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newsdesk@thenational.ae Daniel Bardsley is a UK-based freelance journalist and former reporter at The National.

# LET THE PEOPLE WALK

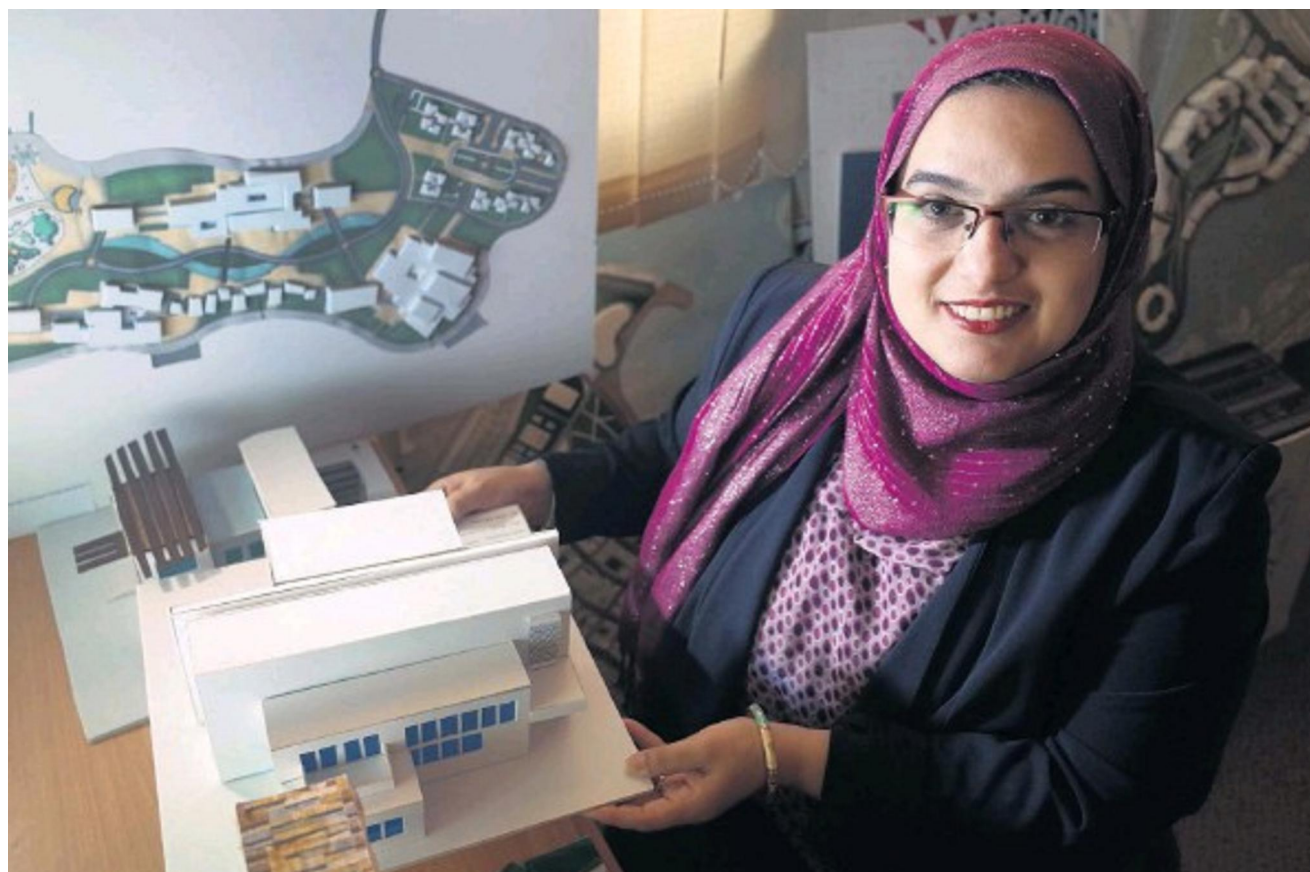
Civic planners now agree that traditional inner-city areas are best for walkability because they evolved as places for socialising and shopping, rather than roads reserved for car users. The idea of more compact cities is catching on, Daniel Bardsley repo

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*Planners worldwide are beginning to better understand the importance of making areas walkable*

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Urban planners give more priority to the 'walkability' of our cities, How walkable are cities such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah? The first factor that springs to mind when it comes to walkability is the weather, but there is more to bear in mind.



