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A SYNTHESIS OF JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER'S THEMES OF URBANIZATION AND THE IMPENDING OIL CRISIS

By William S. Humphrey

For years, the human race has been developing and innovating itself and its surroundings to make life more comfortable. We construct buildings to live in, cars to get ourselves from place to place, and roadways to connect us. These developments greatly facilitate life, but they do it at a cost. American social critic and author James Howard Kunstler literarily attacks Americans' need to add comfort to our lives without any regard to the devastating effects of the adding on to buildings, consuming more energy, and the focus on facilitating everyday life. Kunstler, in response to this movement, has written four books that detail his fears: *Geography of Nowhere*, *Home from Nowhere*, *The City in Mind*, and *The Long Emergency*. *Geography of Nowhere* critiques the effects of suburban sprawl, or the continuous spreading of suburban developments into rural areas. *Home from Nowhere* similarly explores the same but focuses on the idea of the "American Dream" while offering a solution on how to make that dream a reality and avoiding suburban sprawl. In *The City in Mind*, Kunstler gives account of the histories of several cities such as Paris, Rome, Tenochtitlan, and Las Vegas, deciding where they went wrong and what still lasts among the better examples of his idea of New Urbanism. In writing about these cities, Kunstler offers suggestions as to how America may be revived. Finally, in *The Long Emergency*, Kunstler sheds light on the consequences of the blatant disregard Americans (and other people worldwide) have towards the availability of oil and on how this end of the cheap oil era may cause other lasting problems of the most sinister kind. In these four works, Kunstler chillingly asserts the horrors of suburban sprawl and of the impending death of cheap, attainable oil and offers solutions to these problems.

First, the suburban sprawl movement has been plaguing the United States and other parts of the world for decades. This is mainly due to modernism in America. Modernism, as apparent in architecture, can roughly be defined as the attempt to break away from conventional ideals of construction. Today, the modernist movement is evident in many of the big cities that Kunstler decries. In *Geography of Nowhere*, he says that the movement

did its immense damage...by divorcing the practice of building from the history and traditional meanings of building; by promoting a species of urbanism that destroyed age-old social arrangements and,

with them, urban life as a general proposition; and by creating a physical setting for man that failed to respect the limits of scale, growth, and the consumption of natural resources, or to respect the lives of other living things.¹

Essentially, the modernist movement threw away everything characteristically “good” about construction and architecture of the past and lost every notion of their functionalities. Kunstler explicitly and directly attacks modernism in his harping on the horrors of suburban sprawl. The idea of suburban sprawl is difficult to critique because one would assume that it is inevitable. It is common knowledge that the earth’s population is ever-growing, and with a growing population, society needs to accommodate it somehow. The chief way that humans make space for themselves, though, is through constructing more buildings in more spaces not otherwise occupied. Rural areas once used for farming are now smothered in concrete and lavish country areas have become large neighborhoods. This sprawl mainly leads to an increased car-dependency and replacing of civic art with zoning. While this is not an entirely incorrect practice, urban planners could devise a better use of territory. The word “sprawl” connotes a horizontal spread. It may be more beneficial to sprawl upwards, though. By building taller buildings to accommodate the growing population, cities may create more room for their citizens in a way that neither steals valuable farmland nor adds radial distance within the city.

In this day and age, Americans are so accustomed to using vehicles as the main method of transportation that they pay no heed to the fact that they are car-dependent. There was a time when schools were within walking distance, when libraries and restaurants required no pit stops at gas stations, and when traffic was hardly an issue. Now, however, Americans are so far removed from each other due to suburban sprawl that they cannot even get to work without driving across town for forty minutes. This separation by car has given Americans an excuse to desynchronize with each other so much that the American ideal is being eclipsed by the disconnect. Kunstler argues that because of this disconnect, Americans “have lost [their] knowledge of how physically to connect things in [their] everyday world, except by car and telephone.”² Kunstler calls this a crisis—a crisis in which people are lost in the effects of suburban sprawl from which there is little to no escape. “This crisis of place,” he

¹ James Howard Kunstler, *Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 59.

² Kunstler, *Geography of Nowhere*, 246.

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says, “has led to the creation of a gigantic industry dedicated to the temporary escape from the crisis.”³ This “escape” comes in the form of places such as Las Vegas and other adult playgrounds where it is easy to ignore the effects of being disconnected from others.

