

## DON'T WALK



The other day, while driving in a part of a nearby city (accurately) known as Commercial Drive—you know, several miles of box stores and chain restaurants, I saw a pedestrian. I was waiting at a light and an unexpected flash of movement and color on my right distracted me. I glanced over, startled. A teenage girl had somehow threaded her way through the idling cars, without benefit of a crosswalk, and was climbing over waist-high steel barriers. I watched with concern as she flung one leg

across, then clumsily scrambled the rest of the way over, swinging a laden backpack ahead of her. Was she at sidewalk now, safe at last? Unfortunately no. As I pulled away, I saw her standing, hands on hips, regarding her next obstacle: a chain-link fence taller than her. Sidewalk was beyond, so close yet so far...

Have you ever tried to walk in such places? Dropped off the car at Jiffy Lube, and forayed out to the nearest Starbucks or Old Navy for some coffee or shopping instead of waiting around? Or, perhaps had someone drop you off at Macy's and you agreed to walk over to the nearby mall where they were headed, for your ride home?

Then you know. Cars hurtle by inches from you, unseeing, spraying grit and leaving you with a mouthful of exhaust. Often there are no sidewalks at all, nor crosswalks, nor bike lanes (as if!), nor even sometimes much of a shoulder. Traffic islands don't count, even if you devise a way to get from one to the next like a frog getting across a pond on lily pads. Should you make it "safely" into a parking lot, your adventure is not over—the door to the mall or the store or the restaurant is across an expanse of parked and moving, turning vehicles. Drivers don't expect to see you there and no allowance is made for your presence. See any walkways, actual or painted on the pavement?

Sometimes pedestrians try to negotiate these commercial areas because they have no choice. Their car broke down, or they don't have a car. They're on their way home or on their way to work (possibly what that young girl was doing). They're carrying bags. They're weaving, dodging, concentrating.

Meanwhile, litter lodges in gutters and grates, and gusts up and down these roadsides, something you may never notice from a car but cannot avoid if you are on foot. Trash, becalmed plastic bags, old dirty sand, discarded lottery tickets, unidentifiable matted crud—it's the flotsam of our car-and-consumer culture, and it's ugly and disheartening. Who's going to clean it up? Can you imagine anyone bothering or daring to wield a push broom in such a setting?

Becoming a second-class citizen to the automobile, in the realm of arterials and onramps and traffic islands and great big parking lots, in the familiar shadows of Best Buy and Applebee's and Staples, is scary. It is also dehumanizing. Any pedestrian is vulnerable and in danger.

Stop. Think! We're so used to driving to and around in such places that we don't even question their daunting layout, the often filthy condition they're in, and their basic creepiness. We take them and their unwritten rules for granted...unless or until we find ourselves navigating them on foot.

"When you degrade the public realm you automatically degrade the quality of your civic life. Nobody wants to be in places that are not worth caring about." (James Howard Kunstler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere*, said this.) Stop. Think! And watch out for other humans, please.

**Epilogue:**

After I wrote this, I remembered a scathing critique of a Virginia (does it really matter where exactly?) shopping-mall area by the architect and planner Andrés Duany, that takes my ruminations a step further.

He suggests that we often assume that the pedestrians we see in such settings are "*Indigent. That kind of environment? It is embarrassing to be seen walking. If you actually see someone halfway decently dressed walking there, you might stop to help them, because obviously there is a problem.*" In other words, regular middle-class people don't walk. We have a car, which exempts us and allows us to scoot past our fellow man, aloof or indifferent.