

STREETS BLOG

Leinberger: Walkable Urbanism Is the Future, and DC Is the Model

By Tanya Snyder | Sep 13, 2012 | [COMMENT HERE](#)

Chris Leinberger wears too many hats to count – real estate developer, George Washington University professor, Brookings fellow – but he has one message: “Walkable urbanism is the future.”

For years now, Leinberger has been preaching the gospel that [the postwar era of automobile-oriented “drivable suburbanism” is over](#) – and urbanism is the new wave. He’s even developed his own lingo for it: He now refers to walkable urban places as WalkUPs.

In a report released this week called *DC: The WalkUP Wake-Up Call* [\[PDF\]](#), Leinberger explores the six different kinds of “regionally significant” WalkUPs, using Washington, DC as the model. Indeed, he claims DC is *the* model of walkable urbanism, a pioneer of the trend.

Of the six types of WalkUPs in Leinberger’s framework, three are urban and three are suburban. Cities have the traditional downtown, “downtown adjacent” neighborhoods like Dupont Circle or Capitol Hill, and “urban commercial” areas like Adams Morgan or H Street. Suburbs have their own town centers like Bethesda, strip commercial redevelopment like [White Flint](#), and greenfield development, like Reston.

Most growth over next 30 years will happen in strip commercial redevelopments, according to Leinberger, and at the vanguard is [Tysons Corner](#) – “the world’s largest drivable sub-



Capital Bikeshare riders under DC’s Chinatown arch. Photo: <http://business.gwu.edu/Walkup.pdf#DC: The WalkUP Wake-Up Call#>

urban concentration of commercial enterprises” — now on its way toward walkable, transit-oriented urbanism. 

Indeed, Leinberger’s brand of urbanism largely looks outside central cities. It’s Washington suburbs that have really caught his attention. Of the 43 WalkUPs he identifies in the DC area “a surprising 58 percent are in the suburbs,” comprising 51 percent of the square footage. 



Many walkable urban neighborhoods don’t make it into his list, though. He calls those “local-serving” places. Though Cleveland Park may not seem that different from Logan Circle and Shirlington not so distinct from Clarendon, they don’t meet Leinberger’s criteria for “regionally significant” – they don’t have high enough concentrations of employment, civic centers, institutions of higher education, and other major cultural assets. Rather, their assets are designed for the neighborhood itself and not the wider region – primary schools, police stations, etc.

So, keeping in mind that many walkable urban places don’t fall within Leinberger’s 43 DC-area WalkUPs, the 43 comprise less than one percent of the land area of the metropolitan area and they contain 34 percent of the area’s jobs.

Leinberger says the walkability of these places is key to their economic success – with economic success judged primarily by real estate values. In fact, he downgrades Silver Spring, Maryland to a “copper” economic ranking for having affordable rents – a factor which gave it a platinum ranking for social equity.

That gave Dr. Richard Green, a skeptic of Leinberger’s theories, some reason to pause. “[Silver Spring is] walkable, it’s transit rich, there’s a lot of retail, there’s office that’s now going in there with the Discovery headquarters, and there’s a high level of social equity,” Green said at a forum this week on the report. “So it makes me wonder how is success being measured.”

Indeed, high rents are the only measure of economic success Leinberger uses. And they inherently count against social equity. Leinberger would like to see property values climb as high as they possibly can, and then reserve some of that wealth to preserve affordable housing options for lower-income residents. A community where equity and diversity are maintained because prices stay within reach is, by definition, failing in his book.

So high property values are, to Leinberger, the only indicator of successful walkable urbanism. But is walkable urbanism the only indicator of high property values? His work 

argues that it is. He says walkability is *the* factor that makes places thrive.

Dr. Green admitted he was surprised by how high the premiums are for walkable neighborhoods. The average annual office rent in WalkUPs is \$36.78 per square foot, compared to \$20.98 for drivable sub-urban office rents, and the premium for housing in walkable urban neighborhoods is nearly that high, at 71 percent. Green isn't convinced walkability is the only factor driving up those rental prices: "The premiums are so big I wonder what else is going on," he said.

The question of what else is going on invites a closer examination of Leinberger's model city, Washington, DC. Part of the growing desirability of the city is simply owed to the fact that the crack epidemic is over. A day without a murder is no longer an uncommon occurrence. Around the country, crime rates have declined since the early nineties, inviting people back into the inner cities from the suburbs to which they'd fled.

The report works on a national level only if people from around the country can extrapolate from DC's experience to inform their own. But DC, of course, is unique in being the seat of the federal government.

"Yes," said Leinberger, "but 25 years ago, the federal government was in Washington and it was a miserable place." True, but 25 years ago the city was walkable, too, and it was a miserable place. The fact that the city used to be "dangerous, dull, and dirty," and now it's an appealing place to live, doesn't render factors moot if they existed before the transition.

Rich Bradley of DC's Downtown Business Improvement District says the city management is another big factor. Riffing off the "if you build it, they will come" mantra, he said, "If you manage it, they will stay."

"There really hasn't been a fundamental change in the land form of downtown Washington in 20 years," Bradley said. "So it's not the design of the place. The sidewalks are where they were, the streets are where they were. What's different now is that there's just a far greater degree of attention to the kind of details that make that work."

He said he's gotten hour-long briefings on the best solvent to use to get the gum stain off the pavement after the "gumbuster" has gone by. "It's that attention to detail," he said. "It's the strategic management of place."

City management certainly has improved in DC, and that's probably one factor in its comeback. So is the fact that federal jobs and the defense industry make the city somewhat



recession-proof. But none of that diminishes the indisputable promise of a place that offers people the lifestyle they're looking for – and it seems like more people are looking for walkability, low transportation costs, a sense of community, and a healthy street life.



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By Tanya Snyder | Sep 19, 2012

USA Today reported today that more and more homes are being built without garages or carports. That stands to reason, as developers are (belatedly) building what the market wants: denser housing in walkable urban centers near transit. Copious parking and driveway curb cuts simply don't mesh with the model. At the peak of the housing [...]



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By Tanya Snyder | Jun 24, 2015

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