



Chapter 8: Walking to the Strip Mall Retrofitting Informal Pedestrian Paths

Image: Cycle and Pedestrian Path. www.constructionphotography.com

The Issue

An important aspect of fixing suburbia is increasing its walkability. One of the most problematic aspects of suburbia is its current auto-dominated state and lack of pedestrian-friendly environment.

The Implications

This chapter investigates the informal pedestrian paths that exist around commercial shopping strips and shows how they can be improved.

Project Information

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Retrofitting Sprawl: Addressing Seventy Years of Failed Urban Form. Edited by Emily Talen. 2015.

The Research

Key Points and Practice Takeaways:

1. Pedestrian networks in suburbia are much more than just sidewalks along streets. They include sidewalks within private property, cut-throughs, the streets themselves, paved and unpaved bike paths, informal goat paths, makeshift gates in fences, and kickdowns.
2. There is a mismatch between designed suburban pedestrian networks and resident's desire for direct and convenient access to commercial strips.
3. Informal pedestrian networks are commonplace and greatly increase connectivity around suburban commercial strips. The widespread existence of these informal paths should be justification for creating more connected pedestrian networks in new developments and pushing for them as retrofits in existing developments.
4. Informal paths, while increasing connectivity, should not be considered an equivalent to formalized pedestrian paths. They are available to a limited population, can be unsafe, are not as regularly maintained, may not be permanent, and raise liability questions for property owners.
5. Planners must carefully consider how to address these networks so that they can guarantee their existence and provide maintenance and safety while not risking their closure due to increased costs and liability to owners.