

A CRITIC AT LARGE

# GET OUT OF TOWN

*Has the celebration of cities gone too far?*

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN

Cities, like children, bear such a heavy load of projection that their real character can be hard to see. Depending on the tenor of the moment, they can appear bleak, filthy, dangerous, and inhumane, or gloriously sophisticated, varied, and exciting. These days, cities so dominate the world that you can use them to demonstrate any truth you choose. What people think about them is usually an expression of what they think about class, work, the way society is organized, money and who gets it, and what's really valuable.

Still, at every moment there is a prevailing consensus. In the United States right now, after a long run of "urban crisis" (punctuated by periodic hopeful reports of revitalization), cities are viewed positively again. The dramatic reduction in violent crime in many big cities has brightened the picture; less obvious, but probably more important, is a change in the way we think about the suburbs, which still lurk in the background of everything said about urban life in America. Cities and suburbs have started to seem less like fundamental opposites, and more like points on a continuum.

It will help to define terms. A metropolitan area is a zone of contiguous settlement—the expanse from the heart of downtown to where open land begins. In the 2000 census, eighty per cent of Americans lived in metropolitan areas with populations of more than a hundred thousand, which explains why so much of the country is so lightly populated. (A graphic designer named Shane Keaney recently calculated that if the entire American population was as densely settled as that of Brooklyn it could fit into the state of New Hampshire, leaving the forty-nine other states as open land.) A suburb is the portion of a metropolitan area that lies outside the formal city limits. During the first half of the twentieth century, vast numbers of Americans moved to the cities; during the second half, vast numbers moved to the suburbs. By 2000, the United States

had become a majority-suburban nation.

Twenty-five years ago, I moved from Austin, Texas, to New York. Austin hadn't yet achieved its current empyrean, SXSW-hosting status. But it was clearly a city, not a town, even though almost nobody there lived in high-rise apartment buildings and almost everybody drove to work. The city limits stretched outward for miles in every direction, so that even many brand-new subdivisions were, legally, in Austin. The people I knew who had consciously rejected city life lived not in suburbs but at the end of rural dirt roads, and even they were often still legally residents of Austin.

New York, on the other hand, was a Manichaean world in which the choice between suburbs and city was seen as life-determining. Demographically, New York as a metropolitan area became majority-suburban long before the country did. But in 1986 the prevailing idea was that the suburbs were for the privileged few and the cities for the poor, the bohemian, and the principled. A few years earlier, the *Post* discovered that Michael Harrington, the author of "The Other America," had moved to Westchester County, and ran a screaming headline about it: "SOCIALIST LEADER FLEES TO LARCHMONT."

Besides being thought of as rich, the suburbs were seen through resonant mid-century depictions offered by writers of fiction like John Cheever and Richard Yates and by writers of nonfiction like William H. Whyte ("The Organization Man") and David Riesman ("The Lonely Crowd"). They were conformist, anti-intellectual, homogeneous, antifeminist, alcoholic, and shot through with anomie. Almost all my friends who had grown up in New York's suburbs had, sometime during adolescence, taken a solemn vow to leave as soon as they had the opportunity and never return.

This vision has been worn down over time by a number of factors. Most resi-

dents of American cities—including economic and cultural centers such as Austin and Seattle and Minneapolis and Los Angeles—live in a manner that reads to New Yorkers as suburban: single-family detached house with a yard and a garage. So the city-suburb distinction has begun to seem a little artificial. After all, cities in the Northeast and the Midwest have more suburbs than cities in the South and the West because of where jurisdictional lines happen to be drawn. Also, American cities generally, and New York in particular, have more obviously taken on the economic form of European cities like Paris and London: the city is for the rich (and the poor), and the outer boroughs and many of the suburbs are for the ethnic working and middle classes. That complicates the old picture of men in suits and fedoras rushing to make the five-forty express to Scarsdale while the artists and intellectuals stayed behind in Manhattan. Culturally, New York increasingly operates on the farmers'-market model: artists, writers, musicians, and actors can't afford to live in the city center, so they come in only for encounters with the commercial supporters of their work.

