

# Urban America On the Brink

Book Review by John Attarian

In *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993) and *Home from Nowhere* (1996), James Howard Kunstler established himself as a serious, insightful, and scathing critic of America's devotion to urban renewal, ugly modern architecture, flimsy, fast-buck construction, and sprawling, car-dependent suburbia. Having visited virtually every major city in the lower forty-eight states over the past eight years, he speaks with authority. Here he examines eight American and foreign cities, to evaluate urban living arrangements from different historical periods, to improve such debate as we have on how we live, and "to discern what kinds of choices and predicaments" we face.

While Kunstler's chapters range widely, deep concern for America's future unites them. He maintains that our adoption of the spatially dispersed suburban model of life, a child of cheap oil, has squandered vast quantities of resources, left us dangerously dependent on cars, and created an infrastructure and pattern of daily life which cannot endure.

Perhaps in implicit reproach to the galloping uglification of American cities, Kunstler opens with an account of the renovation of Paris by Georges-Eugène Haussmann, prefect of the Department of the Seine, or chief administrator of Paris, under Emperor Napoleon III. When Haussmann got the job in 1853, the city of Paris was a foul-smelling, medieval hellhole of narrow, dilapidated streets, overcrowded slums, atrocious sanitation, and disease. Haussmann gave Paris modern sewers, aqueducts to furnish clean, safe drinking water, spacious boulevards, and slum clearance. Paris acquired

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worldwide renown for beauty and gracious living. Well over a century later, Haussmann's Paris endures, testimony to what intelligent and tasteful urban planning can do.

In ominous contrast is Atlanta, Georgia: overbuilt and unsustainable, a megalopolis sprawling over ten counties, full of gargantuan malls which can't pay for themselves. A keen observer, Kunstler divines from the debt-consolidation loan and bankruptcy-lawyer commercials he heard in Atlanta that millions of Americans are operating on razor-thin margins, prey to the slightest interruption in cash flow. The environmental damage and oil dependence inflicted by places like Atlanta are shocking. Some 500 acres of raw land get bulldozed each week for new development in the Atlanta area, and from 1988-1998 development devoured some 190,000 acres of tree cover. Over 100 million vehicle miles are driven on Atlanta roads and highways every day, with

an average daily commute of 35 miles. Obviously, such things can't be kept up forever.

The Sunbelt of huge, overbuilt Southern cities was created by air conditioning, cars, and cheap oil. Kunstler's examination of Atlanta prompts him to sound a serious warning about the consequences of our long dependence on cheap oil. Psychologically, cheap oil has been "powerfully narcotic for the American public," which fails to realize how vulnerable the way of life we take for granted is to disruption of oil supplies. The belief in salvation through alternative fuels is a "dangerous delusion." Given the way we have arranged our lives, with our huge dependence on vehicles fueled by gasoline, nothing can really replace gas. Going ever deeper into debt of all kinds is equally ruinous. He makes the sensible point that just because we like our way of life doesn't mean it's sustainable. "Junkies like their heroin, too, but after a while their veins collapse, their immune systems

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the Urban  
Condition**

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switch off, and their organs begin to shut down.” Reality will “compel us to live very differently.” Quite plausibly, Kunstler foresees massive liquidation of unsound debt; instability in oil markets as Alaska and the North Sea pass their peaks of oil extraction, leaving us at the mercy of the Middle Eastern countries; and disruption of transportation and business. The economic implosion will spark rancorous political divisions. As a result, the “only plausible destiny” of big Sunbelt cities such as Atlanta “is to become significantly depopulated.”

Mexico City offers a very different but equally appalling case of an unsustainable, hypertrophic urban area, which Kunstler, visiting in 1998, found “in a state of crisis verging on breakdown.” Pollution is massive and often lethal, traffic and crowding are terribly high, sanitation is atrocious, disease is rampant, and crime and corruption are pandemic. Routinely, wealthy persons are kidnapped and held for ransom, tourists are kidnapped and forced to drain their bank and credit card accounts at ATMs, restaurants are assaulted by gangs who rob all the patrons, and bandits stop buses and rob their passengers. The police, and private security guards, are often in cahoots with the criminals.

