

# Washington Post Writers Group

NEAL PEIRCE COLUMN

For Release Sunday, December 16, 2007

© 2007 Washington Post Writers Group

WALKABILITY = LIVABILITY = BILLIONS

By Neal Peirce

WASHINGTON - Could it possibly be that Washington, 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 Brookings Institution fellow, makes a startling case for it in his just-published book, *The Option of Urbanism - Investing in a New American Dream* (Island Press).

Leinberger's case isn't about Washington's radically improved politics and city management. Rather, it's about walkability. It's about dramatic reinvestment -- some \$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 and 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's not exclusively a downtown one -- the entire Washington citistate of 5.3 million people is now booming. And it's starring especially in what Leinberger calls "walkable urbanism" -- places with the mix of destinations people want, from shops and parks and schools to pubs and entertainment, all 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 some 5,500 years ago into 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 -- and Washington's no exception -- became so severe 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 (such television shows as *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Sex in 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.

None of this, Leinberger insists, means "drivable sub-urbia" will disappear any time soon: a huge weight of custom, continued consumer choice, zoning and the sheer vastness of today's spread-out suburbia assure it will remain dominant for years to come. Nor will cities' problems, from poverty to schools, disappear soon.

But 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 in the decades ahead 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 walkable 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 -- the most of any U.S. metropolis.

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

But Washington started its Metro 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.