WalkYourCity.org

AS A GRADUATE STUDENT STUDYING URBAN DESIGN AND PLANNING, Matt Tomasulo organized a clever wayfinding project to encourage residents of Raleigh, North Carolina, to walk more rather than drive. With a group of confederates, he designed and produced 27 Coroplast signs, each one-foot square, printed with simple messages such as: "It's a 7 Minute Walk to Raleigh City Cemetery," color-coded by destination category, with an arrow pointing the way. The group attached these with zipties to stoplight poles and the like around three downtown intersections. It took less than 45 minutes to install them all—after dark, because, although the signs looked official, this effort was "unsanctioned," as Tomasulo put it.

As you might expect, the city had the signs taken down. And that could have been the end of it: a provocative gesture and a smart portfolio piece. But in fact, Walk Raleigh has undergone an unexpected metamorphosis since it first appeared back in 2012, evolving into Walk [Your City] (WalkYourCity.org), an ambitious attempt to take the underlying idea nationwide and work with (instead of around) city and planning officials. This year, Tomasulo's fledgling organization received a $182,000 grant from the Knight Foundation, sparking a new phase for the project that includes a particularly thoughtful series of deployments coordinated with officials in San Jose, California.

The way in San Jose is more pedestrian-friendly with signage from Walk [Your City]. Credit: Walk [Your City]

This surprising outcome owes much to shrewd uses of technology—and perhaps even more to the input of a handful of planning officials who saw deeper potential in what could have been a fun but ephemeral stunt.

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The core of Tomasulo's original insight was to probe and attempt to shift *perceptions* of walking: he'd come upon some interesting research suggesting that people often choose not to walk because a destination simply "feels" farther away than it really is.

Older downtowns such as Raleigh's are often "more walkable than people realize," says Julie Campoli, an urban designer and author of *Made for Walking: Density and Neighborhood Form* (2012), published by the Lincoln Institute. But in many cases, decades of traffic engineering have eroded the sense of walkability in built environments where signage is arranged to be visible to drivers, and offers distance information in the car-centric form of miles. For the most part, she says, "The streets are designed for cars."

Tomasulo did his own research in Raleigh, asking neighbors and others if they would, say, walk rather than drive to a certain grocery store if it took 14 minutes. "They'd say, 'Sure, sometimes, at least.' And I'd say: 'Well, it's 12 minutes.' Again and again I had this conversation. People would say, 'I always thought it was too far to walk.'"

Thus Tomasulo's original signs were oriented to pedestrian eye level, and described distance in terms of minutes to a particular destination of potential interest. Tomasulo documented and

More than a hundred municipalities have participated in Walk [Your City] since Matt Tomasulo installed his original signs under cover of night in Raleigh in 2012. Credit: Walk [Your City]

promoted the project on Facebook. The enthusiasm there helped attract media attention, climaxing in a visit from a BBC video crew.

That's when Tomasulo reached out via Twitter to Mitchell Silver, Raleigh's then planning director, and a former president of the American Planning Association. Silver didn't know much about Walk Raleigh, but agreed to talk to the BBC anyway, discussing the desirability of pro-walking efforts and praising this one as a "very cool" example . . . that probably should have gotten a permit first. The clip got even more attention. And when that resulted in inquiries about the signs' legality, Silver removed them himself and returned them to Tomasulo.

"Did Walk Raleigh do something wrong or are our codes out of date?" says Mitchell Silver. "Innovation tests regulation. Matt, without realizing it, tested us."

But Silver also recognized the bigger opportunity. Raleigh's long-term comprehensive plan explicitly called for an emphasis on increasing walkability (and bike-ability), an issue that resonated with the fast-growing municipality's notably young population (about 70 percent under age 47 at the time). "It really became a critical thing," he recalls. "Are we going to embrace innovation? Did Walk Raleigh do something wrong or are our codes out of date?" says Silver, now commissioner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. "Innovation tests regulation. Matt, without realizing it, tested us."

