Window to the Future

Reflections by social critic James Howard Kunstler

Interview by John F. Rohe

> *The road is now like television, violent and tawdry. The landscape it runs through is littered with cartoon buildings and commercial messages. We whiz by them at fifty-five miles an hour and forget them, because one convenience store looks like the next. They do not celebrate anything beyond their mechanistic ability to sell merchandise. We don't want to remember them. We did not savor the approach and we were not rewarded upon reaching the destination, and it will be the same next time, and every time. There is little sense of having arrived anywhere, because every place looks like no place in particular.*
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> – James Howard Kunstler
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> *The Geography of Nowhere*
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> Simon & Schuster, 1993, pg 131

James Howard Kunstler has emerged as one of the nation's leading writers in defining our addiction to fossil fuel. In his latest book, Kunstler observes "America is still sleepwalking into the future." The human prospects in an age demanding more economic growth with dwindling fossil fuel reserves are daunting. They reside beyond the scale of comprehension and scope of responsibility for most individuals.

Kunstler's critique of auto dependent urban sprawl is harsh and pointed: "In effect, Americans threw away their communities in order to save a few dollars on hair dryers and plastic food storage tubs, never stopping to reflect on what they were destroying."

At age 26, while waiting on a literary agent to line up contracts for his horror novel, Kunstler was a cab driver in D.C. Unwary passengers in that day would have been treated to an insightful wit and unstinting curiosity. Kunstler eventually became a writer for *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone Magazine.* The insights gleaned from the journalist's perch have enabled him to take a fresh look at the operative forces underlying urban sprawl and its energy consumptive attributes.

With principled deliberation, Kunstler will not shrink from controversy. As we trek over the perilous "peak oil," the global dipstick registers a steady decline. Kunstler, the *provocateur*, bears grim testimony to the impending drama. He cautions that we are ill-equipped to cope with the imminent transition.

The industrialized world has been sustained on cheap oil. Humanity's acquisitive mode has moved from a luxury to an expectation. At this point, vicissitudes in the price or supply of fossil fuel could lead to traumatic disappointments and harsh competition. Conservation strategies will require the designed human habitat to be weaned from fossil fuel.

Kunstler's warnings are summarized in his latest book, *The Long Emergency; Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-first Century* and in a DVD, *The End of Suburbia*.

The ultimate question for concerned citizens is how to make a difference. How may anyone strike back? Our individual response will be recorded in personal choices. A decision to reside closer to work is a valid option. By returning to a pedestrian scale, we become liberated from the rigors of automobility. How many people can actually walk to work in their house slippers? How many can perform most of life's daily functions within walking range of their homes? A pedestrian lifestyle is more healthful. It also adds hours to each day.

James Howard Kunstler offers the following comments in an interview with *The Social Contract.*

JOHN ROHE: *Good morning, Jim, thanks for taking time for this interview for* The Social Contract.

JAMES KUNSTLER: Hi, John.

JR: *Jim, the readers of* The Social Contract *would likely be familiar with many of your writings over the years. I'd like to ask how you became sensitive to the civic realm. What were some of the important events in your formative years?*

JK: Well, first of all, my parents moved to the New York suburbs on Long Island in 1954, just as that part of the New York hinterland was undergoing its first great wave of development. So we were among the first wave of suburban pioneers. I lived there at a time

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in my life between the ages of five and eight, when people are happiest in that kind of physical setting. When you are six-years old, you're not going into stores by yourself, and you're not really engaging that much with the adult world. So suburbia is a good place for six-year olds.

JR: *Your parents?*

JK: My parents split up when I was eight, and I moved into Manhattan with my mother. You know, it was a curious thing, but that is just exactly the point in your life when a child is starting to become sensible of the larger world beyond play, and starting to engage with things like commerce and the institutional world of museums and libraries. So at the age of eight, I was suddenly thrust into the heart of Manhattan, enrolled in a public school about a mile away, and I took a New York City bus to get there. This was all new to me after having been in the suburbs and being ferried around. When I lived in the suburbs, I walked to school and I went to a grammar school in an old village in Long Island, and it was about a 1920s-vintage grammar school. Because our subdivision was among the very first in that area, we were fairly close to the Village of Greenvale, on the north shore of Long Island, so we walked to school; we did not take the bus. When I got to Manhattan, all of a sudden I was part of that whole world of bustling New York City – and I was just one of many millions of people who got up in the morning, got on public transit, and went to my job, that of being a fourth-grade student.

