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How Should We Be Thinking About Urbanization? A Freakonomics Quorum

By [Stephen J. Dubner](#)

Urbanization has been [climbing steadily of late](#), with more than half of the world's population now living in cities. Given the economic, sociological, political, and environmental ramifications, how should we be thinking about this? We gathered a quorum of smart thinkers on this subject — **James Howard Kunstler**, **Edward Glaeser**, **Robert Bruegmann**, **Dolores Hayden**, and **Alan Berube** — and posed to them the following questions:

This year marked the first time in human history that more people lived in cities than in rural areas. What problems and opportunities does this present? What effects has it had on our local and global culture? Economy? Health?

Thanks to all of them for participating. I found their answers extremely interesting, ranging from the apocalyptic (Kunstler, natch) to the appreciative (Glaeser). It is not fair that Glaeser is so smart and also writes so well. Consider this beautiful kicker to Glaeser's piece: "Humans are a social species, and our greatest achievements are all collaborative. Cities are machines for making collaboration easier. Thus, I am delighted that our planet has become increasingly urban."

I hope you enjoy all of our guests' comments as much as I did.

James Howard Kunstler, author of [The Long Emergency](#) and [The Geography of Nowhere](#):

Most observers tend to extrapolate current trends and assume that what we see now will continue moving in the same direction — ever-larger cities, etc. I don't see it that way. The global energy predicament now gathering around us will synergize with climate change to produce a very different outcome.

I think we'll eventually see a reversal of the 200-year-long cycle of people moving from farms and small towns to big cities. Food production is going to be a big problem when oil-and-gas-based agriculture is no longer possible, and we will have to reestablish a more meaningful relationship between urban places and a more productive agricultural hinterland. (We will have to get much more of our food locally in the decades ahead.)

Our mega-cities will contract substantially. The fortunate ones will densify around their old cores and waterfronts — though sea level rise may affect many harbor cities. This

process of contraction is likely to be problematic and disorderly. In America, there is certainly the potential for ethnic conflict.

Categorically, our colossal metroplexes will not be sustainable in a post-oil future — and despite the wishes and yearnings of many people, the truth is that no combination of alternative fuels will permit us to continue living at this scale. Some of our cities will not make it. Phoenix, Tucson, and other Sunbelt cities will dry up and blow away. In Las Vegas, the excitement will be over. Other mega-cities will have to downscale or face extreme dysfunction.

One thing that almost nobody is paying attention to: the skyscraper will not be a viable building type in our energy-scarce future. Six or seven stories must be the practical limit in a new age when electric supply is not necessarily as reliable as it has been in our time. Cities overburdened with mega-structures will have a severe liability.

The suburbs, for the most part, are toast. They have three possible outcomes in the twenty-first century: as slums, salvage yards, or ruins.

Edward Glaeser, professor of economics at Harvard and director of the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Kennedy School of Government:

A central paradox of the twenty-first century is that declining communication and transportation costs have made cities more vital than ever. In the developing world, cities are the intellectual gateways between the human capital of India and China and the markets of the West. In the developed world, cities have enjoyed a remarkable resurgence over the last 25 years as the density that once made it easier to move hogsheads onto clipper ships now serves to spread knowledge in finance and new technology. Globalization and the death of distance increased the returns for being smart, and you become smart by hanging out with smart people. As such, cities remain important because they create the intellectual connections that forge human capital and spur innovation.

The spread of urbanization is, on net, an enormously beneficial process. People in cities are much more economically productive; urban density has been a wellspring of innovation for many millenia. Cities sometimes have a bad reputation because of their association with problems like poverty, pollution, and disease; but this association does not imply causation.

Cities are full of poor people because cities attract poor people, not because cities make people poor. Millions of the least advantaged come to urban areas not because cities are bad for them, but because cities are good for them. The opportunity to trade and connect offers a brighter future for rural migrants who come to the outskirts of Mumbai. Cities also often have public transit and a social safety net that is not available elsewhere.

There is no doubt that the general process of industrialization and growth adversely impacts the environment, at least initially, but cities shouldn't be blamed for every

smokestack. Cities are not factories. They are the concentration of people at high densities, and that concentration is pretty green. After all, we use a lot less energy when we cluster together in cities than when we spread throughout the country and drive hundreds of miles each day in commuting.

