

# Birmingham Weekly

## Feature Story

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### Walkable talk

#### A Q&A with Christopher Leinberger

By: **Mark Kelly**



*Christopher B. Leinberger is a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., where he focuses on research and practices that help transform traditional and suburban downtowns. At the core of Leinberger's development philosophy is the concept of "walkable urbanism," a model based on the ability to satisfy most everyday needs — school, shopping, parks, employment and even socializing with friends — within walking distance or mass transit of one's home. His approach is laid out in his new book, *The Option of Urbanism: Investing in a New American Dream*.*

*Leinberger was in Birmingham last week to meet with key business leaders and transportation officials to discuss his views on the challenges and opportunities of promoting walkable urban development. On Thursday evening, Feb. 19, he spoke at a reception hosted by the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham, the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce, the Birmingham-Jefferson Transit Authority and Sloss Real Estate. That afternoon, Leinberger sat down for a cup of coffee with Weekly contributing editor Mark Kelly; the following is excerpted from their conversation:*

**KELLY:** In your book, you assert that walkable urbanism is critical to the challenge cities across America are facing, which is how to grow and provide a sustainably high quality of life at the same

**time. What makes that such a critical consideration at this time?**

LEINBERGER: We're in the middle of a structural shift in how we deal with the built environment. Speaking conservatively, the built environment accounts for 35 percent of the assets in our country. Buildings, roads, bus stations, city hall, your home — add it all up and it's 35 percent of our wealth. So this shift is going to have a major impact on our economy.

**How so?**

Well, the last shift we had was in the 1950s and '60s, when we in this country decided we wanted to abandon our cities and build drivable suburbs. This was a brand-new thing in the 5,500-year history of building cities, and government at every level not only encouraged it, but subsidized it through things like changes in zoning laws — and continues to do so to this day.

Promoting drivable suburbanism has been our de facto domestic policy, the basis of the American economy. So we got really good at it, and it worked for a half-century or so until we overdid it. The economic downturn we're now in was caused primarily by overbuilding. We had never gone through a 13-to-14-year boom in real estate before. Given that much time, you can really screw something up, which is pretty much what happened.

**And the trend back to walkable urbanism bodes well for the economy? Real estate developers are now going to be our saviors?**

The built environment drove us into this recession, and it will drive us out. Two of our last three major downturns — the early '90s and this one — were caused by downturns in the built environment, most notably housing. And in the other downturn, when the high-tech bubble burst, it was housing that cushioned the blow. So yes, there are developers, investors and planners who see opportunity, and who are trying to lead the way in walkable urbanism. As their numbers continue to grow, it certainly can become a major economic force.

In the book, I liken it to a pendulum. It began to swing toward the suburbs after World War II and kept swinging that way for a long time. Urban market demand started to re-emerge in the early-to-mid-1990s, and now the pendulum is really moving in that direction. The interesting thing, if you think about it, is that the next upturn will be driven by young people, the millennial generation. That's significant, because this is the first time the Baby Boomers aren't the primary drivers.

**That's really the shift you're talking about, isn't it? A shift in value systems and priorities?**

Right. For the first time in our history, Americans have a choice between living in a walkable urban environment or a drivable suburb — and we want that choice. It's the classic American 50-50 split. Part of what we're seeing now is pent-up demand for urban stuff, but plenty of people also still want drivable suburbs. The problem is, we've oversupplied that, which is why we're now seeing things like the emergence of slums out on the suburban fringes.

**So the principles of walkable urbanism apply to suburban settings as well?**

There is a wide spectrum of walkable urban places. It's not just about revitalizing downtowns. The communities that are going to be successful in the next boom are those that give the market what it wants — a built environment that provides choice, and that is sustainable environmentally and socially, as well as economically.

The research is not done yet, but it's reasonably apparent that walkable urban places have a high

education level. The knowledge-based economy is key to this structural shift we've talked about, and that market is demanding a range of choices — not just downtown lofts, not just single-family homes.

**Generally speaking, what are the elements that go into making a walkable urban environment? More specifically, what are the issues that Birmingham will have to face in trying to achieve that?**

The issue for Birmingham is whether you're going to get left behind. Make no mistake, there are going to be winners and losers in this, and the losers are going to be those who fail to meet the demands of the market. The good news is, now is a good time to be addressing these things. It's a fallow time economically, which means there is time to make good decisions about how you're going to move forward.

**In what areas should we focus?**

In my mind, there are four things to focus on. Transportation is first and foremost. President Obama's stimulus bill recognizes the change that's taking place. The transportation money in the stimulus is 60 percent for highways, 40 percent for development of rail and bike options. If you look back in history, the mix has been about 85 percent highways, so that's a pretty significant increase. With that in mind, now certainly is the time to get rail systems in place.

**And it has to be rail, in terms of mass transit?**

Rail is important to the emerging market. Middle-class Americans like rail, and very simply, developers do not invest around bus stops — they do invest around train stations.

What it boils down to is that, if you want to be a player in the 21st century, you have to have good public transit. I would suggest that Birmingham start with commuter rail, taking advantage of existing rail beds. Several communities around the country have been able to do that very rapidly, and there's no reason Birmingham should not be able to as well. You have to do it, or Birmingham will not be relevant in the 21st century.

The second thing is getting the zoning in place to encourage and support walkable urban development. If we can assume you're going to do what you need to do in terms of getting a rail system in place, then you need to make it both legal and desirable to do high-density, mixed-use development around rail stations. And it's important that the process of doing that is citizen-led. You have to listen to the market, nurture that process of the community determining what it wants to be when it grows up.

Third, you need to get into the place-making business. By that, I mean that you have to have management organizations for specific places, business improvement districts and development authorities and that sort of thing to help keep the focus on planning and implementation. By doing that, you're also creating some tremendous opportunities for attracting the kind of people you need to drive and sustain development — not just strategic planning, but also in maintenance, security, infrastructure and administration.

Finally, you have to focus on affordable housing for the long term. It gets back to providing a range of choices. Think of it this way: If downtown comes all the way back, it's eventually going to be the most expensive place in the community to live and do business. If you don't have a housing strategy that addresses the need to have other options available, you're going to wind up with a "golden ghetto" downtown that feeds class resentment, much of which is likely to be racial in nature. Gentrification has positive aspects, but you'd better have a strategy that includes housing for the bulk of the workforce — schoolteachers, grocery clerks, public employees—as well as truly affordable housing for low-income citizens.

You have some real opportunities here in Birmingham. But like a lot of other places, taking advantage of those is going to require a mentality shift that takes into account the structural shift that's going on nationally with our approach to the built environment.

*Mark Kelly is a contributing editor for Birmingham Weekly and the author of A Powerful Presence: The Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce and the History of Birmingham.*