This human disconnect, Kunstler maintains, also comes from the way in which American cities are laid out. A major point that Kunstler argues is that the way engineers and architectural artists design their masterpieces is very impractical. In fact, he specifically attacks modernism in Boston, and says, in *The City in Mind*, that “few architects have done as much wholesale damage to any city as the partners I. M. Pei and Harry Cobb did in Boston.”⁴ Many cities are technically and virtually unsafe for pedestrians. For example, one of Kunstler’s biggest critiques for modern cities is their streets: they are not very wide nor accommodating for pedestrians on sidewalks. The solution is simple—it would be better for both sidewalks and streets to be larger, with cars parked parallel to the street and sidewalk as a sort of protection from wrecks and other dangers of traffic. Also, as a sort of civic art, trees should be planted along the sidewalk to provide even greater protection. This would foster pedestrian enjoyment in walking along the streets as well as greater security along them. In addition to belittling the way in which cities are put together, Kunstler also describes how cities of today are rather ugly—there is nothing unique about them or worth caring about.⁵ This comes from the art of zoning in urban parts of the world. In *Home from Nowhere*, he says that what “results from zoning is suburban sprawl. Its chief characteristics are the strict separation of human activities, mandatory driving to get from one use to the other, and huge supplies of free parking.”⁶ Kunstler goes on to say that what Americans are building are cities not worth caring about. The levels of dilapidation and general unkemptness show that no one cares to keep them intact or to preserve the histories that they seemingly exude because, in short, they are not unique. Communities do not care about these suburban encroachments; they are just places to live. What little community there is has been or is being destroyed by

³ Kunstler, *Geography of Nowhere*, 217.

⁴ James Howard Kunstler, *The City in Mind: Notes on the Urban Condition* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 206.

⁵ James Howard Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere: Remaking our Everyday World for the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 22.

⁶ Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere*, 110.

zoning, and soon, entire cultures will be riddled with holes bored by suburban sprawl.⁷

At the heart of the problem of building cities not worth caring about is their overall ugliness, leading to Kunstler's overarching assertion that modern cities in the United States have no soul. According to him, suburbia mainly gains soul from the idea of civic art—creating art within cities in a manner that divulges culture. Kunstler says, “Civic art, then, is the practice of assembling human settlements so that they maximize the happiness of their inhabitants.”⁸ This means building homes in styles that are both aesthetically pleasing and still accommodating for the average American family of four. Another way that cities have no soul is how many Americans are mindless to the effects of suburban sprawl and how they have become virtually numb to the need for change. Kunstler says that Americans “have hardly paused to think about what we are so busy building, and what we have thrown away”⁹ and have lost their sense of community, which, “as it once existed in the form of places worth caring about, supported by local economies, has been extirpated by an insidious corporate colonialism that doesn't care about the places from which it extracts its profits or the people subject to its operations.”¹⁰ Summarily, suburban sprawl has created a monstrous gap in American society. The haphazard way in which urbanism mercilessly stretches across the nation is debilitating American communities and decreasing American satisfaction with itself—“Americans are suffering deeply from the centerlessness of suburbia.”¹¹

Second, James Howard Kunstler sees the end of the cheap oil era due to the blatant misuse of nonrenewable resources as a threat approaching America all too quickly. He primarily describes the end of cheap, attainable oil in *The Long Emergency*, but his other works also touch upon the subject. In fact, Kunstler says that the effects of suburban sprawl have been one of the biggest factors in the diminishing supply of resources: “America has now squandered its national wealth erecting a human habitat that, in all likelihood, will not be usable much longer, and there are few unspoiled places left to retreat to in the nation's habitable reaches.”¹² The heart of Kunstler's argument is that, first of all, there are little resources left, and, second, the American devil-may-care way

⁷ Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere.*, 125.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁹ Kunstler, *Geography of Nowhere*, 10.

¹⁰ Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere*, 22.

¹¹ Kunstler, *Geography of Nowhere*, 198.

