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Car-Free in America?

By [The Editors](#)



(Photo: Steve Ruark for The New York Times) Residential and retail space co-exist at Market Common Clarendon, an urban village in Arlington, Va.

A New York Times [article this week](#) described efforts in Vauban, Germany, a suburb of Freiburg, to go “car free.” The story mentioned attempts in some American communities to achieve something similar. While walkable communities have become common all over the United States in the last 15 years, going car-free is another challenge altogether. Is this a realistic goal in a car culture like ours? We asked some urban planners, developers and other experts to comment.

- [Witold Rybczynski](#), professor of urbanism
 - [D.J. Waldie](#), author of “Holy Land”
 - [Dolores Hayden](#), professor of architecture
 - [Christopher B. Leinberger](#), real estate developer and author
 - [J.H. Crawford](#), author of “Carfree Cities”
 - [Marc Schlossberg](#), professor of public policy
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Bottom Line: It's Cheaper



[Christopher B. Leinberger](#), a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution and professor at the University of Michigan, is a real estate developer and author of "[The Option of Urbanism: Investing in the New American Dream](#)" and "[The Next Slum](#)," a March 2008 article in *The Atlantic*.

This country is in the middle of a structural shift toward walkable urban way of living and working. After 60 years of almost exclusively building a drivable suburban way of life, which the market wanted and we in real estate built, the consumer is now demanding the other alternative. That alternative is for places where most everyday needs can be met within walking distance and cars are not a necessity for every trip out of the house.

This market demand has redeveloped many downtowns and downtown adjacent places in this country over the past 15 years. But perhaps more profoundly, it is transforming the suburbs into a variety of walkable urban places.

Metropolitan Washington, D.C., has more walkable urban places per capita than anywhere else in the country. Of the 30 emerging or existing walkable urban places in the region, 70 percent are in the suburbs: like downtown Bethesda, Md., Reston, Va., and the string of places along Wilson Boulevard in Arlington, Va., including Ballston, Court House and Clarendon.

The monster in Virginia that is known as Tyson's Corner, 44 million square feet of drivable-only commercial development which is universally hated, is seeing four new Metrorail stations built and has community support to increase its size to 100 million square feet ... but it will evolve into a walkable urban set of places.

There are a number of steps that need to occur to give the market what it wants, including:

- More rail transit and bike and walking infrastructure
- Legal permission to build higher-density, multiuse projects (generally, walkable urban development is illegal in the U.S.)
- Management of these places to insure cleanliness and safety, and promote festivals and infrastructure
- Affordable housing programs to insure inclusiveness since these places tend to be the most expensive places to live and work on a price-per-square-foot basis.

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There are many reasons to encourage this market trend: social cohesion, environmental sustainability, public health, lower public sector costs for infrastructure per square foot.

But the bottom line is household economics. American families who are car-dependent spend 25 percent of their household income on their fleet of cars, compared with just 9 percent for transportation for those who live in walkable urban places. That potential 16 percent savings

could go into improved housing (building household wealth), educating children or that most un-American of all activities, saving.

Mandating only one way of living and working does not fit a huge segment of American families. Walkable urban development is not for everyone but it is time that American communities offer choice.