JR: *Did your mother honor your wing span autonomy at that time?*

JK: I got a key to the apartment all of a sudden when I was eight-years old. After school, if I wanted to go to the Museum of Natural History, which was quite a distance across Central Park, I managed to learn to take a cross-town bus, and used my bus pass. The museum was free in those days.

JR: *Were there safety considerations for you?*

JK: No, no. The level of concern for the safety of children was just about zero compared to the level of paranoia that exists today. Living in a nation that appears to be wall-to-wall child abductors and perverts today…

JR: *Wall-to-wall perverts?*

JK: That's the impression you get from watching *CNN*. I'm not saying that there weren't any child molesters in the 1950s. I rather tend to believe that there were plenty of them. But the level of paranoia about it was much lower, and I imagine there is quite a bit of needless paranoia about it today. We've actually inflated the anxiety level over this to the degree that children are now so hyper-protected that they have almost no sovereign liberty of their own anymore. Not only are they constrained by the physical limits of their environments; the fact that they can't get to anything except by car, which means they have to depend on mommy. The idea of a child going to a museum alone now would be unthinkable.

JR: *A form of child abuse?*

JK: It might even be prosecutable if some disgruntled family member got wind of it.

JR: *Is it your point that by affording more of these social interactions, we might be putting more eyes on the street?*

JK: That's exactly right. But we do not afford much of a variety of social interaction, either for adults or children. At both ends, the social interaction is fairly impoverished, and so the suspicion and paranoia I think increases proportionally.

JR: *Jim, how did your school years influence your eventual sensitivity to community?*

JK: For one thing, it made me want to go to a small town and ride motorcycles, and go bass fishing, and date girls named Alice.

JR: *Because they were at the front of the line alphabetically?*

JK: No, it was because they had vowels in their names. I wanted to meet some girls who had vowels in their names. I was pining to live life on a smaller scale, a closer and more intimate scale with my surroundings. New York City for me became kind of an overwhelming place, where everything was far, far away, and my friends were in places that I couldn't reach.

JR: *Did you have siblings, Jim?*

JK: No, I had no brothers or sisters.

JR: *And your mother was employed outside of the home?*

JK: Yes, she had a business of her own. She was a stationery designer.

JR: *Eventually you moved to D.C.*

JK: That was years later, when I was a 26-year-old adult. I was in D.C., and I was driving a cab waiting for my agent to sell a horror novel. She never did. After about four months, I got discouraged, so I decided to just quit Washington.

JR: *How long were you there in total?*

JK: I was there from August through December of 1975.

JR: *As a cab driver principally?*

JK: Yes, living in a house in Georgetown with some

people I knew. I still had that motorcycle, and worked on a horror novel.

JR: *Did the horror novel ever get published?*

JK: Yes, but not for a while. About five years later I sold it to a company that published pulp horror novels. It never did that well, but I did sell it finally for a few thousand dollars.

JR: *Eventually you moved to Saratoga Springs, New York.*

JK: Yes, I'm still there today. Saratoga was an old resort town from the nineteenth century that had fallen on hard times. It was full of great old Victorian buildings, but they were in poor repair.

JR: *You got to know your neighbors?*

JK: It was beyond that. I developed a very rich social network for myself, living in a small town. A lot of my friends today are fifty-year old people who were hippie carpenters when I got here. My friends now are ex-hippie carpenters. They have grown up, their hair has fallen out, and they don't smoke as much dope as they used to. And they are making more money then they did back then.

JR: *You appreciated Saratoga Springs?*

JK: I really enjoyed small-town America.

JR: *And eventually, that experience may have transformed you into an urban critic.*

JK: Yes. In the late '80s, I started doing stories for *The New York Times Magazine*. Some of them were concerned about the hyper-development in America at the time. This was beginning to be perceived as a problem, especially in New England.

JR: *Did the* New York Times *writings lead to* The Geography of Nowhere?

JK: Yes. I went far beyond the reporting for *The Times*. I really looked as deeply as I could into this issue. I read a lot about these issues: the history of settlement patterns, and the history of urbanism. I was educating myself in a subject that wasn't very well defined.

