

## **Walking While... : Walkable Communities and the Politics of Urban Neighborhood Governance**

**Mars Quiambao**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores walkable communities, with a specific emphasis on the intricate dynamics of urban neighborhood governance. Drawing upon case studies from three diverse urban locales—namely, the predominantly Black Chicago neighborhood of Eastwood, the predominantly Chinese Chicago neighborhood of Bridgeport, and the community occupying People’s Park in Berkeley, California—my research scrutinizes the politics surrounding walkable communities. Central to this analysis is an examination of the role played by urban neighborhood governance in ensuring the safety, accessibility, and equitable distribution of amenities, including public transportation, educational facilities, and healthcare services. In addition, this article delves into the multifaceted effects of policing, spatial inequalities, and urban redevelopment within the context of walkable communities. This examination is anchored in the broader question of whether the concept of walkable communities contributes positively or negatively to the pursuit of social justice within urban housing landscapes. To argue that there are numerous inequities seen in walkable communities, for example, due to wealth, race, and gender, I raise the question: for whom is the city walkable if it distributes uneven spatial citizenship?

Keywords: walkable communities, urban governance, accessibility, right to the city, spatial inequities, hyper-surveillance, hypervigilance, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)

### **Introduction**

According to a research article from *Urban Studies*, walkability is “a set of capacities of any given neighborhood that is embodied in urban morphologies in three main ways—the densities (concentrations) of buildings and people; the mix of different functions and attractions; and the access networks we use to navigate between them” (Dovey and Pafka 2019, 94). On a more informal note, walkability is a way of life. It means different things to different people. To real estate developers, walkability means more amenities are available to prospective homeowners and residents, which results in higher revenue. In the sphere of public health, walkability means more physical activity and lower rates of obesity in a given population. With regard to care for the environment, a walkable community or environment means fewer cars on the road, resulting in fewer carbon emissions. However, for some populations, walkable communities may also represent a way of life that is inaccessible and unsympathetic to and even hostile toward them. To clarify, there are instances in which there is a lack of care and attention given to the distribution of inhabitants’ rights and amenities, thereby targeting and overtly surveilling

marginalized populations that are predominantly lower class, Black and Brown, and/or unhoused.

An instance of such overt violence occurred on February 23, 2020, when a 25-year-old Black man named Ahmaud Arbery went out for a jog and was chased and then killed by three white men in broad daylight. The men claimed they thought Arbery was robbing a property in their neighborhood and thus they had acted in self-defense against him. Nearly one year later, those three men were convicted of murder charges. Arbery's murder came amid a period of reckoning around race and racial justice in the wake of several killings of innocent and unarmed Black Americans (Faussett 2022).

In acknowledgement of Ahmaud Arbery's unjust murder, this article examines walkable communities, emphasizing the politics of neighborhood governance. It examines three case studies located in the predominantly Black Chicago neighborhood of Eastwood, the predominantly Chinese Chicago neighborhood of Bridgeport, and in the community occupying People's Park in Berkeley, California. Moreover, it focuses on the ability of urban neighborhood governance—the processes through which local and municipal governments are organized and delivered in urban areas and the existing relationship between government agencies and its local civil communities—to provide safety and accessibility to residents and equitably distribute adequate amenities (e.g., public transportation, educational facilities, and healthcare facilities). Further, in this article, I expand on the effects of policing, unequal urban geographies, and urban redevelopment and their differential impacts on those who enjoy the rights to walkability in the community. I thus question whether the concept of walkable communities, works for or against social justice in the urban housing landscape. Acknowledging the complexity of its social effects, I assert that walkable communities, although conceived with good intentions, still work to perpetuate social injustice in urban neighborhoods and communities.

I argue that there are numerous inequities (e.g., found across dimensions of wealth, race, and gender, among others) evident in walkable communities, and accordingly raise several questions. First, despite the many amenities they provide, are walkable communities making cities affordable, accessible, and available to everyone? Second, in acknowledgement of Ahmaud Arbery's murder, how can walkable communities provide minorities, especially those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), the fundamental human right to move about their community on public streets and trails without fear and without risk of hyper-surveillance? I assert that walking may seem apolitical, but in actuality, walkability is a deeply politicized issue: walking and having a walkable environment is what creates a community's surrounding culture, and it is affected by factors that contribute to unequal urban geographies. In attempting to develop and create equitable urban spaces, how do we make walkable communities better for everyone living in them?

