



## The Triumph of Density and the Agony of Sprawl

### Glaeser's Solutions for Improving Our Cities

Richard E. Ocejo

**Reviewed:** Edward Glaeser. 2011. *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier*, New York: Penguin Press.

*The city is more and more often hailed as the paradigmatic form of a new sustainable development,<sup>1</sup> both economic and environmental. Glaeser's book is another significant contribution to this popular awakening. Without contesting the point, Richard Ocejo shows how the arguments put forward in the book may reflect only a partial view of the city, one that misses out on its most important asset: people's actual practices and experiences.*

Racial inequality, the regulation of public space, crime and gentrification are frequently explored social problems that dominate research on cities. But we have few books that take on the larger topic of analyzing the economic, social, and environmental value of cities and critiquing urban environments and development patterns based on these metrics. This work, *Triumph of the City*, is the culmination of Harvard economist Edward Glaeser's many years of research on which urban forms and policies provide tangible benefits for economic growth, increased productivity, personal health and satisfaction, and sustainable environments. He wants nothing less than to show readers that not only are cities humanity's greatest invention, but that our fate as a civilization is intertwined with how we develop cities. For avowed urbanists, such as those who start their pro-city arguments with the work of Jane Jacobs (1961) (whose classic book is still arguably the reigning reference in these debates), this perspective is not new. But Glaeser points his critiques at those actors who either argue against cities or, wittingly or unwittingly, limit their potential for growth. These include policymakers who encourage sprawl as well as urban "NIMBYists" (from "NIMBY": not in my back yard) who fight against growth through historic preservation and zoning restrictions. The result is a book full of insight and policy ideas on how to encourage beneficial forms of urban development. But its issues stem from how Glaeser treats the actual people who live in cities, particularly those who do not subscribe to excessive growth, or who are marginal to the growing industries of the global economy.

### The Benefits of Density

Glaeser attributes the importance of cities to the personal connections they facilitate: "Cities are the absence of physical space between people and companies. They are proximity, density, closeness. They enable us to work and play together, and their success depends on the demand for physical connection" (p. 6). Despite advanced information and communication technology, whose

<sup>1</sup> See Jacques Lévy (translated by Eric Rosencrantz), "The city is sustainable development", *Metropolitiques*, 9 February 2011. URL : <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-city-is-sustainable.html>.

impending development once forecast the obsolescence of spatial concentration, people are moving to cities today in record numbers. After several decades of decline due to deindustrialization, cities have once again become centers of economic activity and the chief nodes in a global economy. This turnaround has been fostered by the benefits of density for the spread of knowledge and the concentration of capital in urban centers. Even those cities that have grown successfully due to information technology industries—Palo Alto, Boston, Bangalore—have done so, Glaeser argues, due to density levels that encourage connection and communication between firms and industries. To demonstrate density's benefits, he heavily peppers the book with numerous statistical factoids on urban conditions and urban life. In doing so, he often turns common arguments that antiurbanists and advocates for sprawl have historically made against the city back against them: urbanites today are healthier and live longer than their rural counterparts. They also enjoy higher wages and standards of living and are more productive and happier. And dense cities reduce greenhouse gas levels and are better for our health and the environment.

While Glaeser intends to address policies that impede dense growth or could improve the development of all urban areas, his chief examples of success and failure are American cities—New York City and Houston as models of the former, and Detroit as one of the latter—with a few handpicked non-Western cities—Singapore and Gaborone as cities that got growth right, and Mumbai as one that got it wrong—added to the discussion. He chiefly criticizes cities whose leaders and interest groups prevent or limit density as well as antiquated industrial-era policies that promote infrastructural growth. Detroit, the easiest target and Glaeser's favorite, represents failing Rust Belt cities around the world that have not wisely transitioned to the postindustrial economy. Detroit's initial growth relied on a single large industry. It did not have a diversified economy or make any global intra-industry connections. When Detroit's decline was imminent, its leaders responded by developing structures—office space and sophisticated mass transit—instead of trying to attract the creative, well-educated workers who would drive economic resurgences, such as that which occurred in New York City.

