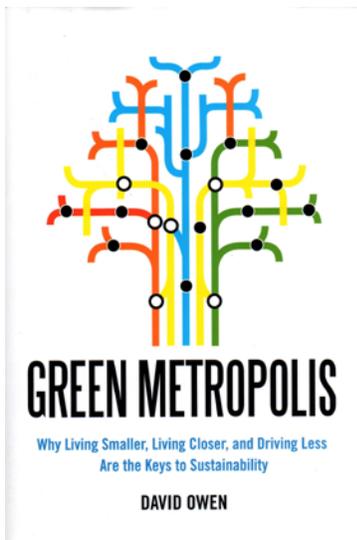




Green Metropolis

Why Living Smaller, Living Closer and Driving Less Are the Keys to Sustainability

David Owen



Brian heard Owen speak, then had a chat with him at the 2010 McGraw Hill Innovation Conference, theme of which was “Big and Super-Green: From Buildings to Cityscapes”. Owen, a staff writer for the New Yorker, was keynote speaker, underlining the key message of the conference that individual, “green” buildings are fine ... but not nearly enough to truly achieve sustainability and address the challenges of climate change.

Sustainability can only be achieved at the scale of the city.

His thesis - a provocative one - is that well-designed, dense cities are the greenest.

He argues that Manhattan is the greenest urban space in the US.

What? But all those lights in Times Square ... that can't be good!

Superb transit. So many residents without cars. Walk-able. Bike-able. Mixed use. Residents living near where they work and shop. Super-efficient use of infrastructure like water, sewers, and yes, roads. Energy-efficient building forms. Smaller residences. Variety, interesting things to see and do and experience, all made viable by high density. Access to green space.

That's what makes Manhattan so green.

- Live smaller – the average size of a US home doubled since the 1950's – yet, the size of the household shrunk. “In the long run, big, empty houses are no more sustainable than private jets, no matter how many photovoltaic panels they have on their roofs.” He champions the strategy of embodied efficiency rather than the ‘dessert’ add-ons like PV cells, wind. Take a step back and consider the basics, in this case, do I need to live this big?? Do I need that big, though ‘eco-friendly’ addition on this building? Should I spend my reno-money on insulation and caulking or on PV panels that will generate some power when the sun shines?
- Live closer – live nearer to where you work, shop, enjoy recreation, have friends. It reduces car usage and makes transit and walking feasible and viable. Cars have enabled sprawl, and inherently require huge investment in infrastructure like roads, water, sewers, electricity to service that sprawl. Unsustainable.
- Drive less – Owen says “Making automobiles more fuel-efficient isn't necessarily a bad idea, but it won't solve the world's energy and environmental dilemmas.” Cars make it too easy for people to spread out. In fact, he argues, that improvements to fuel efficiency are counter-productive, making it cheaper to drive.

Owen argues that if we really believe the market will address these environmental challenges, that market needs to reflect the true costs of things like auto and air travel. Roads shouldn't be subsidized through general revenues. The cost of parking should reflect reality. Europeans pay much more than what Americans pay for gasoline. Yet, listen to the cries of despair when US gas hits \$4 a gallon.

Of course, also watch how the sales of large cars and trucks and SUVs plummets while gas is a \$4, only to bounce back when the price moderates to “normal” levels.

Owen is not a fan of LEED and similar rating systems and devotes a large part of one chapter to pointing out the flaws. Says that it supports the myth that efficiency can only be achieved with high-priced add-ons and technology. He argues that LEED actually

penalizes designers who think at an urban scale. Consolidate all of the employees of a company into one brand new, highly-efficient LEED Platinum building. Sounds good, right? But, those employees previously worked in three high-rise office buildings downtown. The new building is on the outskirts of town. Where folks walked to work, walked to lunch or shop, walked home ... they now have to buy a car and drive. Or move to the suburbs. And still drive. Calls this "LEED Brain".

Devotes a chapter to our extravagant use of fossil fuels, and the coming end of 'cheap oil'.

Another entire chapter about walking, parks, park design. Links that to health and the 'increasingly sedentary' American lifestyle. Interesting note about Central Park ... better to have a series of smaller parks than one very large one where activities are not visible from the exterior. Studies show that pedestrians will walk around Central Park rather than through it to get to the opposite side ... in part because it is so open and vacant that they feel no particular attraction to walk through, and because they don't feel safe. Contrast this with the much, much smaller Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village, for example, which is much more highly-used on a per square foot basis.

He talks about China and India, how they are developing on models that are too US-based. Car-based. (What Thomas Friedman means by "flat" in his book "Hot, Flat and Crowded" --- too many others around the developing world are succumbing to the appeal of the US model. Driving big SUVs, building larger houses, bulldozing hectares of traditional, highly-efficient *hutong* in China, only to replace them by Western-style high-rises and big boxes. Where people cycled or walked to work, to shop, to dine ... they now must drive. In gridlocked traffic.

Owen laments that Dubai has missed a huge opportunity. That city-state started with a blank piece of paper 15 or 20 years ago. Yet is now "even more automobile-dependent than Beijing is. In fact, it's more auto-dependent than any city in the United States."

But, one of the biggest challenges we face, he concludes, is that the sprawled, US model is so appealing ... not just within the US itself, but around the developing world.

His solution? "Money really does talk – and this fact suggests another powerful environmental tool, if we can find the will to use it: people do what they are given incentives to do."

Policymakers and politicians, take note.