Required reading for
urban planners?

Michael Lewis’s Moneyball was more than a book about how the small-market Oakland Athletics employed unconventional, statistics-based methods to beat bigger-money teams in the game of baseball. The genius of the book — and I’m probably biased here as a lifelong Oakland A’s fan — was its ability to expose human beings’ flawed sense of perception. When trying to observe trends, such as how well a batter hits with runners in scoring position, the human brain tends to privilege emotionally powerful anecdotes, such as memorable hits in big situations. Some teams award million dollar contracts on this basis, despite the contrary drumbeat of dispassionately collected statistics. While the A’s didn’t invent stats-heavy player evaluation (credit Bill James), the team took it to new levels.

Compensating for our weaknesses at observing trends is important in any context, but particularly when it comes to determining public policy. The Economist offers a nice example of applying Moneyball principles to encouraging walkable urban communities. Researchers in Europe have been trying to crack the code as to why some streets become magnets for pedestrians and others don’t. One of the factors, according to experiments on people’s preferences, has to do with “desire lines” — those intuitive paths we take to walk to a destination:

> Desire lines can be seen in virtually every public park as the informal dirt trails trampled by walkers as they head off path networks to their preferred destination. They also exist over longer distances within cities. Pedestrians seem to prefer routes that afford most visibility, for example. An experiment carried out by Jan Wiener and colleagues at Freiburg University in Germany gave people a choice of two paths in a virtual environment: they reliably chose the direction which had the longest line of sight.

Innovative research like this could provide practical guidance for cities and towns seeking to achieve walkability with all its benefits, such as reduced driving, revitalized downtowns, and more housing options. Let’s hope these urban leaders have the will to proceed and the resources to implement the latest and best data-based ideas (and hopefully do a better job than the A’s have been playing recently).

And if these folks aren’t inspired by baseball, there’s always Brad Pitt in the movie version.