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Walkability and the new urbanism



Intersections. Mohawk Road and Upper James Street rates a 45 on a walkability score. *Cathie Coward/The Hamilton Spectator Source: The Hamilton Spectator*

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Urban expert Christopher Leinberger has witnessed a revolution in his Washington, D.C. neighbourhood.

Ten years ago, his Dupont Circle townhouse in the historic district of the nation's capital was worth 25 per cent less per square foot than a house in suburban Maryland or Virginia 30 minutes away. That same townhouse is worth 70 per cent more per square foot today.

Leinberger says demand for homes in urban, walkable neighbourhoods is outstripping supply in most United States cities and that for the first time since the suburbs became king in the 1960s, housing values there have fallen below those of their urban counterparts.

The same trend is evident in Canada's biggest cities of Toronto and Vancouver, he says, and is likely inevitably coming to other metro areas. While cities are thriving and growing, suburbs have grown more congested, less green, even more car-centric and been pushed further out into the hinterland.

Leinberger, who teaches at the University of Michigan, is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institute and is a partner in a development and consulting firm. He will be the keynote speaker at Thursday's fourth annual Hamilton Economic Summit.

The theme of this year's summit is focused on bringing people and profits to the lower city, defined as stretching from McMaster Innovation Park, through the downtown and the waterfront and into the industrial North End. The summit brings leaders from business, politics, city bureaucracy, civic, cultural and nonprofit organizations together for a daylong discussion about the city's present and future.

So what is a walkable neighbourhood?

Well, if you have no viable choice but to get in your car to hit a grocery store or a bank, you aren't in a walkable neighbourhood. According to Leinberger, walkability means there are many destinations within 500 to 800 metres of your doorstep.

A Seattle-based website called walkscore.com offers ratings out of 100 for walkability. It measures distances to restaurants, grocery stores, coffee shops, schools, parks, shopping, libraries, banks and pubs. It doesn't measure, however, how safe or pleasant those walks might be.

So according to walkscore, an address at King and James is a "walker's paradise" at 100. An address from a Binbrook subdivision gets a 40 while a downtown Dundas home gets an 83. A 10-year-old Waterdown subdivision nets a 32, Upper James and Mohawk is still car dependent at 45, while a house on a rural concession in Flamborough rates a goose egg.

"Some houses on the fringe you need a car to go to the bathroom," says Leinberger. "Families there are making eight to 12 trips a day by car."

That kind of car dependence is taking a big chunk out of household budgets. Leinberger says the average suburban American family is spending 25 per cent of its income on its cars. Dropping one car can increase a household's mortgage-carrying capacity by more than \$100,000, he says.

Car dependence also has deep social, economic and health impacts, including poor air quality, obesity and high property taxes to feed the cost of building roads and services, says Leinberger. He says fringe suburbanism consumes land and energy at a much higher rate and produces "could be anywhere places," lacking character or substance.

"It's not that the fringe, luxury house is in trouble but the demand and value increase is clearly elsewhere," Leinberger said. "What is in trouble is the entry level, low-end fringe development. Those are the next slums."

He means that literally and the recession, which devastated the American housing sector, has only accelerated the trend, Leinberger has found. Densely built inner suburbs and city cores lost a fraction of their value compared to housing on the suburban fringe.

"(N)ow that the bubble has popped, we can clearly see that underlying demand in these areas is extremely weak, and oversupply is massive," he wrote in an article published in The Atlantic called Here Comes the Neighborhood.

He says outlying suburban homes in many parts of the U.S. are now worth less than the materials that went into building them. The cycle is that homeowners have no incentive to invest in their homes and banks won't finance renovations anyway. Homeowners with a choice move away, leaving behind those who can't afford to live anywhere else. Crime and decay isn't far behind.

On the flip side, the trend to walkable urbanism is driven by those in their 20s and 30s, who don't want to spend their disposable income on cars and crave high-density and fast-paced downtown living. A whole lot of experts — perhaps Richard Florida best known among them — say for cities to thrive, they have to cater to young, creative workers who are sought after by the employees of the knowledge economy.

But baby boomers, singles, childless couples and empty nesters are also looking for interesting urban living in droves. And their proportion of the population is rising.

A key element, says Leinberger, is an urban rail system. The metro region of Washington has more examples of walkable urbanism than any other city in North America, he says, and 90 per cent of them are served by rail. The City of Hamilton is currently designing a light rail route from Eastgate Square to McMaster University, but there has been no commitment of funding from any level of government.

Really, the ultimate vision of walkability harks back to the 1920s, what Leinberger calls the “golden age,” when cars didn't rule, streetcars criss-crossed cities and neighbourhoods were compact. The end of World War II and the meteoric rise of the automobile led to a whole different kind of development that has prevailed for more than half a century.

Leinberger says the best city Hamilton could compare itself to is Chattanooga, Tenn., a rust belt town that made explosives and pig iron before its economy collapsed in the 1980s.

“Twenty or 30 years ago it had the worst air quality in the country. Number 2 was L.A.”

Leinberger helped the city craft a downtown catalytic strategy that identified 14 initiatives, including building the world's biggest freshwater aquarium and a free battery-powered bus system downtown. Much of the work was completed in just four years and private investors jumped in with three-quarters of the funding.

Another example for Hamilton is Lancaster, Pa., which survived its major employer going bankrupt and is reinventing itself as an arts and medical hub.

There is lots of interest in urban density and walkability these days.

The province has set out planning guidelines to limit the amount of sprawl and increase densities in urban areas. The city signed an International Charter for Walking in 2008 and has recently developed a 20-year walkability plan to attempt to get people out of cars and walking and cycling city streets. It includes plans for more trails, bike lanes, street art, improved streetscapes and pedestrian walkways over roadways.

Every city project is now assessed according to its impact — and potential to improve — pedestrian traffic.