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WALKABLE *urbanism*

**CHRIS LEINBERGER, JOURNALIST & URBAN STRATEGIST
SHARES IMPLICATIONS FOR ST. LOUIS**

By Jim Baer

CHRISTOPHER B. LEINBERGER, a noted national journalist, urban strategist and developer with impeccable curriculum vitae delivered the keynote address at the annual meeting of the Downtown St. Louis Partnership.

Leinberger deeply believes in "walkable urbanism," says he was preaching to the choir. "Oh yes, they (the audience got it)," he says recalling his presentation before a sellout crowd of 400 plus. "The Mayor was there, there were all kinds of politicians and civic officials. They got the message," he remembers.

And what exactly was that message to the choir?

St. Louis can either drift its way towards development in the 21st century, or take up the cause the way cities like Denver, Washington, D.C. and Chattanooga have all embraced real meaningful urban change. Those who believe the pendulum is swinging away from the exurb suburbs and back to central city development need to look 1,000 miles to the west to Denver and the great Mid-Continent experiment with a stunning urban Rocky Mountain revival.

In 2003, a free spirited maverick that never held public office was elected as Denver's mayor. He was John Hickenlooper, an out-of-work petroleum engineer who took his generous severance pay and invested in brewpubs in Denver and in Colorado Springs. "This is a guy who never held office. He is a guy who rides his bike to work. You know what he did on the second day on the job?" questions Leinberger. "He brought 32 suburban mayors in the Denver surrounding region to his place of work (the Wynkoop Brewing Co.) in the Lower Downtown historic district and got them all liquored up and got them to quickly agree to a regional mass transit system to service the entire Denver region."

With almost the snap of a finger, the mayors quickly got a vote passed to bring \$4 billion worth of light rail transit to Denver.

"St. Louis is moving in the right direction. It has the beginnings of a light rail system. The middle and upper class do not like bus transportation and the lower class has no choice," says Leinberger.

Critical mass. That's where it's at according to this planner who is a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution in D.C, heads a development firm (The Arcadia Land Co.) out of Philadelphia and is a visiting professor of Practice and Director of the Real Estate Development program at the University of Michigan/Ann Arbor.

Leinberger is living "walking urbanism." He has a dwelling in Washington, D.C. with his wife Lisa, and experiences the transformation every day of the year.

"The Creative Class (artisans, young white collared professionals) wants to be part of walkable urbanism. They don't want to be part of suburban sprawl," he says matter-of-factly.

Washington, D.C. has become one of the unexpected leading walkable communities in the United States today. The district has 20 walkable places with another 10 in the developing stages. That includes redeveloping of Anacostia, northeast D.C., the Georgetown area, DuPont Circle (where Leinberger lives) and the area surrounding the nation's capitol. The downtown D.C. office market place has experienced a tremendous rebound. Seedy and dilapidated buildings have given way to totally renovated and highly-in-demand retail space and living units.

Everyone at the Ballpark Hilton Hotel in downtown St. Louis wanted to know if their city was up to par with say Denver, D.C., Chattanooga, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Portland and the like?

"St. Louis is getting there, but it's not there yet," says Leinberger. "It has yet to become a 24/7 city like Chicago, for instance."

"Chicago offers nightlife that attracts your 20 and 30 year olds. I spent time walking around downtown St. Louis late at night and at times, I was the only person on the street."

Leinberger recognizes St. Louis has to rebuild its inner-core to complete the deal. He knows there are all kinds of lofts along Washington Avenue and that Ballpark Village brings an aura of future promise. Sectioning downtown into six distinctly different districts is a good first step, referring to the Old Post Office District, Cupples Station, Laclede's Landing and the rest.

"It's all about leadership and vision," reasons Leinberger. "Your mayor (Francis Slay) gets it, but there's more that needs to be done."

For instance: Richard Baron, principal of McCormack Baron is longing to clear the rail road tracks west of Busch Stadium and south of Cupples Station and launch the long-dormant Chouteau's Lake project. "He (Richard) calls that opportunity seizing 'low hanging fruit' He believes he can easily line up financing to launch housing and retail there. He needs to do just that," says Leinberger.

Cities all over America are experiencing a variety of regional revivals. The professor outlined five different types of walkable urban developments that are already prospering around this country.

"St. Louis is showing progress. Fifty years ago, St. Louis had the fifth largest population in the United States. Today, it's not even in the top 40. Community planners have learned lessons from suburban projects. The people who are developing (downtown) have the correct focus on the riverfront. The big projects are already done (Busch Stadium, light rail and urban entertainment).

Management of future projects is crucial to future development. Civic leaders (the Mayor and others) need to start the projects and then get out of the way of developers. They will never be successful if they (future projects) are micro-managed," he says. "In terms of real estate development, the stage of critical mass has not yet been reached.

"I call it 'private/public partnerships' with the emphasis on the private. One hundred billion dollars has already been invested in D.C. redevelopment the past decade," he reports.

Above all, Leinberger says memory is a great motivator. "People come up to me all the time and remind me of where that elevator was in a building that was torn down. People remember the shops and the shopping experiences. Many yearn to see the electric trains in the display windows at Macy's once again during the Christmas season. Historic buildings add character to an experience you cannot buy," reasons Leinberger.

That pendulum is definitely swinging in the direction of downtown St. Louis. St. Louis' Central West End, Clayton, Old Town St. Charles, and the University City Loop are all flourishing urban walkable areas. Downtown, from at least 12th street needs to fully develop in the same manner.

Chris Leinberger thinks that if public officials listen, businesses form partnerships with the citizens of the region and the Creative Class representing the next generation keep looking downtown, the critical mass issue will happen—and in very imaginative and successful ways. City fathers would love to add the name of St. Louis to the rapidly growing national list of those cities that have fully recovered.

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