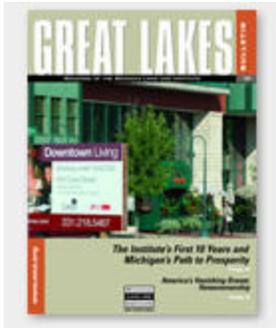


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April 27, 2006

Three New Urbanists Reshaping Michigan's Development Patterns

By [Keith Schneider](#)
Great Lakes Bulletin News Service

Among the many hats Christopher Leinberger has worn as a New Urbanist developer, one stands out. Mr. Leinberger, who last year began teaching at the University of Michigan, founded and directed Albuquerque's public-private Historic District Improvement Company. The project spurred more than \$200 million in redevelopment projects, turning a sun-faded downtown into one of New Mexico's best places to live and work.



Christopher Leinberger, Soji Adelaja, and Mulugetta Birru.

When Mr. Leinberger announced his appointment last year as professor and director of the new Real Estate Development Program at the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Design, The Albuquerque Tribune lamented the departure and commended him for "making the clearest case yet for investing private money downtown—and for putting his money where his mouth is."

Mr. Leinberger is now focusing the same sort of innovative intelligence and energy on redeveloping housing and commercial districts in Michigan, especially downtown Detroit. He joins two other land use specialists of equal renown who've also come from out of state to help rebuild the state's cities, promote New Urbanism, conserve farmland and open space, and generate prosperity.

The first is Soji Adelaja, the John A. Hannah Distinguished Professor in Land Policy at Michigan State University, who, among other things, helped to form a \$1 billion farmland and open space conservation fund in New Jersey.

Dr. Adelaja, an economist and native of Nigeria, has built MSU's two-year-

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Special Report

old Land Policy Program into a compelling, long-term project of academic research and outreach across 10 areas of public policy. He recruited within the university and at campuses statewide to assemble an interdisciplinary research team dedicated to convincing Michigan to establish a new way to grow, including improving the design of existing and new neighborhoods. "I want to know what the big idea is here," he almost always says when evaluating a research proposal.

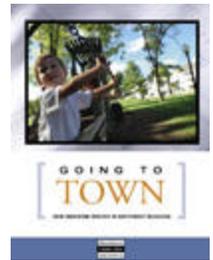
The third big dog that's run onto Michigan's redevelopment field is Mulugetta Birru, an economist and native of Ethiopia, who for nearly two years has directed the Greater Wayne County Economic Development Corporation. Dr. Birru earned a national reputation for resuscitating struggling neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, where he also advocated for a successful bus rapid transit system, built several sports stadiums and a convention center, and revitalized hundreds of acres of former industrial sites into office, retail, and industrial developments.

Dr. Birru's signature proposal for metropolitan Detroit is turning 25,000 acres around Detroit Metro and Willow Run airports into an environmentally sensitive, resource-conserving, energy-efficient, neighborhood-promoting, public transit-oriented "Airport City."

"When you want to create something you don't go with the flow," he said. "You sometimes have to be a little radical in your thinking."

Mr. Leinberger also is more than willing to challenge convention. He cautions students that "if you want to learn how to do conventional sprawl development, don't come to Michigan." His articles on how to design, zone, finance, and build inspiring rather than demoralizing developments have appeared in Atlantic Monthly, The Wall Street Journal, and Urban Land.

"There is market demand for progressive alternatives to conventional development that is readily apparent," he said. "The focus of my work is to help train the next generation of developers to build it."



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