

Stu's Notes #2

Stu's Notes provide selected passages from books that are of interest to Stu. They are primarily direct quotes, though some longer passages are summarized. They do not generally provide a thorough synopsis of the book. Rather, they capture individual facts or opinions of interest, which may or may not be reflective of the overall text.

Unlike other editions of *Stu's Notes*, this one is a précis rather than a collection of quotes.

Title: Home From Nowhere

Author: James Howard Kunstler

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Summary: The cities that we build have an effect on the society that we create. North American cities suffer from being sprawling, single-use landscapes. We would be better with higher-density, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented development. Not only is this more efficient, but it allows for more a higher quantity and quality of human interaction, and thus makes for a better society.

Highlights: The value of density and mixed-used development

Effect of cities on who we are

Ever since industry became ugly and noisy, we've brought in zoning laws which separate one land use from another. Industry is separate from shopping which is separate from housing. This protected us from the ugliness of industry. But it also meant that we had to drive to everything, because the only thing near our home was other people's homes. So, we created a society where you need a car.

This effect was made worse by deciding that everyone needs their own little piece of nature surrounding their house: the front yard and back yard. This forces the houses to be farther apart. That means that there aren't as many people living in any given area, so you don't have enough people to support amenities like convenience stores, schools, restaurants, etc. As a result, you are again forced to get in your car, because everything is further away than it would be if you had people living closer to each other. Finally, being spread out makes it hard to provide good bus service: if people lived closer together, more of them would be near a bus route and you could afford to run buses more often, which would encourage more people to use them.

Another point is that we no longer build pedestrian-friendly cities. The roads are designed to make life easy for car drivers, at the expense of pedestrians. (For example, the area where I work doesn't have sidewalks. You have to walk on the road. In lots of other ways, we build roads that are good for cars and bad for people.) In addition, we don't take as much pride in how our cities look: many of the commercial buildings today are purely functional, with little thought to their external appearance. And the buildings are set back from the roads, behind parking lots. All these things make for a less-appealing pedestrian environment. No wonder we all drive!

Some statistics about cars:

- The United States has 5% of the world's population but consumes 25% of the world's oil (half of this for cars).
- Americans use their cars for 82% of their trips, compared with about 47% for Europeans.
- The USA spends \$50 billion a year on their military presence in the Middle East, so that oil continues to be affordable.
- Shopping centres have free parking for customers, but their cost to provide this parking is tax deductible, so parking is actually paid for by the government (i.e., you and me).

Aside from the environmental effects, the poor layout of our cities also affects who we are as people. We don't interact with as many human beings, because we're in our car and they are in theirs. So we become more isolated from each other. Since our cities usually have all homes in one neighbourhood costing about the same, we are even more isolated from people of different income levels, careers, and attitudes. So we stop seeing other people's perspectives, because we never interact with those "different" people.

As people, what we instinctively like is a traditional town "Main Street", with shops on the main floor and people living on two or three levels above this. This means that lots of people are living in the area, which helps support the shops but also puts lots of pedestrians on the streets at all hours of the day and night. So it's safer, too. Today, in North America, you can only find this in resort towns, like Whistler. The result is a vibrant community with lots of people interacting. The same sort of thing exists at Disney World. People are willing to pay lots of money to spend time in this kind of environment, because they like it but they can't get it in the "real world".

In most urban areas today, the zoning bylaws actually prohibit this mixed-use kind of development. It's illegal. You must put all the people in one area and all the shops in another area. Even if a developer wants to build a good neighbourhood for people, it is easier for him to build a bad one, because it matches the zoning bylaws. (Fortunately, the zoning bylaws are slowly starting to change.)

In the midst of all this talk about cities is a chapter on organic farming! Modern industrial farming kills the soil. Now, you must use fertilizers because there are no nutrients left in the soil. Organic farming puts nutrients into the soil, thus allowing the plants to grow. In industrial farming, we irrigate lots of land, and this leaves a small deposit of salt.

Gradually, this builds up until irrigated land is too salty for farming. Finally, we don't buy things from local farms: most food travels long distances, so we are generating even more vehicle emissions that ruin our atmosphere.

Downtown New York City is given as an example of a better way to live. This is because there are enough people there to create a viable human habitat. "Within 300 yards of my mom's building on 68th Street, there are five food markets, a post office, two liquor stores, three Chinese, two Italian, and one Afghani restaurants, five saloons, four newsstands, three flower shops, a bike shop, a video store, a catering establishment, a locksmith, a picture framer, lamp, shoe, book, furniture, and electronics shops, two dry cleaners, three branch banks, four movie theaters, one legitimate theater, three public parking garages, a high school, a major hospital, and more freelance psychiatrists, dentists, chiropractors, haircutters and dog-walkers than you could shake a stick at."