Once you start to move beyond the city-suburb culture wars, there's room for other topics, and these days the main one is globalization. "Global city" theorists don't think of American cities in contrast with their agricultural hinterlands (as in "Sister Carrie" or "Native Son") or with their suburbs ("Revolutionary Road"); they think of them in relation to cities in other countries. People, money, and goods glide frictionlessly around the world, and cities expand or contract based on their marginal attractiveness. Cities are assumed to be places to flee to, not flee from. But with work, community, friendship, and money so unmoored and virtualized today, you might wonder why cities exist at all. Instead of gathering, why don't we scatter to the four winds? What benefit are we meant to harvest by living so close to so many other people?

A striking feature of cities is their theatrical aspect. We all inhabit private realms made up of people of our own ethnicity, class, and belief system, but in cities there are public spaces where a broad range of people can congregate. Sometimes they interact, sometimes they just gawk, but the rules of human display and behavior are

different. The veteran sociologist Elijah Anderson's latest book, "The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life" (Norton; \$25.95), posits that there are certain venues in cities (Philadelphia is his example), such as public markets, where the races can come together temporarily without conflict. But he cautions against taking too much from this. He offers detailed, occasionally first-person descriptions of how racially charged life can be for an upper-middle-class black man when he ventures outside the cosmopolitan canopy—even if he's a tenured professor at an Ivy League university like Anderson, in a sophisticated city like Philadelphia. A relentless and depressing procession of examples document the "nigger moments" that punctuate the lives of black professionals in restaurants, building lobbies, taxis, and stores. (It's impossible to read "The Cosmopolitan Canopy" without reflecting on how much effort must go into the Obamas' casually post-racial self-presentation.) If the level of public tolerance in cities isn't really so high, though, you might wonder whether the cosmopolitan canopy is an exclusively urban phenomenon. Couldn't it extend to suburban shopping malls? Are cities so different from suburbs as social environments?

Maybe the real benefits are economic. Certainly, a lot of writing about globalization takes economic development to be the ultimate good. Traditional structures and interests in society are regarded as mere impediments, with no useful function. Human activities are to be organized around the goal of "innovation." Good things happen for simple, clear, catchy reasons. There are rules that explain why life proceeds on the course it does. In this kind of writing, which often emanates from business schools and economics departments and is aimed at an audience of people who are on business trips, one often finds easily digestible, anecdotalized theoretical and historical sweep and the exemplary stories of successful entrepreneurs blended with anecdotes about the author's own life.

One person who helped usher in the new era of urban cheer is Richard Florida, who burst out of monographic obscurity in 2002 with a big, ambitious book called "The Rise of the Creative Class." Florida, who, like many of the leading writers about cities these days, operates a consulting and lecturing business, has published



*The old culture war between suburbs and cities has given way to topics like globalization.*

three books since then; the latest, "The Great Reset" (Harper; \$26.99), came out last year. He now directs the Martin Prosperity Institute, at the University of Toronto's business school.

Florida argues that there is an identifiable cluster of occupations (scientist, architect, academic, artist) that, taken together, constitute something called the Super-Creative Core. Adjacent to the Super-Creative Core sits the lesser, but larger part of the Creative Class, made up of managers, lawyers, accountants, and so on. The two groups combined are the Creative Class: thirty-eight million people, making up thirty per cent of the labor force. The key factor in determining whether a city is successful is how significant a cohort of the Creative Class it attracts.

One might argue that Florida's Creative Class isn't all that different from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' less exciting professional, managerial, and technical occupational categories, and that he's really saying that the urban economy is now white-collar rather than industrial. But that would ruin the fun. There is something delightfully counterintuitive about Florida's theory as he chooses to state it: you would have thought it was dull Babbits who made a city commercially successful, but no—it's kids with scruffy beards and tattoos who have alt-rock bands, script iPhone apps, and wait tables in vegan restaurants.

What's the connection between them and prosperity? (Their parents are probably asking the same question.) They

generate an atmosphere of cultural richness and innovation that attracts more obviously productive types, who have lots of choices about where to live and will pick places they find exciting and attractive. (Florida's best-known obiter dictum is that the more gay-friendly a city is the better it will do economically.) So: "Seattle was the home of Jimi Hendrix and later Nirvana and Pearl Jam as well as Microsoft and Amazon. Austin was home to Willie Nelson and its fabulous Sixth Street music scene before Michael Dell ever stepped into his now famous University of Texas fraternity house. New York had Christopher Street and SoHo long before Silicon Alley erupted. All of these places were open, diverse and culturally creative first. *Then* they became technologically creative and subsequently gave rise to new high-tech firms and industries."

