

Back to the Future

Sustainable communities to come will be smaller and more beautiful.

By James Howard Kunstler

BACK IN THE EARLY 20th century, when the cheap oil fiesta was just getting underway and some major new technological innovation made its debut every month—cars, radio, movies, airplanes—there was no practical limit to what men of vision could imagine about the future city, though often their imaginings were ridiculous. The representative case is Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, 1887-1965), the leading architectural hoodoo-meister of Early High Modernism, whose 1925 *Plan Voisin* for Paris proposed to knock down the entire Marais district on the Right Bank and replace it with rows of identical towers set between freeways.

Luckily for Paris, the city officials laughed at him every time he came back with the scheme over the next 40 years—and Corb was nothing if not a relentless self-promoter. Ironically and tragically, though, the *Plan Voisin* model was later adopted gleefully by post-World War II American planners and resulted in such urban monstrosities as the infamous Cabrini-Green housing projects of Chicago and scores of things like it around the country.

Other visions of that early period involved Tom Swifitian scenes of Everest-size skyscrapers with Zeppelin moorings on top, linked to zooming air trams, while various types of personal helicopters swooped between. Virtually all these schemes had one thing in common: the city of the future they depicted was vibrant. We know now, here in the U.S. anyway, that this was the

one thing they got most wrong. By 1970, many American cities were stone dead at their centers, especially the industrial giants of the Midwest. Ten years later, the American city of the future was the nightmare vision of “Blade Runner,” an acid-rain-dripping ruin fit only for androids.

These days, a new generation of mojo architect savants such as Daniel Libeskind and Rem Koolhaas is retailing an urban futurism that is basically warmed-over Corb with an expressionist horror-movie spin, featuring torqued and tortured skyscrapers made possible by computer-aided design, clad in Darth Vader glass or other sheer surfaces, with grim public spaces exquisitely engineered to induce agoraphobia. There’s more than a tinge of sadism in all this, though Koolhaas is much more explicit in his many writings than the less voluble Libeskind about consciously surrendering to a zeitgeist of cruel alienation. But these are also very rarified exercises among a tiny group of mutually referential fashionista narcissists, while the general public itself—at least the fraction that thinks about anything—only grudgingly goes along with it as a sort of drear obeisance to the religion of art.

An alternate awful urban vision of the future, advanced by public intellectuals such as author Mike Davis (*The Ecology of Fear*), is actually more about the city of the present: the Third World mega-slum embodied by such ghastly organisms as present-day

Lagos, Lima, and Karachi. This is a vision of plain toxic hypertrophy with no particular artistic or architectural overlay to it. These cities have organized according to a simple logarithmic progression of horrible conditions—more people, more pollution, more poverty—nourished by cheap-energy globalism, with the expectation that they will only continue along that path and get worse.

Yet another vision of the future is supplied by the New Urbanists, who have campaigned for a return to the body of principle and methodology drawn from successful historic practice rather than science fiction, politics, or metaphysics. That is, they rely on urban design that has proven to work well in the past and is worth emulating—by which I mean the relations of buildings to public space and to each other, not the deployment of sewer lines and other infrastructure. The New Urbanists are marginalized because their reliance on tradition is considered sentimental and nostalgic. Their work is viewed by the mandarins of architecture through the lens of Modernist ideology, which, going back a hundred years to Adolf Loos’s declaration that ornament is crime, has worked to decouple contemporary practice from what they regard as the filthy claptrap of history. Of course, Modernism itself has self-evidently become historical in its own right, and the more this is true, paradoxically, the more its defenders insist that history does not matter. Whatever else this represents in the form of intel-

lectual imprudence, it at least promotes a discontinuity of human experience that cannot be healthy.

The New Urbanists are also disdained for their modesty of ambition. They are not interested in the biggest this or that. Their plans are typically scaled to the quarter-mile walk and rarely include super-sized buildings. The cutting edge holds no attractions for them in and of itself. They want to create neighborhoods and quarters, not intergalactic space ports. They want streets, squares, and building façades to provide decorum, legibility, and even beauty, while the latest crop of Modernists seek to confound our expectations about the urban environment as much as possible, in the service of generating anxiety rather than pleasure. The Modernists use the lame adjective “edgy” to describe their methods. It is supposed to signify excitement, novelty, and especially innovation, but mostly they have managed to innovate only new ways to make people feel bad about where they are.

The future direction of urban experience depends a great deal on an understanding of history, and of recent history in particular, because the hyperdevelopment of the past 200 years has followed the arc of increasing energy resources and, above all, we are now facing the worldwide depletion of energy resources.

