

# Pedestrian City

*Middle and high school students investigate the walkability of their urban neighbourhoods*



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**S**TATISTICS ON OUR ever-urbanizing planet are well known and widely circulated: half of humanity currently lives in a city or town; by the year 2030, we will have 5 billion urban dwellers and nearly 40 megacities of 10 million or more; at the midpoint of the 21st century, 70% of the planet will call a city home.

Less hyped is the fact that one third of urban dwellers worldwide are children, many of whom live in poverty. While organizations like the United Nations and UNICEF are working towards getting children onto the urban agenda as important stakeholders<sup>1</sup>, schools have been slow to adopt urban education as part of the curriculum. Few formal educational opportunities exist for children to study how we build, plan, govern, and live optimally in cities. If part of our job as educators is to prepare students to be globally-minded and locally-engaged citizens of the future world they will sustain and lead, urban issues must be part of the conversation in the classroom of the 21st century.

Walking is the most basic mode of urban transportation we all share, a phenomenon aptly described by architect Jan

Gehl in the 2011 film *Urbanized*: “Cultural circumstances may differ, economic circumstances may differ, climatic circumstances may differ, but basically we are the same little walking animal.” Walking is also critical to sustainable urban design since neighbourhoods that prioritize pedestrian use make for economically, environmentally, and socially vital places. These factors make a study of walking an obvious jumping-off point for an authentic discussion of sustainable urban transportation and design at the middle or secondary school level.

The following three learning activities focus on “walkability” and are designed to get students to think about, describe, and sharpen their ideas about what walking means as a mode of transport. These lessons are accessible to any teacher and can be delivered in just about any context without prior knowledge or additional resources. The first two learning activities are described broadly with a selection of teaching procedures, while the third learning activity, a creative mapping exercise, is described in detail with hand-outs and exemplars as appendices.

These three lessons are drawn from a larger Urban Mobility Unit, which also includes three cycling activities

and three transit activities. Throughout this unit the students identify different modes of urban transportation and then examine the benefits and challenges of each mode. Once students have gained some base knowledge of the hierarchy of modes of transportation, they will reflect on how they interact with and use different modes in their daily lives, and examine potential improvements for each mode individually and as a mobility network. Each module contains an introductory lesson, an experiential component, and a hands-on creative task. (See sidebar for more details about the Unit and the Maximum City curriculum of which it is a part.)

## Learning Activity 1

**Description:** This activity launches the Urban Mobility Unit with an introduction to walking as a mode of transportation. Students will follow a guided discussion and answer reflection questions on the topic of walking.

**Essential Questions:** What *is* walking? What is the history of walking? For what purposes do we walk and how important is walking? What are the challenges and benefits of walking? How can walking be encouraged and improved as a mode of urban transport?

### A Selection of Introductory Talking Points:

- Humans are made for walking—literally. We are the only species that walks (rather than hops) on two legs for any distance.
- Our bodies have evolved specifically to walk on two legs—every part of the body has been reshaped to support it.
- It’s the only mode of transportation that comes completely naturally to us. We all start walking as soon as we can, as children. For other types of transportation, we need to learn or have training.
- For thousands of years, walking has been the primary way for people to get around cities.
- Walking is still an important way to get around a city and is often underestimated. Walking is especially important for people who have less power or means in our society—children and youth, the elderly, or people who can’t afford cars.
- To some extent, everyone is a pedestrian. Most people still walk for all or part of their trips, and sometimes people walk just for its own sake, not to get somewhere.

## Learning Activity 2

**Description:** This second pedestrian activity continues the Urban Mobility Unit with a follow-up experiential lesson on walking in which the teacher leads the students on a neighbourhood walk.

**Essential Questions:** What is the walking experience in your school neighbourhood? What are the strengths and gaps of the walking experience in the neighbourhood? What kinds of pedestrian infrastructure exist around your school? How does this infrastructure affect social behaviors?

**Introduction to the Walk:** Discuss some initiatives that your city or town is doing (or not doing) to encourage walking, such as pedestrian charters, walking strategies, wayfinding forums, and infrastructure improvements.

**Planning the Walk:** Plan an appropriate and interesting route for the walk in advance. During the walk, ask guiding questions: *What do you notice? Do you have any insights or ideas about this walking environment? How does this space feel?* Point out specific features of locations such as sidewalk width and condition, curb cuts and accessibility features, crossings and intersections, wayfinding tools and street furniture.

## Learning Activity 3

**Description:** This activity culminates the pedestrian module with a creative hands-on activity on walking in which students create a hand-drawn map of a walk they do regularly, labeled with anecdotal comments and observations (See Appendix A for handout instructions below. For exemplars, see Appendix B which is posted at <[www.greenteacher.com/contents96.html](http://www.greenteacher.com/contents96.html)>).

