



# WALKING AWAY FROM THE *great disconnect*

Let's get people back on our streets and back to social interaction, says **Christopher Martin**

**I** am writing this article in the month of May which, for one means I have missed my deadline for this article; but more importantly, it means that I am writing this in National Walking Month, a Living Streets initiative that celebrates the health and happiness benefits of walking and wheeling more. As they rightly say, walking is one of the easiest ways to improve our health and stay connected to our community, helping us feel less lonely and isolated. And by swapping a short drive for a short walk, you can also help reduce air pollution, congestion and road danger – and save money in the process.

The idea that walking can help us stay connected is a hugely important one for us to focus on as urban designers, and one which grows in importance daily because we are living in a metacrisis of disconnection that has profound effects on our wellbeing.

For one, our addiction to digital dopamine hits and ever more instant gratification

disconnects us from others and hinders us from forming open and honest bonds with other people. The result of this disconnection is the mental health and loneliness crises that we see all around us in cities, and it greatly reduces people's ability to develop their potential and truly enjoy life and, in the worst case, it costs them their lives.

Not only this, but our increasing need to seek solace in homogenous groups, and to place others who have a different view at the polar opposite end of the spectrum further disconnects us from the richness of our collective awesomeness. We have seen this all too clearly in global politics over the last year, and we see it closer to home in the debate around interventions to reduce traffic in residential areas. The furore around Low Traffic Neighbourhoods is based on exactly this societal disconnect that we have created for ourselves. People are either complicit in putting up Stalinist Berlin Walls in our towns and cities, or they're Oath Keepers protecting us from the WEF – it seems I am not allowed

**“The most impactful improvement to public life and society we can make is to encourage more people to spend more time on streets”**

to be someone who quite likes it on the whole, secretly wishes his Uber ride was cheaper on a Saturday evening, and can see all the many sides of the debate good and bad.

So, how do we fight this global disconnect? Because if we don't, surely this will all get worse. For my money, the most impactful improvement to public life and society we can make is to encourage more people to spend more time on streets – increasing opportunity for social interaction, for spontaneity, and for city life. We need to make our cities the celebrants of walking so that we are better connected to our community, better connected to debates in society, and more aware of our collective awesomeness.



**CHRISTOPHER MARTIN**

Christopher is an influential urban designer and planner working all over the globe to help

communities improve their public spaces; as well as supporting cities and governments to develop strategy, change policies, and make great places possible. He is co-founder and director of Urban Strategy at Urban Movement; a trustee of the UK charity for everyday walking – Living Streets; vice chair of the UK Urban Design Group; and is a member of the United Nations Planning and Climate Action Group.

[urbanmovement.co.uk](http://urbanmovement.co.uk) @ChrisCities