## Methods

This critical study focuses on the viability of walkability in communities in cities across the United States, and the analysis draws from a comprehensive examination of secondary sources. This secondary qualitative research effort spanned one month and encompassed investigations within library archives and online public databases from March 2022 to April 2022. The research explored anecdotes and extensive analytical studies concerning the attitudes and perceptions surrounding neighborhoods where the concept of Henri Lefebvre's "right to the city" is a contentious issue (as quoted in Purcell 2016). Simply stated, the right to city is, as British geographer David Harvey defines it, is "far more than a right of individual access to the

resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire...a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization" (2016, 158). For this reason, the prevailing concern revolves around access to the walkable city and its associated rights, privileges, and amenities, all of which are profoundly influenced by considerations of race and class. This overarching observation centers on the spatial and hierarchical organization inherent to urban planning and development, which are deeply intertwined with the unique historical backgrounds of each city. Such dynamics highlight the intricate interplay of power and politics, race and class, and, notably, gender. The methodological challenges encountered during this primarily qualitative and analytical research endeavor underscore the limitations of available knowledge and information.

I argue that walkability contributes to the perpetuation of residential inequity, as it is available primarily to individuals of certain classes and racially defined groups. In this sense, walkability contributes to larger areas of scholarship on comparative mobilities, including migration. Here, the act of walking in and of itself assumes a highly personalized and community-specific character. This underscores the need for a nuanced perspective on agency and personal choices, as, critically, a pervasive state of hypervigilance among residents in urban walkable communities is often produced—as many individuals are wary of who is walking in their community. As previously mentioned, walking carries diverse connotations and meanings, reflecting its role as a means of taking up urban space. Within the constraints imposed by the information available, this research extends our understanding of walking but also illuminates the intricate intersections between walking and the cultivation of walkable communities across various sociological dimensions, including gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and power dynamics.

### **Public Parks and Perceptions of Quality of Life**

Parks are public spaces and therefore are a part of the imagined walkable community, if not a tangible reflection of the quality of life in a community. They provide identity for citizens of any background and are a major factor in the perception of a better quality of life. Geographer Don Mitchell (1995) examines the struggle over public space across three different uses in People's Park, located in Berkeley California: the park as a space of collective action, as a space of control for powerful institutions, and as a space of hierarchical organization in relation to Berkeley's surrounding unhoused population.

Mitchell (1995) details that public parks are important community resources that promote a better quality of life through emphasizing and improving upon physical activity, mental health, social cohesion, and conservation. Despite these benefits, it remains clear that Black and Brown community members, in this case comprising most of the unhoused population in People's Park, are less likely to benefit from these resources in places, due to over-policing in the name of order and supposed cleanliness. Tracing the history of People's Park over time, Mitchell shows that the aggressive policing and removal of local activists, so-called squatters, and mere urban dwellers in this area is particularly alarming because it stands in contrast to the mission of public parks—providing recreational and leisure experiences to everyone and anyone who occupies them.

Mitchell's (1995) work speaks to an unfortunate pattern, one in which people of color have historically been both directly and indirectly excluded from the benefits of public space and hence, the amenities provided by walkable communities. Informally, the concept of a community alludes to a notion of shared space where people can interact and to which people can attach

meaning. In the case of People’s Park, the state (i.e., either the city police or local government officials) removes those deemed by officials as illegitimate in terms of the right to occupy that space. This removal highlights the fact that in the realm of urban governance, development, and aesthetics, people of specific backgrounds—more specifically those who might be Black and Brown, transient, and poor—are not, and will not be, prioritized in their needs and amenities in the imagined perfect walkable community. Such groups are denied the right to live in their own community, which perpetuates social injustice.

