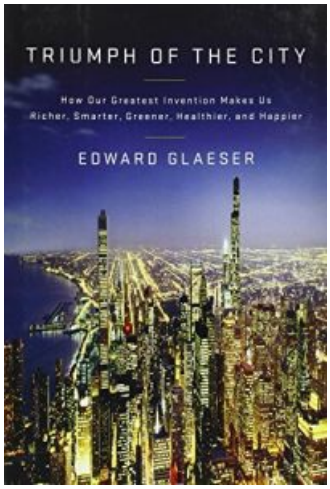

Book Triumph of the City

How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier

Edward L. Glaeser
Penguin Group (USA), 2011

Recommendation

Harvard economics professor Edward Glaeser revels in cities. He loves the historical, cultural and economic forces that intersect to create cities, he loves what makes them fail or succeed, and he loves the collaborative exchange of ideas and energy that only cities offer. His wide-ranging, storytelling approach provides illustrative tales and resonant factoids, all in support of his main contention: Cities are healthier for people, economies and the environment than any other mode of living. Glaeser makes a strong, entertaining case as he travels around the world and through time. His episodic, anecdotal style both obscures and reveals his work's intent. The evocative history he unearths makes his theoretical points with more force than his attempts to plainly state his concepts. In fact, his conjectured solutions to urban problems read as academic, and he offers no practical plans to translate them into action. But those are smaller issues within an amusing read. *BooksInShort* recommends his welcome distillation of current thinking about cities to those who live in one, who might be considering living in one or who swear they never would.

Take-Aways

- "Ideas spread easily in dense environments." That's one primary advantage of urban life.
- Cities prosper when they contain numerous businesses as well as residents who have diverse abilities.
- To succeed, cities must supply clean drinking water and dispose of human waste.
- Cities are environmentally healthier than suburbs, exurbs or rural living.
- London and Singapore assess "congestion" fees to control traffic in their central zones. New Yorkers use less gasoline per capita than people in any other US city.
- Density is a crucial factor in gas use. More miles of roads always means more traffic.
- Average January temperature is a significant factor in the decline or expansion of a US city. "Rust Belt" residents fled unemployment and the cold, and won't be back.
- Compare the lives of the urban poor not to the lives of the urban rich, but to the lives of the rural poor.
- Urban crime is predominantly the poor stealing from the poor.
- The virtual world will never replace the benefits of face-to-face contact or fulfill the need to be with other people.

Summary

Proximity in an Urban World

More than 50% of all people now live in cities. Urbanity can be harsh, but it endures because city space is necessary, fulfilling and efficient. People flock to the financial and cultural opportunities of cities. Despite expanding exurbs and myths of cottage living, 243 million Americans live in urban environments, covering only 3% of the nation's land.

> "The strength that comes from human collaboration is the central truth behind civilization's success and the primary reason cities exist."

New York City's harbor made the area a natural transportation hub, and it grew as such. The city's fortunes fell as import-export business shifted to other harbor and railroad urban centers, and New York remade itself as a manufacturing city. When manufacturing became cheaper elsewhere, the city transformed once more,

becoming a capital of information, and demonstrating a dominant component of a successful city: It brings diverse cultures and ideas together closely enough to collaborate. New York "introduces...the central paradox of the modern metropolis – proximity has become ever more valuable as the cost of connecting over long distances has fallen." Though you can Skype with your business partner half a continent away, you need a city to connect to others who might inspire you.

> "Urban density may create marvels but it also comes with costs."

Cities work. Cities put people and businesses close to one another. Cities provide "proximity, density, closeness." United States urban workers out-earn nonurban workers by 30%, and those in big cities are 50% "more productive" than those in smaller cities or rural areas. The ever-growing number of people who reverse commute indicates urban advantages beyond work. Living in the city offers so many benefits that workers make the sacrifice of commuting to outside jobs.

Transportation

The contemporary mode of transportation – no matter what the historical time frame – gives cities their identity. In cities with ancient walls – like Florence or Jerusalem – tight, curving streets mean citizens must walk, so those narrow streets feature endless retail outlets. In compressed Hong Kong, residents live and work on top of one another. Folks in sprawling Houston or Atlanta drive everywhere. Even all their mileage cannot change a crucial fact: Urban environments are healthier for the planet. New Yorkers use less gas per capita than people in any other US city.

> "Any city, however small, is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich."

