

## REVIEW ESSAYS

### TWO TALES OF A CITY

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*Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier*

Edward Glaeser

(New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 352 pages.

“As in the pseudoscience of bloodletting, just so in the pseudoscience of city rebuilding and planning,” wrote Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, her scholarly assault on the field of city planning.<sup>1</sup> An iconoclast, Jacobs intended the volume as nothing less than an indictment of the prevailing urban orthodoxy. “Years of learning and a plethora of subtle and complicated dogma have arisen on a foundation of nonsense,” she wrote.<sup>2</sup> In painstaking detail, Jacobs refutes the titans of city planning whose ideas dominated her era: Daniel Burnham, Lewis Mumford, Le Corbusier and Robert Moses, among others. In time, she was hailed as a pioneer in urban thought and a champion of those who see cities as living communities, not mere lines on a map. Though the faceless high-rises she disdained still tower over many metropolises, her vision has become required reading for urban planners everywhere, and her ideas form the basis of some of the most successful efforts to revitalize life in the American city over the past twenty-five years.

Fifty years after Jacobs’s seminal work first appeared, Edward Glaeser, an urban economist who teaches at Harvard and writes for the *New York Times*, has set out to overturn conventional thinking about our urban landscapes once more. In *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier*, he presents an avalanche of data to argue that our fundamental misunderstanding of the way cities work and their importance to our future have led to poor policy choices and misguided attempts to salvage failing urban areas. In

an era when advances in communication technologies have led some to predict the death of distance, Glaeser contends that physical proximity—and the competition and collaboration that such closeness promotes—is more important than ever. Like Jacobs, Glaeser extols the city as an incubator for intellectual dynamism and an engine for new ideas. A thriving metropolis, he insists, requires recognition that the fundamental building block of the city is not made of steel and concrete, but of flesh and creativity.


But where Jacobs invited us to reevaluate our understanding of the city by strolling its sidewalks and peering into its storefronts, Glaeser prefers to take a broader view of the metropolis, buttressing his arguments with data culled from the latest studies. Glaeser is at his most persuasive when heralding the city as our greatest hope for reducing carbon emissions. Most green advocates have typically regarded cities as bastions of the enemy, conjuring images of smoke-spewing factories and concrete canyons devoid of natural splendor. However, through a meticulous examination of energy use in urban, suburban and rural areas, Glaeser reaches a counterintuitive yet convincing conclusion: the average urbanite uses far less energy than his counterpart in the countryside or suburbia. The author leaves little doubt that the combination of public transportation, smaller homes, higher population density and neighborhoods designed for walking makes cities the most environmentally friendly places for living.

Since cities produce greener, happier and healthier residents, Glaeser argues, policies that erect obstacles to greater density are misguided and often counterproductive. Though San Francisco, New York and Paris hold reputations as outposts of progressivism with strong antipoverty policies, they are quickly turning into enclaves that only the rich can afford because of onerous restrictions on new housing developments. Meanwhile, Houston, rarely viewed as a champion of the underclass, has attracted large numbers of low- and middle-income residents through simply the availability of affordable housing produced by unfettered development.

Less prosperous cities have tried different renewal strategies. Cleveland built the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame; the Guggenheim Museum rose in Bilbao, Spain. Do large-scale construction projects contribute to a city's revitalization? Count Glaeser among the skeptics. The author reserves particular ire for leaders who have sought to hide urban decline behind Potemkin skyscrapers, calling the strategy—which Reinhold Niebuhr once termed “the doctrine of salvation by bricks”—the greatest mistake in the last sixty years of urban policy.<sup>3</sup> He argues that this “edifice complex” has been severely harmful to cities like Detroit, which foolishly responded to urban decline and a dwindling population by building soaring—and now empty—office towers.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, this informative book succeeds in forcing readers to reevaluate their conceptions of the city. Glaeser has scoured the existing research (much of which he authored himself) to extract meaningful lessons about what works and what doesn't in urban policy. He skillfully weaves together history, law, public health, architecture, criminal justice, sociology and economics to make his case. His writing is clear and accessible, and he has a talent for offering up both interesting anecdotes and telling statistics.

But Glaeser is somewhat less successful in his attempt to reinterpret this data to conclude that unadulterated growth and development is the only formula with which cities can thrive. Not every city aims to be the next London or Singapore; many don't even aspire to become Calgary or Tulsa. Another weak point for a book with global aspirations is the author's overreliance on examples drawn from American cities. Though he offers brief snapshots of life in Bangalore, Nagasaki, Paris and a few other international hubs, the preponderance of Glaeser's examples of the thrills and ills of city life are from the areas in which he has lived (including New York, Boston and Chicago), and may therefore be less relevant to international audiences.

Nonetheless, the author's unabashed enthusiasm for the offerings of urban life and his belief that the city, for all its problems, is humankind's greatest invention, are both engaging and thought provoking. That the reader may finish the book convinced the author is right is a testament to Glaeser's mastery of the subject and his ability, like Jacobs before him, to challenge the way we think about our urban spaces. Certainly the people of the world, taken as a whole, have cast a vote with their feet in favor of the author's proposition; since 2008, more than half of the global population has resided in urban areas. The reader is more likely than ever before to be one of these urban residents—riding the subway, relaxing on a downtown park bench, or gazing from the heights of a skyscraper. That is a testament to the enduring allure of the city. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Glaeser, *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 61.