LIVABLE COMMUNITIES WE LOVE

Good for People and the Planet

by John D. Ivanko and Lisa Kivirist

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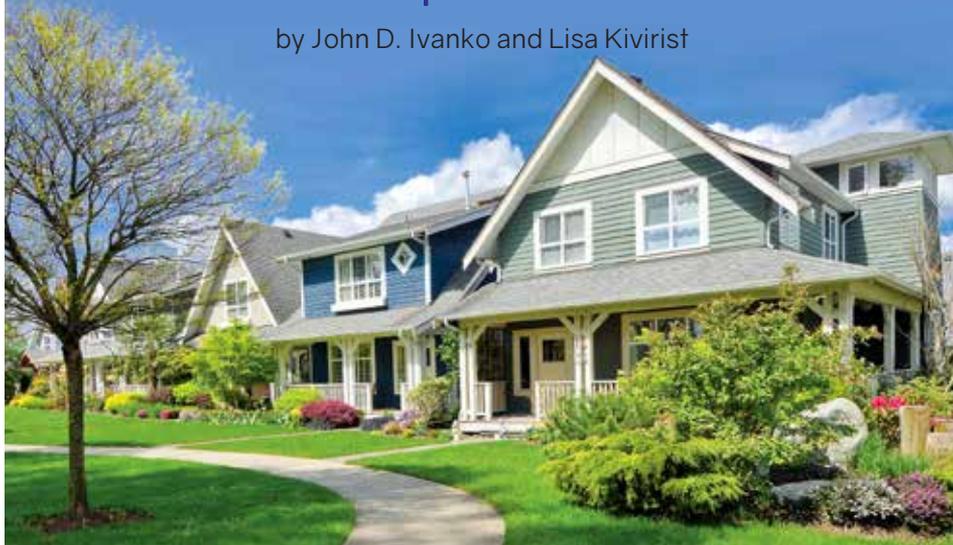
Many people define a livable city as one that is easy to get around in by foot, bike or public transportation. Many also prioritize ready access to fresh, local, organic food via farmers' markets and community gardens. Others champion affordable housing and cost of living factors, safe neighborhoods with a diversity of people, careful stewardship of clean air and water, and plentiful amenities, including considerable open space and natural settings. Many work to preserve and enhance a sense of place suited to the locale.

Partners for Livable Communities, a national nonprofit in Washington, D.C., that renews and restores communities, maintains, "Livability is the sum of the factors that add up to a community's quality of life, including the built and natural environments, economic prosperity, social stability and equity, educational opportunity and cultural, entertainment and recreation possibilities." The American Association of Retired Persons considers livable communities as age-friendly for young and old alike.

Along with economic opportunities, a leading stimulus in moving to urban centers is, "More people are looking for a sociable environment where they can walk out of their door to the shops or transit and be among others they recognize who also recognize them," observes Suzanne Lennard, director of the International Making Cities Livable Conferences, LLC, in Portland, Oregon. "People who have traveled abroad, especially to Europe, and tasted the quality of life possible in a truly livable, walkable, beautiful and sociable city, often want to find such a place to live themselves."

Following are a few examples of America's many livable cities. More are transitioning and evolving as city planners, government officials, businesses and nonprofit community organizations strive to make their hometowns both people- and planet-friendly, often through public and private partnerships.

Street-Scene Renaissance

In Pittsburgh, revitalization is transforming 10,000 parcels of vacant or abandoned land—some where steel mills formerly operated—into greenspace, bike lanes and other enticing and productive public areas. "Biking and our food scene have exploded," says Chris Sandvig, director of policy with the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group, which advocates for equitable urban revitalization through their Vacant Property Working Group, helping communities access blighted areas for pennies on the dollar. "We're now one of the top 10 bicycling commuter cities in the country. People also come here as food tourists due to vibrant local agricultural activity."

"A related ideal is to create compact, human-scale, mixed-use urban centers in the suburbs that are less expensive to construct—and thus remain more affordable—while placing shops, schools, parks, services, workplaces and public transit within walking and biking distance," Lennard notes. "This ensures a healthy, affordable and high quality of life for all; suburban, as well as urban."

Fast-growing Carmel, Indiana, just north of Indianapolis, is following suit. "After years of watching the suburbs sprawl into subdivisions with large lawns, privacy fences and cul-de-sacs, we created a vibrant central core with apartments, townhomes, condos and new options for smaller homes—all within walking distance or a short bike ride to new places to work, shop and dine," explains Mayor James Brainard. The design efforts serve people instead of cars.

"Carmel has spent the last 20-plus years building more than 900 miles of trails and multi-use pathways, enabling residents to commute by bicycle to work and enjoy easy access to a growing number of parks and recreational areas," says Brainard. To facilitate traffic flow, some 100 roundabouts replaced stoplights and four-way stops. "Reducing traffic congestion has improved our air quality, and saved gasoline and lives." A new, mixed-use downtown Arts and Design District includes a Center for the Performing Arts with a Center Green that hosts a farmers' market in summer and an outdoor *Christkindlmarkt* and outdoor skating rink in winter.

