

Dense, Walkable Urban Cities Create YIMBY Neighbors

by April Streever, Portland, Oregon on 05.29.10

DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE



Not quite dead, but oversupplied. Photo via [thegiantvermin](#) @ flickr.

Looking at the massive build up of low-density, car-dependent housing over the last 50 years, real estate developer Christopher Leinberger says in his book *The Option of Urbanism* that developers simply supplied too much of the wrong product in the wrong location. Yup, But, good news. Density in walkable urban areas tends to create YIMBY's neighbors (Yes, In My Back Yard) because quality of life and property values get better. Leinberger doesn't say the [suburbs are dead](#) - there will still be some demand for that product. But freedom to choose (that much lauded American ideal) means supplying the walkable urban demand could be a potent engine for economic growth. Oh yeah, and it's pretty green, too. See what Leinberger has to say in this TreeHugger interview.



Author photo Island Press.

/>TH: How far have we come in shifting to walkable urbanism?

CL: It depends on your metropolitan area. If you are in metropolitan Washington, DC, Boston, San Francisco, Denver, Portland, Chicago or Seattle, you will have about 15-20% of the region's housing in walkable urban places versus probably 40-50% demand. As a result, walkable urban is now the most expensive housing in the metropolitan area on a price per square foot basis; the lines crossed this past decade where walkable urban housing became the most expensive compared to drivable sub-urban (they crossed going the other direction back in the

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1960s). In metro areas like Dallas-Ft Worth, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Miami, Phoenix, San Diego and Los Angeles, you are beginning to see some walkable urban places development (perhaps 5-10% of the housing stock) versus 30-40% demand. In metropolitan areas like Oklahoma City, Kansas City, Las Vegas and Tampa, less than 5% of the housing stock is walkable urban while the demand is probably 30-40%. Interestingly, metro NYC, which has the image of being very walkable urban, is also in the middle group. While Manhattan, parts of Brooklyn, Hoboken, downtown Stamford and a few other places are very walkable urban, they only represent about 10% or so of the housing stock. The rest of the housing is spread over four states at a density less than metro LA...Tony Soprano's house is their model. So there is significant pent-up demand in virtually all metro areas...so much so that it will take a generation to meet this demand.

TH: What are needed changes for more development of walkable urbanism?

CL: 1. Make it legal to build walkable urbanism...always helps if you do not have to change the zoning laws to develop what the market, environmental quality and government tax base wants and needs. 2. NIMBY opposition from surrounding neighborhoods since they were trained that more development leads to less quality of life...which is the case for drivable sub-urban development (who wants the new strip mall next to your sub-division?). However, great walkable urbanism adjacent to single family neighborhoods, assuming the unintended consequences such as noise, cut through traffic and overflow parking are managed (which is well understood how to do), the single-family neighbors tend to find that their quality of life and property values increase dramatically. In the metro area with the most walkable urban development, Washington, DC, many NIMBYs are becoming "YIMBYs" (Yes in my backyard) since there is so much positive experience with walkable urban development. 3. Stop massively subsidizing drivable sub-urban infrastructure, which is bankrupting government and the economy as a whole, and build walkable urban infrastructure, such as rail transit, bike and walking paths, small parks, in-town schools, etc. Walkable urban infrastructure is vastly less expensive on a per unit or per square foot basis than drivable sub-urban infrastructure, which is why drivable sub-urban infrastructure has been so massively subsidized.

TH: Is Complete Streets a help or a hindrance in the goal of walkable urbanism?

CL: It is a great help...it is a necessary step in developing walkable urban places. Public streets are a huge public asset, representing 30-40% of all metropolitan land. But they do NOT pay property taxes, take significant maintenance, and have been built following the "build the church for Easter Sunday" school of thought. This public asset must be used for rail transit, parking, bike lanes and maybe even narrowed and sold to the private sector where it can be put to property tax paying uses.

TH: One problem I have found in the attitudes of my neighbors is that while people want walkable urbanism right around them, i.e. in their neighborhood, they still either accept or want drivable suburbanism because they think it is cheaper for big shopping trips, kids events, etc. In other words, they don't really support (enough) the businesses that develop in walkable urban areas. Any ideas on how to change this attitude or if it matters?

CL: People forget about their 2nd largest expense...buying and maintaining a fleet of cars to participate in a drivable sub-urban lifestyle. The average American family spends 19% of their total income on transportation...the vast majority to finance, fuel, insure, maintain, park and gas their cars (this ignores their taxes that go to subsidize the roads, the environmental damage of oil exploration and burning, that at least a third of our Defense budget goes to protecting the oil-lanes and countries who produce our oil and the health damage caused by obesity and asthma due to driving as much as we do). However, drivable sub-urban households pay 24% of their income for their fleet of cars while walkable urban households spend half of that...the increased costs incurred by drivable sub-urban households is \$700 billion per year; half of the country's total health care budget. This also does not take into account that only 2/3rds of us do NOT drive; they are too poor, too old, too handicapped or too young. That means that the other 2/3rds have to chauffeur the 1/3rd around, which includes schlepping the kids to all of their car-dependent destinations, making them fat, reliant upon their parents for every trip outside of the home and takes away vast amount of family time...as does the long commutes breadwinners have to endure. If you could drop one car out of your household budget, which the AAA says costs \$9,200 per year in after-tax dollars (what a Camry driven 15,000 per year cost on average in 2009), you could increase your mortgage capacity by over \$120,000, or you could do that most un-American of all activities, savings for retirement, education, etc.