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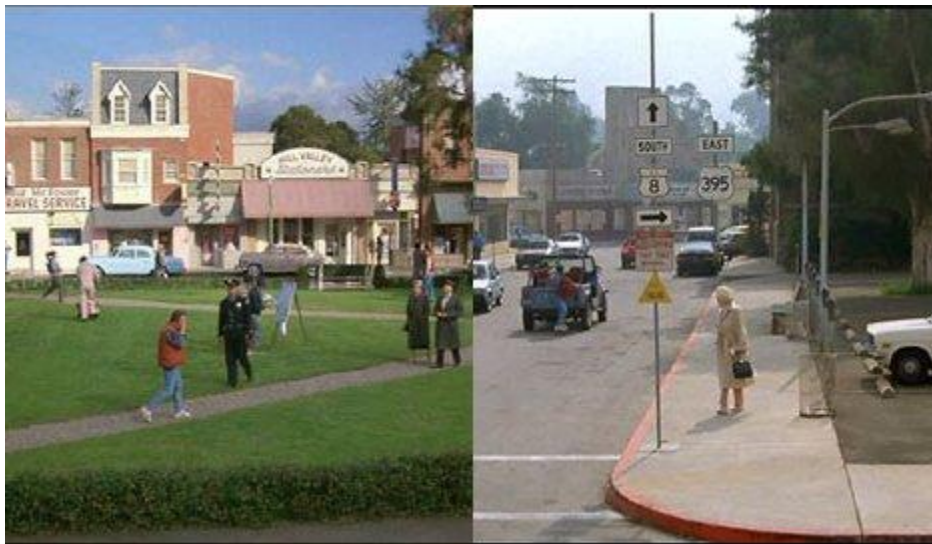
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Christopher Leinberger Explains Why Washington, DC, is a Model for Walkable Redevelopment

by [David DeFranza, Washington, DC](#) on 10.27.10

[Design & Architecture](#)



The walkable Hill Valley of 1955 compared to the blighted Hill Valley of 1985. Photo Credit: Universal Studios

You can learn a lot about development in the United States, argues [Brookings Fellow Christopher Leinberger](#), by watching *Back to the Future*. By comparing Hill Valley, the fictional town that serves as the film's setting, as it appears in 1985—a blighted and abandoned downtown

ringed by highways, parking lots, and malls—to the vibrant, walkable, town it was in 1955, the two options for development become clear.

After decades of favoring the former, Leinberger suggests, developers, consumers, and politicians are finally coming around to the benefits of the later—and the Washington, DC, area is [leading the transformation](#).



Unfortunately, Hill Valley was lost in the 2008 Universal Studios fire. Photo credit: [Evan Wohrman/Creative Commons](#)

Of course, DC's redevelopment has benefited from the opportunities of a largely blank canvas—left by the [destruction of the 1968 riots](#), subsequent flight to the suburbs, decades of decline and neglect—and recent infusion of private and federal funding. In a recent interview, Leinberger told TreeHugger that 20 years ago, there were only two neighborhoods in the DC area that could truly be described as "walkable urban": Georgetown in DC and Old Town in Alexandria, Virginia.

The expansion of the metro system in the 1980s and 1990s, he explains, led to a development boom. Now, there are 39 [walkable urban areas](#) in the region, including areas within the city limits like Dupont Circle, China Town, and the Capitol Waterfront, and those in the suburbs like Reston Town Center and Arlington in Virginia, and Downtown Silver Spring in Maryland.

Of course, this is simply proof of a long-held axiom of real estate development: "Investment follows infrastructure." As TreeHugger's [Lloyd Alter points out](#):

If you build good transit and fix roads, people will come. Density will increase. Taxbase will improve.

This increase in density is not only good for developers and property owners, it's good for the environment as well. Clearly, denser, more walkable communities, reduce emissions from both transit—by [allowing people to drive less](#)—and the built environment.

However, the reality is not as simple or inevitable as this "build it and they will come" mantra implies.

Lessons From a Metro Line



Arlington County, Virginia, with metro stations and development zones marked. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

Indeed, Leinberger points to one section of the Washington Metro that can serve as a model for transit and infrastructure development around the country—if not the world. "The orange line," he says, "is the single most important metro line in the country." Specifically, he continues, the border between Arlington and Fairfax counties in Virginia.

[INTERVIEW: Dense, Walkable Urban Cities Create YIMBY Neighbors](#)

When the [transit authority decided to extend the metro](#) into the Virginia suburbs, Leinberger explains, they elected to take the cheapest option available: Running the new lines down the undeveloped center of the existing highway. Arlington County chose, at their own expense, to pull the line from the highway and run it through their then-unwalkable—rapidly decaying—downtown areas.

Over the following decades, development in these areas exploded, with the price-per-square-foot of real estate increasing 70 percent.



The area around a metro station in Fairfax County, Virginia. Note the abundance of parking and little else. Photo credit: Google Maps

Meanwhile, just over the county border in Fairfax, Virginia, the metro line continued down the middle of Route 66 as planned. Looking at aerial photos of the two areas is telling: One, densely developed, the other empty save for a sea of parking.

Working for a More Walkable Future

With 10,000 dead or dying malls and stripmalls across the country, Leinberger says, the opportunity for redevelopment is huge. But transitioning from drivable suburban communities—a [model that is clearly outmoded](#) and unsustainable—is not a simple process.

It will take, Leinberger says, work from politicians at the municipal, state, and federal levels—many of whom still don't understand the transformation that is already taking place. It will require motivated and vocal consumers to push demand for more sustainable real estate options. And it will take courageous developers to abandon the proven profitability of suburban sprawl.

Perhaps most important, it will take governments, citizens, and developers, working together, to ensure this new [walkable lifestyle is available to everyone](#). For too long, Leinberger says, the approach to affordable housing has been "drive until you can pay." Only with careful planning can walkable urban development exist without this unacceptable trade off.

Going Back to the Future

In spite of the big box stores and parking lots, highways and McMansions, Christopher Leinberger believes the United States has already emerged as a leader in suburban redevelopment. The built environment pendulum, he says, "which was stuck on primarily

building walkable urban places for thousands of years," became unstuck after World War II and quickly made it's way to the other extreme.

If Washington, DC, is a sign of things to come, it may finally be time for development to go "back to the future."