"The old way of doing things in which cities and towns sat back and let the market dictate how a community should be grown must come to an end," remarks Brainard, advocating the benefits of local governance.

Smart City Advantages

Key elements of smart cities—sensors, cameras, data analytics and powerful networks that capture and relay vital information—help them become more energy-efficient or quicker to respond to environmental and residential issues. Such products highlighted the 2018 Consumer Electronics Show, in Las Vegas. Reducing traffic can also contribute to safer highways and shorter commutes with decreased greenhouse gas emissions.

"Citizens are using apps to monitor issues and alert city managers, improving the livability of their communities," explains Steve Koenig, senior director of market research with the Consumer Technology Association.

In Boston, the app BOS:311 allows residents to instantaneously notify government departments of pollution concerns, like blocked drains and other environmental or community needs, feeding the information directly into the city's work order system via their mobile phone. This real-time collaboration results in a cleaner, safer and healthier city.

The Envision Charlotte project encompasses interactive kiosks in 64 businesses and government buildings citywide, gathering energy usage data for office buildings to increase energy efficiency and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. So far, energy consumption has dropped 19 percent, saving companies about $26 million. The program has strengthened economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability.

Nature in the City

Some cities have focused on the natural environment for improving local livability while mitigating contributions to climate change. Forested open spaces, wetlands and protected watersheds improve air quality, protect drinking water and buffer intense storms. Such areas also connect more people with nature and engage them in communal and healthy outdoor recreation.

Portland, Oregon, boasts more than 10,000 acres of parks, plus an innovative Biketown sharing program that has facilitated 160,000 bike trips since its launch in 2016. The city's Bike Bill requires all new streets to accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians by design. Portland also embraces urban gardens and allows residents to raise chickens, bees, goats or rabbits in their backyards.

No one wants to live where pollution runs unchecked or water is unsafe to drink. Philadelphia's Green City, Clean Waters program works to keep stormwater out of sewers and reduce rainwater runoff through decentralized soil-based and plant-based systems, including pervious pavement, green roofs and rain gardens. Begun in 2011, its goal is to reduce rainwater runoff by 85 percent by 2036. Rainwater has become a valuable community resource.

The program is just one of many ways that the City of Brotherly Love is transforming itself into one of the greenest in the United States. Overseen by the city's Office of Sustainability, Greenworks Philadelphia devises long-term sustainability strategies that encompass eight facets, including clean and efficient energy, carbon-neutrality and zero waste. Preparations are already underway to cope with a hotter, wetter future.

Preserving a Sense of Place

Making communities livable goes beyond infrastructure. Actions usually involve preserving, protecting and enhancing what appeals to residents. Santa Fe, New Mexico, is one example of many where livability priorities are guided by the values of its residents and its sense of place.

"From our historic public square and marketplaces to outdoor cafes, farmers' markets and community festivals; from human-scale architecture and balanced transportation to pedestrian and bicycle networks, this place represents shared values," says Mayor Javier M. Gonzales. "Santa Fe is also full of public art. The city is designed to be safe, creative and inspiring for young and old, families of all kinds and everyone else that comes to see us."

Good Life as Kids See It

Ultimately, making cities move livable for children can make them highly livable for all. "Children need the same things from a city that we all need, but their needs are greater than ours," says Lennard. "The environment a child grows up in shapes their health and their mental and social development for the rest of their lives. Our modern, unwalkable suburban environments are contributing to childhood obesity, which has been widely linked to chronic diseases that in the past were only associated with old age."

She notes, "Children need the exercise of walking or biking to school. They need safe streets so they can become independent and explore their neighborhoods; sidewalks and other outdoor areas where they can play, meet friends and interact with adults in the community; easy access to nature; beauty in their environment; and intriguing architecture, works of art and other places to stimulate their affection and imagination. As they become teenagers, they need access by foot or bike to a wide variety of resources to broaden their horizons. Don't we all need these things?"

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LIVABLE COMMUNITIES TOOLBOX

International Making Cities Livable hosts conferences in the U.S. and Europe. *LivableCities.org*

Consumer Technology Association's Smart Cities, an overview of the latest technology in making cities more smart and livable. *Tinyurl.com/SmartCitiesTechnology*

AARP Livable Communities fact sheets, helpful for communities looking to become more livable. *Tinyurl.com/LivableCommunityFacts*

AARP Livability Index, a livability rating of U.S. localities according to housing, neighborhood, transportation, environment, health, engagement and opportunity. *LivabilityIndex.aarp.org*

Toward Sustainable Communities: Solutions for Citizens and Their Governments, by Mark Roseland. The fourth edition offers a comprehensive guidebook for creating vibrant, healthy, equitable and economically viable places.