

REVIEWS

moving pages, however, the author dispenses some new or surprising facts.

I have trouble accepting Leinberger's contention that the extent of walkable urban development is limited by the distances that people can walk. I think it would be physically possible to keep extending the dense walkable areas. In Manhattan, heavily populated, mixed-use, transit-accessible areas continue for mile after mile. My hunch is that in cities and suburbs alike, neighborhood opposition, not comfortable walking distances, will be the biggest impediment to the emerging urbanism.

All in all, this is a serious, well-researched, and instructive book — a useful guide to the future. "The United States," Leinberger declares, "is on the verge of a new phase in constructing its built environment."

New Urban Cowboy

The Labors of Michael E. Arth

A documentary film by Michael E. Arth and Blake Wiers

Golden Apples Media Inc., 2007, 1 hour, 39 minutes

REVIEW BY ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

Michael E. Arth is an ordinary-looking guy who wants to change the world. He is an artist, a builder, and an urbanist whose soft-spoken demeanor belies deep determination.

About a dozen years ago, Arth began research for a book that he calls *The Labors of Hercules*, still unfinished but originally envisioned as a slim volume outlining simple solutions to the world's problems. "I got up to the chapters on urbanism, and really began to focus on that." In 2001, he dragged his pregnant wife out of a beautiful house in Santa Barbara, California — sold at a loss — to purchase property in a crack-infested, rundown neighborhood in DeLand, Florida. "I begged Michael not to make me move into this slum," she said. One of the moving guys said as he was unloading the truck: "Nobody has the guts to walk down the street here let alone make it look pretty."

In a few short years, the slum has turned into a fashionable urban neighborhood called the Garden District, recently designated as an historical area. Property values have soared, and the drug dealers are gone. Arth, his wife Maya, and daughter Sophie are unscathed, but at least one worker was wounded and the wife of another killed during the revitalization period. A couple of years ago, county officials named a day in Arth's honor.

New Urban Cowboy tells a remarkable story with plenty of interest to new urbanists, including challenges of financing and government red tape, and urban design ideas played out in a small city. There's drama, too. The video is a testament to the power of placemaking to transform a city neighborhood.

Arth is influenced by new urbanists, but his philosophy differs in one important respect. He believes in the Radburn/Village Homes model of fronting houses on pedestrian passages, with streets behind. He calls this "New Pedestrianism" a big improvement over New Urbanism, even though it is a subtle change. Everybody lives on a linear park." At the same time, Arth retains many of the placemaking aspects of New Urbanism, and his plans show clearly defined urban block patterns with human-scale dimensions.



New Urban Cowboy tells the story of the transformation of a slum, above, into fashionable urban housing.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL E. ARTH

Whether Arth can make this approach work is unclear from the film, because the Garden District is mostly a typical urban neighborhood with houses facing streets. There also are courtyard houses of a type similar to what can be found in many new urban communities.

Arth has plans to build a 1,400-acre "Pedestrian Village" in Saskatchewan. After the challenges he overcame in DeLand, I wouldn't doubt that he could pull it off. If Arth has something important to show new urbanists, that will become apparent in time. In the meantime, I recommend this documentary. See www.newurbancowboy.com. ♦

NEW URBAN UPDATE

■ Dover, Kohl & Partners led a week-long charrette in mid-September aimed at bringing order, pedestrian comfort, and a degree of architectural grace to the jumbled section of Miami containing the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine, the Miami-Dade justice center, and other institutions.

"In working sessions, faculty, staff, and local residents told the consultants they want the district to be a safe, navigable, inviting place," the *Miami Herald* reported. "Near the top of the wish list: wider sidewalks, trees and shade, and decent, affordable housing and lodging within easy walking distance."

The university and its medical school took the lead in sponsoring the charrette, which focuses on an area that has recently been christened the "Miami Health District" (see Oct. 2006 *New Urban News*). "We realized we couldn't continue to put buildings up in isolation," said Jose Szapocznik, the medical school's associate dean for community development. "We have a great opportunity here." University President Donna Shalala sees the creation of a thriving precinct for the medical school as a way of helping to elevate the med school's ranking nationally.