

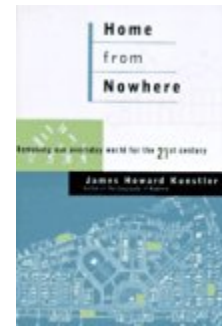
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James Howard Kunstler. *Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. 318 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-81196-3.

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## Home from Nowhere

Kunstler begins with the Stroke and Stupor Theories advanced by Peter Calthrope. The occasion was an annual affair, the Seaside Prize, sponsored by Robert Davis and his Seaside Institute held at Seaside, Florida. Robert Davis is the developer of the much acclaimed iconic artifact of New Urbanism. These theories, at least in part flow epistemologically from the American experience following World War Two. Kunstler connects them to "...the phenomenon known among historians as The Victory Disease, the condition in which a nation's military triumph carries within it the demoralizing seeds of its own later destruction" (p 17).

With "shapeliness of (his) prose" (p 300), Kunstler in a fashion reminiscent of Philip Wyley in *The Generation of Vipers* (Reprint 1996), Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) and William H. Whyte in his *Project for Public Spaces* in New York City during the mid seventies takes to task the American anti-urban post World War Two phenomenon. In the fashion of a journalist, he describes the incessant, almost fanatical march of Americans away from the city to the sprawling, monotonous suburbs and edge cities. Kunstler's theme is that this pseudo culture created away from traditional and historic urban places has demoralized, dehumanized and desocialized the American landscape and created endless non-places. These non-places surrounding, or exuding, from dying urban centers and sprawling across the landscape with mega-malls, franchise rows along major automobile raceways, and ticky tacky boxes with stuck on bits and pieces of architectural

artifact somehow have become the norm in urban development. Kunstler examines the reasons for this including the anachronistic zoning laws of most of our cities and urban counties, the loan philosophy of banking interest, Federal and local taxing policies, and the plans and policies of governmental planning agencies that condone and perpetrate the demise of American cities.

Standards of urban living have been lowered to a point that "Fewer and fewer Americans have any experience living in good (cities), of any city at all-good, bad or mediocre" (p 18). This book seeks to identify the failures of post World War Two urban development with ridicule and sensitive argument and point to a much loftier view of our urban culture, the built environment and the beauty of historic places and the humanity of beauty in everyday life. We have destroyed much of the traditional urban artifact and replaced it with parking lots and displaced populations to suburban sprawl, or decaying urban cores; all lacking beauty and humanity.

"When intellectuals take the position that beauty is a subject beneath discussion ..." (p 18,19) Kunstler tells us that the American culture is in real trouble. The primary argument in this book is for raising standards of urban design and urban life and advancing some explicit technical suggestions rooted in the planning and architectural reform movement called New Urbanism. Its principle addresses the importance of the physical form of the city. The New Urbanists vision "... is at once deeply familiar and revolutionary: the mixed-use neighborhood in

increments of villages, towns, and cities” (p. 19). The familiarity of the movement is simply based in the way America built itself throughout its city history and until World War Two. It, New Urbanism, reflects the city of the past and attempts to restore that vision of the future. It is revolutionary because it stands in stark contrast to the urban sprawl driven by various public and private policies of land use, zoning, road building, banking—all facilitated by the American love affair with automobiles. The chapters, “Who We Are,” “The Public Realm,” “The Common Good,” “Car Crazy” and “Charm” offer an intellectual framework for Kunstler’s apology in support of New Urbanism.

If there is a theme to “Who We Are,” it is expressed with the unhappiness that, “What we have done to the physical fabric of our country is not an illusion at all but a genuine tragedy.” (p. 24). We have too often turned our urban backs on the rivers and bays of our cities and built freeways. There are notable exceptions; e.g., the public outcry which stopped the building of San Francisco’s Embarcadero Freeway. We have literally thrown away and scattered our towns and cities by “a centrifugal flinging outward away from the center” (p. 28) which has gobbled up productive farm lands and devastated the urban core. In an insidious way, this flinging out has permitted the urban planners and developers to privatize our communities and it has fostered “an extraordinary view of democracy” that is “essentially absurd and cannot sustain communities” (p. 29). In summary, I turn to Kunstler, “I don’t believe we can afford to keep pretending that life is a never ending episode of Little House on the Prairie” (p. 33).