Florida's breezy pronouncements are what got him the world's attention, but they have also created the impression that making them is all he does. Especially in "The Rise of the Creative Class," which is by far the best of his books, he shows himself to be an amiable, unpretentious thinker—not somebody with an arrestingly original mind but a dogged, careful compiler of data and assimilator of material drawn from across a wide range. In the line of descent from Jane Jacobs, he sees cities as the sites of small-scale, unplanned human interactions that, in the aggregate, yield big civilizational rewards.

Florida's theory represents the perspective of someone who (like President Obama) has chosen to live his adult life in

urban neighborhoods near universities. He dreams of a world that respects cultural and intellectual life, and the down-market, ethnically diverse older neighborhoods where it often takes place. It's a sign of the times that the most effective way to promulgate such values is to present them as preconditions of economic development. And people take his argument on its own terms: in Michigan, Governor Jennifer Granholm recently tried to reposition depressed factory towns like Flint and Lansing as "Cool Cities," and in New Mexico the developer Albert Ratner is building a huge suburb in the desert outside Albuquerque called Mesa del Sol, which he says is designed to attract the Creative Class.

"It would be a mistake for cities to think they can survive solely as magnets for the young and hip," the Harvard economist Edward Glaeser writes in his new book, "Triumph of the City" (Penguin Press; \$29.95), by way of dismissing Richard Florida. Glaeser is a sterner character than Florida: the genial Florida repeatedly praises Glaeser in his work, but Glaeser doesn't return the favor, and, although he's pro-city, he does think some changes must be made before cities can reach their full soaring potential.

For Glaeser, the key factor that makes cities successful is not the presence of the Creative Class but "proximity," the way they bring people into contact, enabling them to interact in rich, unexpected, productive ways. "In a big city, people can choose peers who share their interests," he writes, "just as Monet and Cézanne found

each other in nineteenth-century Paris, or Belushi and Aykroyd found each other in twentieth-century Chicago." Accordingly, Glaeser is an enthusiast for high-rise apartment houses and office skyscrapers, and he wants public policy to favor this kind of development and density. He thinks architectural preservationism is out of hand, likes political autocrats who can get things done (such as Chicago's Richard M. Daley and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew), and wants us to stop subsidizing the suburbs via tax credits and highway construction.

Although Glaeser confesses that he has recently moved to the suburbs with his wife and young children, he blames this on "the anti-urban public policy tri-fecta of the Massachusetts Turnpike, the home mortgage interest deduction, and the problems of urban schools." He hopes that "the twentieth-century fling with suburban living will look, just like the brief age of the industrial city, more like an aberration than a trend." He points out that, thanks to the public-health miracles of the past century, cities in the developed world have gone from being pestilential to unusually healthy, and that dense cities like New York have low carbon footprints. If the latter-day admirers of Jane Jacobs—Glaeser isn't one; he thinks Jacobs didn't understand the law of supply and demand—would give up their attachment to small-scale urban neighborhoods and allow more high-rise construction, cities might become affordable again and sprawl might end.

Though Edward Glaeser considers Richard Florida's celebration of cities sentimental and unrigorous compared with his own celebration of cities, the same trump card of hard-hearted rigor could be played against Glaeser. What makes him so sure that sprawl is not a naturally popular and efficient economic form? There are, in fact, theorists who argue that, if you really love the twenty-first-century city, you have to embrace sprawl as an inextricable part of it. Back in 1991, Joel Garreau, then a reporter for the Washington Post (and now the head of the Garreau Group, a consulting company), laid out this position in "Edge City," a perverse celebration of those brand-new, characterless, mega-malled, pedestrian-unfriendly places which have sprung up all over the country, beyond the traditional suburban zone. Edge Cities—Garreau's prime example was Tysons Corner, Virginia, out-



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side Washington, D.C.—violate the ideas that all right-thinking people hold about how metropolitan life should be organized. They house offices as well as residences, so they complicate our conception of commuting without the collateral benefit of reducing traffic and pollution. Recently, they have served as incubators of the world financial crisis, since Edge Cities in the Sun Belt tended to have the highest rates of defaulted mortgages. But, as a matter of what economists call revealed preference, they're a big hit.

