

Urban renewal: Now you're walking

WASHINGTON — Could it possibly be that Washington, D.C., for years bashed by politicians, its population shrinking and, at one point, almost bankrupt, has become a model of how the entire nation might smartly develop in the 21st century?

I never thought I'd see the day. But Christopher Leinberger, one of America's top real-estate analysts and now a Brookings Institution fellow, makes a startling case for it in his just-published book, "The Option of Urbanism" (Island Press).

Leinberger's case is about walkability. It's about dramatic reinvestment — about \$8.2 billion worth — pouring in the city's downtown since 1997. Complementing monumental Washington, there's been a rush of new cinemas, theaters, quality restaurants, trendy retail stores and a wildly popular sports arena, all helped along by a downtown business district providing special security, marketing and planning.

But the success story is not exclusively a downtown one — the entire Washington citistate of 5.3 million people is now booming. And it's starring specialty is what Leinberger calls "walkable urbanism" — places with a mix of destinations people want, from shops and parks to pubs and entertainment, accessible on foot.

In a sense, walkable urbanism is nothing new; it was the way towns and cities were organized from the first urban settlements about 5,500 years ago to the 20th century.

But after World War II, with Americans' rush to thousands of new suburban locations, a never-before-seen norm appeared. Leinberger calls it "drivable sub-urbanism." And what a market smash it proved, offering Americans a sense of freedom, mobility, privacy, their own piece of turf and a yard for the kids to play. Plus plenty of jobs and profits, from autos to oil to real estate to fast food. The new form became virtually synonymous with the American Dream. Two generations of Americans knew practically nothing else.

But in the 1990s, the model began to lose some of its luster. Suburbia's big parking lots and low-density zoning meant an auto for every trip. Walking and transit were impractical. Older suburbs began to decline, inducing families to drive farther and farther to new suburban rings. Thousands of malls and shopping strips were abandoned. Traffic congestion became so severe that many families were obliged to build their lives around it. Kids had to be driven everywhere. Vehicle miles driven in America shot up a stunning 226 percent from 1983 to 2001, while population increased just 22 percent.

So by the mid-1990s a significant number of Americans — and not just the poor and minorities long consigned to inner cities — began to ask: Isn't there a better way? Popular media began to shift its images of the city from crime and violence to the exciting, hip place to be (with such television shows as "Seinfeld," "Friends" and "Sex and the City").

Urban crime rates took a deep dive. Most downtowns began a surprising revitalization, with more offices, entertainment, restaurants and a leading edge of middle-class people (often youth and empty nesters) returning. And the ideas of walkable town and city life, spread with fervor by the architects and planners of the New Urbanism movement, gnawed at the decades-old supremacy of the suburban ideal.

Walkable urbanism has demographics going for it. The share of U.S. families with children at home has been declining sharply; the largest household growth will be empty nesters, never-nesters and singles, many likely to look to cities and their excitement. And cities, competing, will likely keep heeding advice to lure creative young professionals; in fact, those that don't offer true walk-able urbanism, Leinberger suggests, are "probably destined" to lose out economically.

In the 1980s, the Washington region had two highly walkable places — Georgetown and Old Town Alexandria. Today, Leinberger calculates, it has 17 highly walkable, beckoning urban centers, with at least five more emerging.

Significantly, 16 of Washington's walkable centers have subway stops; the modern Metro system, which began in the 1970s, has transformed the region as communities — Arlington County, Va., is the star — have consciously planned dense, multiuse development around the stops.

But Washington started its system when generous federal aid still flowed. Denver's doing it the harder way, with a \$4.7 billion light-rail system that's 80 percent financed by local taxpayers. But the Denver region will end up with 119 miles of track, many walkable centers, and a burnished reputation. In the process, it, too, is setting a national model.

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