Delores Johnson / The National

**Dr Rim Meziani, assistant professor of architecture and interior design at Abu Dhabi University, says many traditional cities are much more walkable than modern ones because they were not designed for cars, but for people to move around in on foot.**

Walkability has exercised the minds of researchers for decades, and they have come up with myriad ways to measure what might seem like a simple concept. As Dr Tahar Ledraa from the College of Architecture and Planning at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, details in a recent Emirates Journal for Engineering Research paper, one set of researchers developed 78 measures of streetscape characteristics to determine an area's walkability. Others looked at 162 items covering accessibility, perceived safety, the walking pleasure and more.

In his paper, Dr Ledraa analysed the walkability of neighbourhoods in Riyadh and concluded that in the traditional inner-city areas, where residential density could be as much as 13 times higher than in newer

districts, people tended to walk more than in the suburbs.

In general, areas of higher density with lower traffic volume and speeds, traffic-calming measures, mixed land use, short blocks and high levels of street connectivity – lots of junctions with other streets – tend to be suitable for walking. Good paths and public transport help.

“The old Riyadh, with its more traditional neighbourhoods, is more or less walkable. But the modern Riyadh, which constitutes 75 to 80 per cent of Riyadh city, is a completely car-orientated city,” Dr Ledraa says.

Walking is discouraged in newer areas, he says, by wide streets of four to six lanes or more, narrow pavements and the placing within pavements of trees or lamp posts. Lack of street enclosure caused by wide streets and low-rise buildings also discourages walking because there is little shade, while blank walls separating the house entry from the public street similarly make walking less pleasant.

Like Riyadh, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and many other major cities in the Arabian Gulf also have a mix of older, denser downtown areas – built “according to human scale, not car scale” and expansive newer suburbs.

“Strip development is the most common urban planning pattern in many Gulf countries. This pattern is more suitable for car use but not for walking,” Dr Ledraa says.

“This is precisely what killed neighbourhood centres and pushed residents to rely exclusively on car use, even for getting a simple bottle of water or milk.”

Planners worldwide are beginning to better understand the importance of making areas walkable, according to Dr Paulo Ancaes, a research associate in the Faculty of Engineering Science at University College London.

“I think there’s more awareness now compared with 10 or 12 years ago, especially about land use – the factors of residential density, business density. There’s more concern about making neighbourhoods have a diversity of land use,” he says. The UAE and Gulf are part of this trend.

Dubai, which improved walkability by opening Dubai Metro in 2009, is aiming to take further steps. This year a senior official said that new developments in the city, and the 2020 Dubai master plan, would focus on walkability, creating a “compact city”.

Reflecting the same priority, last month the Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council (UPC) announced the launch of an upgraded online application for designing more walkable streets. The app has been made to help create streets that adhere to the characteristics specified in the Abu Dhabi Urban Street Design Manual. Officials hope the tool, which is freely available online, will improve walkability and safety. Likewise, Masdar City in the capital was designed to promote walkability, having mixed-use, interconnected neighbourhoods with parks and open spaces, plus shaded and cooled areas for walking.

Dr Ledraa would like to see new urban regulations in the Gulf to replace those centred on “use-based zoning”, which have applied for the past half century or so. Improved street enclosure, building shorter blocks and the conversion of one or two lanes of road into pavements and other measures should be considered.

“The street should first be designed as an urban place for socialisation and not as a road reserved mostly for car movement,” Dr Ledraa says.

“Compact planning to increase residential density is another factor that helps to create liveliness in the street and sustain other models of transport, such as public transport, walking and biking.”

Urban planning specialist Dr Rim Meziani, an assistant professor in the architecture and design department of Abu Dhabi University, says a number of measures, such as having more pleasant and safer paths, can improve walkability. “Locate the neighbourhood park or the children’s playground area, nursery or elementary school or the mosque or the hypermarket in walking distance so that people are encouraged to walk rather than ride a car to reach their daily shops or facilities,” she says. Dr Meziani hopes more parts of the world will learn from traditional cities, because “they are the ones that are sustainable”.

Some countries not traditionally associated with having walkable cities, such as the United States, are now taking the issue more seriously, perhaps taking lessons from more traditional neighbourhoods.

“There are some new developments in south Florida built in a different way compared with other suburban areas. They’re far from the centre but they’re being built thinking about shops and parks where people can walk,” Dr Ancaes says.

In other countries planners have gone a step further, with Dr Ancaes noting that in Seoul, South Korea, a motorway was ripped out.

The elevated road ran above the River Cheonggyecheon, which had become closed in and polluted. With the water cleaned up and the motorway removed more than a decade ago, this has now become a favourite walking area in the city.

While it seems unlikely that the UAE will be pulling up motorways, walkability is moving up the list of priorities, a development likely to be welcomed by all the country’s residents.

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