The public realm is defined as “the connective tissue of our everyday world” (p. 36). It is parks, streets, squares, sidewalks, gardens peeking over walls, vistas and views and defined open space and seascapes, rural working landscapes and wilderness and porticos and entrances to the more often private spaces of buildings. I can add the passage of time, the smells, and all of the interesting little events along the way. In Florida, for instance, few cities have sidewalks and we wonder why public transit doesn’t work. How on earth do you walk to a bus stop? The lack of a place to walk is too common. The common good has been eclipsed by the “... political attitude among the suburban well-off ...that they have been willing to try almost any expensive social experiment except returning to live in towns and cities” (p. 52). It is tragic that American cities “have become unworthy of the American republic” (p. 57). This view is supported by a parade of evidence drawn from Kunstler’s

many miles and years of travel in America and conversations with many thoughtful people as he went about doing the research for this book. The book reflects the keen, sometimes acerbic and iconoclastic, but always careful observations of a polished commentator.

Kunstler predicts that the next twenty five years will bring to an end the phase of American life when the automobile will “drive” urban life. He is convinced that we, Americans, have confused “geographic mobility and social mobility” (p. 59). The automobile culture fueled by cheap gasoline has tended to devalue and confuse the ideas of democracy and freedom. He suggests that this pervasive influence holds that all “opinions, like votes have equal value, that all values are relative ...” (p. 60). This is a heavy burden to place at the altar of the American automobile, but the notion that we enjoy so much mobility that we can isolate ourselves from involvement from the processes of civilization has considerable merit. The automobile has by its ubiquitous, isolating, and shielding characteristics created a mobile cocoon protecting the occupant from the environment, urban venues and participation in social interchange so necessary to urban life. It “...allows Americans to persist in the delusion that civic life is unnecessary” (p. 65). Congestion portends the downfall of car transport. Congestion has precluded speed in any American conurbation as an option. Private and public costs are exorbitant. Kunstler calculates that an average consumer will spend \$440,000 on his or her car transport over a thirty year period with no equity at the end of the day. This is considerably less than that average consumer will spend on housing and still have equity at the end of thirty years.

In Chapter Four, “Charm,” Kunstler introduces Christopher Alexander’s language of urban patterns (*A Pattern Language*, 1977). In a later study with others, Christopher Alexander completed a campus plan for the University of Oregon. The group documented the plan in *The Oregon Experiment* (1975). In *The Oregon Experiment*, the six basic principles for planning and plan making were offered. The principles of organic order, participation, piecemeal growth, patterns, diagnosis and coordination are fundamental to creating community. It is these and other sources used in this chapter that make it one of the most interesting and useful passages for the practitioner and loving observer of urban places. The classic Golden Mean is invoked to provide a discussion of proportions in architecture and city spaces. Very excellent descriptions of places such as the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs and its demise and replacement by a too typical strip mall are visited by Kunstler. The

mall at the time of this book's writing was "worn out" and much local debate ensued regarding the future of the site in the context of Saratoga's Broadway. Beauty, ugliness and connectivity in time and space must again become central to the urban debate. "It will no longer do to say that virtue is too complex to be understood—and that, therefore, we prefer no definition of virtue to a possibly imperfect one" (p. 108).

"It is literally against the law almost everywhere in the United States to build the kind of places that Americans themselves consider authentic and traditional" (p. 109). In beginning of "Creating Someplace" (Chapter Five), Kunstler establishes the need for what he describes as a short course in the general principles of civic art (p. 115) The pattern of civic art he discusses includes neo-traditional planning, traditional neighborhood development (TND) low density urbanism, Transit Oriented Development (TOD) and/or the concept of New Urbanism. Such planning principles are hopefully designed to produce urban settings resembling the American town prior to World War Two. The basic unit of planning is the neighborhood. The neighborhood is limited in size to a five minute walk, or about a quarter of a mile. Secondary units of assembly are corridors and districts which both connect neighborhoods and define them. The concept of New Urbanism embodies among other paradigms, a mix of housing, value, and size; types and mix of uses must include commerce and housing; and all of these functions are to be brought together with order, harmony and diversity designed for pedestrian scale and access and architectural quality. The community charrette is a method used to promote public participation, choice and design. Buildings are "... disciplined on their lots in order to successfully define public space" (p. 117). Public space and architectural harmony are a part of an architectural code. Street patterns are conceived as a grided network in order to maximize what some traffic engineers call the "Manhattan Metric". Traffic calming is the mode here. Civic buildings are placed on preferential sites such as frontage of squares, neighborhood centers, and where a street vista might terminate.

