

Walkable Washington

City thrives by offering a mix of destinations accessible by foot

NEAL PEIRCE

Washington Post Writers Group

WASHINGTON --

Could it possibly be that Washington, its population shrinking and, at one point, almost bankrupt, has become a model of how the entire nation might smartly develop in the 21st century?

I never thought I'd see the day. But Christopher Leinberger, one of America's top real estate analysts and now a Brookings Institution fellow, makes a startling case for it in his just-published book, "The Option of Urbanism" (Island Press).

Leinberger's case isn't about Washington's radically improved politics and city management. Rather, it's about walkability. It's about dramatic reinvestment -- about \$8.2 billion worth -- pouring in the city's downtown since 1997. Complementing monumental Washington, there's been a rush of new cinemas, theaters, quality restaurants, trendy retail stores and a wildly popular sports arena, all helped along by a downtown business district providing special security, marketing and planning.

But the success story is not exclusively a downtown one -- the entire Washington citistate of 5.3 million people is now booming. And its starring specialty is what Leinberger calls "walkable urbanism" -- places with a mix of destinations people want, from shops and parks and schools to pubs and entertainment, accessible on foot.

Throwback to pre-WWII

In a sense, walkable urbanism is nothing new; it was the way towns and cities were organized from the first urban settlements about 5,500 years ago to the 20th century. But after World War II, with Americans' rush to thousands of new suburban locations, a never-before-seen norm appeared. Leinberger calls it "drivable sub-urbanism." And what a market smash it proved, offering Americans a sense of freedom, mobility, privacy, their own piece of turf and a yard for the kids. Plus plenty of jobs and profits, from autos to oil to real estate to fast food. The new form became virtually synonymous with the American Dream. Two generations of Americans knew practically nothing else.

But in the 1990s, the model began to lose some of its luster. Suburbia's big parking lots and low-density zoning meant an auto for every trip. Walking and transit were impractical. Older suburbs began to decline, inducing families to drive farther and farther to new suburban rings. Thousands of malls and shopping strips were abandoned. Traffic congestion -- and Washington is no exception -- became so severe that many families were obliged to build their lives around it. Kids

had to be driven everywhere. Vehicle miles driven in America shot up a stunning 226 percent from 1983 to 2001, while population increased just 22 percent.

Isn't there a better way?

So by the mid-1990s a significant number of Americans -- and not just the poor and minorities long consigned to inner cities -- began to ask: Isn't there a better way? Popular media began to shift its images of the city from a place of crime and violence to the exciting, hip place to be (with such television shows as "Seinfeld," "Friends" and "Sex and the City").

Urban crime rates took a deep dive. Most downtowns began a surprising revitalization, with more offices, entertainment, restaurants and a leading edge of middle-class people (often youth and empty nesters) returning. The ideas of walkable town and city life, spread with fervor by the architects and planners of the New Urbanism movement, gnawed at the decades-old supremacy of the suburban ideal.

None of this, Leinberger insists, means "drivable suburbia" will disappear anytime soon: A huge weight of custom, continued consumer choice, zoning and the sheer vastness of today's spread-out suburbia assure it will remain dominant for years to come. Nor will cities' problems, from poverty to schools, disappear soon.

But walkable urbanism has demographics going for it. The share of U.S. families with children at home has been declining sharply; the largest household growth will be empty nesters, never-nesters and singles, many likely to look to cities and their excitement. Cities that don't offer true walkable urbanism, Leinberger suggests, are "probably destined" to lose out economically.

New urban centers

In the 1980s, the Washington region had two highly walkable places -- Georgetown and Old Town Alexandria. Today, Leinberger calculates, it has 17 highly walkable, beckoning urban centers, with at least five more emerging -- the most of any U.S. metropolis.

Significantly, 16 of Washington's walkable centers have subway stops; the modern Metro system, which began in the 1970s, transformed the region as communities planned dense, multi-use development around the stops.

But Washington started its system when generous federal aid flowed. Denver's doing it the harder way, with a \$4.7 billion light-rail system that's 80 percent financed by local taxpayers. But that region will end up with 119 miles of track, many walkable centers, and a burnished reputation. It too is setting a national model.

Neal Peirce

Neal Peirce writes about state and local government and federal relations. Write him c/o Washington Post Writers Group, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, DC 20071, or by e-mail at nrp@citistates.com.