



Walking In the Rain

Considering the Walker

by Clyde Doktor

It is not only the weather that makes the city of Portland inherently hostile to walkers. Where I live, sidewalks on arterial streets lack buffering grass strips and give way to muddy paths even within a few miles of downtown. Pedestrian crossings on major streets are often spaced at half mile intervals, leaving the walker a Hobson's choice. He or she can continue on a muddy path or illegally dodge cars and trucks that are as unpredictable as the charging bulls of Pamplona. On arterial streets traffic subjects the walker to the spray, gravel, fumes and noise from which the driver is protected by a steel cocoon.

There also are stealth cyclists who track hapless walkers onto the sidewalk and brush them off balance with a casual and belated, "on your left." Based on eighteen years as a walking-commuter in Portland I have to judge Oregon's vaunted land use planning system as marginally successful. Is it fair to judge such a grand scheme by the seemingly insignificant and contrarian needs of a small minority? I think it is.

In the naive and heady days of the mid-1970s, I served on the Hillsboro Planning Commission. When we thought of the word "transportation," we did not just think "machine." When we drafted our first state-wide plan, SB 100, we glimpsed the vision of a community structured so that facilities for a civil

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existence would be clustered around neighborhoods, accessible by a network of walking and bicycle paths. Citizens could choose to live in close proximity to their work, play, education, shopping, health care, and entertainment.

The vision of a closely integrated community emerged from the process of meeting with Hillsboro's residents and asking them to tell us about cities they liked. The most commonly mentioned cities—London, Paris, San Francisco, Venice and Florence—were large cities, but with a common development pattern. They evolved by combining smaller cities. Even though these cities are now much larger, their citizens find most of the amenities of life within a few blocks of their residences. They are cities where walking is valued, allowing access to the city's riches. It is ironic that many of the cities in which people love to walk were not planned at all, but simply evolved in times when walking was for most citizens the only practical mode of transport.

Fortunately, walker-friendly land use patterns have emerged in some neighborhoods in Portland. Whether the result of land use planning, neighborhood organization or market forces, these revitalized neighborhoods illustrate the benefits of compact urban design. As the residents of Northwest, the Hawthorne district, Northeast Broadway and the Pearl District know, neighborhood living is available to those who can afford it.

Discussions concerning new bridges over the Willamette river and Mayor Katz's bold proposal to eventually reclaim the air space over I-405 for urban development hold promise for significant improvements to the walker's environment. Each of these projects offer the prospect for the creation of a type of passage common in medieval Europe and peculiarly beneficial to the walker. The French, of course, have a phrase for it, the *pont-maison*.

The *pont-maison* or "house bridge" is a street, complete with housing and shops, that crosses a river. In his delightful book, *Streets for People*, Bernard Rudofsky illustrates the popularity of walking-oriented bridges in Paris, London and throughout Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These were not mere footbridges with some civil accouterments, but grand structures lined with five-story apartments and shops of all description. Four of the bridges serving Paris's Ile de la Cité were *pont-maisons*. In the case of the original London Bridge, luxury shops lined its narrow lane which encouraged shoppers to linger and browse.

The last remaining significant, but not nearly so grand, example is the famed

Ponte Vecchio in Florence. It seems that no one who visits Florence feels their stay is complete without ambling across this fourteenth century structure with its artistically-framed views of the Arno and its jewelry shops. The upper story is reserved for those who, like the fabled Medicis, want to travel between the Uffizzi Gallery and the Petit Palace protected from both the weather and prying eyes.

Even though the Willamette lends itself to such a project, given current uncertainties relating to a new Willamette bridge, an I-405 bridge seems the more likely candidate for Portland. A *pont-maison* across I-405 in Portland would serve a number of land use and other public policy goals. A bridge dedicated to walkers would be a practical encouragement to walkers and a powerful symbol of the city's commitment to truly alternative transportation.

It would be a relatively simple project, jump-starting the I-405 proposal by serving as a model and proving its efficacy. A "walker's bridge" would be an ideal candidate for the public-private partnership so valued by today's local officials. The state and city could provide the basic structure and utilities with the private sector developing the commercial and residential areas.

Because the property is in the public domain, a number of public benefits could be achieved. Portland is concerned about the shortage of affordable housing in the city center, so a portion of the housing units could be set aside for that purpose. Because a walkers' bridge would presumably not require dedicated parking areas, the housing would be favored by low-income persons reliant on public transport, seniors who have given up driving, practicing environmentalists or anyone who simply enjoys the thought of being able to walk to work, the store, school or the many cultural amenities in an urban center. As on the Ponte Vecchio, the location would also appeal to artisans who want to live above their shops. The housing contribution could be substantial. The original London Bridge was lined with full-sized apartments five stories high!

The project also would tie together two neighborhoods previously divided by the freeway. The concept could be expanded to include a small village center with convenience shopping, coffee and newspaper shops, and even a small park setting with benches to enjoy the views—yes, the views. Freeways may not enjoy the best of reputations, but they do have the benefit of opening up large swaths of a city to light and views. Have you noticed in your driving that some of the best views in the city are from its bridges? The small viewing

parks could double as outdoor seating for those coffee shops.

Of course, there will be challenges. After all, the I-405 is not the gentle flowing Arno. The project will have to be engineered to withstand the noise and fumes of the freeway below. This may not be so great a challenge as it first appears. Today's energy conservation building codes already promote much quieter and better sealed structures than in the past. In addition, we have plenty of experience in building apartments and commercial structures alongside freeways. Given Oregon's long wet season, it is probably advisable to cover the bridge so the bridge itself becomes a respite for walkers on rainy days. "One Percent for the Arts" funds might be used to fashion an attractive glass canopy to let in light and keep out rain, on the model of the renowned Galleria in Milan.

A greater challenge is the need to service businesses and residences from small trucks, assuming that delivering goods in hand carts is too quaint even for Portland. This need is met in many cities with pedestrian malls by limiting delivery hours to early in the morning, before latte-powered commuters hit the streets. Access is provided by removing barricade posts to allow trucks in during the appointed hours. The same posts could be used to separate walking and bicycle lanes. Convenient bicycle racks would allow bicyclists to stop and enjoy the ambiance of the walkers' world before speeding on their way.

This proposal for a simple house bridge over I-405, patterned after Florence's Ponte Vecchio, pales in comparison to the grand scheme envisioned by Mayor Katz. Despite its diminutive scope, it provides an unusual number of benefits, not just to the forgotten walker, but to the residents of the housing it would provide and to the adjacent neighborhoods. It provides the opportunity, as with the now familiar spires of the convention center, for the city to create yet another cultural icon. It would work even better as that faintly envisioned new walkers' bridge over the Willamette.

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