

Transdisciplinary Collaboration Through Memphis Walks

ANTHONY KITSINGER
University of Memphis

BRIAN D. CROOKS
University of Memphis

Memphis Walks represents an interdisciplinary, community-engaged effort to enhance health through re-envisioning the built environment. With the goal of increasing walkability in urban neighborhoods, Memphis Walks addresses many social determinants detrimental to health: crime, inadequate outdoor lighting, deteriorating sidewalks and crosswalks, dangerous traffic patterns, inadequate access to health care, and lack of walkable destinations.

WHY WALKABILITY?

Walkability is at the center of most communities' quality of life index – enhancing physical health, the environment, and social cohesion. However, as our built environment has evolved, walking in the twenty-first century has become the transportation mode of last resort.

As U.S. cities are becoming increasingly car dependent and less safe for pedestrians, a large portion of our population cannot access jobs, goods and services without driving. Concomitantly, our lifestyles are increasingly sedentary and public health concerns, such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and air pollution continue to worsen.

This study contends that the simple act of walking has the potential to positively affect our physical, mental and social well-being. Through Memphis Walks we are developing walkability metrics so that communities can benchmark their current conditions and measure progress over time.

Beginning in Memphis' inner-city Crosstown neighborhood, we engaged community residents through a community survey designed to gauge perceptions of crime, safety, blight, walking patterns, traffic congestion, social engagement, and health status. University faculty and students conducted environmental assessments related to crime patterns, community lighting, walkability, traffic speed, pedestrian counts, unsafe sidewalks, and physical design in the neighborhood. Active transportation and transit is critical for the roughly 4,000 residents of this diverse community.

Memphis Walks has taken on the challenge of overcoming the environmental challenges that discourage walking. A primary objective

of this effort is to improve public policy to prioritize people over automobiles, so people become more important than cars.

The ultimate intent is that research and dialog from this collaboration will influence public policy to support the development of more safe, walkable places to in an urban community, as well as support transdisciplinary graduate education.

This University of Memphis Design Collaborative (UMDC) initiative is a partnership among the departments of Architecture, City & Regional Planning, Engineering, Criminology & Criminal Justice, the School of Public Health and five community partners: The Shelby County Health Department (SCHD), Office of Sustainability, the Church Health Center (CHC), Livable Memphis, and Crosstown Arts. UMDC, along with university and community partners, was recently selected as a new member of the national AIA Design and Health Research Consortium for our "Memphis Walks" initiative.¹

The University of Memphis Design Collaborative (UMDC) serves as an outreach arm of the University, focused on critical community challenges in urban design and community development.²⁻³ The UMDC is led by a partnership between the Department of City & Regional Planning and the Department of Architecture,



Image 1: The UMDC, along with university and community partners, was recently selected as a new member of the national AIA Design and Health Research Consortium for our "Memphis Walks" initiative.

however its collaborative initiatives include many other University and community partners. Through its interdisciplinary strengths, the UMDC connects *design to community improvement* in a comprehensive way.

The Design Collaborative’s initiatives are generative from critical community issues and are:

Built on collaboration, with partnerships between different disciplines at the University, and partnerships between the University and the community (including grassroots organizations, non-profits, practitioners, philanthropists, and local government).

Forward-thinking and focused on what we want Memphis to be.

Comprehensive, so that we’re promoting public projects that complement each other and drive a common community objective.

The **UMDC’s Place & Health initiative** focuses on how the built environment can influence public health. This interdisciplinary research correlates improved public health and a more walkable environment.

The UMDC Studio is focused on the critical issue of healthy communities, addressing the determinants of health through placed-based study in the Crosstown Memphis area.

“Memphis Walks” represents interdisciplinary research and community initiatives to improve walkability and its correlation to improved public health. UMDC, along with university and community partners, is a member of the national AIA Design and Health Research Consortium.

Collaboration and trust is strengthened among these partners. For example, Architecture, Planning, and Civil Engineering collaborated in an existing conditions analysis. The School of Public Health has partnered in research with Civil Engineering to promote walking to school in urban areas. Further evidence of our University partners’ commitment to collaboration lies in the multiple opportunities afforded our students for cross-disciplinary studies. Dual degrees and certificates were developed between the Master of City and Regional Planning, Master of Architecture, and/or Master of Public Health.

The UMDC studio hosted a public open house, held on February 3, 2016, focused on “Envisioning Healthy Communities.” The UMDC Studio prepared the exhibit of case study work that was displayed in the UofM Department of Architecture Gallery. The exhibit represented research of successful case-studies of healthy community initiatives that enhanced quality of life.