An odd, fascinating new book called "Aerotropolis" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$30) takes Garreau's idea and brings it to an even stranger place, predicting that, in the future, cities will reorient themselves around enormous airports. The book's strangeness begins with its authorship: it was written by an entity called "John D. Kasarda/Greg Lindsay"—just the names, no "by." Kasarda is a sociologist who teaches at the business school of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and has become a globe-trotting economic-development guru. Lindsay is a business journalist. The two seem to have struck a deal in which Kasarda would get primary author's credit even though he is really the subject and Lindsay did all the writing. Lindsay is no ghostwriter or collaborator working from a series of long living-room interviews with his partner. He did extensive, lively reporting all over the world, the book is in his voice, and for long stretches Kasarda disappears entirely. Their arrangement certainly demonstrates that Kasarda is a skilled negotiator.

In keeping with its peculiar mode of authorship, "Aerotropolis" often feels like two books trapped inside the same cover. The first lays out Kasarda's theory, mainly through examples drawn from his consulting gigs. Urban strategists have a penchant for magically simple explanations, but Kasarda takes it to an extreme: for him, air freight is the core element of human civilization, and so if a city wants to do well it must build a mega-airport.

Kasarda is right to remind us that the Internet hasn't taken the place of physical goods, and that much information technology is merely an enabling device for shipping. Globalization makes airports all the more important, then, because factories are frequently halfway around the world from their customers, who expect nearly instant delivery. In the past, cities

always grew up around transportation hubs, so why not now? Kasarda's theory, at least as presented by Lindsay, is all-powerful and impervious to evidence. Washington, Los Angeles, and Chicago are doomed because they don't have enough runways. (If an aerotropolis fails, like Suvarnabhumi, in Thailand, a Kasarda client, it's only because of poor execution.) The American future belongs to places with big airports, such as Memphis (of FedEx), Louisville (of U.P.S.), and Denver, and maybe in a few years even Detroit, if it proceeds with a long-shot plan to create an aerotropolis between Detroit's airport and a small regional airport west of the city. Abroad, Kasarda's models include Dubai; New Songdo, an aerotropolis being built on a man-made island off the coast of South Korea; and the forthcoming Beijing Airport City. He predicts that people will increasingly want to live in subdivisions near giant airports.

The only obstacle to this alluring future is the way governments are hamstrung by the Lilliputian political interests that often halt progress in older cities. Kasarda is inspired, accordingly, by the fact that Beijing could build a new airport from scratch without debate, and by its plans to build yet another one. Its location is a "state secret," but it "almost doesn't matter, because the government will simply do what it did at the site of the current one, which was to flatten fifteen villages and resettle ten thousand residents without compensation. Kasarda was awed by the ministry's rationale: 'Democracy sacrifices efficiency.'

The second book contained within the covers of "Aerotropolis" is Lindsay's, and it is an enthralling and only intermittently dogmatic tour of some of the gigantic, no-context sites that globalization has created, such as the all-night flower auction in Amsterdam that gets roses from Kenya to Chicago before they've wilted, the Fox-Conn factory in China where iPods and iPhones are made, and the mega-hospital Bumrungrad, in Bangkok, which performs cut-rate major surgery on the uninsured from all over the world. You can get some feeling for the bizarreness of this new world from Lindsay's description of New Songdo: "an English-speaking island stocked with prep schools from Boston,

malls from Beverly Hills, and a golf course designed by Jack Nicklaus. . . . New Songdo cherry-picks the signatures of universally beloved cities and recycles them as building blocks. The city trumpets itself as an amalgam of New York, Venice, and Savannah."

Another journalistic visitor to the extremes of urban globalization is Doug Saunders, a reporter for the Toronto *Globe and Mail* and the author of "Arrival City" (Pantheon; \$27.95). Saunders leads us on a brisk world tour of enormous urban-fringe neighborhoods populated by people who have left the countryside, among them Tatary, in west-central Poland; Kibera, in Nairobi; and Petare, in Caracas. All over the world, farms and villages are emptying out, Saunders says, and cities are filling up: "The modern arrival city is the product of the final great human migration. A third of the world's population is on the move this century, from village to city."