Humans are a social species, and our greatest achievements are all collaborative. Cities are machines for making collaboration easier. Thus, I am delighted that our planet has become increasingly urban.

Robert Bruegmann, professor of art history, architecture, and urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago:

The headlines tell us that the world is now more urban than rural. Surely this fact ought to have profound consequences that call for new attitudes and public policies. However, as is often the case with profound change, what actually is happening — and how we should view these changes — is extremely murky.

From one point of view, the vast migration of people from the countryside to the city is simply the latest chapter in a story that has played out worldwide over the last several centuries. First in the most affluent nations of the West, and now in the developing world, as more efficient agriculture has reduced the number of people needed in the fields, the rise of new urban economies has drawn them to cities. Every time this push-pull phenomenon has shifted into high gear, whether in London in the Nineteenth century or in Mumbai today, there have been wrenching dislocations followed by attempts on the part of public authorities to stop or slow the process. These efforts have rarely been effective in the long run, and have often backfired because they have tried to control behavior rather than plan for it.

In the long run, however, the policies were probably less important than the eventual result — an equally massive move from the cities back into the countryside. In virtually every affluent nation on earth, the old Nineteenth-century industrial cities have exploded outward, allowing densities to plummet at the core as residents move further and further out into low-density suburbia and a very low-density exurban penumbra around that. The city of Paris today has a third fewer residents than it did a century ago, and the suburban and exurban territory around it leapfrogs more or less from the English Channel to Burgundy. In this process, the very distinction between urban and rural has all but disappeared as citizens in almost every part of affluent societies are able to participate in what is essentially an urban culture.

Of course, this huge outward migration of people has caused problems, just as the migration to the cities did. And public authorities have once again tried to slow or halt the process, now pejoratively called “sprawl,” often with the explicit aim of preserving the distinction between the urban and the rural. This effort is likely to be just as futile as the effort to stop people from moving into the cities, and just as likely to be counterproductive. No one knows what the next chapter of urban history will bring, but if there is any lesson to draw from what has happened to date, it is that abstract ideas about

the proper form of settlement, whether urban or rural or hybrids we can't yet imagine, tend to lag far behind the reality on the ground.

Dolores Hayden, professor of architecture, urbanism, and American studies at Yale and author of [*Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*](#):

I'll address these questions in terms of our own culture, and leave the global analysis to others. Old divisions between "city" and "countryside" have become misleading in urbanized nations like the U.S. "City" in the U.S. today really means "metropolitan region," because we are a predominantly suburban nation. After almost two centuries of peripheral urban growth, American suburbs have overwhelmed the centers of cities, creating urban regions largely formed of suburban parts. By 2000, more Americans lived in suburbs than in central cities and rural areas combined.

Metropolitan areas, including suburbs, are much more ethnically diverse than they used to be. One person living alone (single, widowed, or divorced) represents the predominant household type in suburban areas today. The suburban male breadwinner family with a stay-at-home mom and two children living in a peaceful three-bedroom colonial with a leafy yard predominates only in reruns of old sitcoms.

For years, when urban historians wrote about the "city," they meant the center, the skyline, downtown. Suburbs were left out of traditional "city biographies" emphasizing economic development, population growth, and the achievements of business leaders. Everyone knew that large suburbs existed and had something to do with the process of urbanization. But most historians thought they were less significant than the city center: spatially, because they were less dense than centers; culturally, because more of their attractions involved nature than architecture; and socially, because their daytime activities involved women and children more than men.

Because of prejudices about density, high culture, and gender, suburbia resisted scrutiny for decades. It evaded both art historical analysis (based on the aesthetic assessment of outstanding buildings), and urban analysis (based on demographic and economic statistics). As a result, many urban historians were surprised that the consistent spatial push for residential development at the very edge of the city finally brought about the dominance of a suburban pattern in the metropolitan landscape as a whole. They were intellectually unprepared for the shift.

