this is actually quite nice!" If you can get people to try walking to a park or shop once, it becomes an option for them.

Links

[A Walker In The Suburbs](#)

A blog that might provide some inspiration.

[Retrofitting The Suburbs To Increase Walking](#)

A long but information-rich review of ways in which urban planning can encourage walking.

Jane's Walk is a movement of free, citizen-led walking tours inspired by Jane Jacobs. The walks get people to tell stories about their communities, explore their communities, and connect with neighbours. Find out more at janeswalk.org

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With thanks to Jess Taylor and Celina Agaton.

Photo by Dan Jelly.