As the industrial age gained traction in the early 19th century, so did the demographic trend of people increasingly moving from the farms and villages to the big cities. Industrial production was centralized in the cities and recruited armies of workers insatiably. Meanwhile, mechanized farming required fewer farmers to feed more people. The railroad, by its nature, favored centralization. By 1900, cities such as London and New York had evolved into megaurbanisms of multiple millions of

people. Around the same time, electrification was generally complete and with it came skyscrapers serviced by elevators. Over the next 20 years, oil moved ahead of coal as the primary fuel for transport and, especially in the U.S. where oil was cheap and abundant, led to mass automobile ownership. That, in turn, sparked the decanting of households into massive new suburban hinterlands, and to the extreme separation of activities by zoning law there, which climaxed—with interruptions for depression and war—in the evolution of the late 20th-century car-dependent metropolises like Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix, and Atlanta. That is where things stand now.

Now my own view is that we face severe energy problems in the decades ahead, and they will not be ameliorated by any combination of alternative fuels or schemes for running them. This permanent global energy crisis will have all kinds of consequences, most particularly on our cities. These looming circumstances imply several major trends

has already been replaced by a so-called information economy or a consumer economy. In reality, manufacturing activities have been insidiously replaced over the past 20 years by a suburban-sprawl-building economy—and the mass production of suburban houses, highways, strip malls, and big-box stores is a different sort of manufacturing than making hair driers and TV sets. The sprawl industry also drove a reckless debt-creation racket and multiple layers of traffic in mortgages and spin-offs of mortgages (such as the derivatives trade based on bundled, securitized debt) that represents, at bottom, hallucinated wealth that in turn has spread false liquidity through the equity markets and is certain to affect them badly sooner or later. All this is what we have been calling the “housing bubble,” and it is now beginning to fly apart with deadly effect.

Much of the suburban real estate produced by this process is destined to lose its supposed value, both in practical and monetary terms as energy scarcities get

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that contradict conventional expectations, especially of continued urban growth.

One certain impact will be the contraction of industrial activity per se and of the financial sector whose instruments and certificates represent the expectation of growth in accumulated wealth. This alone will constitute a basic challenge to industrial capitalism—apart from the sociopolitical strife that such financial catastrophe is apt to generate.

I hasten to add it is a mistake to suppose that the U.S. industrial economy

traction. So on top of the sheer distortions and perversities of the glut in bad mortgage paper, America will be faced with the accelerating worthlessness of the collateral—the houses, Jiffy Lubes, and office parks—as gasoline prices go up, long commutes become untenable, jobs along with incomes are lost, and the cost of heating houses larger than 1,500 square feet becomes an insuperable burden.

All this is to say that the suburban rings of our cities have poor prospects in the future. They represent a massive

tragic misinvestment, perhaps the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world. It is hard to say how this stuff might be reused or retrofitted, if at all, but some of it, perhaps a lot, may end up as a combined salvage yard and sheer ruin.

Another major impact of the coming energy scarcity will be the end of industrial agriculture. Without abundant and cheap oil- and gas-based fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and fuels for running huge machines and irrigation systems, we will have to make other arrangements for feeding ourselves. Crop yields will go down—a big reason, by the way, to be skeptical of ethanol and bio-diesel alternative fuel schemes based on corn or soybean crops. We will have to grow food closer to home, on a smaller scale, probably requiring more human and even animal labor, and agriculture is likely to come closer to the center of economic life than it has within memory—at the same time that mass-production homebuilding, tourism based on mass aviation, easy motoring, and a host of other obsolete activities fade into history.

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I think this will lead to an epochal demographic shift, a reversal of the 200 year long trend of people moving from the farms and rural places to the big cities. Instead, I believe we will see a substantial contraction of our cities at the same time that they densify at their cores and along their waterfronts. A preview of this can be seen in Baltimore today. The remaining viable fabric of the

pre-automobile city is relatively tiny and concentrated in the old center around a complex harbor system. With little need for industrial workers, vast neighborhoods of row housing built for them are either abandoned or inhabited now only by such economically distressed people that abandonment is inevitable. The pattern of contraction may not be identical in all American cities.

In some it will be a lot worse. Phoenix, Tucson, and Las Vegas will just dry up and blow away, since local agriculture will not be possible and they will be afflicted with severe water problems on top of all the other problems growing out of energy scarcity and an extreme car-dependent development pattern. Cities in the “wet” sunbelt such as Houston, Orlando, and Atlanta will probably still be there but revert to insignificance for the additional simple reason that a lack of cheap air conditioning will make them unbearable.

It is worth keeping in mind that cities generally are located on important geographical sites—harbors, rivers, railroad junctions—and some kind of urban settlement is likely to persist in

many of these places unless climate change drowns them. In recent years, most waterfront property has been reassigned from industrial and commercial uses to condominium sites and greenways. This will not continue. If we are going to have any kind of commerce between one place and another, we will have to reactivate our waterfronts for shipping—and not necessar-

ily of the automated steel-container variety. Like virtually everything else in the coming energy-scarce world, maritime trade will have to be rescaled. It may even have to rely on wind power again to some extent. These operations will require wharves, warehouses, cheap quarters for sailors, and all the other furnishings typically required through history.

