

micro urban

A small-city urbanist blog by [Peter Kamali](#)

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Review: The Option of Urbanism by Christopher Leinberger

I read *The Option of Urbanism* over the holidays, a rarity that I manage to get through even a short book in a few days lately. I had been trying to read Kotkin's *Next 100 Million* for a couple months, but had only gotten about half way through. I was happy to set Kotkin's book further aside for this, and some of the flaws I saw in Kotkin will help illustrate what I liked about Leinberger.

Kotkin exhibits seriously selective policy-blindness, focusing for example on some failed subsidized high-density projects while not addressing the larger subsidies and policy decisions that doom many such projects. He has some major anti-urban assumptions, that people generally want the suburban lifestyle and their choices seemingly aren't affected at all by domestic policy.

Plus, Kotkin has some occasionally bizarre points, such as downtowns being merely an industrial era anomaly, or suburban space being why American birthrates are higher than European ones. (Data suggests it's largely economic, and birthrates in many countries tick up again once per capita GDP reach American levels or higher.) And, he makes points about cul-de-sacs being "safer" (from crime) without addressing the causality of this, or the bigger picture of safety when you factor in the dangers of added time in the car.

So, no surprise that an urbanist blogger would put down the Kotkin book to read through Leinberger's book instead. But, it's not purely because I agree with the conclusions. Leinberger is much fairer to the other side, making pains to point out that there was no conspiracy leading to suburbanization. To Leinberger, we were as a country strongly wooed by the vision of Futurama at the 1940 World's Fair, the first really new development scheme since people first started building towns thousands of years before.

Walkable Urbanism vs Drivable Sub-urbanism

Before Futurama, town and city development followed the model of walkable urbanism--amenities were within walking distance of the home. Even when trains and trolleys came about, they led people from work to their compact neighborhoods. This contrasts with drivable sub-urbanism (perhaps more appropriately called *car-dependent* sub-urbanism), introduced by Futurama and various visionaries like Le Corbusier.

He sees walkable vs drivable divide as better to study than "urban" vs "suburban", which someone like Kotkin uses to tout that nearly all growth over the next 40 years will be "suburban". A lot of this suburban growth will continually sprawl further out, but some will be

denser and truly more urban than sub-urban. E.g. somewhere like Reston, VA is more "urban" than somewhere like the San Fernando Valley in the city of Los Angeles. Plus, many small cities may be ambiguous as to whether they're "urban" or "suburban" when they're near a larger city, so walkable urbanism and drivable sub-urbanism *are* a better way to analyze the built environment and demographics.

To Leinberger, drivable sub-urbanism has an average floor-area ratios (FARs) below 0.3, whereas walkable urbanism occurs at FARs above 0.8. The area in between doesn't really fit either mode well, seemingly destined to move to one of the stable states. (My own neighborhood falls into that dreaded in-between zone.) He estimates that at most 15-20% of current building stock in the U.S. would count as walkable urbanism.

Subsidies, Public Policy, and Development Funding

"From one perspective, any domestic policy engages in social engineering."

Leinberger gives huge credit to the emotional allure of Futurama, but continues to give a broadly detailed look at how the pendulum swung so far from walkable urbanism to drivable sub-urbanism, starting with government subsidies. These subsidies include direct subsidies of highways and roads, and indirect subsidies like intervention in the middle east. If foreign intervention were reflected in the price of gasoline, it would be \$1.40 *more* per gallon. There are local subsidies too, like rules to charge the same amount for sewage infrastructure regardless of whether it's run another 20 feet or another 200 feet.

He also dives into local zoning laws, and how they've helped stymie walkable urbanism. He gives the example of Santa Fe, NM, whose vibrant downtown, if destroyed, couldn't be rebuilt under current zoning laws.

Finally he looks at the financial instruments that have arisen to fund development projects. Wall St. likes larger investments (\$50M+) and commoditizing them to be able to compare apples to apples. So, the standard real estate project types (19 of them) are predominantly the cookie cutter suburban variety (a few each for office, residential, retail, etc.)