JR: *The book had a literary value, but also a depth of insight and research.*

JK: That's something for other people to judge. Personally, my investment in that either professionally or artistically was no higher than the investment that I made in my novels, and I didn't write it any more carefully. It was just my first non-fiction book.

JR: *What is the adjective that would result from this? Do you define yourself then as an urban critic?*

JK: No, I define myself as a social critic – a social commentator.

JR: *So, in other words it's the place that defines our social attributes. Tell us about your latest.*

JK: I recently published *The Long Emergency*, which is mainly about the global energy predicament.

JR: *How did you come to this issue?*

JK: Well, it was a subject that fell into my lap because I was a newspaper reporter in the '70s and I covered the OPEC oil embargo and it made a huge impression on me. Even the later chapters of *The Geography of Nowhere* draw attention to this.

JR: *Have your views continued to evolve?*

JK: Definitely. Look, we really have a serious problem here, and we are not doing anything about it, and we're not thinking about it.

JR: *We're sleepwalking into the future, you say. You refer to suburbia as "the greatest misallocation of resources in history." Your words.*

JK: The reason I chose those words was to allow people to understand what a liability all that stuff now is when you go out and actually find yourself on a six-lane highway surrounded by the hamburger shacks, and the big box stores, and the muffler shops. You know, it's one thing to just wrinkle your nose at it and say oh, it's ugly, and I don't feel good here. It's another thing to recognize what it really represents; a tremendous drag on the future, a tremendous liability for us to carry forward, a tremendous price that we're going to have to pay to get out of that situation. It does not lend itself to be retrofitted or adapted or reused. One of the great disappointments of the times will prove to be that alternative fuels will not allow us to run even a substantial fraction of the present. We're going to be very disappointed.

JR: *Do you see yourself as a prophet?*

JK: No, I think of myself as a writer.

JR: *Jim, isn't there a prophesy here?*

JK: I'm only predicting things that ought to be self-evident to anybody.

JR: *Are you satisfied with the reviews?*

JK: I got a review yesterday from an Internet magazine. It was a negative review of my book, *The Long Emergency*, and the writer was obviously a follower of the Julian Simon school of economics.

JR: *Perpetual growth for a finite planet!*

JK: Exactly. Perpetual growth for a finite planet, and that human ingenuity will compensate for all of our other shortages, including our energy problems. Plus there is the creamy nougat center of oil at the center of

the earth that we are going to be able to access, and we're going to have perpetual cheap oil.

JR: *How about coal?*

JK: I've got a friend in town, Jeff Goodell, a *New York Times Magazine* and *Rolling* Stone reporter, who is writing a book on the coal and electric industry. "Big Coal" is the title. He's been told by the coal company executives that they actually have far less coal than most Americans typically believe. It is of poorer quality, and harder to get out of the ground. It would inflict massive environmental damage on top of the increased costs of getting it out of the ground. We do have a substantial amount of coal, but not as much as people believe.

JR: *Environmental penalties?*

JK: Secondary consequences.

JR: *How might the nation respond to West Virginia looking like a strip mine?*

JK: We could turn Wyoming into a gravel pit and probably poison much of the water of the Rocky Mountain region. My point is that all other things being equal, even if there is some magic bullet that's going to rescue us, there is certainly going to be an interval of hardship between now and then. And that's why I called my book *The Long Emergency*.

JR: *Might we regress as a civilization? Might future history books resemble a read from back to front?*

JK: It is possible, but I doubt it would be the kind of orderly process that some people imagine.

JR: *How would you offer advice to someone on living securely for the future?*

JK: Since I believe that the energy problems of the decades ahead are going to severely affect agriculture, I think we're going to have trouble producing food. We are going to have to take local food production much more seriously. It has implications for where people choose to live, how people are going to live. I personally think we are going to see a reversal of the trend of the last two-hundred years. Instead of people moving from the small towns and rural regions to the big cities, I think we'll see the opposite.

JR: *How about employment prospects?*

JK: I think we will see people leaving the big cities and the big cities contracting severely and populations moving back to smaller towns and smaller cities, and in places that are proximate to local agriculture or places where local agriculture is viable. I also think that there is going to be a huge vocational change. A lot of jobs and careers, and professions are going to vanish. There are going to be far fewer people being public relations executives and far more people working in agriculture one way or another, either directly or indirectly – either directly producing food or in the activities associated with it.