### **The Perils of Sprawl and Preservation**

Today it has become common for authors of wide-audience nonfiction to tackle academic subjects by including anecdotes of their personal lives and experiences that exemplify the main arguments of their analyses, most of whose fine details get placed in the endnotes. The aforementioned Richard Florida (2003) and Thomas Friedman (2005) are two notable examples of this trend in their work on the rise of "creative cities" and the impacts of globalization, respectively. (Even Jane Jacobs relies mainly on a few streets in her own neighborhood to make her points.) Glaeser follows this pattern by regularly mentioning his own biography, such as his upbringing in Manhattan and his family's decision to move out of central Boston to the suburbs. He uses these personal facts to highlight what he sees as the two enemies of dense urban growth: sprawl and preservation. Until he left Boston, Glaeser states he had always lived in older cities and college towns, and walking was always his preferred mode of transportation. But, like many families, the birth of children combined with pro-sprawl government policies encouraged the Glaesers to flee the city. These policies include the subsidization of infrastructure for automotive transit (in his case, the Massachusetts Turnpike), the federal home interest mortgage deduction, and the lack of investment in urban public schools, each of which encourages people to leave cities as they age, settle down, and presumably start families. Glaeser wants to live in the city, but the city, state, and federal governments don't seem to want him to. It is creative, well-educated people like him, however, that these governments should be trying to keep in and attract to cities by reversing and altering their policies.

But Glaeser draws special attention to policies and advocates of preservation such as landmarking and zoning measures that limit dense growth and concentrate the benefits of cities in the hands of a privileged few. Such groups, who seem to only reside in successful postindustrial cities like New

York City, San Francisco and Paris, raise real estate prices and the standard of living in those places by restricting dense development. By imposing their own preferences and preserving their own lifestyles, Glaeser argues, these groups impede the growth potential of their cities and close them off to newcomers. At one point he states, “The government should not be in the business of enforcing lifestyles that we happen to find appealing. The government’s job is to allow people to choose the life they want, as long as they are paying for the costs of that lifestyle” (p. 167). This statement encapsulates Glaeser’s recommendations and hints at his gripes. The solution, for Glaeser, is essentially a “cap and trade”-style development policy. Instead of limiting building heights, he suggests imposing a system of fees that developers would pay in compensation for the costs of excessive height (e.g. light and views) and the social costs that could arise from certain uses (these are not specified). This recommendation dovetails with such policies as a “congestion tax” that charges drivers for excessive carbon emissions, a measure that Glaeser supports and which has already been adopted in many global cities. Elites may continue to be elites, provided they pay for the status.

### **Cities and the Poor**

An interesting aspect of Glaeser’s argument is his claim that poverty is not necessarily bad for cities. On the contrary, poverty indicates a city is successful, because poor people want to go to prosperous places where there are jobs and prospects of upward mobility, both of which dense cities provide. Cities don’t make people poor. Rather, people who are already poor go to cities. And being poor in a dense city, to return to an earlier argument, is statistically better than being poor in rural areas in terms of income, health, and opportunity. He cites a few highly anecdotal examples of poor industrial-era urbanites who achieved upward mobility, such as the Kennedys in Boston, Richard Wright in Chicago, and Leila Velez in Rio, as proof that cities provide conditions for rags to riches stories. Glaeser disapproves of cases of perpetual urban poverty, such as the segregated African-American ghetto, whose conditions are serious impediments to upward mobility. But beyond maintaining density and increasing the number of charter schools, Glaeser offers little in terms of how cities can ensure that its impoverished citizens have viable pathways to get out of poverty today.

