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The Option of Urbanism

I just finished up reading a very insightful book called "[The Option of Urbanism: Investing in a New American Dream](#)," by Christopher B. Leinberger. The main focus of this book was that America will start to fall behind the rest of the world economically if we do not switch to a denser, walkable and transit based society.

In the book Leinberger starts out by saying that before the invention of the car cities were very compact and dense. One could only travel as far as they could walk, so this made it necessary for all things to be close by. Stores, work and home all needed to be located close to one another for the sake of convenience. Even when cars started being produced they weren't something that was owned by every family.

It wasn't until the World's Fair of 1939 and 1940 in New York that the idea of owning a car became something that all Americans wanted. At the fair, General Motors set up a major exhibit called "Futurama." This exhibit "showed radio-controlled, automated fourteen-lane highways crisscrossing the country with three speed limits (depending on the lane) of fifty, seventy-five, and one hundred miles per hour." Over the course of the fair it was estimated that 27 million people saw this exhibit, and most were very impressed by it. The exhibit promised that this vision would become a reality by 1960.

According to the book, there were two major contributors to the massive expansion of the suburbs. The first was the end of World War II. Many soldiers came home and immediately started to have children. They started to look for a new kind of lifestyle, and the suburbs seemed to offer just that. The other major contributor was the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. This act built the new 46,837 mile freeway system that currently covers the entire country. It was finally completed in 1991. This also helped make commuting from the suburbs to the city that much easier.

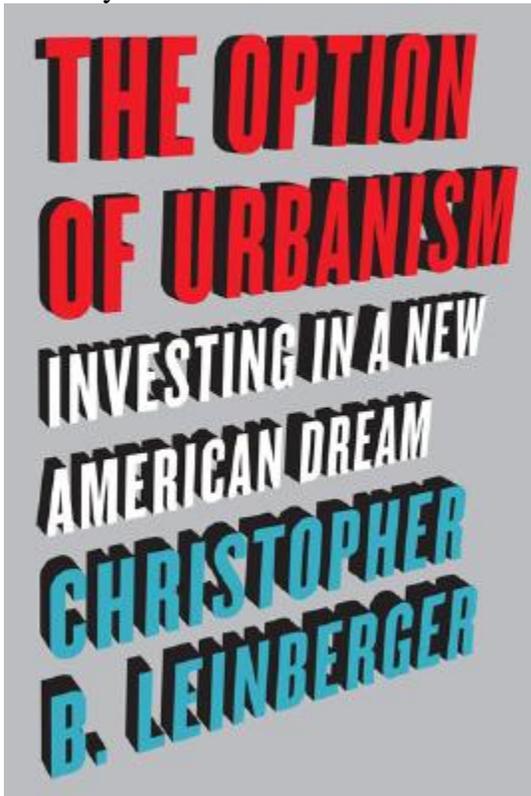
In this new society, only the rich could afford the suburbs, and the cities were filled with the poor. Many of the traditional downtown department stores left for the suburbs because business had become so bad in the city. As people moved to the suburbs and found out that they had much more space and privacy, they naturally told their friends about this paradise. After hearing such wonderful things, the friends moved out too.

Leinberger argues that while initially suburbs seemed to offer what was being promoted as the "American Dream," it actually led to a lower quality of life. With sprawl, people are forced to drive until they qualify for a place to live. For the poor working class this can mean driving hours each way just to get to work. More time in the car means less time with family, and this would lead to a poorer quality of life.

Leinberger has suggested a rational solution to this problem. He essentially echoes what many have been saying for the past few years. We need to be more like the Europeans.

He suggests having a central city that is linked to the outside suburbs via some sort of rail/transit line. In the suburbs, the transit center would be what the rest of the town was built around, thus making it convenient for all people to access it. He also suggests that instead of spending billions daily to fund a war that supports our sprawling and congested lifestyle, we should instead be using that money to create better mass transit systems. Until people have better transit options, they will continue to use their cars because that is the only way.

In conclusion, I think that it will take a number of things for the United States to switch into a more transit based society. Once gas prices reach certain heights, people will start to consider transit to be a more viable option and not something that is strictly used by the poor. With increased ridership numbers, the cities should recognize this pent up demand and will infuse more money into the public transit system. All in all I really enjoyed this book. I think that Leinberger made some excellent points on how to fix some of our transit problems. Unlike other books, Leinberger's solutions actually seem feasible and quite likely to be implemented in the near future. I would highly suggest reading this book if you are at all interested in urban development or environmentalism.



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