That's how London and New York and Chicago became big cities in the nineteenth century—by offering, in succession, an unusually high economic return to newcomers. "Throughout the nineteenth century, North America offered stunning levels of upward mobility," Saunders writes. Middle-class reformers usually look at arrival cities as an urgent problem to be fixed—take a look at Jacob Riis's descriptions of the Lower East Side in "How the Other Half Lives"—but Saunders wants us to think kindly of them. Sometimes they are squalid, but they contain elaborate systems of mutual support that are often invisible to outsiders, and tearing down the slums and dispersing their residents is not necessarily doing them a favor. Perhaps because Saunders is a journalist who isn't selling his advice, his version of the city is unlovelier than the rest—overwhelming, at times—but also more persuasive.

**S**till, the new urban optimism leaves a lot of questions unanswered. First, why are cities so economically successful? Catchy explanations like the Creative Class and big airports are entertaining but surely not sufficient. In Restoration-era Paris, as rendered by Balzac and Flaubert, ambitious young men like Lucien de Rubempre and Frédéric Moreau would come



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to the city from the stolid provinces and encounter a world of relaxed social convention (not least regarding sex), elaborate public role-playing, and ruinous expense. The costumed afternoon promenade in the Tuilleries was quintessentially urban, but it had far more to do with culture and society than with economic progress. Hardly anybody newly urban in nineteenth-century novels seems to make money; were the novelists missing a crucial element of economic enablement in the social tableau? William Whyte, the author of "The Organization Man," spent his later years, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, in part trying to demonstrate that big companies that moved their headquarters from Manhattan to suburban campuses were going to hurt themselves economically, by sealing themselves off from varied human interaction. He did this by camping out in midtown with a notebook and a camera, so as to record the random, fruitful collisions of the human molecules. But Silicon Valley is entirely made up of office campuses. Its secret seems to be its proximity to a major university, Stanford, and a dense, fluid concentration of interrelated high-level talent, capital, and technology within easy driving range—not serendipitous pedestrian culture. Is city life productive or merely interesting? That's what we don't know.

I lived in the suburbs—Pelham, in Westchester County—for twenty-one years, after which my family moved to an apartment in New York City. We're all intermittently homesick, especially at this time of year, when suburbia feels like the land of fecundity, as green as a jungle, the streets and sidewalks jammed with children playing. Pelham is devoted to a (long) season of life, parenthood. Most people moved there because they couldn't afford to live decently in the city with children, and, like Frank and April Wheeler in "Revolutionary Road," they claimed that they stayed there only out of necessity. As time passed, our collective secret became clear. It wasn't just good public schools and one bedroom per child that kept us in Pelham. We actually liked it—liked the houses, the slower pace, the regular unplanned access to each other. And, given the kids, we couldn't have done all the wondrous things you can do only in cities anyway.

This raises a second unresolved question about cities: is there really a huge pent-up demand to move from the sub-

urbs to the city, just waiting to be released by wiser government policies? James S. Russell, the architecture critic for Bloomberg News and the author of a new book called "The Agile City" (Island Press; \$35), uses the term "megaburbs" to describe what cities have become. In much of the world, it seems pretty clear that most people who have the chance do leave dense inner cities, while staying in metropolitan areas. Even "arrival cities," Doug Saunders acknowledges, are often in the suburbs. Can this great tide really be reversed just by raising gas taxes and easing urban building codes, or should we figure that sprawl is here to stay, and focus on managing it better?

Anyway, all these questions about life within metropolitan areas are beginning to seem minor compared with the immensity of a broader phenomenon: the expansion of the metropolitan areas themselves. Urban growth (whether upward or outward) is taking place on a scale that, if we hadn't become so sanguine about it, would be frighteningly large and rapid. Industrial capitalism, in its day, was an unstoppable force, but it generated enormous moderating and countervailing forces, like labor unions, the welfare state, and Communism.

Globalization, for all its velocity and power and relentless mutation, will not simply proceed unimpeded, either. Many people are unwilling to participate in a social compact based on perpetual motion. Masters of the new economy, social visionaries, and tongue-studded app developers figure large in the imagination of urban theorists these days, but most people are looking for something pretty mundane: a neighborhood, a patch of ground, a measure of peace and security, a family, status, dignity. In twentieth-century America, some people found those things in tightly packed neighborhoods. Far more found them in the suburbs. They tended their gardens, washed their cars, took their children to Little League games, went to PTA meetings and to religious services. It's one thing to create a vast metropolis. It's another to create a society, with a distinctive order and a set of embedded bargains regarding who gets how much of what. Twenty-first-century cities haven't yet figured out that part. ♦

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A conversation with Nicholas Lemann.