

Sidewalks Can Make a Town a Neighborhood

We've forgotten the joy of roaming—and that driving our kids everywhere won't keep them safe.

BY CAROLYN V. EGAN

ACCORDING TO MY ODOMETER, the grocery store is exactly 1.1 miles down the road from where I live in an emerging suburb that was a stretch of largely uninterrupted tobacco fields a mere 25 years ago. I walked this distance once in a spasm of self-recrimination, only to find my life at risk at every quirky bend along the route where cars are accustomed to their incautious rule.

My adventure yielded this startling revelation: I need a car to safely navigate my town, because—apart from a few new developments that sit like isolated cocoons—it lacks sidewalks. Most of us drive everywhere, no matter how near our destination. But in my childhood during the 1960s and '70s, the world was still accessible to pedestrians.

Some of my earliest memories are of me scurrying to keep pace with my mother as she pushed my sister in her baby carriage along the sidewalks across town. When I was older, I memorized every crack in the half mile of sidewalk linking my home to my grammar school. No schoolbus stopped traffic at every block to pick up children at their front doors. Nor did a parade of mothers wait in idling automobiles to cart their children home when the school bell sounded.

When I was little, the world was mine. I knew where the rainwater carved rivers in sand beds at the bottom of the hill before roiling to its final plunge down the storm drain. I knew the best street for a running slide in my winter boots. I knew the smell and look of spring as it quickened green upon the front lawns I passed. And I

remember my heart quickening with it, in anticipation.

As I grew, I walked farther. I walked to and from more-distant schools. I walked to my first jobs, to my friends' houses, to the movies. Sidewalks enabled these humming, skipping, thoughtful journeys,



POUNGING THE PAVEMENT: When I was little, no parade of mothers waited in idling automobiles to cart their kids home

during which I came to know the corner stores, the old factory buildings, the smiling ladies hunched over their gardens

along the meandering paths that twisted toward home. I knew the seasons of the geese that pierced the indigo sky and the seasons of the squirrels that clicked in solemn contest with hungry birds in gray branches. I knew which dogs would greet

me and which would bark a warning; the cats that curled sweet tails around my legs; the mailmen who trudged—heads down—from house to house. All these things I knew and counted on.

I am told that nobody really cares about sidewalks; nobody wants to shovel them. Yet sidewalks—those evenly spaced concrete blocks—stitch a town into a neighborhood. They allow a physical experience of community while beckoning children to explore, to discover, to make friends three blocks away. For kids today, geography is understood from the back seat of a car, rather than through the scents and textures of heart-beating, muscle-flexing, self-motivated expeditions that connect one place to another, one person to another. The destination has displaced the journey.

Parents have become slaves to their children's schedules, terrified to let their offspring out of sight. New houses are huge, enclosing all of life. They're connected by technological portals to the outside world, making an abstraction of everything beyond their walls.

We worry about the safety of our children if we let them loose to wander sidewalks, even while we hear more and more stories of predators on the highways and byways of the Internet. We have forgotten that we cannot protect our children by telling them to hop in and buckle up. Our children do not develop the instincts to discern and avoid danger from the back seat of an automobile. We deprive them of self-mastery by insulating them from very cold and very hot temperatures, from rain, from wind. They do not know who they are without a plan, without a ride. While we encourage dependence in our children by chauffeuring them everywhere, we also encourage in them habits of selfishness and parochialism. Adult maturity is rooted in the unstructured roaming of childhood.

Sidewalks are becoming nostalgic artifacts of a time before three- or four-car families. To me, their absence represents disturbing changes in the way we connect to one another—and the habits, values and capacities we bequeath to our children.

It troubles me to wonder where the sidewalk really ends.

EGAN lives in South Windsor, Conn.

Submit

your own essay for use
in our new Online
My Turn column at
Myturn.Newsweek.com
on MSNBC