¹² *Ibid.*, 114.

of overspending or misallocation of resources will cause a catastrophic panic never seen before—a Long Emergency.¹³

The majority of all American activity involves oil. The substance has been available to the United States for decades, but it is quickly running out as it is becoming increasingly necessary to catch up with the rate of technological advancement. Kunstler mentions in *The Long Emergency* how its discovery worldwide in the mid-twentieth century has further engrossed U.S. ignorance towards the availability of oil; its discovery in other parts of the world allows Americans to think that it could always be found in parts that would be willing to trade oil for economic development, especially in developing countries.¹⁴ This is not the case. In fact, many parts of the world, although economically oil-dependent, export oil to the U.S. at high prices. And, as Kunstler predicts, world powers may be forced to pit themselves against each other for the sake of obtaining a means to continue to uphold the standard of living. He notes this as the end to the Long Emergency—“world powers retreating into their own regional corners, left to deal with fateful contraction of their societies due to the depletion of cheap fossil fuels.”¹⁵ This belief may seem far-fetched, but Kunstler may be right. The globe is already regionalizing into economic blocs for the benefit of free trade zones and for sharing resources. Today, there are many regionalized areas in North America (NAFTA), South America (Mercosur), and Asia and Oceania (ASEAN). By joining together, these regions fortify themselves against the tentative economic fallacies of the world order. As a nonrenewable resource, fossil fuels would greatly foment the need to regionalize because their scarcity stress the economic climate.

Because the world has become so oil-dependent, its fossil fuels are depleting rapidly. Scientists are making substitutions for it. However, their substitutions are weaker or do not work at all. Oil continues to dwindle and no one seems to care. Kunstler dubs this a type of vanity, “narcissism,” even: the American oil addiction has captured a nation who seems not to be able to realize that it is even in a state of distress.¹⁶ This is how the American way of life is converging towards its own demise. This is a tragic occurrence in the Western world. What was once a beacon in the “despotic darkness of the night”¹⁷ that

¹³ James Howard Kunstler, *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Convergence of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁴ Kunstler, *The Long Emergency*, 43

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

helped to extend the earth's carrying capacity has now been cast aside as something that will respawn.¹⁸ This horrible management of oil and other fossil fuels is not a blatant waste of oil—it is a misallocation of resources.

Kunstler writes about how oil abundance is diminishing because the lusts of modern industrialism and materialism use it all without heeding the importance of saving. This oil is being used for wrong purposes and in perhaps the least efficient way possible, according to Kunstler: urbanization. America, though, loves urbanization. It seeks ways to build more so that life may be more comfortable, so that homes may be aplenty. This is exactly the “misallocation of resources” Kunstler deems “the colossal misinvestment that suburbia represents.”¹⁹ Instead of spending resources to build necessary things for the betterment of humanity or for creating alternatives to the resources that will soon be out of reach, suburbs are planted, all the while hurtling the nation into more debt. “We’ve spent our national wealth on an empire of junk that will soon lose even the marginal utility it may have possessed,” and instead of setting aside money and resources to build cities of value or to spread civic art, suburban sprawl creeps across the United States.²⁰ Moreover, the misallocation of resources would further put the United States as a whole into a state of despair, contributing to Kunstler’s Long Emergency. The worst part is that there seems to be no way out of the deepening hole of the Long Emergency; there is too grand an “investment in an oil-addicted way of life...that it is too late to salvage all the national wealth wasted on building it, or to continue that way of life more than a decade or so into the future.”²¹

Finally, Kunstler gives numerous examples as to how the United States, specifically the American culture, effortlessly throws itself into an abyss of materialistic consumerism; to these examples, though, he offers solutions as to how Americans may ameliorate their situation. What may help the most is a better economy, better neighborhood development, and the preservation of the countryside. Kunstler says that before a solution may be put into action there first must be a recognition of “the benefits of a well-designed realm, and the civic life that comes with it, over the uncivil, politically toxic, socially impoverished, hyper-privatized realm of suburbia.”²² With this realization, the want to create a society that merits fixing may be cultivated. How could this

¹⁸ Kunstler, *The Long Emergency*, 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere*, 154.

²¹ Kunstler, *The Long Emergency*, 28.

²² Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere*, 57.

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current state be fixed, though? Kunstler says that we do not have proper places to live in because we are basically creating habitable places just for the sake of living. Cities do not have charm anymore; towns will have to be rebuilt, and cities must be rethought in order to promote a more advanced economy and to give life a more artistic flair.²³ Kunstler first lauds the advantages of civic art in cities. He says that if there were more civic art instead of zoning, then societies may care more about the cities in which they live. America must do away with zoning, and instead implement it as civic art: “it is distinguished from civic art especially in its lack of concern for the human scale and for human psychological needs.”²⁴ Civic art is more than just making public spaces and architecture look more attractive—it is about fostering a unique way of urbanism so that more may be inspired by it to engage in the New Urbanism movement, to promote human satisfaction. Kunstler says that attacking suburbanization with civic art is possible, that it is within our power to construct places worthy to care about.²⁵

