

Sidewalk Wrongs and Walkers' Rights

Elise Vider

Tripping last summer on stairs at a SEPTA station broke my foot. Hobbling around Center City opened my eyes.

Those of us fortunate to be able bodied (most of the time) take for granted the ability to navigate uneven sidewalks, cross the street to accommodate a sidewalk obstructed by construction or do an end run around roadwork.



Perilous crossing conditions at 10th and South. Several corners in the neighborhood are similarly blocked. Credit: Elise Vider

But Philadelphia's streets and sidewalks are a dangerous and unrelenting obstacle course, especially for those dependent on crutches, walkers, canes or wheelchairs or pushing a baby stroller.

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The Design Advocacy Group is a volunteer organization whose more than 1,600 members come from a broad spectrum of disciplines and share an interest in Philadelphia's design, development and planning. DAG is a public forum and advocate for design quality and equity in the planning, architecture, preservation and physical development of Philadelphia.

As in many large cities (but not all), sidewalk maintenance, repair and replacement are up to individual property owners. That leaves miles of Philadelphia sidewalks uneven, cracked, crumbling or barely existent.

It also leads to a cacophony of paving materials, colors, textures and patterns. Many downtown blocks, especially, are fronted by an incoherent mash up of brick, concrete, asphalt, slate, pavers and other materials.

Aesthetics aside, sidewalks blocked by construction and deliveries are the major impediment to safely getting around the city on foot. Mayor Kenney identified construction-related obstructions and closures as a key issue when he ran for election in 2015 and a year ago he signed into law a measure that requires developers and builders essentially to *try* (emphasis mine) to provide a “protected” walkway if a “covered” walkway on the sidewalk is not practicable.

Hence the proliferation of “protected” walkways in which unsightly Jersey barriers are lined up to create a pedestrian lane in the street. These still require pedestrians, able bodied and not, to navigate the curb and progress single file through a cattle chute. They also contribute to vehicular congestion by shutting down a traffic lane.

Delivery trucks pulled across the sidewalk are another hazard that routinely force pedestrians into the roadway.

Granted, our narrow streets pose a never-ending challenge, but Philadelphia is far too willing to push pedestrians out of the way to accommodate construction and deliveries. Examples abound, as illustrated in these images taken by my DAG Steering Committee colleague George Claflen and by me.



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Waiting for the bus at 17th and Walnut. (George Claflen photo)



At 16th and Walnut, September 2017 (Elise Vider photo)



A treacherous stroll down Walnut Street—in the street, September 2017. (Elise Vider photo)

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Broad Street sidewalk under construction—totally. (George Claflen photo)



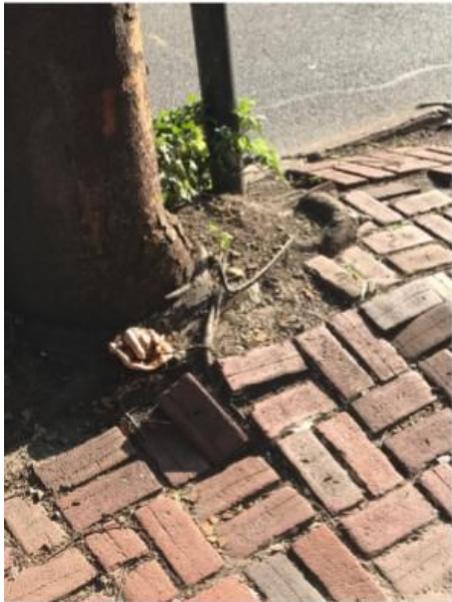
Nowhere to walk, nowhere to run. (George Claflen photo)

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An unsafe sidewalk. San Francisco and some other cities pay to repair damage caused by tree roots. (Elise Vider photo)



The preferred solution: a "covered" walkway. (Elise Vider photo)

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Horses like wide sidewalks, too. (Elise Vider photo)



Sansom, one of Philadelphia's picturesque little streets. (Elise Vider photo)



Blocking the sidewalk in a snowstorm, no less. (George Clafien photo)

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Current construction around the northeast quadrant of City Hall pushes pedestrians into the street, in a "protected" walkway. (Elise Vider photo)



Even where sidewalks are wide and streets are wider, like at City Hall, we block them for construction. (Elise Vider photo)

A few suggestions. Most immediately, the city needs to demand that developers and builders do much more to maintain safe, passable sidewalks and streets during construction, ideally by providing covered passages on the sidewalk.

The administration, City Council, regulators, the development community and construction industry should make safe sidewalk and street passage a priority and devote all necessary resources to potential solutions. What are the best practices in other cities that make it so much easier and safer to navigate their streets on foot?

And we need much better coordination so that pedestrians can avoid dodging cars, crossing back and forth, or getting stopped in their tracks, often within a short distance. An online and well-maintained map to show where the city has issued permits for sidewalk or street closures – a sort of “Waze” for pedestrians – would be extraordinarily useful. How about the city makes that information available through its OpenDataPhilly program to encourage app and map makers to tackle the job?

Walkability is a key pleasure of urban life and an important measure of urban attractiveness. Philadelphia’s impassable streets and sidewalks belie our



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reputation as a walkable city and make it challenging and dangerous for pedestrians, hobbled or otherwise, to chart a safe course.

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