Kunstler continues his apology with a thorough discussion of details and arguments for each principle. Again, a very worthwhile chapter for the citizen planner, the student of urban affairs and planning and the practicing architect, planner and landscape architect. There are, of course, several publications available including New Urbanism planning and architectural design standards and guidelines.

It is almost dogma that small towns, and older city cores of medium size have density deficits. "There are not enough people living, or business activities, at the core to maintain the synergies necessary for civic life" (p. 133). William Whyte has suggested that a minimum number of pedestrians must pass a point in a town center on Friday between 12:00 and 1:00 PM. In Whyte's view, any count below is a certain indicator that commerce and social interaction are not likely to be sustained. The number will vary, depending upon the population of the neighborhood, the variety of attractions, ease of access and density. Simply said, the new urbanist hold that civic life can only occur when and where people come regularly together for a great variety of reasons.

Too often, public policies are chosen based on the "comfortable" position and the will is lacking to make a difference. Kunstler concludes this discussion, "Creating Someplace," by saying, "Human settlements are like living organisms. They must grow and they will change. But we can decide on the nature of that growth ..." (p. 149).

Chapters Six and Seven provide a group of case studies wherein principles of New Urbanism have been employed in planning, or in some cases where the principles have been employed by imaginative and creative local developers. The question addressed is, "But do we have the will to reimagine city and town life as a general proposition?" (p. 155) The case studies are wide ranging. Some appear to show considerable success, while others are in trouble financially; in trouble with locally ossified land development regulations and building codes; or, caught up in the NIMBYism of the day. It is beyond the scope of this review to cite each case study, but the reader is certainly aimed at the story of Memphis developer, Henry Turley. Kunstler's report here is wonderful as developer Turley describes planning and developing Harbortown on Mud Island in the Mississippi River. The island, an old spoil, is connected by bridge to downtown Memphis. Turley came to his realization of his development philosophy, a philosophy very closely akin to New Urbanism by his keen observation of what was happening to his native Memphis. He is quoted by Kunstler. "I see a phenomenon that's unique to Memphis, the abandonment of the historic city. I see a re-segregation of people. It's immediate and palpable and visceral. I see decisions being made out of fear and negativity. It's not pleasing. I was compelled to do good work because I was endeavorin' to overcome the prejudices of my time" (p. 170). In many ways, this may be the most important contribution Kunstler has made as we look to a future for urban America. It

is not with business as usual that we will survive the cultural degradation of the latter years of the twentieth century. We cannot continue to abandon the urban artifact and expect to sustain American civilization. We cannot continue to wall ourselves in suburbia to keep “them” out (Fortress America, Blakely and Snyder, 1997). We must not continue to build the “anti-place” (p. 93).

Woven in among the case studies Kunstler discusses the sometimes strange bedfellows that appear to destroy good development proposals. One such was his recounting of “A Debacle in Brooklyn” (p. 171) wherein an environmental group and local NIMBY group essentially derailed the project in an area of New York City where the proposed new development would have provided jobs and improved city living. I suppose such affiliations are not so strange.

In Chapter Eight Kunstler offers a “brief” discussion of Henry George’s land tax theory. It is offered to suggest that if ad valorem taxes were imposed on land only, redevelopment would be encouraged. The argument is incomplete. He cites the open spaces in many urban areas used for parking lots; thus a kind of long term private land banking counter acts against the possibility of “socially created value” (p. 197) that could be an outcome of redevelopment.

The final chapters offer case studies of planning and zoning battles in Saratoga Springs, Kunstler’s home. He

visits with a friend who is an organic farmer in the Hudson River Valley exploring the nature and techniques of sustainable agriculture. In a passage of reverie, Kunstler thoroughly enjoys visiting his hometown, New York City. The final chapter brings us his coda. It is a very honest, thoughtful and useful piece of fine writing.

I set out in this review with prejudices regarding the concept of New Urbanism. My prejudice is rooted in growing up in a small Florida town, Winter Haven, (It is no longer a small town and suffers from all the indicators Kunstler discusses.) during the thirties and enjoying the front porches, walking to everywhere, knowing all of the kids in school, and having plenty of adults watching over us in the village. As a planner and architect practicing and teaching through the years, I have tried to recognize the vitality of pedestrian scale and the essence of civic life, both professionally and by means of public service. My attitude toward New Urbanism was “so what else is new?” Kunstler has focused in this book the vital and urgent need to search out our urban ethos and urban settings and demand new directions which will restore civic and civil life to America. If we do not search, explore, and find the political will, we will surely fail in rebuilding urban America.

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