Along with a realization of what plagues America, it is important to recognize threats that may impede progress in the right direction. As suburbia began with an increased political and economic stability, a resiliency to bad decisions and cheap oil also entrenched themselves in suburban sprawl.²⁶ With this, a sense of community was lost. Americans became focused on how much *stuff* could be attained throughout life instead of actually caring about each other. Kunstler asserts that the way in which communities are misrepresented greatly hinders the New Urbanism movement: community sounds like a good idea in theory, but the government never actually does anything to promote it.²⁷ Civic art, then, is the approach Kunstler suggests to help foster community. This entails building parks that are more than just parks; adding more to streets than just lanes and stoplights; promoting pedestrianism or at least decreasing automobilism; and increasing an overall aesthetically pleasing atmosphere among cities.

Another impediment to the progress of the New Urbanism movement is the fact that it is generally thought that Americans are complacent with their current state. This is not the case. In fact, in the United States, there is a growing overall dissatisfaction in regard to livability. Kunstler says that this is ignored

²³ Kunstler, *Geography of Nowhere*, 248.

²⁴ Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere*, 123.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁶ Kunstler, *The City in Mind*, 73.

²⁷ Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere*, 194.

and taken for granted; those who push for suburbia genuinely believe that people want more of it, but Kunstler thinks that their current comfortability does not mean that they will live that way forever.²⁸

Kunstler also offers cities that exemplify what he views as New Urbanism done correctly. He largely does this in *The City in Mind*, where, among thrashing diatribes, he gives account of the histories of these cities and what they have done right. For example, while ripping Atlanta and Las Vegas to shreds, Kunstler lauds Paris' wide boulevards, Rome's historical preservation, and Boston's "self-confidence and self-consciousness," which he deems as missing in other American cities.²⁹ The latter three are older, though, and have experienced much trial and error in development. Therefore, it may be that he is forgetting their rich history and age, which will overshadow any nascent sentimental value in newer cities such as Atlanta and Las Vegas. This comparison between the cities he praises and the cities he deplores makes it obvious that he sees the American way of life as a toxic entity that has wasted the raw culture of its European ancestors. The American cesspool is richest in Las Vegas, according to Kunstler: "The trouble with Las Vegas is not that it is ridiculous and dysfunctional, but that anybody might take it seriously as a model for human ecology on anything but the most extreme provisional terms."³⁰ The cities in the United States that fit Kunstler's model for a city not lost in suburban sprawl are largely found along the east coast; the west largely represents the consumerism that lies at the heart of American ideals.

In addition to offering solutions as to how suburban sprawl may be made better, Kunstler decries the oil situation yet says that although it is certain that resources are to run out, there are still actions to be taken to slow the decline of the availability of resources. The cause of the rapid decrease of resources is the onset of industrialism.³¹ Kunstler sees the Long Emergency as a sort of apocalyptic age in which there will be "diminished life spans for many of us,"³² where "America will be challenged to produce enough food for its own domestic needs"³³ and "mortality will return with a vengeance."³⁴ Kunstler advises the usual conservation of resources and the attempt to switch to alternative sources of energy so that oil may be preserved. In the future, it will help that humans

²⁸ Kunstler, *The City in Mind*, 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

³¹ Kunstler, *The Long Emergency*, 161.

³² *Ibid.*, 11

³³ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

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will be forced to cut back on their consumerism, that spending will be reduced, and that imports and exports may be limited. This will, of course, severely cleave worldwide wealth, but that cutback will serve as a leveling effect that takes all other nations with it. Kunstler's main point in how the Long Emergency may be solved is that alternative energy that comes from natural gas, biomass, nuclear power, solar power, fuel cells will ultimately not work,³⁵ but "there is a possibility that humans will manage to carry on because we've been there before."³⁶

In his four works about the dangers of industrialization, James Howard Kunstler says that America is digging itself into a deep, deep hole from which it may not escape, and that the current predicament that lies before all Americans concerning the availability of oil will only worsen with time if something is not done about it soon. Kunstler calls for a society that will build homes and cities worth caring about, which will give America charm. He also seeks to change the current oil situation before we enter a heightened state of emergency in which our resources will deplete. Kunstler is avid in his writing about these two themes; his argument is one of specific concern but is well-supported by the plausibility of such events occurring. One can only hope that America becomes a place worth caring about so that Kunstler may be wrong in his assertion that one day it will meet its end under the duress of the impending oil crisis.

³⁵. Kunstler, *The City in Mind*, 74.

³⁶. Kunstler, *The Long Emergency*, 5.