

Could Kirby become a great urban boulevard?

By David Crossley

It's becoming clear that the growing group of citizens who are thinking about and working on the Upper Kirby Master Plan are setting walkability as perhaps the highest priority. That is, they are thinking about a future District that is far more pedestrian-oriented than is the case today.

This is a fabulously important priority to set, because it brings the focus to people, to their desires and difficulties and to their need to exchange and observe in the public realm. This has always been the source of innovation and thus of the creation of wealth.

If walkability is a serious notion, then future policies and expenditures in the Upper Kirby District will first go to improve the pedestrian and public realm. We will see an essentially different theme applied to the area, and a remarkable redevelopment - particularly, one hopes, on Kirby Drive.

A lot has gone wrong in the District in terms of the evolution of an increasingly unpleasant mobility realm over the last ten years or so. The combination of a now largely discredited set of theories and practices in the world of traffic engineers plus an almost religious adherence to the laissez-faire development policies has produced a model traffic sewer that gets more irritating and stressful every day and is a growing threat to pedestrians and bicyclists.

Presumably it's obvious that policies designed to increase capacity and speeds of automobiles don't make a great foundation for a pedestrian-oriented vision. Getting Kirby under control has to be the top priority. That will require two essential actions: calming traffic and producing excellent pedestrian right of way.

Not one cent should be spent on "gateways" or street furniture and decorations until the District has secured adequate right of way for pedestrian activity and funded a plan to create broad, safe, convenient, comfortable, shaded sidewalks on both sides of the street. If there's plenty of money, do decorations with pavers or whatever, but always remember the comment of Paul Goldberger at the New Yorker magazine that "There are no pavers in Manhattan."

The point is to create the space and the facility, and then to decorate it. It is imperative by definition that if your priority is pedestrian orientation you have to provide excellent places for people, including groups of people, to walk.

Pedestrian-oriented design is not exactly rocket science, but it's not simple either. There are several important issues, among them the previously mentioned characteristics of good sidewalks being Broad, Safe, Convenient, Comfortable, and Shaded.

Broad sidewalks

What is Broad? The sidewalks on some of Harlem's avenues are 34 feet wide, each side. Together, they are wider than the street. There are perfectly serviceable sidewalks in New Orleans' French Quarter that are only 6 feet wide. The new sidewalks on Main Street, touted as Houston's signature pedestrian-oriented boulevard, are about four and a half feet wide. Those sidewalks are designed for groups of laughing young professionals in capes and scarves sauntering down the boulevard amongst cafes and street musicians, but traveling single file, hoping they don't have to confront another lively group coming the other way.

Broad is 12 feet. The sidewalks on Kirby Drive from San Felipe to the Southwest Freeway and maybe to

Westpark and beyond to the Village, should be 18 feet wide.

Safe sidewalks

What is Safe? Safe means several things, but particularly safe from the crushing effects of moving cars and trucks. This requires substantial armor to be set up, and one of the simplest ways is to provide and encourage on-street parking. A row of parked cars is a pretty good barrier against sidewalk-seeking Sting Rays. Parked cars also tend to calm moving traffic, immediately increasing safety standards.

Second, either a line of trees should be planted along the curb to further improve safety and on many streets to provide the primary buffer against cars, or occasional use of sidewalk arcades could provide this buffer. Both of these sidewalk edge treatments also supply Shade, another important characteristic of good pedestrian right of way.

Convenient sidewalks

Convenient has several meanings but its primary one is that all along the non-street edge of the sidewalk is a broad variety of shops and services that not only make it possible to perform several errands at once without a car, but make it interesting and even fun. Convenient is also a result of not allowing any activity or structure that inhibits pedestrian goals. For example, curb cuts for driveways on Kirby make the pedestrian environment much less Convenient and much less Safe.

Shaded sidewalks

Shaded is a requirement, particularly in Houston's summer and rainy seasons. Considering the latter, arcades may be better strategy than trees in some places. But something has to keep the sun off the pedestrians.

Comfortable sidewalks

Comfortable means you feel okay about where you are, you feel Safe, there's plenty of room because the space is Broad, everything's Convenient, and the Sun isn't pounding on you because you are Shaded by trees or awnings or arcades all up and down the street.

That's where you start, with Kirby Drive. If you think about where people go and hang out in cities like New York (Fifth Avenue), Chicago (Michigan Avenue), New Orleans (Canal Street), Paris (the Champs Elysee) you're thinking about places that were designed for that purpose. Kirby Drive should become one of those great urban streets that people actually remember with affection.

The decision toward pedestrian policies will require some brave decisions to calm down the vehicle traffic, narrow the pedestrian crossings, and slowly remove all curb cuts and parking from Kirby Drive. Not making those decisions will prevent serious pedestrian activity from occurring. Walkability isn't rocket science, but you do have to do everything and get all of it right if you actually want it work. We have very little understanding in Houston of how walkability works, but there is some understanding and there are experts out there in the rest of the country, producing pedestrian-oriented places today.

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