



## Last lecture in Grid Un-Locked series explores 'walkability' and the future of planning

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SARASOTA — It is not drinking finer wine and buying better salami that makes Italians healthier than most Americans, according to a diagnosis from a renowned city planner.

Odd that a planner and engineer would be trying to diagnose health in the first place, in fact, but New Urbanist expert Rick Hall argued his analysis gets to the heart health of cities themselves.

He contended that the difference isn't the quality or health of the food, it's that the Italians walk down to the store to get it while Americans sit in traffic on the way to buy groceries. Here, American doctors actually prescribe walking because it's so removed from their routines, he added.

Doctors could argue with his conclusions about healthy eating habits, but probably not this point: "We in this country have to take extra time to do our walking because there's no logical daily use of walking to get around," Hall said with a laugh Tuesday evening.

That must and will change, he told attendees of the final lecture in a series hosted by the Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce called "Grid Un-Locked" that has explored mobility, or lack thereof, throughout Sarasota.

"We can continue down the path of automotive dominance thinking that's what most Americans want," Hall said. "The problem is it's so difficult to imagine anything else. But if you go to a place that has been proactively built to support walkability and transit ... it's night and day."

Downtown Sarasota as it is today is an example of what that could look like, said Hall, who helped develop the downtown master plan that envisioned walkability under the guidance of Andres Duany. But the rest of the city or county certainly isn't, he said.

In a not-so-distant future, the markets will shift in favor of walkable neighborhoods and communities over the classically American low-density suburban experience in much of the area now, he said. Communities that begin to plan for such a future now will be well ahead of a trend already well underway.

Planning for that eventuality will look a lot like the past, when walking and rail and water taxis offered other convenient travel options, as planner Andrew Georgiadis lectured about during last week's forum.

It also will involve what Hall called “context policy,” in which a street isn’t considered just by how many lanes it has or cars it carries, but in the consideration of what development exists around it. That means sidewalks in suburban areas will look dramatically different than those hugging Main Street and that cars screaming down a suburban arterial will behave very differently than those crawling down an urban thoroughfare with many walkers, he said.

“You can’t know how to design a street unless you know where you are, and if you don’t subscribe to this kind of differentiation of how you design streets, you’re going to design them all the same ... Context should guide street design.”

The Florida Department of Transportation is breaking out of its usual ways to establish its “complete streets” program that is classifying different stretches of state roads in that way, proving “this is not your father’s DOT anymore,” he joked. Now when an engineer is asked to design something more pedestrian friendly, the book they typically will rely on will actually have that option in the rules, Hall said.

But the sweeping changes that the inevitable introduction of driverless cars will bring have yet to be incorporated into much of the discussion, he admitted. In many ways, driverless cars might actually increase traffic trips even if they ultimately drive down car ownership, he said.

But Hall, and Georgiadis last week, both stressed balance. Some trips will remain too long to walk and some people will be unable to walk even the short distances, and the ability to afford to live and work in roughly the same place will continue to be a challenge, Hall conceded.

Ultimately, though, the suburban and car-centric design of communities will cease to exist, he added.

“They’re unhealthy for us, they’re unhealthy for the environment and they are a poor business model going forward,” he said.

The forums, hosted in partnership with the Gulf Coast Community Foundation and SRQ Media, will conclude on Nov. 7 with a review of the previous workshops and the creation of a series of recommendations and best practices to try to improve mobility here.

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