The Favored Quarter and Consequences of Drivable Sub-urban Growth

The new highways and people's new found freedom behind the wheel led to a "favored quarter" in metro areas--literally a one-quarter pie slice of land radiating out from the center, where the wealthiest ended up moving. The big box stores, high-end malls, and ultimately the edge cities ended up following. Thus the job growth in the metro area shifted to the favored quarter, leading to more policies and development favoring this quarter. This has accelerated the process pushed the development further and further out, expanding the land area of metros geometrically relative to population growth. This took the new jobs further out and away from the poor, increasing consequences like car dependence and social segregation.

Leinberger also rightly raises the many environmental and health effects, plus some economic effects. He does note that the safety from crime of suburban living is offset by the increased danger from driving, but this point is perhaps glossed over too quickly. When you factor in life-changing injuries--not just deaths--car dependency must come out even worse. Add to this illness

from air pollution and lack of exercise, and the conventional safety argument is thoroughly backwards.

Moving Forward

Leinberger gives some reasons for hope, perhaps most significantly changing market sentiment. From the premium that walkable urban housing can charge, we can conclude that demand is not being met. He cites consumer research that says roughly equal numbers of people want walkable urban housing as want drivable sub-urban, with another roughly equal number on the fence. Further, the standard real estate product types that Wall St invests in are changing to incorporate some more walkable urban types, and the development industry is gradually learning how to do urban and mixed use projects.

And finally, there's a strong network effect in walkable urbanism's favor--more development makes existing development more useful, desirable, and valuable. Contrast this with drivable sub-urbanism, where added development increases traffic, decreases quality of life, and is greeted with NIMBYism.

Further Thoughts

The Option of Urbanism closes with some unintended consequences of walkable urbanism. All of these points, though, equate walkable urbanism with gentrification. There are some drawbacks to gentrification of course, but gentrification doesn't have to arise hand-in-hand with walkable urbanism.

It's also not clear why FAR, i.e. building density, is a better measure of walkable urbanism than population density, which will also factor in how much space is given to streets. Having a family of 4 in a 1000sf apartment is more conducive to walkable urbanism than a single squatter in a giant warehouse. Another alternative measure might be a floor-area to lot-width ratio. You could have a very walkable urban main street even if the lots go back far. Granted, these measures would have their own flaws in some scenarios.

Leinberger brings up Jane Jacobs at one point, but doesn't raise some of her key conditions for a healthy city: having narrow lot widths and a variety of ages of buildings. Narrow lots provide lots of different buildings and businesses to be seen on even a short walk, making the walk more interesting. The variety of ages allows multiple uses and income-levels in an area. As older buildings fall down the market, they can be used by lower-margin but necessary businesses, or for lower income tenants. Both of these Jacobsian conditions for a healthy city would be better met by much smaller, single-lot development, allowing cities or neighborhoods to grow organically over time.

I was left wrestling with whether such organic, varied blocks are possible now, given the drive toward mega-funded, large, disposable buildings, which take up whole blocks if not multiple blocks. Without the variety of ages and narrow facades, new development will have a Disney-like sameness to it and won't be nearly as interesting to walk around. Plus, it won't serve a

variety of uses and economic classes, and entire blocks will slide down market together ending up as a giant undesirable eyesore in 20 years.

A last critique, the book is a little too kind to New Urbanism. While most of us would agree that New Urbanism is still way better than typical sprawl, old urbanism is far better than new. There's a lot to be said about how our tax/subsidies, domestic policy, and very local funding for schools and services encourages not just intra-metropolitan but inter-metropolitan migration, pushing the upward and downward spirals that have raised newer, sprawling cities and razed older, denser cities. While there have been some economic and social factors at play as well, leveling the playing field may do a lot to preserve and restore older walkable cities which New Urbanism attempts to copy.

But these are rather small complaints for a 176-page book that succinctly and otherwise quite thoroughly explains how we arrived at extreme car dependence, and points to many of the ways out of this mess. Well worth a read.