

# Arizona Republic

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## Live Talk Wednesday (Jan. 16) Guest: Christopher B. Leinberger Urban redevelopment professor and author

**Joe Garcia**  
aztalk moderator

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Urban redevelopment expert and author **Christopher B. Leinberger** answers questions concerning the Valley's effort to transform downtown into a pedestrian paradise.

Leinberger is a professor and director of the Graduate Real Estate Program at the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture & Urban Planning. He also is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institutional Metropolitan Policy Program.

Leinberger is author of "Option of Urbanism: Investing in A New American Dream." He was keynote speaker at the Jan. 14 DREAM'R Awards, sponsored by the Downtown Phoenix Partnership.

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**Welcome to aztalk Live Talk Wednesday, Chris. First off, tell us a bit out yourself and your book.**

I am in the academic phase of my life, splitting my time between the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, MI, and the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. I live in DC. I maintain my partnership interests in my real estate development firm, though my partner does the heavy lifting these days. I was a full time developer over the past decade or so. Prior to that, I was the co-owner and managing director of RCLCo, the leading real estate consulting company in the country. It was based in Los Angeles, though I lived in Santa Fe, NM. RCLCo's work was international and it included much work in Phoenix; I have seen the growth of Phoenix for 30 years.

"The Option of Urbanism; Investing in a New American Dream" is my most recent book. It postulates that the US is undergoing a structural shift in how we build the built environment. The last one was in the post-WWII period, leading to the development of the suburbs. The pendulum is swinging back to building "walkable urban" development; whether downtown, suburban town center, lifestyle center or redevelopment of obsolete regional malls. It was just published by Island Press in 2008.

**You write about how we've gone from the Ozzie and Harriett drivable suburban vision of the American Dream to the Seinfeld vision of "walkable urbanism." Seinfeld was in New York City. This is the Valley, sprawl city -- or cities, actually. Is it possible for such a place here, even in downtown Phoenix?**

Assuming folks living in Phoenix are somewhat like those living in Denver, San Diego, Dallas and Portland (OR), it is a safe bet that a significant percentage of you (30-40%) want some form of walkable urbanism, where you can walk to most of everyday needs or have a short transit hop to these needs. Not that you will get rid of all car trips but you will have the option of multiple ways of getting around, but at the base your life is walkable.

Many other metropolitan areas have considered themselves addicted to an oil-based, car-dominated lifestyle and came to realize that many of the households want a different option. Not that everyone wants it, but it is nice to have the option. So it is not just NYC...it's just that NYC was where the TV show, Seinfeld, was based.

**I imagine you get many of your ideas by walking around. What are some of your early thoughts on Phoenix? Is it "do-able" or are we banging our heads against hot concrete in trying to build a downtown for a culture of cars?**

I was pleasantly surprised...almost shocked...to see the progress you have undertaken and have under construction. You have huge projects, new housing, the stadiums, new offices, museums, the convention center, among many others. But it is especially the higher education/research (ASU, UA, the biomedical) and the light rail that are unexpected. You have taken on some big projects and have them coming to fruition...now it is time for the smaller, more detail-oriented work to begin. And it is

crucial to add significantly more housing, especially rental housing over the next 3-5 years.

**How much of a role do you see light rail playing in the Valley's future to become less dependent on cars and freeways? And is more needed to be done, such as building full commuter trains and connecting lines, like in other big cities?**

It is crucial....it is so impressive that you have the starter line almost ready to open and the 2nd phase funded. This will be the most important infrastructure improvement the metro area will make in the early 21st century. It will spark billions of new development around the stations and will make your leaders look like visionaries as gasoline prices continue to escalate, as they will.

From an economic development perspective, the development around the stations will attract the “creative class”, those entrepreneurs and workers that will fuel the knowledge economy....many of these people will be the kids of current residents; insuring that they will stay in Phoenix, rather than going to San Diego, Denver or New York for the walkable urban lifestyle available there.

**OK, Here's the million-dollar question: What do you do about the heat? It's simply too hot many days in the summer to walk a few blocks without catching on fire or cooking your brains. The Chamber of Commerce might now want to hear that, but I don't think it's a secret about Phoenix in the summertime. How can we create shade besides the obvious (trees)?**

ALL sidewalks should be shaded by trees, awnings or buildings. There should be R&D in how to cool sidewalks by the energy generated by the sun; there are hundreds of cities that face this issue and why not solve it in Phoenix and create a new industry to boot.

**Downtown is a great hub for sporting activities, concerts, culture, theater and arts, hotels and such. There are big cranes everywhere, building a better tomorrow. But what as a city are we missing to draw people downtown? More housing? A big aquarium? A giant central park with the world's largest interactive fountain? What?**

As I mentioned above, you have done many of the BIG things....now is the time for small things and housing, especially rental housing. The hard things are behind you, now take advantage of these investments and focus on:

- small and regional retailers coming downtown,
- expanded management responsibility for such things as parking, parks, etc.,
- making pedestrian-friendly design mandatory.

But since 65% of real estate is housing, get more housing downtown and since the for-sale market is flat or declining, focus on rental housing. Exploit the investments you have already made.

**Do you see most of downtown Phoenix denizens being true Yuppies -- young, upwardly mobile individuals? I know ASU's increased presence, complete with a new dorm, will help with that demographic. Or does an urban pedestrian paradise require people of all walks of life (pardon the pun)?**

Certainly it starts with knowledge workers, the new Yuppies, but it needs to be all inclusive. There seems to be a major, though not proven, connection between knowledge workers and walkable urban places...they seem to want a vibrant urban lifestyle. The days of our affordable housing strategy in this country being “drive until you qualify”, given rising gasoline prices and climate change, are over. Affordable and workforce housing must be a part of the strategy for downtown Phoenix.