Memphis Walks partners continued to meet regularly, during 2016, to plan and implement the Memphis Walks initiative in Crosstown. Partners developed and implemented a community perception survey focused on walkability, safety, and health.

CROSTOWN COMMUNITY PERCEPTION SURVEY

The Crosstown Community Perception Survey arose to obtain information regarding the Crosstown area. Residents from within the community and surrounding areas provided thoughts and perceptions concerning the issues of walkability, crime, and health, especially as they related to elements of the built environment such as lighting, sidewalk quality, destinations, traffic congestion, safety, and social engagement. The survey was one of the first steps in understanding, and improving upon, healthy places within Memphis.

The survey is the product of *Memphis Walks*, a partnership among the University of Memphis Design Collaborative (UMDC), University of Memphis School of Public Health, UofM Departments of Engineering and Criminology & Criminal Justice; the Church Health Center, Livable Memphis, Shelby County Health Department, and Memphis & Shelby County Office of Sustainability. This partnership’s focus adheres to enhancing quality of life by supporting improved walkability, promoting increased physical activity, air quality, and social cohesion through walking.

Crosstown was selected to become the pilot study area for many reasons. First, Crosstown establishes itself as a truly urban neighborhood located directly between four major areas within Memphis. Developing between Downtown, the

Crosstown Community Perception Survey: Summary Report on Data Findings

The University of Memphis Design Collaborative

UofM Department of City and Regional Planning
UofM Department of Architecture
UofM School of Public Health
UofM Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice
UofM Department of Civil Engineering
Livable Memphis
Church Health Center
Crosstown Arts
Memphis & Shelby County Office of Sustainability
Shelby County Health Department



Image 2: The cover of the Crosstown Community Perception Survey, which broken into five separate sections: walkability, safety, recommendations for walkability & safety, health, and demographics.

Medical District, North Memphis, and Midtown Crosstown serves as a link to connect these communities together. The area has long been underserved especially when it comes to walkability, safety concerns, and high risk populations. Recently, the rehabilitation of the historic Sears Tower has sparked renewed interest toward the area, making Crosstown a key area for study, prior to and post opening of Crosstown Concourse, termed a “vertical urban village”.

With completion of the Crosstown Concourse (expected in early 2017), activity will increase within the area and walkability and safety of residents, people coming and going, will be of interest to understand. The Crosstown Community Perception Survey then begins the first step in understanding perceptions revolving around the community.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was designed to gather a broad range of perceptions related to walkability, safety, and health within the community at large. The survey was made available in paper and electronic formats. Both forms of the survey function in the same way; the electronic format allowed access to a wider audience who could not participate in a one-on-one setting with *Memphis Walks* member staff at events held in the Crosstown area. The survey relies on anonymity, providing confidentiality within the entire process of the survey. Individual information has not been identified to maintain confidentiality.



Image 3: While researching the Crosstown neighborhood, and performing existing Conditions analysis on the area to understand present conditions, the UMDC Studio held a tour of a \$200M re Crosstown Concourse.

Respondents came from neighborhoods which surround and make up the larger Crosstown district, focusing on Crosstown, Evergreen Historic District, Speedway Terrace, Vollintine/Evergreen, Klondike/Smokey City, Washington Bottoms, Madison Heights, Central Gardens, and Galloway-Speedway. Residents and workers from the adjacent neighborhoods, along with those identifying Crosstown as a smaller neighborhood area, became the primary targets for data collection.

To get a thorough understanding concerning the built environment, the survey is broken into five separate sections: walkability, safety, recommendations for walkability & safety, health, and demographics. The section on walkability asks about information regarding destinations within the neighborhood, how those destinations are accessed, and if participants would prefer an alternative way of reaching those destinations.

Walkability. The walkability section included questions about how often residents walk within their neighborhood; what the reasons they walk are; and what keeps them from walking in their neighborhood. The respondents were also asked what distance they are willing to walk to get to a destination. Lastly, for the walkability section, the survey included a Likert-like scale asking level of agreement with statements focusing on the aesthetics of walkability within the area.

The first part of the walkability section is broken into four parts which focus on destinations and mobility for those areas. The first two questions ask for the top three places most often visited in Crosstown and how respondents get to those destinations. This question plays an important role in understanding where people go and how they arrive providing a link between place with mobility. The results show how people access the locations which they most often visit within the community, and if there is a lack or need for those types of transportation and how they relate with walkability.