In the introduction of *The Right to The City* (2003), Don Mitchell further discusses how People’s Park went from being a space of freedom to a perceived space of depravity. In other words, the mere fact that unhoused people are in the physical space seemingly makes it a space of social and moral deprivation. It is also important to note that the academic administration at the University of Berkeley and the city government of Berkeley entered into a municipal agreement to redevelop People’s Park so as to thwart its “inappropriate” use (Mitchell 2003, 91). The definition of inappropriate use in this context suggests that authoritative figures (i.e., the state) view unhoused individuals as “inappropriate” or “undesirable” users of public spaces, and so local government policy makes efforts to discourage or even criminalize the unhoused. The “right to the city” concept, which Mitchell (2003) explores, advocates for the idea that urban spaces should be inclusive and accessible to all, regardless of their socioeconomic status. By framing the issue in terms of “inappropriate use,” his work critiques the stigmatization of unhoused individuals and condemns the reaction to unhoused people occupying People’s Park, arguing it is antithetical to the purpose of public parks.

In addition, Don Mitchell’s (2003) commentary about the relationship between the unhoused population, the overt regulation and policing of the space, and the physical space of the park itself illustrates the idea of the *dispositif*, a conceptual framework illustrating how specific aspects of urban development, such as transportation, land use, or public spaces, are shaped and governed. The concept of the societal *dispositif*, as developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault (as quoted in Pløger 2008), is particularly relevant when examining the regulation of public spaces, especially in the context of unhoused individuals being prevented from inhabiting them. As Pløger writes,

Foucault always regarded space, from his early writings onwards, as a place for configurations of knowledge, bodies and the shaping of human behaviour, a relation between body, gaze and discipline, all leading to powerful spatializations of specific (societal/situational/social) configurations...[and he] saw space as both rational and separating. On one hand, they [governing bodies] employ space to implement a bio-politic, a “sorting out” through classifications and on the other hand, it is used to separate what is “normal” and “a-normal”, the sick and the healthy, the good and the bad. In this way, urban space becomes important to the administration of city life and to a political “modernizing of power”. The emergent bio-medical episteme becomes an important societal *dispositif* of “sorting out”, dividing and dispersing people rationally in space through a certain coordination and institutionalization of certain schemes of signification (2008, 61).

Under the circumstances described by Mitchell (1995, 2003), the *dispositif* encompasses a complex network of elements all of which are systemically oppressive, including city regulations, municipal policies, law enforcement practices, public opinion, and spatial design, that jointly influence the utilization of public spaces. When unhoused individuals are denied access to spaces such as People’s Park, it underscores the power dynamics at play within this

authoritative system. The regulation of the park, for example, reflects the interests of city authorities, property owners, and local businesses, who seek to maintain a certain image or functionality of these spaces. As a consequence, the deliberate exclusion of unhoused people in People's Park occurs and thus exemplifies the dispositive's ability to define who has the right to occupy and utilize public spaces and how such regulations are enforced. This has, over time, led to the perpetuation of societal norms and hierarchies of spatial access based on housing status, economic privilege, and public aesthetics. Thus, it is crucial to analyze the issue through the lens of Foucault's concept (as quoted in Raffnsøe et al. 2014), as it unveils the interplay of power, knowledge, and spatial configurations in shaping a hostile and exclusionary urban landscape, such as that of People's Park, and shows the shortcomings in terms of accessibility to those who wish to be visible and simply exist within the public space.

### **Walking and Mobility in the Eastwood Neighborhood**

On the same note of people being denied the right to live in their own community, Laurence Ralph's book *Renegade Dreams: Living Through Injury in Gangland Chicago* (2014) contextualizes the effects of disability and high-crime rates among other social forces, that pressure Black urban residents to endure and persevere through the chaotic state of the Chicago neighborhood of Eastwood. Ralph asserts that Eastwood is not just a warzone but a community. However, it is also a place where people's dreams are projected but never fully realized. Eastwood's residents deal with poor urban neighborhood governance, which can be seen in the numbers, as Eastwood has incredibly high rates of unemployment, dilapidated housing, as well as high rates of incarceration and criminal activity, addiction, and so forth.