Cities teach valuable lessons. For one, society should discourage home ownership, with its mortgage tax deduction and enormous energy expenditures. Villages are not more efficient or more conducive to good health than cities. Electronic communication cannot and never will replace face-to-face interaction. Cities first thrived as transfer thresholds among different ways of life. Think of Constantinople, now Istanbul, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia; consider all the energy and ideas exchanged there among people who never dreamed they might meet. No matter how technology advances, human beings need the crackle, the inspiration, of contact. An overheard remark in a coffee shop, a gathering of like-minded souls at a book reading, a mass cheer and shared song at a soccer match – the virtual world cannot duplicate these interactions. The exurbs and suburbs are well-known wellsprings of alienation. The car-dependent life separates neighbors, but rubbing elbows on the subway or walking amid the mix of rich and poor on any big-city sidewalk inspires ideas and suggests a myriad of possible collaborations.

> "Even when compared to the most dire urban poverty, conditions in rural areas are usually worse."

A thousand years ago, three of Europe's biggest cities, Seville, Palermo and Cordoba, were Islamic. The Caliphate reached from the Near East to Portugal. A web of trade brought ideas from every corner of the world. As Europe retrenched in the Middle Ages, Venice emerged as a portal for Eastern ideas and a center of the printed word. So many scholars from so many nations came through or lived there that it had more demand to print books than any other city. Its multifaceted nature enabled it to thrive for centuries. Cities that falter often depend on only one resource.

Cities In Decline

Detroit is an industrial city. New York City is a commercial one. New York, like Chicago, and for a time, Detroit, thrived as a location where transportation modes intersected and goods moved between them: from ships to wagons, from canal barges to trains, and so on. Early in the 20th century, the tonnage of goods moving through Detroit was three times as much as the flow through New York or London. As intersections, commercial cities shelter a sufficient variety of businesses to survive global changes in technology and finance. Industrial cities do not. Industrial cities throughout history have – dangerously – been one-product metropolises.

> "No matter how much we love New Orleans jazz, it never made sense to spend more than $100 billion putting infrastructure in a place that lost its economic rationale long ago."

When Detroit became a one-industry town, it sowed the seeds of its own decline. Its automobile assembly lines and the related manufacturing brought new standards of living to nonskilled labor, and initiated one of America's great migrations by bringing southern and rural African-American workers north. But Detroit's factories did not help semiskilled or one-skill workers gain new abilities. When modern times moved past Detroit's methods, it lacked enough workers trained in other fields to stay dynamic, and no alternative jobs awaited its workforce. "Between 1950 and 2008, Detroit lost 58% of its population." Now, 33% of its people live below the poverty line. Other US "Rust Belt" industrial cities suffered similar impoverishment. And another phenomenon is in play: "Over the last century, no variable has been a better predictor of urban growth than temperate winters." People leave cold cities and move to warmer locales. Phoenix, Dallas, Houston, Atlanta and Nashville have experienced explosive growth. The population that abandoned Detroit and other dying Rust Belt cities is simply never coming back.

The Power of Slums

The movement of the rural poor to any city in any country always indicates the same thing: Life is worse outside the city than in the worst urban slums. Cities in underdeveloped nations gain five million new people a month. This growing number of urban poor testifies to the city's vitality, the countryside's lack of options, or both. "Cities attract poor people with the prospect of improving their lot." New city slum dwellers often have higher poverty rates than long-term citizens because the longer people live in cities, even in slums, the better their standard of living becomes. Comparing the lives of the urban poor to the urban rich reveals little. The more telling comparison is between the urban poor and the rural poor. By most standards – life expectancy, earnings, health and opportunities for education – the urban poor fare better. Urban density, even in slums, promotes markets, big and small. People living close together trade with one another.

> "When a city has really high housing prices relative to income, you can bet there is something nice about the place."

Former slaves created Rio de Janeiro's famous slum hill-cities, the "*favelas*." When the slaves initiated a tax rebellion in 1896, the Brazilian army suppressed them. When the government withheld the soldiers' salaries, they established their own villages on the hillsides overlooking Rio. Thus were the favelas born. Poverty in the favelas is crushing, but people there thrive compared to those in Brazil's hinterlands. Imagining that the urban poor should return to the countryside is a fallacy. Lack of agricultural opportunities ("many poor nations suffer...poor soil quality") drove the rural poor to the cities in the first place. They could not make a living in the country.

This trend drives the rural poor in China and Africa into ever-expanding cities.