JR: *How about Saratoga Springs? What is your prognosis?*

JK: The place where I live has better prospects than Las Vegas. We have a lot of undervalued agricultural land around here in upstate New York that has gone through many different phases of use. It's been semi-derelict for decades now as dairy farming collapsed.

JR: *Do you have a sense, Jim, for an optimum U.S. population?*

JK: I would go so far as to say that it may be somewhat lower than where we are now. We're not China or India, but we are now supporting a population of 300 million people on a lot of artificial input so to speak. A lot of cheap oil and a lot of available gas and fossil fuels. Whether or not that will be possible in the future is very much open to question. That's why I tend to put the whole agricultural issue at the center of this discussion, because the question of whether we can feed ourselves is very important.

JR: *We've been at sub-replacement level fertility in the United States since the mid '70s. Yet, under current projections, we will be a billion-person nation in the lifetime of a child born today. Where in your priorities do you put immigration on the hierarchy of issues?*

JK: I'd start by answering that this way: One of the possibilities, and I think probability, is that we're going to see plummeting standards of living, and decreased life expectancies. The situation in the U.S. ten years from now may be analogous to what we saw in the former Soviet Union after the 1990 collapse of the Soviet Government, namely, lower life expectancies – a lot of people dying off, to put it bluntly. People not making it. Rampant disease. And we certainly have prospects for even greater problems with epidemic and pandemic diseases than we have ever faced in our lifetimes.

JR: *Don't all those issues relate to population numbers and densities?*

JK: Well they tend to, but they relate to other things too. The current epidemic or pandemic fear now circulating in the medical community, is the fear of Asian bird flu getting out of hand. And that has as much to do with gross hypertrophic population expansion as it does with the fact that in Asian countries, people tend to live in close proximity with their animals. To put it simply, people in China live with their ducks and chickens and other poultry right around the household and are in contact with them

constantly. The bird flu tends to transmit through a chain of organisms that run from the wild bird populations to the domestic bird populations to the swine populations to the human populations. And the flu is able to mutate as it crosses species in that order, and when you have people living in proximity to domestic poultry and swine as you do in China, you start to get the real possibility for an epidemic.

JR: *How about our border issues?*

JK: Our southern border has become increasingly permeable. Mexico has become kind of an annex to the United States. A lot of those populations are spreading into other parts of the country, into North Carolina, even New England. But for the most part, they are moving into the Southwest. That has actual political implications that go far beyond the mere numbers and even the job issues. It has to do with whether or not Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado become contested territories, as they were 150 years ago. That's going to be a political reality that we have to face.

JR: *What are the prospects for our border with Mexico?*

JK: If we don't have a meaningful border, and if Mexico becomes a more disorderly place than it is now, partly because America is becoming a more disorderly place, and because of their dependence on the help of our economy and our social system to maintain their economic integrity, then I think that you will finally see it translated into some kind of strife and violence. And it may be the *reconquista* scenario, which is more or less taking over chunks of territory by sheer overwhelming ethnicity. Of course, the first thing that people will do is jump on that and say, "Oh, that's a racist statement." But I'm offering it merely as a statement of fact – that human nature is such that people will tend to behave in a certain way. When territories are contested by different ethnic and language groups, it can escalate to violence. I think that is a possibility.

JR: *Are there any physical constraints?*

JK: I would hasten to add that the contested territory, namely the southwestern United States, is territory that we don't have any reason to believe can support large populations of people of any ethnicity. For example, Phoenix. There is a huge population in Phoenix now that is able to be there because of cheap gasoline and cheap air conditioning and cheap electricity, and supplies of water in a place that does not naturally provide a lot of water. And the water is there also because of the cheap energy, and our ability to pump it, and get it, and move it. So not only is it going to be contested territory, but it is going to be contested territory that has even less ability to support large populations than it does now. So the long-term view for places like Arizona, even if there is a violent contest over this territory, is that it won't even support the winners.

JR: *Sounds like you're thinking about the preface to your next book.*

JK: Well, not actually.

JR: *Is it fiction or non-fiction?*

JK: I'm writing a novel at the moment.

JR: *I enjoyed your last novel,* Maggie Darling.

JK: Thanks, few people knew it existed.

JR: *I'm one of the privileged few.*

JK: Well, I guess you are.

JR: *Thanks for your time, Jim.* ■