Many of the roots of Mexico City’s predicament lie in Mexican history and culture, which Kunstler presents in a concise and fascinating narrative. Aztec culture and society were dominated by the need to appease the sun god Huitzilopotchli with human hearts obtained from sacrificial victims; as a result the Aztec empire was a theocratic despotism, death was an obsession, and life was cruel. When the Spanish conquered the Aztecs in 1521, the Spanish Inquisition was in full swing, Spanish institutions were stagnant and backward, and the Inquisition put a premium on suspicion and treachery. Mexico absorbed these unhealthy influences. A society grounded in such things, Kunstler rightly observes, “is hard put to support a meaningful social contract,” and the social contract in modern Mexico City is “a flimsy and provisional thing. Rule of law is an illusion.”

Perhaps worse still, Mexico City is an ecological disaster waiting to happen. Its location in a high basin traps air pollution above the city. Water is scarce and must be pumped in from surrounding states, which resent Mexico City’s water gluttony. Draining the aquifers beneath the basin lowers Mexico City eleven centimeters a year. As Homero Aridjis, president of the environmentalist organization Grupo de los Cien, told

Kunstler, “There is no official threshold, but we predict at the most it can last ten more years. The issue is too frightening for politicians to think about.”

Reading between the lines, one sees urgent danger signals for America here. Mass immigration of a people with a flimsy social contract and an illusory rule of law will necessarily make America worse off. The rampant crime and corruption Kunstler describes grimly hint at what continued massive Latin immigration will do to us. Indeed, this chapter should be read by every American, especially those living in the Southwest, as a preview of coming attractions if we don’t stop mass immigration. After reading it, I cannot reconcile the *Wall Street Journal’s* enthusiasm for open borders with love of country, reason, or even sanity. Is this what the *Journal’s* editors want for America? What planet do they live on? Furthermore, Mexico City’s environmental problems are a ticking bomb for us. When Mexico City tanks and becomes uninhabitable, Mexican immigration will explode. Some thirty million Mexicans, one-fourth of Mexico’s population, live in Mexico City, most of them in abject poverty. When Mexico City’s water runs out and pollution and disease become murderous, they will seek a better life elsewhere, and where do you suppose they will go? Think immigration is bad now? You ain’t seen nothin’ yet! Though Kunstler does not mention immigration, his Mexico City chapter amounts to a powerful case for closing the border — now.

The reality of limits emerges in Kunstler’s depiction of Las Vegas, which he rightly sees as epitomizing some of the worst aspects of the American character: contempt for nature and a desire to get something for nothing. As gambling became a mainstream activity in the past few decades, Las Vegas’s hotels and casinos grew to monstrous size. These huge complexes, Kunstler maintains, have finally become too huge to sustain. One, the Bellagio, has 3,000 rooms and represents an investment of a billion dollars. Also, being located in the driest part of North America, Las Vegas is terribly vulnerable to disruption of its water supply; but given present growth rates, it is projected to hit an “absolute limit” on its water supply between 2007 and 2013. Nevada, Arizona, California, Colorado and three other states share the Colorado River’s water under a 1922 law, with California granted both the lion’s share of the water and top priority, entitled to receive its allocation before the other states can receive theirs. Las Vegas

must compete for water with growing demands for water in other states, especially California's San Diego area. So far, schemes for dodging the limits on the water supply by, e.g., getting more water from other states, have not panned out. Nevada is making frantic efforts to get residents to conserve water, "but these are mere gestures in the face of that inexorable wall of limits." Given all this, plus the end of the cheap-petroleum era, Kunstler plausibly sees Las Vegas as another unsustainable mess.

