

Dallas not alone in how suburban sprawl affected urban life



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Streets will always be constructed to move cars, but the nation's mayors were told Monday that they're doing their cities a disservice if vehicles are the only thing they look at when building and reshaping infrastructure.

Mukul Malhotra, a principal and design director for planning and design firm MIG Inc., said city streets should also be designed to consider pedestrians, businesses and even nature.

"It should be a much larger argument of economic development, of social development," he said during the fourth day of the U.S. Conference of Mayors at the Omni Dallas Hotel. "That is a game changer."

His presentation, "Designing Streets for Living Instead of Driving," came on the heels of a report released last week that ranked Dallas among the least walkable big cities in America.

The study Foot Traffic Ahead from the George Washington University School of Business put Dallas in 25th place out of the nation's largest 30 cities when it comes to being walkable for residents and visitors. The city does even worse (it was next to last) when it comes the amount people who live in walkable areas. It also found that only 9 percent of the city's office and retail space is within walkable neighborhoods.

The city hired Malhotra's firm five years ago to develop Downtown Dallas 360, a plan to link downtown districts including Deep Ellum, the Farmers Market, Main Street and the Arts District. Malhotra used Dallas as an example of how transportation investments since World War II focused on getting people into and out of suburbs, leaving urban cities with infrastructure that is inhospitable to pedestrians and businesses.

"We placed a very important role on mobility," Malhotra said of how the country has built metropolitan areas in recent decades. "Sometimes it gets too much."

With a map of Dallas from around the turn of the 20th Century on the screen beside him, Malhotra said Dallas' simple grid system of streets made it "one of the most walkable cities." He showed a picture of Main Street in downtown from about 70 years ago that depicted hordes of pedestrians packing sidewalks and mingling with vehicles and streetcars.

Then he showed a current photo of the same street. It had plenty of parked and moving cars but very few pedestrians.

Dallas is far from alone in how streets have developed or in grappling to make massive changes while state and federal transportation dollars dry up. Malhotra used before-and-after pictures from cities throughout the world to illustrate how streets can be turned from uninviting corridors into pedestrian-friendly gathering places that boost storefront business and improve quality of life.

He showed how Long Beach, Calif. added benches and bus shelters along a once-stark corridor where several transit lines meet to create the pedestrian-friendly First Street Transit Gallery. Another picture illustrated how West Sacramento, Calif. used giant Ws on bus shelters to also serve as gateways to particular areas. He said street and sidewalk elements such as the shelters should serve at least two or more purposes.

“Because we don’t have enough money right now,” he said.

He also showed cities that put solar panels on street lights, allowed vegetable gardens in the centers of round-a-bouts and used street planters to control storm water.

Presenters also introduced ideas that are counter to several practices that have influenced how American streets now look. They argued that allowing cars to go as fast as possible isn’t always best. They said that requires more than posting signs with lower speed limits.

“People will drive at the speed limit the street is designed for,” said Trinity Simons, director of the Mayors’ Institute of City Design.

Malhotra also said the fewer signs have been shown to create safer streets in European cities, even where cars, bikers and public transit vehicles all mingle. He said human brains can only process five things at one time and that minimizing signage forced people using streets to look around and at other people.

“The more eye contact, the safer it is,” he said.

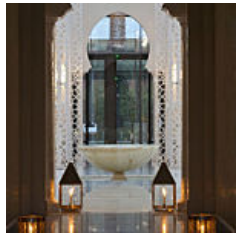
Malhotra argued that in some cases, removing curbs can also make corridors more inviting and allow them to be turned into pedestrian-only plazas for specific events.

“It’s a dramatic difference,” he said.

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