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Review: David Owen's "Green Metropolis"

Jason Lewis

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Possibly the most exciting book on ecology or environmentalism to be published in several years, David Owen's *Green Metropolis: Why Living Smaller, Living Closer, and Driving Less Are the Keys to Sustainability* challenges the conventional wisdom of the environmental movement and uses as a model of true sustainability, not Portland, Oregon or rural Vermont, but New York City.

Owen's seemingly counter-intuitive argument is supported by the data: New Yorkers have the lowest per capita energy consumption and smallest per capita carbon footprint of anyone in the United States. The key to this isn't that New Yorkers are morally superior or ideologically predisposed to environmentalism, but simply the structure of the city:

"Manhattan's density is approximately 67,000 people per square mile, or more than eight hundred times that of the nation as a whole and roughly thirty times that of Los Angeles. Placing one and a half million people on a twenty-three-square-mile island sharply reduces their opportunities to be wasteful, enables most of them to get by without owning cars, encourages them to keep

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their families small, and forces the majority to live in some of the most inherently energy-efficient residential structures in the world: apartment buildings. It also frees huge tracts of land for the rest of America to sprawl into.”

Owen’s argument hinges on the (quite reasonable) notion that the two greatest enemies of true sustainability are mutually reinforcing factors: cars and sprawl. Cars have allowed Americans to spread out over great distances, leaving the cities for far-flung subdivisions which make driving a necessity, since there’s nothing in walking distance, and half-acre lots make public transit impractical. Cars are also the greatest offender in terms of energy consumption and carbon output.

The second chapter of Green Metropolis is spent describing the connection between America’s codependent relationship with driving and our voracious addiction to oil. Unlike most environmental writers, Owen does not see the solution in hybrids, electric cars, or hydrogen fuel cells. Rather, the depletion in oil reserves relative to increasing demand provides an important economic incentive: when oil prices peaked in 2008, Americans finally responded by switching to smaller cars, avoiding unnecessary trips, and carpooling. This analysis is perhaps one of the book’s greatest strengths: Owen doesn’t see much change coming from environmental evangelism or propaganda, especially when so much Eco-fashion selects precisely the wrong solution to a solvable problem. For Owen, people will live more sustainably not when they start to care more about nature, but when it becomes too expensive and inconvenient to do otherwise.

Currently, Americans’ desire to live at unsustainable distances is subsidized by the rest of the population in the form of highway construction, extension of water and sewer lines, and running electricity to new subdivisions at taxpayer expense. If the true cost of sprawl were borne by developers and suburban home-buyers, in the form of increased housing prices, higher property taxes, infrastructure recovery costs included in utility bills, and tolls placed on

highways used primarily by commuters, the suburbs would look much less attractive.

One of Owen's most interesting suggestions is in regard to the idea (popular among environmentalists) of fuel-tax increases or carbon-tax charges to bring U.S. Fuel prices more in line with Europe, where a gallon of gas costs at least double what it does here. Owen writes:

“But high energy taxes are a good idea... for reasons that go beyond their direct environmental impact. For example, increasing the tax on motor fuel, by forcing down U.S. Petroleum consumption, would constitute a diversion of wealth from petroleum producers, including OPEC, to local, state, and federal treasuries in the United States. Such a tax increase could be made “revenue neutral” by pairing it with a compensating reduction in other taxes—perhaps including payroll taxes, which are highly regressive.”

Owen also points out, however, that “increasing the fuel efficiency of a car is mathematically indistinguishable from lowering the price of its fuel; it's just fiddling with the other side of the same equation.” This is, at least in part, why Owen finds troubling the environmentalist obsession with hybrid cars; oil consumption and carbon output are just part of the problem cars present, and probably not the biggest part.

Cars make possible the suburban lifestyle, with its concomitant wastefulness, inefficient use of resources, massive energy consumption, and voracious devouring of arable land to build subdivisions. And often, the advance guard of sprawl are environmentalists themselves, who have a Thoreau anti-urban mentality. “Preaching the sanctity of open spaces helps to propel development into those very spaces, and the process is self-reinforcing because, as one environmentalist said to me, ‘Sprawl is created by people escaping sprawl.’ Wild landscapes are less often destroyed by people who despise wild landscapes than by people who love them, or think they do—by people who move to be near them, and then, when others follow, move again.” Living in dense cities

actually preserves the natural world, by keeping humans away from it.

Among the other Eco-fads Owen punctures are LEED certification, “Smart Growth” zoning, and typical ‘green’ urban planning. All of these actually tend in practice to make development less sustainable, by circumventing the very factors which make dense urban centers so efficient: high population density, mixed-use development, wide sidewalks, narrow streets; the very factors which make cities livable, and make walking, bicycling, and transit more practical options than driving. Likewise, the typical ‘solutions’ to congestion and traffic tend, in practice, to make matters worse: HOV lanes, widening highways, smarter traffic flow control, etc., by making traffic flow more smoothly, takes away the very disincentives that get people out of their cars and onto transit. Environmentalists tend to hate the sight of traffic jams, with cars sitting there emitting exhaust without moving, but cars’ emissions while idling are often less than 25% of emissions at normal highway speeds, and hybrid engines shut off while idling. So cars sitting in traffic are a boon, both in terms of carbon, and in terms of driver frustration which might prompt some people to give up the car habit.

Owen also addresses the important point of the enjoyability of urban life, citing Jane Jacobs’ seminal classic, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*. For Jacobs, density and diversity are the keys to working human communities. When people live very close together, in neighborhoods where residences are interspersed with businesses, and residents are not narrowly segregated by wealth, it provides for a vibrant street life and cultural opportunities, safer neighborhoods, and a greater sense of community. Owen comments, “Placing people and their daily activities close to one another doesn’t just make the people more interesting; it also makes them greener.”

The neighborhood that Jacobs loved, and where she lived when her book was published in 1961, was Greenwich Village. This in

particular leads to an issue which Owens touches only obliquely, and tends to gloss over: when cities become attractive enough to reach the levels of population density where benefits begin to cascade, the cost of living is driven up to levels which are unsustainable for most of the working-class residents, and one of Jacobs’ criteria (not narrowly segregated by wealth) begins to vanish. This has been the case in most of Manhattan for some time, and gentrification is rolling through Harlem, Washington Heights, and even many parts of Brooklyn. Owen views Europe as an excellent model because Europeans are more likely to live in dense cities and less likely to drive cars; what he doesn’t address is the way in which the dense urban cores are affordable only to elites, while poor and immigrant families are forced out to suburban slums.

Of course, European cities never saw the mass exodus of the white middle class driven by American racism in the 1960’s. This is another way in which Manhattan is atypical, and an oft-neglected factor in the discussion of the motives for moving farther and farther from cities. The phenomenon of “white flight” is a tragedy for most American cities, but its consequences over 40 years later might be viewed as an opportunity for maintaining economic diversity. Since rent control is a thing of the past, and there’s no incentive for the State to protect the working class, the best strategy at this point might be to bet that Owen is right, and the economics of peak oil will dictate a return to the city for vast numbers of people, and work on projects that will place us in a more secure position within our cities for the future: start now organizing tenants’ unions, acquiring cheap residential property to form land trusts, and so on. The suburbs will have to go, one way or another; Green Metropolis is a wake-up call, to remind us both that that’s a good thing, and that we need to plan smart, sustainable, and urban lifestyles.