



[Profile of Christopher B. Leinberger \(PDF file\)](#)

## Community Builders Profile

### Christopher B. Leinberger

by Desiree French

As recently as 1998, downtown Albuquerque, New Mexico, was beset by moribund parking lots, left over from the urban renewal days, and vacant storefronts. Save for the homeless and 20-year-olds who frequented the local taprooms, virtually all pedestrian traffic and activity ground to a halt after the evening rush hour.

Enter Chris Leinberger, a founding partner of Albuquerque-based Arcadia Land Co., a self-described new urbanist development firm with offices in Wayne, Pennsylvania, and Seaside, Florida. He also is the chairman and chief executive officer of the local Historic District Improvement Company (HDIC). A national champion of development that embraces walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods, Leinberger, at the invitation of Jim Baca, former mayor of Albuquerque, became one of the point people seven years ago of a campaign by the city, business community, and citizens to turn downtown Albuquerque into "the best mid-sized downtown in the country."

Thanks to Leinberger, also the managing director of Robert Charles Lesser & Co., LLC, a real estate consulting firm headquartered in Washington, D.C., the city is well on the way to meeting its goal. In 1998, no private sector building permit, other than for small add-ons, had been issued downtown in 15 years. Since that time, Leinberger and HDIC, owned partially by Arcadia and the McCune Charitable Foundation, have helped to generate more than \$400 million in new public and private sector development in downtown Albuquerque.

Included in the mix is the 110,000-square-foot, \$20 million Century theater block, consisting of a 14-screen movie theater surrounded by retail and office space. In November 2001, HDIC, created to be the "catalytic" downtown developer, opened the complex as the first of four projects to date that will demonstrate to the private real estate development industry that development downtown can be feasible.

"Everyone told us that project would not succeed," recalls Pat Bryan, HDIC's chief operating officer. "Our view was: if you're trying to get people to come downtown, you have to give them something exciting, exuberant, and different from what they were used to."

Local residents agree. Many have turned out to patronize the new shops, restaurants, and pubs now housed in an old 53,000-square-foot building called the Crossroads. The structure is strategically placed at the historic intersection of Route 66 and the 16th-century Spanish Royal Road, extending from Mexico to the center of downtown. Formerly the site of a Woolworth's and JCPenney, the Crossroads development—the second of HDIC's projects—has created a "patio culture" that generates significant foot traffic. This intersection is now home to the largest concentration of restaurants in the state.

The vivacity is welcomed. "Chris was able to open our eyes, meaning the whole community, to what revitalization could

mean to us in terms of opportunities," Richard Sertich, the associate director of

Albuquerque's planning department, says. "Before, we thought of doing small, single projects that were city funded. He has imparted to us the need to get moving on many fronts, looking at commercial, retail, residential, and public/private partnerships. He has been a real plus for the city of Albuquerque," he adds.

Leinberger, a noted land strategist who has helped to plan or redevelop 50 downtown areas in the United States and Europe, says he has sought from the very beginning to continue in Albuquerque what he has espoused elsewhere: "to change how we develop the built environment." By this, he means how development is both built and financed. Along with his two Arcadia partners—Robert Davis and Joseph Duckworth—he endorses building influenced by the conservation development movement and new urbanism. The latter, says Leinberger, seeks an alternative to "low-density, single-purpose, car-based sprawl."

Leinberger and his partners claim a formula-driven real estate industry—which produces "could-be-anywhere places" that give rise to detrimental health, environmental, economic, and social consequences—is bolstered by the way the industry is financed. They want to change that.

"Over the last 30 to 40 years, through our financing mechanisms, we've turned what historically was a 40-year asset class into a product with a seven- to ten-year life," explains Leinberger. "Beyond year seven, there's a blind spot in our investment underwriting process. We can't see cash flows beyond that, so we are building only what we can measure. We build things to throw them away because they become obsolete in ten years."

To avoid the negative consequences of development that adheres to this process, Leinberger says he is an advocate of constructing places that are long term in nature—which is what he is doing in Albuquerque, the focal point of most of his community building work. (See "Building for the Long Term," page 95, November/December 2003.)

"Chris has been tireless in his efforts to make, as he calls it, 'doing the right thing' easy," asserts Rob Dickson, owner of the redevelopment firm of Paradigm & Co., in Albuquerque. "He is very firmly grounded in market research. He understands that a vast portion of the consumer market, for housing and for living, is looking for a more convenient, more walkable lifestyle. So he's working to change development and financing rules to allow these kinds of places to be built because he knows the market wants them."

Thus, the all-out push by Leinberger to support other developers who are strongly committed to changing the face of downtown Albuquerque. He has publicly backed Dickson's effort to revive an area called EDo, short for East Downtown, and was involved in the design that Dickson used to convert Albuquerque High School into 54 loft apartments.

Now that the entertainment venues and retail space are strategically in place, housing—and plenty of it—is in demand. In March, HDIC completed construction on the 80,000-square-foot Gold Avenue Lofts. The \$15 million project includes 32 condominium lofts, office condos, and retail space. Plans calls

for breaking ground on a 109-unit luxury apartment complex in the fall. Next year, after Greyhound moves to the city's new Alvarado Intermodal Transportation Center near the aforementioned theater complex, HDIC is contemplating developing the bus company's old space into a supermarket, with 200 to 250 mixed-income residential units on the upper floors.

Virtually none of the existing development would have been possible without significant changes to the downtown zoning code, which HDIC aggressively sought and won. "Chris and HDIC have allowed us to be active because they worked very hard getting the new, Downtown 2010 zoning code in place," says Jay Rembe, the owner of Infill Solutions, a multidisciplinary development practice in Albuquerque. "By streamlining the development process, it has lessened the pressures that we would have faced." The code now allows for straight zoning approval in a day, building permit approval in three weeks, administratively, and allowances for more height, and therefore more density, depending on the building type.

Leinberger also has set up the Albuquerque Civic Trust to ensure the continued availability of affordable housing, commercial space, and public space downtown. It is an attempt, he says, "to have gentrification pay for affordable space on a permanent basis by the private sector."

Looking ahead, Leinberger says he has a close eye on two major developments: a proposal by a Phoenix developer to build a downtown arena and the day HDIC completes its final project. That is when Leinberger, who has written a number of books and articles, says he plans to hang up his active development hat to focus full time on writing, real estate research, and teaching.

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