The claim that poverty benefits cities as long as it offers paths to success for the poor raises an issue with Glaeser’s overall argument. Glaeser completely accepts several influential and popular perspectives in academia and the media on contemporary economic transformations, such as Thomas Friedman’s (2005) “the world is flat” metaphor to describe globalization and Richard Florida’s (2003) “human capital” thesis that encourages attracting the best, brightest, and most creative workers. He also accepts the general notion that cities prosper when they are left alone to attract members of the “creative class.” While he rejects the industrial-era strategies of growth such as investment in infrastructure, he assumes that postindustrial-era investments of human capital, knowledge and information will produce conditions that will lead to widespread prosperity as conditions eventually did for many (mainly European immigrants) during the industrial era. It is true that many poor immigrant groups in the United States gained entry to the middle class over several generations, when cities produced goods instead of services, information and knowledge. But not only is this a highly American-centric story, it is far from clear that such a process will reoccur among today’s immigrant groups and for the urban poor. There is ample evidence that today’s service-, information- and knowledge-based economy does not have the equivalent of a unionized employment tier of the industrial-sector that stabilized the working class and facilitated the upward mobility of their children into the middle class. Without reflection on the distinctions between industrial and postindustrial economies, we are left with the evidence that urban poverty is still preferable to rural poverty. The city, therefore, will always win out.

## Harnessing the City's Central Resource: People

A central strength and concern in *Triumph of the City* is that it is primarily organized around solutions on how cities *should* be managed and developed based on economic analyses that measure such variables as “health,” “happiness,” “green,” “productivity,” and “sprawl.” The results from these metrics are often fascinating and enlightening, and in combination with the policy recommendations provide interesting food for thought. However, we miss out on how people *actually* live in and understand their urban environments and how such perspectives fit within his framework for change. Glaeser does not attempt to explain the ideologies of the preservationists he derides and pejoratively calls “NIMBYs,” nor does he offer a ground-up solution for addressing the concerns of the urban poor. He supports government policy that overrides local restrictions on growth, but at the same time promotes greater local control over development decisions. This uneasy conflict runs throughout the book. Furthermore, preservation policies have, in many cases, become important for city leaders to compete for tourism and external investment. Parisian leaders, businesses and residents may rigidly restrict the development of high-rise apartment buildings in the city center, which would increase density levels (and therefore facilitate productivity) and presumably reduce real-estate prices. But why visit Paris if you can't walk its beautiful low-rise boulevards? True, those boulevards are products of modernist development, but were working-class Parisians who protested the razing of their neighborhoods merely historical NIMBYs standing in the way of urban progress?

Glaeser's prodigious research and provocative discussions offer readers a new set of reasons for appreciating urban patterns of development and city life. His analyses should impressively convince us that cities offer many solutions to many ills that afflict our economy, social lives, health and happiness. But *Triumph of the City* is weakened by its omission of what we know about urban culture and human behavior in its list of solutions for what “should” be done to improve cities for all through democratic processes. If people are a city's most significant resource, as Glaeser contends, then people and their attitudes, cultures, and perspectives must be the starting point for solutions to its problems.

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**Richard E. Ocejo** earned his doctorate in sociology at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center and joined the faculty at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, as an assistant professor in fall 2009. His primary research interests are on the interrelationship between culture and economy in contemporary cities. Ocejo specifically uses the formation of nightlife scenes as an analytical lens for examining a broad range of urban issues, such as gentrification, contestations over community, the use of public space, the formation of cultural communities, and urban growth policies.

He is under contract to publish a book on his research on conflicts over nightlife on the Lower East Side with Princeton University Press. He has also conducted research on social interactions in the public space of the subway. Ocejo is currently working on a research project that examines the reinvention and incorporation of new cultural meanings into old working-class occupations. This ongoing work focuses on the attitudes and practices of people in several of these occupations to reveal emerging patterns of cultural production and consumption and the changing nature of

cultural work in the postindustrial economy. He is also editing a reader of classic and contemporary urban ethnographies that is to be published by Routledge in 2012.

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