Taking a unique approach to his field research and urban ethnography, Ralph (2014) examines the social forces behind Eastwood's long-standing plight. Ralph begins by giving an account of the Divine Knights Gang and their everyday interactions in the neighborhood. For children living in Eastwood, walking from place to place means needing to be aware of their space all the time or in other words, being extremely vigilant. That means avoiding certain streets and alleys in order to avoid getting jumped by rival gangs or to avoid law enforcement. But what systems are in place to address this issue? As the rates of policing are high in this predominantly Black and high crime neighborhood, there seems to be no rush from local governance to address and reduce such rates, rather, it is a fact of life. Apart from policing, there is also blatant disregard around addressing the dilapidated housing in Eastwood. Municipal efforts instead focus on housing redevelopment plans for more affluent and wealthy prospective buyers, and not on senior residents or long-standing members in the community and members of the Divine Knights Gang (Ralph 2014). With this in mind, Ralph's *Renegade Dreams* not only points out the negative social forces contributing to Eastwood's demise, but also lets the reader reconsider, in both the physical and metaphysical sense, what can be done for Eastwood inhabitants. How can walking and mobilization around the neighborhood be safe and upward mobility in the Eastwood neighborhood and beyond become possible?

This idea that walking speaks to larger ideas of mobility, as both personal and impersonal, is further examined in Evrick Brown and Timothy Shortell's *Walking in Cities: Quotidian Mobility as Urban Theory, Method, and Practice* (2015). By definition, walking is the right to mobility. Walking and mobility are, more importantly, activities that have been transformed and redefined by urbanization and by the eras and the communities in which they have taken place. As geographer Tim Cresswell states,

The idea of mobility as liberty and freedom would have made little sense in feudal society. In the early modern period, as cities grew, and people were displaced from the land, the practice and ideology of mobility was transformed. New mobile figures began to inhabit the landscapes of Europe. Mobility as a right [was] accompanied by the rise of the figure of the modern *citizen* who was granted the right to move at will within the bounds of the nation-state (quoted in Brown and Shortell 2015, 1; emphasis original).

This quote alludes to the freedoms that were newly founded during the beginnings of urban modernity in Europe, and over time, these have transformed into what people see as mobility, and how people use mobility in the context of urban space and social interaction.

In the context of race, power, and gender, walking is used as a context for intergroup interaction and simultaneously reflects the systemic inequalities that order contemporary intergroup interaction in everyday urban life and communities. For example, walking for elites is a lifestyle choice. Elites do not have to walk but choose to do so for pleasure and for leisure, despite having access to better vehicles or other aspects of material wealth, such as money and chauffeurs. In contrast, for the relatively less powerful and wealthy, and the poor, walking is often born out of necessity. Shortell (Brown and Shortell 2015) asserts that poor and vulnerable citizens have various motives; they are sometimes walking *away* from something, such as to escape from a toxic or non-ideal living situation, and if not, they are walking *toward* something better, such as better work opportunities. Focusing on the power dynamics of walking is therefore important, as walking often makes the relatively powerless more vulnerable, for example in situations that include heightened exposure to street crime for residents of poorer, high-crime neighborhoods. As a result, it becomes the responsibility of the walker to evade dangerous situations, rather than the responsibility of institutions to mitigate or ameliorate the negative social forces and situations in the first place.

### **Gendered and Racialized Walking**

Shanshan Lan, in Brown and Shortell's (2015) book, details her ethnographic field research in which she simultaneously examines walking, narratives about walking, and the accumulation of racial knowledge. Lan's work is powerful as she is both an academic ethnographer and a person who lives alongside of and closely identifies with the affected community in Bridgeport, otherwise known as Chicago's Chinatown. In providing both a formal and informal perspective of walking, Lan shows that walking can be an experience of racialized, gendered, and classed violence and harm. Lan thus poses walking as a highly personal experience that requires special precautions depending on how you appear to the community around you. That said, walking is an embodied experience in which the built environment, and more importantly, the governance surrounding it, are critical to how marginalization and inequity operates and proliferates.