Safety. The second section within the survey deals with safety perceptions about Crosstown. The section begins by asking residents to describe how large or little certain problems are (e.g., overall crime, graffiti, blighted lots and structures, sidewalk and crosswalk conditions, traffic congestion, robbery/burglary, identity theft, and lighting conditions). Respondents are asked to rate the likelihood of a certain type of crime occurring in the neighborhood. Following this, safety perceptions are assessed, again using a Likert-like scale measuring agreement with various statements related to safety perception.

The safety section begins by focusing on perceptions of safety within neighborhoods by asking to what extent certain elements often associated with safety concerns are present. This first question for the safety section asks about ten different components: crime, graffiti, run-down/boarded-up buildings; blighted lots, unsafe sidewalks, traffic congestion; robbery/break-ins, identity theft, poor lighting, and missing or damaged sidewalks.

The survey sought information on whether the participant or anyone in their household has been a victim of crime, what type of crime, and if it was reported to the police or not. The last question in this section asked respondents to indicate whether they noticed an increase or decrease in crime within the neighborhood.

The third section focuses solely on recommendations about safety and walkability in the form of two open-ended free response questions. The first asks about ideas for how to make the neighborhood safer and enhance walking. This was followed up by a question

providing a space for any additional information about walking and safety. Following the recommendation section, the fourth focused on health issues. Respondents were asked to rate their general health and whether they or anyone within their household had been told they had a specific chronic illness (e.g., diabetes or asthma).

Health. The health portion of the survey is one of the shorter sections of the Crosstown survey consisting of only two questions. The first asks the respondent about their general health. A medical conditions question asked about the extent of families' medical diagnosis of high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, depression and/or anxiety, and drug and/or alcohol dependence.

Demographics. The final section of the survey consists of demographic information. The information comprises which neighborhood participants lived in, what their zip code was, their age group, gender, and racial ethnicity.

SURVEY RESULTS

In total, the public answered 120 surveys. No question was required, as each was voluntary. This resulted in some questions left blank by some respondents resulting in data gaps. However, for the most part, each respondent filled out nearly the entirety of the survey.

Recommendations to Walkability and Safety. The recommendation section for walkability and safety exists in the form of open response, essay formats where participants could freely and openly present ideas about the community.

The Crosstown Community Perception Survey has been helpful in identifying perceptions regarding walkability, safety, and health within the Crosstown area. Being able to understand where the major destinations are within Crosstown allows for a key starting point for addressing further research around those places. It allows to see what ways they are accessible, what infrastructure exists to support those locations, and what land uses are present. It also helps prioritization of methods of mobility, where the patterns of movement can help develop efficient routes for transit, biking, and where increased connections are needed for other modes. By knowing that most people still drive, but are willing or wanting to use another method of transportation helps in creating policies, designs, and projects, which do exactly that.

Respondent recommendations and suggestions become very helpful in detailing and understanding what residents of the area want to see happen within the community. By knowing that they want more lighting, better sidewalks, and reduction in traffic through calming devices shows a commitment to walkability which may not be evident within some of the data presented in the survey, where people do believe there is adequate amount of lighting or sidewalks conditions are okay. They are saying that there is always room for improvement and they would like to have that improvement towards walkable, healthy, and safe environments.

The survey suggests many different possibilities, all of which are positive for the future. Urban design and public policy can have

a large impact in changing this community for the better in promoting health, and allowing for equitable solutions to issues. The survey suggests a strong district who wishes to build, grow, and become healthier in all ways possible.

Creation of priority areas will be needed moving forward, looking at what features are in most need and how feasible solutions can be at meeting objectives and goals. Increasing the partnerships within the community will become helpful going forward to continually obtain feedback with residents and businesses to reshape focus area and priorities. It will become helpful as study continues to link all the data and research together to build the best case possible for how to address present and perceived issues within Crosstown.

Important to the understanding of the community will be the reaction to the opening of the Concourse and how it shapes the area. With this being the first of many studies, it is important to gain a snapshot of Pre-Concourse perceptions where, into the future, another study will be beneficial to see how change has manifested.

COMMUNITY EVENTS & CONVERSATIONS

The UMDC Studio hosted a Crosstown Community Workshop held in the neighborhood on April 14, 2016 to acquire resident feedback on existing condition analysis and acquire more engagement with the perception survey. During this event a discussion was held focused around the issues of walkability, safety, and health as it pertained to the Crosstown area, particularly if residents felt our analysis of existing conditions were accurate. Feedback for our SWOT analysis was provided, where much additional information was provided along with recommendations for future endeavors. Livable Memphis also attended and demonstrated their Walkability Toolkit⁴ and how the community can utilize it to better the area for residents.