In the 1970s and 1980s, architects and urban theorists also largely ignored suburbs, or lambasted them as banal and unlivable areas of tract houses. Artists and writers tended to agree, perhaps because television, films, and advertising often represented American family life in comfortable suburban houses as a mindless consumer world. Synonyms for suburb in those years included "land of mediocrity," "middle America," and "silent majority," as well as terms like outskirts, outposts, borderlands, and periphery.

Today, Americans need to come to terms with the urbanized landscapes we have created. As **Harlan Douglas**, a perceptive sociologist, defined the urban region composed of

suburbs in the 1920s, “It is the city trying to escape the consequences of being a city while still remaining a city. It is urban society trying to eat its cake and keep it, too.”

Since the mid-1930s, the federal government has encouraged green field development on raw land outside of urban centers, usually through tax subsidies rather than direct spending. These incentives account for extended metropolitan expansion promoted by “growth machines” — alliances of bankers, developers, and business leaders profiting from hidden federal subsidies for suburban development. Excessive green field growth lies behind the national energy shortage and the mortgage crisis. Using federal incentives to constantly expand urban peripheries with commercial and residential development has had serious consequences. Reliance on imported oil, pursuit of war in the Middle East, and the credit crunch shaking Wall Street suggest that wise patterns of urban land use are more important to economic well-being than many Americans recognize.

Alan Berube, research director of the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program:

I’m inclined to look at this question from a purely domestic perspective. And from that vantage point, most Americans would probably be stunned to learn that, by the [U.N.’s definition](#) (the basis for the more-city-than-rural-dwellers statistic), 81 percent of the U.S. population lives in “cities.” How can that be true in the world’s preeminent suburban nation, where many people still hold a [Jeffersonian view](#) of cities (“pestilential to the morals, the health, and the liberties of man”)?

The way the U.N. — and most economists — look at it, a city encompasses not just the political geography that lies at the heart of an urban region, but the entire surrounding metropolitan area that functions as an economic whole. So New York isn’t just the five boroughs (population 8.2 million), but the [enormous labor market](#) that extends from Rockland County upstate, west to the Poconos, east to Suffolk County, and south to the Jersey Shore (population 18.8 million). What separates us from the world’s developing nations (and many developed ones, too) is that most Americans who live in these “cities” or “urban agglomerations” would describe themselves as living in the suburbs.

But if you live in Westchester County, N.Y.; Cobb County, Ga.; Lake County, Ill.; or Collin County, Tex., would you really have a reason to be there if it weren’t for New York City, Atlanta, Chicago, or Dallas? Even if you don’t work downtown — true of only about one-fifth of Americans today — you might work at a firm that provides goods and services for central-city firms or consumers (think back-office banking operations); use specialized services that concentrate in the city (legal, finance, consulting, temp employment, or retail); or rely on media (say, the *New York Times*), cultural offerings, and sports teams that remain rooted in the city (with a few glaring exceptions: see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Regardless, the same economic forces that are attracting people to large urban regions in the developing world apply here in the U.S. (and really [always have](#)). Firms and workers derive benefits from co-locating in large metro areas, in that they can each find a better “match” with one another given a greater variety of options. Big urban areas can cost-

effectively support critical infrastructure like international airports, passenger and freight rail, and wireless networks. And urban proximity generates spillovers across workers, firms, and universities, embodied in the “network innovation” that powers areas like Silicon Valley (and in the [venture capital](#) that is its lifeblood). The result: big places are getting bigger. While the nation’s 100 largest metro areas (containing at least half a million people) contain 65 percent of U.S. population, they have captured 76 percent of its recent population growth. No wonder; as Ed Glaeser has argued, urbanization makes us more [productive](#) and, in the end, wealthier.

The jury is out on whether America can openly accept its urban condition (starting the presidential race in Iowa and New Hampshire, two of our least urban states, doesn’t help). But we’re not headed back to the future; despite [some predictions](#), technology has yet to turn us into a nation of mountaintop telecommuters. My colleagues at Brookings and I have argued that in light of this reality, we ought to begin to tackle critical national challenges — on economic growth, education and skills, infrastructure, and the environment — with a keener eye toward the big, complex, messy, [metropolitan way](#) in which the majority of Americans (and now, our global counterparts) live their lives.

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