In Bridgeport, this inequity and danger is perpetuated by the power and structure of institutions, as historically racist state policies such as urban renewal and housing segregation persist in other forms. For those reasons, the rapid deterioration of the built environment and interracial-class coalitions are likely to occur and only add to the dangers of urban walking (Lan 2015). For white, Black, and Asian residents, their understandings of the neighborhood, such as the focus on "street etiquette" and "street smarts," are racially coded. The need for such local knowledge only compounds the stress and vigilance that Chinese residents and non-white residents are burdened with, as they must maintain a constant awareness to stay alert and safe and have a strong will to survive in the racialized urban environment. All the while, white

Bridgeport residents and tourists know little about the racial landscape of the community and do not require this type of knowledge or the will to survive and navigate their day-to-day lives. In Lan's closing remarks, using her insights from her ethnographic research, she compares two types of walking: walking as a daily routine that requires diligence and care, and walking as a planned special event. Lan describes the latter as operating through the white touristic gaze, which only objectifies the community's amenities for pleasure and leisure. Lan concludes that these two approaches to walking require different levels of attention and mindfulness. It is additionally unfair to burden residents who are overwhelmingly non-white with the need to be preoccupied with navigating how to survive in their own neighborhood, when it is not just a space that they occupy—it is their home.

Lily Linke's podcast *Foot Notes* delves into the intersection between walkability and race. Linke (2020) focuses on designing a home or the "perfect street for the imagined walkable community," but recognizes it is a luxury not available to all. In an article from *America Walks*, Linke asserts that:

The decision about whether or not to walk somewhere, and if so what route to take, is deeply personal, political, social, and cultural. Where I feel safe and comfortable is an amalgamation of my identity, my lived experiences, and the culture of the place I find myself in. We can design the "perfect" street, but if we don't address the culture that governs that street, walking will continue to be a luxury enjoyed by some, and not the deeply human right it must be, enjoyed by all (2020).

As mentioned earlier, Black Americans, especially Black males, continue to be harassed, assaulted, or murdered while just trying to move through their daily lives. Trayvon Martin was murdered while walking through his own neighborhood (Baldwin 2022). Ahmaud Arbery was murdered while jogging through a neighborhood adjacent to his own. It is this reality that pushed Linke to produce *Foot Notes*, and that pushed me to question how walkable communities and those who advocate for walkability can address the issue of anti-Black violence and overt surveillance of Black people. In this context, it is reasonable to argue that many individuals find that so-called walkable communities are spaces that are unsympathetic and hostile toward them.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Walking is heavily imbricated with factors concerning race, class, and gender and influences the way people perceive themselves. This research has illuminated such topics as the right to the city and asks more specifically: what rights and liberties can citizens fairly expect to benefit from and participate in? My research perspective expands on considerations of the unequal geographies found in Chicago neighborhoods such as Eastwood and Bridgeport, illuminating both the multi-sensorial similarities and differences found in communities of people with different backgrounds—Black and Asian—and the manner in which these respective groups interact with their built environment by walking out of necessity and survival.

From a personal perspective, it would be remiss to not think about the importance of having a walkable campus and how that aspect is integral to the college experience. However, having a walkable community does have implications for the neighboring residents around it. Therefore, it is important to understand the impact of walkable communities, how they exacerbate disparities in wealth, race, and class, and as seen from the findings, how this particularly affects

communities of color. By acknowledging this, we can reimagine the ways walkable communities are seen by either group affected: those who build them and those who inhabit them.

The findings provided in this article show that poor urban neighborhood governance and unequal geographies of infrastructure in cities across the United State have led to cumulative injustices experienced by marginalized populations that are predominantly lower class, Black and Brown, and/or unhoused. In each community mentioned, urban planning initiatives by local and municipal agencies have failed to prioritize safety and accessibility for all residents in favor of social legitimacy and imposed images of city cleanliness, economic incentives, and supposed future prosperity. In the process of attaining such socially desirable goals, the communities I have pointed to here have fallen short of meeting the needs of those who inhabit them. In turn, residents are subjected to further social and emotional pressure, whether that be fear of danger or death.

Moving forward, those in charge of planning walkable communities need to be focused on a direction that calls for both racial and social equity. Researchers and planners must listen to and engage with communities directly. We must also seek to understand how municipal governance and those in positions of power and privilege often contribute to the struggles of those who are relatively powerless and vulnerable, even when those in power never intend for this to happen. Finally, the imagined walkable community must have coalitions of people from all backgrounds and consider identities beyond those related to race, class, and gender, such as ability, age, and so forth. To achieve the goal in mind, we must acknowledge that for safe walkable communities to exist, we must eliminate the fear that such marginalized populations as those studied here have been experiencing all their lives.

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