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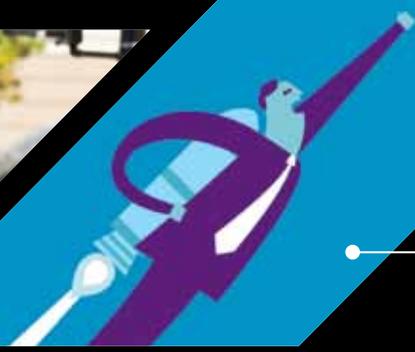


THE NEW URBANISM

A Walkthrough with Chris Leinberger



CAN THE LATIN AMERICAN BOOM CONTINUE?





**CHRIS LEINBERGER, EVANGELIST OF THE NEW URBANISM,
COMBINES ON-THE-GROUND WORK**



WITH ABSTRACT THINKING



Chris Leinberger was fascinated by real estate at a very early age: When he was five years old, he remembers walking in Philadelphia with his mother and wondering why one store location drew more people than other locations.

This curiosity about why some locations do well and others don't has served Leinberger well during his long and successful career in real estate. For more than three decades he's worked in almost every nook and cranny of the industry—from strategist to developer to author. He's been interviewed by prominent magazines and newspapers as an industry trendsetter and was named one of the top 100 urban thinkers of all time in a 2009 poll by the urban planning website *Planetizen*.

A senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and president of LOCUS, an advocacy group for progressive developers, he's also spoken to numerous downtown groups, from San Jose, Calif., to San Jose, Costa Rica, and he is a regular contributor to *The Atlantic*.

"He's a leader in every way," said Geoff Anderson, president of Smart Growth America, a political advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. "He's got great vision and can spot trends and connections before others do."

Now, Leinberger, 61, is bringing his legendary insights to the George Washington School of Business as the newly minted Charles Bendit Distinguished Scholar and Research Professor. His teaching and research will focus on New Urbanism, a growing movement promoting the development of communities where, unlike urban sprawl, stores and jobs are within walking distance of homes.

Leinberger will teach students how to build, manage and finance walkable communities. No other business school in the United States has a program like this. Meanwhile, he'll continue a project he began at Brookings that, for the first time, will identify and rank walkable communities around the country.

His methodology, developed with Mariela Alfonzo, will compare communities' accessibility to the general public and their ability to attract investment capital. The first city he's looking at is Washington, where he has identified 43 neighborhoods within walking distance of work and shopping.

"Welcome to the future," Leinberger wrote in a report on his research. "The field of urbanism and real estate must continue to make strides in better understanding how to build and manage great places."

By Francis X. Donnelly

FEATURES

A REAL ESTATE PRO WITH AN INTELLECTUAL BENT

Leinberger's career as a real estate pro with an intellectual bent almost never happened. After graduating from Harvard Business School in 1976, Leinberger became director of strategic planning for Saga Corp., a restaurant and food service company based in Menlo Park, Calif.

In 1979, while still at Saga, he received two job offers: One was to manage a couple of local food service chains for a venture capitalist, the other was to run a small real estate consulting firm. He chose real estate, and not just because the company was located in Southern California—he just didn't find the food business very stimulating intellectually.

"I hated the food service/restaurant business," he said. "You work when everyone else

works and work when everyone else plays."

In 1982 he bought the small real estate consulting firm and turned it into the largest independent real estate consulting company in the country. He expanded Robert Charles Lesser & Co. from one office to four, grew business 15 percent a year and broadened its offerings from residential to income property and strategic planning for downtown groups and real estate firms. And all the growth came during a two-decade stretch that weathered two real estate depressions.

But after all those years of helping developers, Leinberger decided to become one himself. In 2000 he sold the consulting business, where he had become a major proponent of smart growth, acting as a bridge between mainstream developers and the progressive wing of the industry.

Along with two partners he then started Arcadia Land Co., which would specialize in New Urbanism developments.

RELEARNING THE 'OLD WAY' OF ASSEMBLING TOWNS

At Arcadia, he helped revive downtown Albuquerque, N.M. His strategy for a 12-block area included new federal build-

rail line and east-west rapid transit line, and redeveloping a high school into apartments and lofts.

The strategy also called for the formation of an enterprise to develop projects that could spur growth. Arcadia joined with a nonprofit foundation to become the Historic District Improvement Company (HDIC), which is now a model

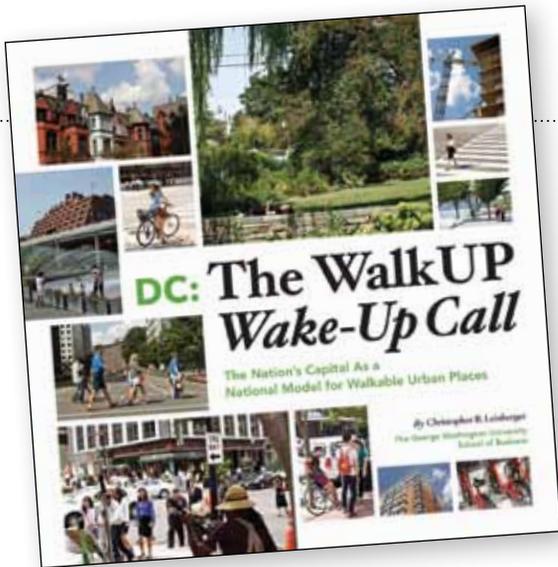
"Welcome to the future. The field of urbanism and real estate must continue to make strides in better understanding how to build and manage great places."

—CHRIS LEINBERGER

ings, a transportation center, a business improvement district, a north-south commuter

for other foundations around the country. HDIC's first revitalization project was a \$20





million theater block at the entrance to downtown that boasted homes, shops, offices and a 14-screen movie theater.

He was a partner in a quest to build a privately financed arena across from the theater block, but a newly elected mayor killed the project for political reasons. That was another lesson Leinberger learned during his career—politics didn't mesh well with real estate strategy. The project's demise, along with a long-held interest in academia, helped push him toward the next phase of his career.

NEW URBANISM

Arriving at Brookings in 2005, Leinberger delved even more

into New Urbanism, which, he explained, is really Old Urbanism. Before the mid-1900s, most communities had homes within walking distance of jobs and stores. But the proliferation of cars and highways allowed towns to stretch out, separating residences from retail and retail from commercial and commercial from hotels, making everything reachable only by auto.

"It wasn't particularly satisfying," he said about suburban sprawl. "It doesn't create a society that's humane or inclusive."

But the U.S. needs to relearn the old way of assembling towns, said Leinberger. The new way is no longer



New urbanism in Washington, D.C.: humane, inclusive, walkable communities.

working. It's overbuilt, clogs traffic, caused urban sprawl and contributed to the mortgage meltdown which triggered the last recession.

He said everyone uses the same formulas. "It's the reason the country looks the same no matter where you go."

Building walkable communities won't be easy, he said. Rather than segregating homes, shops and offices, developers will have to learn to combine all those uses in a single neighborhood. They'll need to figure out how to blend the area with various types of transportation. As opposed to drivable communities where cheap architecture was used to catch a motorist's eye, New Urbanism developers will have to invest in quality workmanship.

It's like comparing race cars with fighter jets, said Leinberger. Drivable communities are like the cars, traveling 150 mph and only turning left. Walkable communities are the



jets, flying 600 mph and able to turn right, left, up or down. The walkable communities are riskier but have a greater upside, he said. There's pent-up demand for New Urbanism that will take a generation to satisfy.

"Developers already know how to do sprawl," he said. "They need to understand how to do walkable projects. If they don't, they'll be stuck in a 20th century economy." **GW**