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Re-visioning America: Sustainable Real Estate with Christopher B. Leinberger

by Jane Schneider

What will U.S. cities look like in the coming decades? Will homeowners slowly turn their backs on the suburban sprawl that has largely defined post-WWII expansion in this country? Will we embrace instead more walkable urban places? Consider the mid-sized cities of Chattanooga, Roanoke, and Charlottesville, Virginia. According to land use strategist Christopher B. Leinberger, the new urbanism movement is already underway.

The University of Michigan professor and founding director of the Graduate Real Estate Development Program, developer, author, and researcher explored the topic of sustainable real estate as the Economic Club's keynote speaker, kicking off the March 24th Conference on Sustainable Real Estate. The three-day event, hosted by the Fogelman College of Business at the University of Memphis, brought together academicians and business professionals to discuss best land use practices and what sustainability means to Memphis' economic future.

Leinberger drove home one simple fact: Real estate has been responsible for two of the last three recessions. And when real estate takes a nosedive, it brings the economy down with it. Why? Because real estate: houses, commercial properties, and industrial complexes, in tandem with the infrastructure required to support it: transportation, sewer lines, electricity, etc., comprises 35 percent of the economy's asset base. Transportation is also an integral piece of that development puzzle, "It's the rudder on the ship," notes Leinberger. "It dictates where the rest of the built environment goes."

Since WWII, our built environment has largely been low density, drivable communities across much of U.S. But the built environment is also responsible for producing 70 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. Leinberger argues that if we are to climb out of the current economic slump, real estate must be part of the answer. But it can't come with the same type of development that's taken place over the past 50 years. Policy and business leaders must refocus their energies on more sustainable development that focuses on urban centers.

Walkable neighborhoods:

The desirability of walkable urban real estate is being reflected in the shift in housing values in urban locales versus fringe suburban neighborhoods, a shift that has become discernible over the past decade. Leinberger points to DuPont Circle, his own neighborhood in Washington, D.C., where housing prices have steadily risen since 2000 in growing response to demand from consumers hungry for dynamic urban neighborhoods with close proximity to retail and commercial outlets. Baby boomers, as well as GenXers, especially those in the creative class, may drive more demand for living in urban centers where amenities are within walking distance and cars are not the sole mode of transportation.

“The pent-up demand for walkable urban places will be the driver for this economy, for this next generation, like drivable suburbs were the driver for the past two generations. What it requires is a fundamental redirection of federal and metropolitan funding,” said Leinberger. The American public has long been dependent on the automobile and freeways as a means of transporting workers from their jobs in cities to their homes in the suburbs. Leinberger posits that the creation of the freeway system, subsidized largely by federal and state funds, drove real estate development by pushing suburban sprawl further and further away from urban centers. “Freeways have pushed demand for support and services further and further out; it's the largest social engineering project of our time, the development of drivable suburban development,” he said. Some of that development that has also been federally subsidized, he pointed out. “People in real estate have made a lot of money, and the thought was, it ain't broke, don't fix it.”

Leinberger said the public's appetite for suburban ease was reflected back to us on television programs like *I Love Lucy*, where in one episode, Lucy waxes poetically about the fresh air and peacefulness of suburban life. That irony wasn't lost on developers. “We typically named projects after the things we'd destroyed to build,” says Leinberger, whose comment elicited a chuckle from the audience.

He also showed a scene from the movie *Back to the Future*, which depicts two types of development models. When Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd return to the town center of Fox's youth, he's incredulous to discover that it's been replaced by a faceless strip mall. Leinberger uses the scene to describe the sense of lost identity we experience as a community when development is allowed to go unchecked. Memphis needs only to look at the growth of Desoto County and communities east of downtown like Cordova to see examples of what Leinberger describes.

Leinberger also makes the argument that cities need to invest in light rail and make better use of mass transit if they are going to successfully revision urban neighborhoods and reinvest in areas that have the potential to provide the amenities people want. The recent arrival of the retailer Urban Outfitters, which inked a 20-year lease to be at the entrance to the Cooper Young neighborhood, could provide continued traction that neighborhood has harnessed as it continues to evolve as an urban hub.

As he concluded his talk, Leinberger dictated a to-do list for audience members to continue the discussion.

- Go and visit mid-sized towns like Chattanooga that have turned themselves around
- When considering development, remember that a city should have four to five walkable urban places. (The Cooper Young and South Main neighborhoods are two local examples.)
- Expand the scope of downtown management organizations.
- Start a discussion about light rail transit; this is as important as the highways were during the 1950s and 1960s. Without it, you're condemned to be a twentieth century city. The private sector has to take the lead. Chattanooga did a superb job in that respect. (One example: They have an excellent electric bus service that transports riders around the downtown sector at a nominal fee.)

“The greatest asset you've got in your downtown is memory imbued into old buildings. People want a sense of place; they don't want to see that destroyed. But you need to include density, because older buildings don't always have that.” What are the steps Memphis can take to revision its urban core? Discuss. Talk to each other.