HEALTHY PLACES SUMMIT

The **Healthy Places Summit** functioned as a community conversation about our urban environment's effect on health. The event offered a space for critical observation of the intersects between urban design and public health. Through open conversation we aimed to identify and define design and policy interventions to improve the safety, health, and quality of life of our urban spaces, focusing on how improved walkability in the built environment and active transportation can support overall quality of life for Memphians. Dialogue from this event will help in directly influencing public policy that supports the development of safer, more walkable places within the Mid-South region, improve public health endeavors, and enhance the accessibility of mobility for all community members.

The Summit was hosted by the UMDC and the *Memphis Walks* partners. The partners include: UofM School of Public Health; UofM Departments of Civil Engineering and Criminology & Criminal Justice; Crosstown Arts; Livable Memphis; Church Health Center;



Image 4: The Healthy Places Summit served as a community conversation about our urban environment’s effect on health. The event offers a space for critical observation of the intersects between urban design and public health.

Memphis and Shelby County Office of Sustainability; and Shelby County Health Department. Additional partners include Innovate Memphis, the Nashville Civic Design Center, the Memphis Medical District Collaborative, and Memphis Tilth.

Taking place on May 4, 2016 at the J.K. Lewis Senior Center, the **Healthy Places Summit** featured a variety of topics related to public health and urban design, often bridging the gap between the two disciplines. From the Provocation Address by Gary Gaston, Director of the Nashville Civic Design Center⁵ (Nashville CDC); to the Car-free Commuting Workshop; to the Access to Healthy Food Workshop. Each element of the Summit had unique qualities which provided needed elements of discussion around healthy communities, often in how to get there and what communities need to truly be healthy.

Following the Provocation Address, the panel discussion took place featuring professionals from various areas of health and design. The panelists included Gary: Alisa Haushalter, Director, Shelby County Health Department; Sharon Moore, Wellness Education Supervision at Church Health Center; Tommy Pacello, President, Memphis Medical District Collaborative (MDC); Todd Richardson, Cofounder/Coleader, Crosstown Arts & Crosstown Concourse. Dr. Charles Santo, Chair of the UofM Department of City & Regional Planning, was the moderator for the discussion.

QUOTES AND COMMENTS REGARDING THE PANEL DISCUSSION

1. “Memphis has many spaces for physical activity but limited to no access to many of those locations.”
2. “Partnerships, dialogue, and collaboration are important for achieving goals, address issues, and finding creative solutions to problems.”
3. “Psychological and social factors can directly influence health as they relate to the built environment through neighborhood place perceptions, providing correlation with environment and health.”
4. Crosstown Concourse is all about building community. The idea or sense of community and type of community is still



Image 5: The Summit featured a Design & Health Panel, along with four focus group discussions around: Safety, Healthy foods, Car-free Commuting, and Walkability Assessments.

up for debate as Concourse continues development and shapes the surrounding area.

5. “Expression of art, creativity, and/or design are all processes which are directly related to health and wellness within a community and individual.”
6. “Design and planning interventions can often cause social friction which helps to provide social enhancement through interactions. This friction helps communities understand themselves more fully, and allows for a healthy social atmosphere.”
7. Nashville Next became the narrative of the city from such a planning process: Obtained through years of working, but with major political and social buy-in and individual connections lead to a collective narrative vision.
8. “Important to remember for the future is that 1000 projects do not make a place, and isolated initiatives can set up an arena for failure.”

Afternoon workshops were held looking at elements of walkability, health, and safety as they relate to the built environment and health places.

SAFER NEIGHBORHOODS WORKSHOP

BY Simone Tulumello (University of Lisbon/UofM City & Regional Planning) and K.B. Turner (UofM Criminology & Criminal Justice)

This workshop on “public safety” adopted a methodology of using future scenarios to create a space for collaborative discussion on creating a long-term strategy in dealing with structural issues that form the roots of crime and violence in Memphis. The presenters developed two scenarios using an online survey with initiatives that helped fulfill the future possibilities. During the workshop, the workshop group collectively discussed the initiatives that come out of the recommendations, and which policies and practices would work best and which of the future scenarios is preferred for Memphis.