**Essential Questions:** What is a route you walk regularly? Describe your personal experience as a pedestrian. What does walking feel like to you? What could improve your experience?

**Time:** 90 minutes

**Instructional Goals/Learning Outcomes:** Students think about their experience as pedestrians; students create a map of a frequent walking route; students share their maps.

**Resources:** instructions handout in Appendix B; pencil crayons and paper for drawing.

## A Selection of Reflection Questions for the Students:

<b>Question 1:</b>	For what purposes do people walk?
<b>Question 2:</b>	What are the good things about walking, for people and for the city? What are the bad things?
<b>Question 3:</b>	What makes a space a good or a bad place to walk? What enhances the advantages of walking? Reduces the problems?

## Teaching Strategies/Procedures:

### Creative Mapping Task:

1. Go over the instructions (see handout in Appendix A) with the class to check for understanding, followed by having students create a map of a walk they do regularly (see exemplar in Appendix B).
2. In groups of 4-5, each student takes a turn sharing and explaining their map; the teacher circulates to assist them.
3. 1-2 students from each group share their group's findings and maps with entire class.
4. Consolidation and wrap up. Revisit essential questions in order to get students to articulate what they learned: *What is the walking experience like in your school neighbourhood? What are the strengths and gaps of walking in the neighbourhood? What kinds of pedestrian infrastructure exist around your school? This can be*

completed as a written reflection for homework.

**Optional Extension:** In the same groups of 4-5, students design their own neighbourhood walking tour based on a theme of their choosing. For full walking tour curriculum, see Jane's Walk School Edition: [http://janeswalk.net/lead/school\\_edition/](http://janeswalk.net/lead/school_edition/)

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See [www.greenteacher.com/contents96.html](http://www.greenteacher.com/contents96.html) for 2 exemplar student maps.

### Endnote

1. See UNICEF's "The State of the World's Children 2012" report at [www.unicef.org/sowc/index\\_61804.html](http://www.unicef.org/sowc/index_61804.html)

## Maximum City

Maximum City is a summer program and curriculum incubator that seeks to assist schools everywhere to adopt urban education as part of the curriculum. It also sets out to satisfy the growing student appetite to tackle urban issues. Along with having their eyes on the future, students are creative risk takers and possess an innate curiosity about how complex systems such as cities work, making them ideally positioned to be key contributors to the shaping and understanding of an urbanizing world.

Maximum City was first offered as a pilot program to a group of 30 middle and high school students in Toronto in the summer of 2011. In the first year, a series of hands-on lessons and authentic learning activities was delivered by a team of experts and professionals from a range of urban fields—architects, planners, designers, city officials, and transit experts. Since then the content has been developed and shaped into a series of shareable learning activities for teachers looking to address urban issues in their classrooms. The summer program will be offered annually to a broader audience of students and continue to operate as an incubator for new curriculum material. Each year the program modules will be informed by different overarching themes: mobility; sustainability; food; arts & culture; technology. During the 2012-2013 school year, Maximum City learning activities will be taught to a cohort of 110 students for the first time as part of their in-school curriculum.

The curriculum is organized into 4 different units and separated into "City" modules as follows:

1. Urban Mobility: Pedestrian City, Cyclist City, and Transit City.
2. The Urban Form: Built City, Design City, and Planned City.
3. Urban Sustainability: Governed City, Liveable City, Resilient City, and Engaged City.
4. The Urban Charrette: A Design Challenge.

Full curriculum modules can be freely downloaded at <http://maximumcity.ca/>

## Appendix A: Creative Mapping Task Instructions Handout

### Mapping a Walk

Think about a walk you do regularly. It could be to school, to a store, to visit a friend or relative, or to the park. It doesn't have to start or end from home. It could be a trip to a transit stop, or to and from school. It could be long, or fairly short.

1. Where do you start and how long does it take you?
2. What are the different stages of the walk?
3. What is the destination and are there stops you make along the way?
4. Why do you walk this route rather than getting there some other way?
5. What factors make each stage of the walk pleasant or unpleasant?
6. Are there landmarks or obstacles you look out for or avoid?
7. What kind of people do you see and how do they affect the walk?
8. What changes daily on your walk and why? (Example: walking speed, where you cross the street, side of street you walk on)

Create a map of the walk on the back of this handout or a separate piece of paper. It doesn't need to be exact or to scale and you don't need to refer to an existing map; we want to know how the walk *feels* to you.

Include landmarks, features, anecdotal observations, and especially ideas that could improve the walk. You can colour-code for how each stage of the walk feels and/or for different kinds of features.