Boston is in better shape to weather a more austere future, he argues, because its politicians have made some smart moves to undo some of the worst damage done by urban renewal and highway construction projects. Previous generations of Boston politicians had eagerly embraced projects such as the elevated John F. Fitzgerald Expressway, which destroyed huge swaths of the city. In the late Sixties, however, the tide turned: a moratorium halted highway construction in Boston. Elected governor in 1974, Michael Dukakis greatly rebuilt and extended Boston's transit system, enhancing Boston's attractiveness to wealthy and middle-class people, which revived many ruined neighborhoods. Then came a huge project to bury the now-dilapidated Fitzgerald Expressway underground, allowing reclamation of the land under the expressway.

Besides these chapters, which are of special interest to *The Social Contract* readers, we see Berlin, having been subjected to the ideologically driven architectural projects of Adolph Hitler and the Communists, struggling to attain a merely normal existence. Kunstler persuasively traces the conflict between urban and rural life to the English aristocracy's flight from London during the turbulent mid-1600s to their country homes, where they developed a rich rural culture, resulting in an idealization of the country; to the nature-prizing Romantic movement; and to revulsion at the dreadful squalor of Victorian London, which prompted efforts to "ruralize the city" with parks. Turning to Rome, Kunstler explains how Western classical architecture was developed by the Greeks and Romans as a recognition of an underlying order in existence. Although classical architecture got a bad name for being adopted by the Nazi and Soviet regimes, it has, he rightly argues, the enormous merit of "dignifying the human condition, which is sublime, tragic, and fraught with beauty." Forced by the coming end of cheap oil to live more compactly, we may be forced to

make our buildings durable; and this in turn may prompt a desire to make them beautiful. This could also lead to a revival of classical architecture, which will be seen as our means of "conveying models of excellence" through time, and as enabling us "to live in a confident present suspended between memory and hope."

Throughout, Kunstler handles historical background superbly, using enough to furnish a context for his discussion of the various cities without overwhelming it. Although he does not cite it, he clearly subscribes to the keen insight Winston Churchill voiced in a speech arguing that the bombed-out House of Commons should be rebuilt exactly as it was: "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." Beautiful or ugly, urban landscapes affect our morale for better or worse, respectively. Our ugly urban landscapes of badly built buildings convey an impression that our cities are places "not worth caring about," and thus subtly but powerfully demoralize us, conveying a sense that our way of life is tacky, bleak and pointless. Thus, "a land made up of places not worth caring about will sooner or later become a nation not worth defending (or a way of life not worth carrying on.)"

If there is one fault, it is the lack of illustrations. Photographs of, say, the boulevards of Paris, the monstrous hotel-casino dinosaurs of Las Vegas, the highways and malls of Atlanta, and the teeming slums of Mexico City, would have nicely complemented Kunstler's lucid and energetic prose, and enhanced the power of his argument.

An important moral emerges from these accounts: while neglectful stewardship is a recipe for disaster, intelligent, vigilant stewardship can make an enormous positive difference. Our national leadership's failure to address energy, resources and immigration is analogous to the governments of Paris, Atlanta, Mexico City, Las Vegas and so many other cities letting them run themselves into the ground. But Napoleon III and Haussmann took a stinking pesthole and transformed it into one of the world's loveliest cities, and Boston, too, underwent a turnaround. If we exert resolute control over immigration and resource depletion, we might still avert the doom bearing down on us.

Early on, Kunstler states his conviction that "life is tragic and there are no guaranteed rescues from the great blunders of history." But although this is a somber book, it is ultimately a hopeful one. Quite convincingly,

Kunstler sees us as hitting a civilizational, political, economic and environmental dead end. While this means a more austere existence, it also means we have nowhere to go but up. We will have to rediscover beauty; make cities livable; put economic activity on a human scale; curtail frivolous consumption and conserve resources; and respect and care for land, buildings and places. Put another way, we will be forced to live like sane human beings. We have sinned and face chastisement and purgation, but we will be better, and better off, when it's over.

An eloquent and important meditation on the self-destructive character and unsustainability of our way of life, *The City in Mind* belongs in the hands of every thoughtful American concerned for our country's future.

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*[A collection of Jim Kunstler's articles, as well as his ongoing observations and commentary on our political, economic and cultural predicament, may be found on his web site, [www.kunstler.com](http://www.kunstler.com).]*