CAR-FREE COMMUTING OPTIONS AND SOLUTIONS WORKSHOP

BY Suzanne Carlson (Innovate Memphis) and Jessica Buttermore (UofM School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy)

This workshop asked participants to examine their current commute patterns, desired commute choices, and real and perceived barriers to taking alternate forms of transportation outside of an automobile. The organizers then offered suggestions and provided information on how participants could embark on making small steps and changes towards their desired commuting options. The workshop could engage participants in long-term strategies toward navigating auto-centric environments and how they could contribute to the development of healthier places.

MEMPHIS WALKABILITY TOOLKIT WORKSHOP

BY John Paul Shaffer and Essence Jackson (Livable Memphis)

This workshop is designed to provide participants with a tool for making and managing pedestrian infrastructure within neighborhoods. The Livable Memphis Walkability Toolkit is designed to give residents a way of enhancing walkability within their area. Participants learned about the critical importance of pedestrians and safety related issues. The workshop helped residents understand how to use the toolkit for assessing walkability and advocating for sidewalk repairs and better infrastructure for pedestrians with property owners, city officials, and neighborhood non-profit groups.

ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS WORKSHOP

BY Ann Langston and Sharon Moore (Church Health) and Dr. Micah Trapp (UofM Anthropology/Memphis Tilth)

This workshop functioned as a way of informing participants about organization in Memphis that are addressing the issues of access to healthy foods. The workshop looked at elements of healthy food access that are often overlooked, like how to prepare healthy meals and what all foods can be made a part of those meals. This topic was related back to not knowing what is healthy versus not having access. Lack of access was addressed with the issues of food deserts also being addressed and how participants can overcome those barriers.

In working with the Crosstown Neighborhood, the UMDC Studio created a **Citizen's Guide to Community Development**. The document provided the community with best practices for neighborhood capacity building. The document contains a section on Citizen Planners Guide to the Public Planning & Zoning Process.

SEEDS SOWED & NEXT STEPS

The UMDC Studio initiated and concluded its Spring 2016 semester centered on the critical issue of "Building Healthy Communities." With a focus on "Design & Public Health," we are documenting how the design of the built environment directly effects community health. Our work looks to improve the built environment's effect on public health by addressing environmental quality, natural systems, physical activity, safety, and social connectivity through walkability.

NEW CROSTOWN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

After months of public dialog and neighborhood capacity building, stakeholders decided that forming a neighborhood organization was the appropriate next step. The UMDC assisted Crosstown community members in forming a new Crosstown Community Development Corporation (CCDC) to re-establish a neighborhood organization to represent the growing Crosstown neighborhood. (Our collaboration led to Midtown Memphis Development Corporation (MMDC) serving as the fiscal agent for the new Crosstown CDC, until their IRS 501c3 application is approved.)

*The Crosstown CDC's Vision is to: "Promote the development of a healthy, vibrant, attractive and sustainable community."*⁶

The UMDC will continue to document, refine and promote the findings of "Envisioning a Healthier Crosstown" through our "Memphis Walks" initiative during the remaining two years of the project.

We hope that public dialogue and findings from this community-based research will influence public policy that supports the development of more safe, walkable places within our region, improve public health, and enhance the accessibility of mobility

The Memphis Walks team is looking forward in continuing working with the Crosstown Community and the whole of Memphis to better the city as a walkable, safe, healthy environment.

REFERENCES

- AIA Design and Health Research Consortium, *The American Institute of Architects (AIA), the AIA Foundation ("AIAF"), and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture ("ACSA"), have established the AIA Design & Health Research Consortium to advance revolutionary, university-led research in the area of design and health.*
- The University of Memphis Design Collaborative, *The UMDC was formed in 2015, as an outreach arm of the University, focused on critical community challenges in urban design and community development. For more information on the work of the UMDC visit: www.memphis.edu/umdc*
- The UMDC is supported in part by funding from the generous support of the Hyde Family Foundation.
- Livable Memphis' Walkability Toolkit, was developed from a grant from the Tennessee Department of Transportation.
- Thanks to Gary Gaston, Director of the Nashville Civic Design Center. *Their new book, Shaping the Healthy Community was released before our Healthy Places Summit event.*
- Crosstown Community Development Corporation (CCDC) Vision quoted from the CCDC Articles of Incorporation, 2016.*
- *Acknowledgement is to be given for Brian Crooks, UMDC Graduate Research Assistant, for his work contributing to the authorship of the Crosstown Community Perception Survey report on data findings along with summarization of key highlights and elements from community engagement events, primarily the Healthy Places Summit.