

Cleveland Plain Dealer

Christopher Leinberger urges Cleveland developers to build walkable neighborhoods

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Christopher Leinberger, the nationally respected real estate expert, issued a forecast and an admonition Tuesday at the 2008 Historic Downtown Cleveland Luncheon Forum.

Leinberger, who teaches at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, said that after 50 or 60 years in which American development has been dominated by what he called "drivable suburbs," the pendulum is swinging the other way.



Christopher Leinberger

Christopher Leinberger is a firm believer in downtowns -- and a critic of sprawl.

Over the next 20 years, he predicted, 88 percent of all new households will consist of couples and singles without children.

Most of them won't want a large house on a large lot in a suburb. Instead, he said, they'll resettle American cities and downtowns. They'll pursue ["The Option of Urbanism,"](#) to cite the title of his new book, published in November by Island Press.

"It's all about mixed-use, transit-oriented development," he told more than 200 planners, developers, publicists, architects and journalists at Windows on the River at the Powerhouse in the Flats.

"We're bored with suburbs," he said. "We need more options to satisfy the market."

In his article, ["The Next Slum?,"](#) published in The Atlantic in March, Leinberger describes how newly finished subdivisions outside Charlotte, N.C.; Sacramento, Calif.; and other cities are losing residents and falling prey to vandals and gangs.

The causes go beyond the current foreclosure crisis to include what he calls "a structural change (that) is under way in the housing market -- a major shift in the way many Americans want to live and work."

As America adds another 100 million people to its population over the next 30 years, much of the new growth will be concentrated in walkable urban neighborhoods where a person's basic needs can be found within 1,500 to 3,000 feet, Leinberger said at the luncheon.

Such neighborhoods include rental, affordable and market-rate housing along with neighborhood services, restaurants, entertainment, cultural attractions and offices.

They can occur in a downtown, adjacent to a downtown, in a suburban town center from the early 20th century, in a redeveloped suburban mall or in a new "lifestyle center" on the suburban fringe. They need to be served by mass transit, and they need to be intentionally designed, encouraged by supportive zoning and aggressively managed once they're built.

Washington, D.C., which Leinberger described as the prime example of the new trend, has more than a dozen such neighborhoods, ranging from tony Dupont Circle to up-and-coming Anacostia.

Cleveland, he said, only has one: University Circle.

"You should have 10 to 12 regionally significant walkable places at critical mass," he said. "If you don't provide the market what it wants, they'll go to New York, Chicago and Munich. You'll be left in the dust."

Social and economic factors driving the new trend include the rising cost of gasoline and the lifestyle preferences of a new, so-called "millennial" generation now coming of age.

Cleveland developers are trying to build exactly the kinds of places Leinberger described. Examples include the proposed Triangle development in University Circle, the Flats East Bank development and the Gordon Square development in Detroit-Shoreway. Leinberger appeared not to know about the projects, and didn't address their prospects.

Brimming with optimism about Detroit, a city often compared unfavorably to Cleveland, Leinberger also sounded optimistic about the Forest City.

"Cleveland's downtown does not have a critical mass," he said. "But I would be surprised if you don't get there in the next upturn.

"You need to focus on water. Water is magic. Water is gold. You've got one of the greatest resources in any city on the planet. But you gotta get to it, however."

Leinberger told his listeners that the city should abandon the old politics of downtown versus the neighborhoods and the region. The city should churn out more financial data showing how a strong downtown tax base provides revenues and services vital to neighborhoods and the region.

He also urged the audience to pay close attention to the formulation of the next federal transportation bill, which will take place when current legislation expires in 2009. The new bill will determine in large measure how cities grow over the next decade, he said.

"This is the future, folks," he said. "Take it and run with it."