Those who are infatuated with skyscrapers are going to be disappointed. I do not think we will be building many more of them further along in this century. We will have trouble running the ones we have, since most of the glass towers built after 1965 have inoperable windows, and even the ones that have them would have to be retrofitted for coal furnaces, and a less than absolutely reliable electric-power grid may make life in a 25th-floor apartment impossible when the elevators go out. In short, I think we will discover that the skyscraper was purely a product of the cheap oil and gas age. Exciting as they may be, we might have to live without them.

The process I have described will probably be messy. Social turbulence should be expected. For instance, the urban underclass will be squeezed even harder than the suffering middle classes, and they already have a nascent warrior culture that could easily redirect its energies from hip-hop entertainment to real guerrilla warfare if the competition for resources becomes desperate. Economic distress in the U.S. is also likely only to aggravate unfavorable conditions in Mexico, sending increased streams of impoverished migrants north. Meanwhile, the faltering U.S. middle classes may be so inflamed by the loss of their entitlement to an easy-motoring existence that they will vote for maniacs and venture into scapegoating. I certainly expect the American public and their leaders to

mount a vigorous defense of suburbia, even if it proves to be a gigantic exercise in futility and a waste of precious resources.

We will be lucky if we can make the transition from our current circumstances to a future of re-sized, re-scaled cities and a reactivated productive rural landscape outside them, with a hierarchy of hamlets, villages, and towns in between, and some ability to conduct commerce and manufacturing. This would, in effect, be a reversion to prior living arrangements, and to some extent it is a model proposed by the New Urbanists—or at least a template they would understand as fundamental. Many things might stand in the way of this. The physical disaggregation of civic life in our small towns is now so extreme that nothing might avail to repair it, especially since we will have far less capital to work with. The suburbs running from Boston through New Jersey to Washington have paved over some of the best farmland in the nation's most populous region, and it may be centuries before it is restored to productivity, if ever. Physical security may become so tenuous that people will sell their allegiance for protection or take to living behind fortifications. In earlier periods of history when societies got into trouble—for instance, the plague years in Europe—rural places were beset by banditry and lawlessness, adding another layer of difficulty to food production on top of the loss of the peasant labor.

We don't know how any of these things may actually play out. I have not even mentioned the potential for geopolitical mischief, which could skew the picture a lot more. But the urban future isn't what it was cracked up to be when we were riding high, surfing the big waves of cheap energy in the seemingly endless summer of oil. It won't be fun fun fun 'til Daddy takes

the T-bird away. It won't be a Herbert Muschamp smorgasbord of delicious, rarified architectural irony. The Koolhaas celebration of alienation will not seem worth partying for. The metaphysics of Libeskind and Peter Eisenman will stand naked in their phoniness. By and by, even the mega-slums of the Third World will contract as the surplus grain supplies of the formerly developed nations are reduced to nothing and export ceases.

I often wonder what people will think decades from now if they are able to view those old Doris Day and Rock Hudson comedies of the mid 20th

century. Invariably these stories took place in a Manhattan of sparkly new glass towers and streets full of cars with tail fins and companies that ruled the world and men and women who had come back from a World War full of confidence that there was no limit to what people with good intentions could do and nothing that they couldn't handle. We are their children and grandchildren, and it is a different world now. ■

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Provoking Pakistan

Making Musharraf our puppet stokes the Kashmir crisis.

By Eric S. Margolis

ONE OF THE ODDER ASPECTS of President George W. Bush's campaign to export democracy is that Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, whom Bush hails as one of his closest allies in these struggles, is a military dictator who runs a nation accused of being a primary producer of violent anti-Western groups.

Pakistan is often described as a dangerously unstable nation seething with terrorist cells that could seize control of its nuclear arsenal if Musharraf is assassinated or if his increasingly unpopular and isolated military regime collapses. Indeed, Britain's recent arrests of more than three score of its citizens of Pakistani descent on terrorism charges reinforces Western suspicions that Pakistan remains a hotbed of Islamic radicalism and haven for al-Qaeda and the Taliban's elusive leaders.

Yet Pakistan has been unstable since its creation in 1947, when the dying British Empire abruptly divided India, and simply to dismiss it as a font of anti-Western terrorism understates the dizzying complexities and motivations of this turbulent nation of 162.4 million people.

At present, Pakistan's army and intelligence service, ISI, is firmly in control of the country's nuclear arsenal, and Pakistan's military government has played a crucial role in the so-called war on terrorism. Close to 1,000 al-Qaeda suspects, including key ringleaders and a prime suspect in the London airline plot, have been arrested by Pakistan, and most have been turned over to the United States. This has roused suspicions that whenever Pakistan has gotten into Washington's bad books—for example, for black-market trading nuclear technology or suspicions it was shelter-