

Walking Into Trouble:

PLANNING AND PHYSICAL UN-FITNESS

by John R. Stilgoe

Gone barefoot lately? Every planner owns a vested interest in the question, and especially in the answer. Walking barefoot means more than heeding the fading echoes of a long-ago Broadway musical, or aping romantic-evening advertisements for Caribbean beach resorts. It means intimate contact with ordinary landscape, even intimate contact with the wilderness of mountain meadows or sandy beaches. And it means something disappearing from contemporary American life. Direct physical contact with physical environments decreases yearly, and erodes entire sections of the unseen, taken-for-granted foundations of planning. Behind arguments concerning subdivision guidelines, downtown revitalization, ecological imperatives and other important issues snuffles something equally important but often offensive, certainly distasteful, always unnerving to scholar and planner alike. An age wary of unjust discrimination and unthinking offensiveness, deals hesitantly with the question of physicality, and often prefers to ignore it altogether.

Planners tend to be active people. While not necessarily athletes, nor even joggers or runners or bodybuilders, planners tend to be out-and-about, perfectly able to walk over a site, to hike up and down Main Street or all over the proposed shopping mall or factory area. Whatever differences of opinion may split their ranks, planners are usually physically fit.

Physically fit denotes something other than *handsome*, *voluptuous*, *beautiful*, *macho*, *distinguished*, and other terms defining mere appearance. But physical fitness no longer immediately indicates much to most thoughtful Americans. Often it conjures up memories, sometimes unpleasant, of high school phys-ed classes and end-of-year outdoor tests, and sometimes it connotes brute strength in a weight-lifting sort



Are these Vermont youngsters the last of a dying breed: barefoot kids?

of way. Contemporary American language makes difficult an immediate definition simply because many defining words have nearly vanished. Terms like *nimble*, *spry*, *supple*, *lithe*, and *limber* are remarkably absent from contemporary speech, general-interest writing, and advertising, and the old near-synonym, *able-bodied*, strikes many as offensive. Indeed, the entire focus today, especially of the news media, is the appearance of the body, not its capacity. But physical capacity is exactly what planners must consider.

Even the Centers for Disease Control, a federal institution increasingly worried about the inactivity and obesity of the American public, and especially the young public, has sounded the alarm. Heart disease is now a *pediatric* disease, and practicing physicians discover every day that more and more patients — children included — get *no* daily exercise. Sitting in front of video screens at work and at home produces overweight people headed for significant medical trouble, as the President's Council now warns in its press releases. Back problems, respiratory problems, leg problems, all such derive in large part from a lack of exercise undreamed of in the 1960s.

Overweight adults will not walk far, and many others choose to walk very little either. Most planners know this, and when designing parking lots, for example,

struggle to keep most parking spaces within six hundred feet or so of the storefront. Shopping mall developers learn that some shoppers now shop in one end of a mall, then drive around to the other end, and shop some more. Urban designers, and their clients too, know that few city folk will walk more than a fifth of a mile or so on routine errands. Nothing is new about such things, but things are changing, and changing so rapidly and subtly that even astute observers miss them.

As the average age of the national population increases, planners confront the prospect of larger and larger numbers of "infirm" people as clients, or certainly as users of built projects. It is the infirm who so often demand "handicapped accessible" beaches, forests, and other areas, because they know all too well that once the paved path is built for the occasional

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wheelchair, the infirm can negotiate it with ease.

Property owners must now design handicapped-access parking and entrance facilities knowing that far more will use the facilities than the genuinely handicapped. Indeed, my observations suggest that the handicapped entrance (and adjacent handicapped parking spaces) are now the most used point of entry at many sites. This area is often filled with shuttling cars, cars temporarily abandoned by people "just running in" to some adjacent building, and cars waiting for someone who is not handicapped but determined not to walk very far.

More and more Americans no longer care to experience space in an intimate way — or else do so in private. Many expect to exert no effort in moving around, and avoid any place demanding exertion. Only the short-sighted rejoice in the increasingly empty outer zones of national forests, seashores, and grasslands, in the trails so bereft of people. Smoothing the wilderness, paving roads deeper and deeper into the natural environment, getting rid of grades, mudholes, and other unpleasant things only encourages the growing infirmity of Americans, and the withdrawal of physically fit people into health clubs and other indoor, machine-equipped places far removed from the 1960s ethic of vigor.

No longer is it enough for planners to simply say that "we see too few people walking downtown." The key question concerns how many people are walking, period. As a larger percentage of the American public reaches retirement age, planners will confront two groups, one arguing for places to walk and hike, and the other demanding easy automobile access to everywhere. In the meantime, if research by the Centers for Disease Control is anywhere near accurate, American children will become ever more inactive. Planning board members out hiking around a site on a Saturday morning might well reflect on this and ask if they are planning for people as physically fit as themselves, or for what may be the new American population.



Physical Fitness: The '60s

Physical fitness is scarcely an old concept. It entered American thinking in the Cold War era, when Eisenhower administration officials, and almost immediately thereafter, President Kennedy, determined that Americans had grown soft. Softness — on communism or the playground — might lead to the triumph of the Soviet Union. A host of government-inspired efforts soon reoriented American life. Against softness, JFK juxtaposed vigor, and vigor became a key term in his three-year presidency. American schoolchildren learned to compete for coveted President's Council patches and seals, struggling with broad jumps and softball-throwing, and running endless races with themselves, with their schoolmates, and with communism.

Barefoot Kids

In the spring of 1987 I published an article on "Treasured Wastes" in *Places*, pointing out how the 1960s small-town, half-suburban landscape encouraged children to modify areas long abandoned by adults. Vacant lots, disused sandpits, grown-over cranberry bogs, even saltmarshes, all became the province of kids building forts, bridges, dams, and other more-or-less transient structures. In emphasizing landscape modification, however, I totally ignored the obvious — the ability of the kids to swing hammers while holding on to the white-pine limbs, to lug boards across the low-tide mud, to splash through waist-deep water while pushing a log. The kids involved in reshaping the small wildernesses differed

slightly, if at all, from those of previous generations. In those years after World War II, "country kids" or "small town kids" — as they are now beginning to be called — were more or less physically fit.

More than memory confirms this. Class pictures and family photographs show kids lean to the point of scrawniness. In an age before two-car families, kids rode bicycles — and not ten-speeds either — everywhere, often on unpaved roads and shortcuts through woods and fields. In the most rural and small town places, only heavy rain kept kids in after school — tradition dictated that mothers insist on fresh air, and the fitness-inclined federal government merely seconded tradition. And an utter lack of after school and weekend sports opportunities thrust kids into all sorts of unstructured play spaces.

Despite the presence of sneakers, by midsummer usually decaying from simple wear and rot, many kids went barefoot part of every day, roaming in woods, on beaches, across streets, and even riding bicycles. In fact, in an era convinced of the healthful effects of sunshine and not yet accustomed to domestic air-conditioning, many parents scarcely insisted on clothing, letting children roam about in brief shorts, swimsuits, faded jeans, and light shirts — and in the case of boys, no shirts at all.

At the end of the twentieth century much of this seems bizarre to almost all my students. They ask about the perverts in the woods or driving along in cars, about the drug dealers in the abandoned farmhouse, about the hospital waste on the beach. They ask about dense vehicular traffic on twisting roads, about all manner of evils they know and respect — including the possibility of stepping barefoot on a discarded hypodermic needle.

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