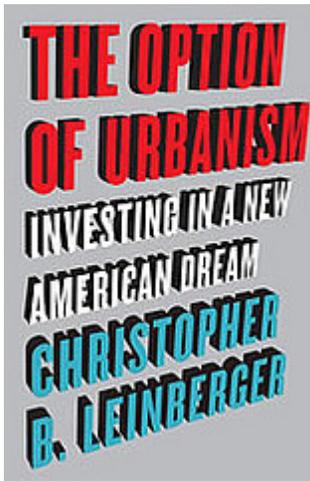


[The Goodspeed Update](#)

Rob Goodspeed's website about urbanism and Washington, D.C.

Review: Leinberger's The Option of Urbanism



Reviewing some of the best known books about urban topics by American authors is something like walking through an intellectual house of mirrors: each author's view is strangely distorted, making it hard to discern the objective reality discussed.

Some are critics, crafting harsh polemics against our [Suburban Nation](#), decrying our [Geography of Nowhere](#), or providing us a [Field Guide to \(our\) Sprawl](#). Historians want to help us uncover the [Origins of the Urban Crisis](#), but are only now beginning to write a [New Suburban History](#). Some are one-dimensionally obsessed with one topic, describing the [High Cost of Free Parking](#) or [How to Build an Urban Village](#). Still more are modern day utopians, sketching bold visions of the [Sustainable Urbanism](#) the future could (or should) hold.

Perhaps that's why when a friend asked me to recommend a good book to introduce her to the field of urban development I struggled to come up with a title to suggest: It's a rare book indeed that displays a sophisticated understanding of the forces that shape our cities in an engaging and accessible way.

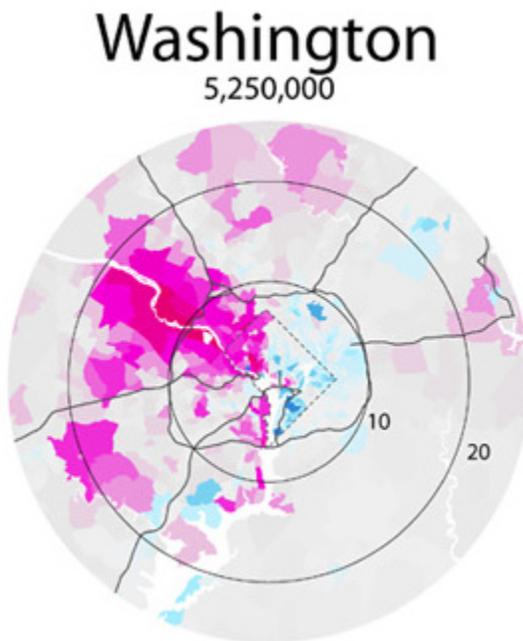
This is the primary strength of [Christopher B. Leinberger](#)'s new book [The Option of Urbanism: Investing in a New American Dream](#). A readable synthesis of history, planning, and real estate, the book is not yet another polemic about How We Should Live, but an informed and realistic argument about future growth and what choices we face along the way. A visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, Leinberger is also a developer in his own right and Director of an [academic program](#) in real estate at the University of Michigan. Recently he has stirred debate in Washington by [suggesting](#) the city should re-visit its height limits on buildings.

The past sixty years in American history, Leinberger argues, has been a break from the past 5,500 years of human city building. Equipped with a vision of a "drivable suburban" (as he insists on calling it) American Dream, a booming economy, and a powerful

auto industry, Americans created the low-density auto-dependent city we know so well. His terse re-telling of the criticisms of this sprawling type of development (Chapter 4) could no doubt be criticized for including or excluding some reason or another, but is impressive for its clarity. This section's description of the financial forces driving recent growth was perhaps the most unusual. He argues the real estate industry's overheated growth of the 1980s caused the Savings and Loan crisis, arguing the crisis was "*the* defining moment of the past half century for the U.S. real estate industry." He describes how Wall Street subsequently stepped in to provide loans to the industry through Real Estate Investment Trusts, and how the forces of global capital encouraged the commodification of real estate into nineteen generally single-use "product types," categories like the "neighborhood retail center," "urban high density apartments" or "move-up housing," generally developed at low quality for short-term returns.



The remainder of the book contains a typology of the alternative, what he dubs "walkable urbanism" (like Ballston, Virginia, to the right), a discussion of some of its consequences (housing affordability and corporate chains are discussed), and the five steps he thinks are needed for the full emergence for this, "next American Dream." The steps described are: new zoning, changes to real estate finance, ending subsidies favoring sprawl, investing in (mostly rail transit) infrastructure, and good management of the new urban districts.



While Leinberger's views would fit well with advocates of both Smart Growth and New Urbanism, he skips a strong affiliation with either of these groups, opting instead for his own nomenclature. Most of all Leinberger is a realist. His blunt assessment of the income inequality of American cities remind me of Bill Rankin's provocative 2006 [City Income maps](#), that seem to offer a visual proof to Leinberger's description of the "favored quarter" where investment and wealth is concentrated. He sees the coming trend of walkable urbanism independent from the inequality and segregation in our cities, and even not necessarily tied to increased use of transit (which he'd prefer). This frank grounding of his argument in actual places (Washington, D.C. is featured prominently) and first-hand knowledge of the real estate

industry's inner workings helps relate the general concepts of walkable urbanism into a concrete understanding of what's built and why.

Leinberger's book offers the novice a readable introduction to some of the debate surrounding the American city, and the veteran a lively respite from the house of mirrors. With well-selected references that provide a good jumping-off point for further reading, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend the book to my students or friends looking for a fresh take on the form and future of our cities.