Urban Crime

City proximity breeds another norm: Poor people who live tightly together steal from one another. Gangs flourish because poor urban youth need protection from one another, and city services seldom provide it. Because impoverished neighborhoods are both compressed and separated from upscale areas, percentage-wise, little crime leaks out to plague the rich. Crime remains an urban phenomenon. In 1989, fewer than 10% of residents of towns of 10,000 or fewer people were crime victims. But 20% of those in cities of a million-plus suffered at the hands of criminals. Differing crime rates among cities seldom align with customary metrics like "law enforcement or income." The slums of Mumbai, India are remarkably crime-free, though the people are desperately poor. The very overcrowding that oppresses Mumbai's poor also generates a self-policing community. Everyone seems to know everyone in each neighborhood, and they all know when something amiss occurs.

The Short Commute

The urban poor stay in cities because public transportation enables their lives. The rich live in the center of urban areas because they value a short commute and pay to live near their jobs. If a city thrives on one mode of transportation – say, driving – it's likely that richer residents live nearer to the city center. When a city offers several modes – driving, buses and subways – the poor usually live close to the center. The newer the city, the less likely it is to have dominant public transport.

The Basics of City Health

Any city's success depends on two basic metrics of health and civilization: It must provide clean drinking water and safely remove human waste. Urban centers in developing nations must recognize these two tasks as their most crucial goals. Sadly, poor infrastructure and corruption stand in the way. Healthy water determines a city's safety. Regular sustained outbreaks of cholera plagued London until 1854, when physician John Snow charted where in the poor neighborhoods outbreaks began. He examined London "street by street" and interviewed residents in slums where few from the outside dared venture. To his surprise, he discovered clusters of cholera centered around one public water pump. At the time, science knew little about water-borne infections; Snow did not make that connection. He did record that those who lived near the pump but drank ale instead of water seldom contracted cholera. When Snow finally convinced the city to shut down that unhealthy pump and others near it, London suffered few cholera outbreaks.

> "The enduring strength of cities reflects the profoundly social nature of humanity."

"A century ago, America was just as corrupt as many developing countries today." Corruption remains the single greatest impediment to clean water and safe sewage removal. Usually, as the number of educated citizens in a city rises, corruption falls. An educated citizenry takes better care of itself and has less need to rely on the local services that a corrupt organization supplies. As the power of dishonest urban networks drops, city government makes inroads in poor neighborhoods. At the start of the 20th century, New York City's government fought a crooked police department and shady agencies before taking over street sweeping and sewage removal. Once government gained the upper hand, health improved in poor areas.

More Roads Always Mean More Cars

"Vehicle miles traveled increases essentially one-to-one with the number of miles of new highway." This is the basic law of traffic. Since building new roads increases traffic, how can cities ease gridlock and congestion? "Congestion pricing" provides the solution. London hugely reduced its city center traffic by imposing congestion fees. Simply put, the closer to the city center you drive, the more you pay. City center residents are exempt, which helps keep urban real estate values high. Large archways over Singapore's city center streets have sensors that read electronic toll-payment devices on every car and photograph the license plates of those who fail to pay. Those drivers receive an invoice and a citation. Congestion pricing has never taken hold in the US because "politics trumps economics." Americans regards millions of miles of highways as their public right and are loath to pay fees to use them, so US cities face increasing gridlock.

Cities Are Greener

Cities are simply better for the environment. Seminal urban planner Jane Jacobs maintained that gathering citizens in high-rises that occupied little space and were placed so that residents could walk to work would cause far less environmental damage than exurban sprawl. Lower density living – suburbs, exurbs and villages – requires more driving. Single-family homes use more electricity than multifamily buildings, and generate, per person, a larger carbon footprint. The US's urban coastal and northeastern areas use less electricity than elsewhere in the country.

> "Our culture, our prosperity and our freedom are all ultimately gifts of people living, working and thinking together – the ultimate triumph of the city."

Environmental disaster awaits if emerging populations in India and China – where "the most important battles over urban development in the coming years will be waged" – recreate the American lifestyle, with suburbs and long commutes. Density is a crucial factor in gas use. People drive most of their mileage not traveling to work but running errands, shopping and picking up kids at school. City dwellers accomplish these tasks on foot or by mass transit, which is far more efficient and greener than cars.

About the Author

Edward Glaeser is the Glimp Professor of Economics at Harvard University.