

Creating walkable urban precincts - pedestrians first

Mention the word 'walkability' and various key elements spring to mind. An urban environment free of cars. A user-friendly grid optimised for pedestrian accessibility. An aesthetically pleasing public space created for human interaction and relaxation.

A paper published by Harvard University in 2015 (*What is a walkable place? The Walkability debate in urban design*) speaks very simply to the idea that 'walkability' refers to no more than making urban environments better in a holistic way: slower-paced, more human-scaled, healthier and happier. It is less about walking, per se, but more about creating a generally good place to be.

As a property development company, the Amdec Group has been at the forefront of designing people-friendly precincts for more than two decades.

Along with Melrose Arch's latest residential development, One on Whiteley which is already 95% sold out, the company is behind a number of other urban pedestrian friendly precincts. These include the Yacht Club development in Cape Town that will connect the V&A Waterfront to the central city's bustling foreshore area and the planned R10 billion Harbour Arch on Cape Town's foreshore, modelled on the global trend for walkable precincts such as Darling Harbour in Sydney and Canary Wharf in London.

As proof of the desirability of smart cities, Harbour Arch is one of the fastest selling large-scale developments in the country, with sales and reservations topping R1 billion since its launch in October 2017. Currently, a mere 13 units remain.

According to Managing Director of Amdec Property Developments, Nicholas Stopforth, the company has spent years developing the precinct concept based on best-practice international examples: "It's about a 'people first' instead of a 'car first' approach to urban design, whether one is developing office complexes, shopping centres or a residential community.

"In other words, when we talk about a 'walkable' precinct, we really just mean great urban design that embraces a number of concepts vital to ensuring that urban areas work to their best advantage."

Among these, notes Stopforth, are:

- developing sustainability to ensure reductions in our carbon footprint
- providing the type of mobility and access that encourages less driving and more non-motorised and thus healthier options in the form of walking or cycling, plus a decrease in transportation costs
- nurturing compact economic development nodes that thrive off each other
- creating beautiful public spaces to encourage public life, and
- developing a sense of cohesion and community among all the users of the space.

These principles are also at the heart of what USA city planner, writer and lecturer Jeff Speck writes about in his renowned book *Walkable City* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), which many urban planners globally consider a blueprint for good urban design.

In the book, Speck notes: “The conventional wisdom used to be that creating a strong economy came first, and that increased population and a higher quality of life would follow. The converse now seems more likely: creating a higher quality of life is the first step to attracting new residents and jobs.”

“This is exactly what we set out to do with Melrose Arch 10 years ago,” says Stopforth.

“We create spaces where all of a person’s daily needs are within walking distance – from home and work to retail and leisure, banking and even medical. In other words, we’ve been refining the model to create a new urban concept where lifestyle meets real estate.”

“My wife and I are a good case study for this entire principle,” says Joe de Beer who has worked as Financial Director at Melrose Arch for the past eight years and who, after “living in suburbia for 20 years”, moved his four-member family to a three-bedroom apartment in the bustling mixed-use precinct.

“We use our car so seldom that the battery runs flat, if I’m not careful,” says De Beer. Travelling fairly regularly for business makes living at Melrose Arch even more of a boon, without having to worry about the safety and security of his family while he’s away. He also finds that clients request meetings to be held at his office rather than theirs “nine times out of ten” because they prefer both the convenience and the ambiance of Melrose Arch. “It’s about the overall convenience of living in an urban precinct like Melrose Arch, and how it simplifies our lives.”