The short-term solution: Tomasulo could donate his signs to the city, which could then reinstall them on an "educational pilot" basis. To help Silver convince the City Council, Tomasulo used online petition tool SignOn.org to gather 1,255 signature in three days. The Council unanimously approved the return of Walk Raleigh.

Tomasulo pushed a little further. (He has since finished with school, and has a Masters in city and regional planning from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and another in landscape architecture from North Carolina State University.) Raising $11,364 on Kickstarter, he and partners built WalkYourCity.org, which offers customizable signage templates to anyone, anywhere. This has led to more than 100 communities creating citizen-led projects in large and small municipalities across the U.S. and beyond.

That shouldn't be a surprise, given what Campoli describes as a growing interest in walkability among citizens and planners alike. The smart growth movement has revived interest in compact city forms, she says, "And in the last ten years, that has converged in this idea of walkability." Particularly in key demographics—millenials and empty-nesters prominently among them—there has been a recognition that car culture is "not as wonderful as it was made out to be," she observes.

And there's an economic dimension for cities, she adds. One way to gauge that is through growing real-estate values associated with more compact, walkable forms.

The economic impact factor inspired a recent collaboration with officials in San Jose, which stands out as an example of how tactical urbanism can cross over into real-world planning influence. Sal Alvarez, of the city's Office of Economic Development, was a fan of WalkYourCity.org as an open online platform—but pointed out that "The city will probably come take the signs down," he says. "You need a champion on the inside, really." He and Jessica Zenk of the city's Department of Transportation served that role in San Jose, quickly launching three pilot programs.

Each is concentrated and strategic. The first leverages the popularity of the newish San Pedro Square Market, a concentration of restaurants and businesses in the city's two-square-mile downtown. It's a favored local destination, but the sort that people often drive to and from without exploring. So a set of 47 signs points to attractions in the adjacent Little Italy district, a park with extensive walking trails, the arena where the city's National Hockey League team plays, and a second park that has been the focus of ongoing revitalization efforts. A second downtown project involved recruiting a dozen volunteers to help put up 74 signs meant to draw links between the city's SoFa arts district and walking-distance landmarks like the convention center.

The popularity of these two experiments inspired a city council member to propose the third, set in a neighborhood outside the downtown core. This centers on a road currently being converted from four lanes to two, with a middle turn lane and bike lane to enable a shift away from vehicle travel. Tomasulo has added a new batch of color-coded sign designs that point specifically to other car-alternative infrastructure, including bike-share locations and Caltrain stops. The city has been gathering traffic data around this project that may help measure the impact of these 50 or so signs at 12 intersections. To Alvarez, the signs are useful tools in pushing the cultural changes that help make infrastructure shifts take hold.

Tomasulo uses a term for officials whose enthusiasm, creativity, and practical how-to-get-it-done wisdom cuts against an all-too-common stereotype. "They're not bureaucrats," he says. "They're herocrats."

More broadly, San Jose officials are working with Tomasulo to "put some tools in the toolbox" of Walk [Your City] to encourage and help enthusiasts to find their own champions within local municipalities, so these projects can contribute to the planning process. "If you don't get the city to buy in at some point," Campoli says, "you're not going to get that permanent change that a short-term event is intended to lead to."

Back in Raleigh, the original project is evolving into a permanent feature of the landscape, with fully vetted and planned campaigns in four neighborhoods, and a partnership with Blue Cross/Blue Shield. That's a solid example of what Silver advocated: a city embracing a grassroots urbanism project instead of just regulating.

But the San Jose example is showing how much the reverse proposition matters, too: tactical urbanism can benefit from embracing official planning structures. Tomasulo certainly sounds pleased with his project's transition from "unsanctioned" experiment to active partnerships with insiders in San Jose and elsewhere. He uses a term he picked up for officials whose enthusiasm, creativity, and practical how-to-get-it-done wisdom cuts against an all-too-common stereotype. "They're not bureaucrats," he says. "They're herocrats." ∎

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