**Not to sound too practical or nitty-gritty detail, but doesn't there need to be more everyday people things right downtown, like, say, a grocery store and laundromat?**

Seems like you are getting a grocery store shortly. Grocery stores, drug stores and Laundromats emerge when there are enough “roof tops”...housing units. They are “follower” uses so housing first, then local-serving retail....sorry, that’s the way the world works.

**What can some of the other cities -- Scottsdale, Mesa, Glendale, Chandler, etc. -- learn from Phoenix as it tries to transform to a pedestrian-friendly center?**

There is probably a demand for 20 regional-significant walkable urban places like downtown Phoenix in the metro area...each with its own character and role. They should be encouraged and it will only make the metro area a more exciting and economically vibrant place.

**Any thoughts on the role of a state Capitol in revitalizing a downtown? Ours is close to downtown, but quite frankly, it's hardly comparable to some of the great state capitols around the nation.**

Government, whether Federal, state or city, tends to be a “black hole” of urban vitality. They suck energy. Don’t make extra-ordinary efforts to include the state capital. In downtown Santa Fe, where I used to live, the downtown is incredibly vital and 2 blocks away, the state capital is dead. Bureaucrats must lead boring lives.

**OK, honest answer: Would you ever live in Phoenix?**

No. Many reasons. I am a four-season person (why I lived in Santa Fe and now DC). Two seasons bore me (I used to live in LA so I know what I am talking about). There are also personal reasons, such as my family, who all live near DC. But it really comes down to my age...I want walkable urbanism NOW so I live in a proven, exciting place; DC. If I were 30 I would certainly bet on Phoenix (assuming I liked two-season places) since it will, no doubt, become the best walkable urban places in the Southwest.

**What surprised you most about Phoenix and the Valley in your recent visit? What will you be telling others about your experiences here?**

How much you have done since my last visit 4-5 years ago. And most of the projects are huge and capital extensive. In particular, I am impressed with the light rail and ASU/UA...also impressed that the two universities are actually working together. Now it is time to focus on the small things; the hard, big things have been started. Now it is time to focus on management of downtown (transit, parking, street life, festivals, etc.), which you have a good start on. It is also the time to pay attention to making it a "could only be in downtown Phoenix" kind of place. It has to reflect you as a people, be unique...not just a bunch of national chains and Johnson sculpture (a common artist seen in too many towns).

**Gov. Janet Napolitano is calling for a commuter train between Phoenix and Tucson, along with an expansion of light rail lines throughout the Valley. Is all this talk of rail system pie in the sky? Or will people -- especially Westerners -- give up and get out of their cars to walk around?**

This kind of investment is the most important infrastructure investment Arizona can make. If this was 1960 and I was asked, "what was the most important infrastructure investment AZ could make for economic growth", I would have said "build freeways". Today in the knowledge economy and a world having to address the need for more energy efficiency and that will have to address climate change, the answer is rail transit. If you do not make that investment, you will be eventually left behind by other regions that are making that investment. However, your phase I light rail opening this year and the funding of phase II is a great start.

**Speaking of walking around, you fail to mention the physical advantages of a pedestrian-friendly city, such as exercise.**

I make that point all the time, just did not make it in a 500 word op-ed. The obesity epidemic is, if you will excuse the pun, the weak underbelly of our nation's future. It is crippling in so many obvious ways but especially economically. We have to care for all the people who will have blown out knees and type II diabetes. Medicare will be taxed to the breaking point. It has been shown that 40-50% of obesity is due to our only having a "drivable sub-urban" lifestyle options. Getting unintended exercise through walking and biking is proven to be the best way of addressing obesity.

**Do you see Phoenix with a real opportunity to be a Gem of the Southwest, since everything isn't yet built out? Or are we in danger of being too "new" without roots in a historic past, like Santa Fe enjoys?**

Absolutely. Having developed real estate projects in downtown Albuquerque and knowing El Paso and Tucson, Phoenix should be the major walkable urban downtown in the SW. Certainly Santa Fe, where I lived for 18 years, has you beat regarding history (real and made up), that will not be a hindrance in you from creating a vibrant, big city,

downtown. Here in DC, where I live now, there were only 2 walkable urban places 20 years ago...today there are 20 with 10 more coming along. Most of those places did not have much history to build upon...in fact some had been burned out in the 1960s riots.

**Phoenix has the reputation of just copying Los Angeles. Did you get that sense here?**

Many have commented, somewhat correctly, that PHX is a suburb of LA. Keep in mind that LA today is not copying LA of 20 years ago. It is becoming increasingly walkable urban. They have put back in much of the rail transit system (subway, commuter rail and light rail) that they used to have. For your next cocktail party, LA had the longest rail transit system in the world in 1945 and it was completely torn out by the mid-1960s. LA has 15 regional-serving walkable urban places today and will probably have another 15-20 over the next decade or so. They have no choice since they have run out of land but also it is just the market getting what it wants.

**What is it you didn't like about Phoenix. In other words, was there one glaring problem or hurdle that you saw that you'd like to change?**

Cynicism. For such a "get it done" kind of town, there are a lot of cynics about whether downtown can turn around. I would suggest those cynics be put on a plane and visit downtown San Diego, Denver, Seattle and Portland. All four of these cities had downtowns that were much worse than Phoenix today in the recent past and today there are marvelous places to live and work. Most people in those towns were as cynical of their eventual success as Phoenix but now they are the models you can go see. Keep in mind; it is not just about the environmentalists and community activists being happy by downtown revitalization, it is about economic development. You offer the market what it wants or the market will go else where to get it.