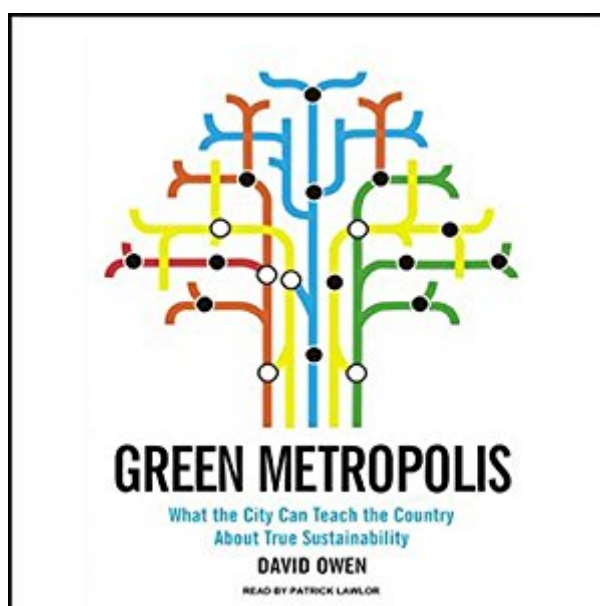


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Green Metropolis: What The City Can Teach The Country About True Sustainability



Synopsis

Look out for David Owen's next book, *Where the Water Goes*. A challenging, controversial, and highly readable look at our lives, our world, and our future. Most Americans think of crowded cities as ecological nightmares, as wastelands of concrete and garbage and diesel fumes and traffic jams. Yet residents of compact urban centers, Owen shows, individually consume less oil, electricity, and water than other Americans. They live in smaller spaces, discard less trash, and, most important of all, spend far less time in automobiles. Residents of Manhattan—the most densely populated place in North America—rank first in public-transit use and last in percapita greenhouse-gas production, and they consume gasoline at a rate that the country as a whole hasn't matched since the mid-1920s, when the most widely owned car in the United States was the Ford Model T. They are also among the only people in the United States for whom walking is still an important means of daily transportation. These achievements are not accidents. Spreading people thinly across the countryside may make them feel green, but it doesn't reduce the damage they do to the environment. In fact, it increases the damage, while also making the problems they cause harder to see and to address. Owen contends that the environmental problem we face, at the current stage of our assault on the world's nonrenewable resources, is not how to make teeming cities more like the pristine countryside. The problem is how to make other settled places more like Manhattan, whose residents presently come closer than any other Americans to meeting environmental goals that all of us, eventually, will have to come to terms with. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

A very interesting read. Further substantiate why I am glad I don't do long commutes. This city dweller will always refuse the sprawl...

Green Metropolis is an excellent thought provoking book and vividly highlights the disconnect between what the community perceives as being "green" and what truly is. I'll give this book 5 stars but would like to mention a few shortcomings. I thought his criticisms of Central Park and Park Avenue were completely off the mark, dead wrong. One of the biggest issues that, to my mind, haunts the thesis of this book is how to make dense urban living palatable and even desirable for a range of classes of people. Central Park was conceived at the very same time that New York was beginning to "experiment" with the large apartment building. Buildings such as the Dakota (1880) were designed specifically to lure well heeled city dwellers away from single family homes (townhouses) and into denser multi-story buildings with luxury space and services. (sound familiar?) Over the next 50 years many more even larger apartment buildings were built on both sides of the Park which was one of the most important ingredients in creating a DESIRABLE dense neighborhood. Far from being a built "criticism" of the dense city (as Owen may perceive it) Central Park was an enabler of density. As wonderful as Jane Jacobs' Greenwich Village of the 40's was, most "upper east side" types probably didn't want to live there then, and they certainly didn't in 1908. Similar points can be made about Park Avenue. I assume he is referring to that portion of Park Avenue above Grand Central Terminal. This urban boulevard was conceived as a cure for the urban blight of the Harlem and New York Railroad tracks (it covered the tracks) as well as an armature for dense luxury apartment building development on both sides. Yes, the ground floors of those buildings may seem a bit sterile to Owen (and others including myself) but the buildings well heeled occupants probably like it that way and can find all the urban vitality they want a block away on Madison and Lexington avenues respectively. Sure, Park Avenue is an "edge" or border between two similar neighborhoods, but that's what boulevards are supposed to do in urban planning. Park Avenue isn't a "criticism" of dense cities. The tree lined boulevard is one component in a tool box for making high density possible. They help establish scale and define precincts in large cities. They don't negatively impact density in any meaningful way. Owen seems to miss this point. Why did Owen bother to pick on these two NYC features in the first place. Didn't he already establish Manhattan as his "gold standard" in the first chapter? Owen is needlessly harsh and dismissive with Washington DC. He draws far too many erroneous conclusions from the hotel desk clerk who advises him to catch a cab for a 4 block trip. Yes, the central Mall area of DC is very vast and spread out and bereft

of urban amenities. Distances are farther than they look and the buildings are by design over scaled to work in that setting. But that is just one district and its flaws are not caused by axial boulevards per se but by misapplied land use concepts contained in DC's "City Beautiful" era Beaux-Arts McMillan Plan of 1901 which created a vast central "monumental core" area of monumental structures set in gardens. Neighborhoods like Foggy Bottom (near GW) and Dupont Circle, just to name two that are outside the McMillan Plan area, are dense, walkable and contain townhouses and 5 to 10 story apartment buildings and have plenty of street amenities. As for the oft-cited building height restriction in Washington the vast majority of Manhattan apartment buildings within Greenwich Village, above 75th street and within the boroughs of the Bronx and Brooklyn, would fit within Washington DC's height restrictions. Sure, Washington as a whole hasn't reached Manhattan levels of density but it's not Phoenix either. I believe that these are but three examples of how late 19th century planners sought to make density palatable at a time when cities were even grimmer and more dangerous than they are today. A close look at FL Olmstead's writings and city planning projects of the late 19th century reveals a man who actively grappled during the latter half of his life with the very same issue that haunts Green Metropolis, that is, how to get Americans to want or at least accept living in dense cities. Parker and Unwin grappled with these very same issues in England at the turn of the century. Nevertheless, I believe the fundamental thesis of this book is sound and Owen gets it out for all to see and react to with wit and conviction. While I wasn't expecting Owen to pull some sort of "blueprint" for a Manhattan-like "city of the future" out of the bag by the end of the book, I was still left wondering...OK so what do we do now? When the President is advocating both "green economy" initiatives AND \$8,000 first time home buyer tax credits in "drive til you qualify" suburbs in the same speech you are left wondering if anyone in the country besides Owen really sees how absurd and contradictory this. In the end, weaning Americans off the short term economic engine and emotional attachment of single family housing production and automobile oriented development may be a lot harder than weaning Afghan farmers off opium poppies.

Don't even know where to start-- Owen is brilliant, brutal, and correct. I bought this book along with several others on urban planning/studies, and found it the most thought-provoking. I actually followed up and bought 10 more paperback copies to hand out to friends/family, especially those considering relocating to the suburbs. Seriously!!!!

New York City is the most environmentally friendly city in the country. Anything we can do to make

other cities more like New York City or increase density within New York City so more people will live there is an environmental win. This is the case made in Green Metropolis. It does an amazing job of making this conclusion seem obvious thus showing many flaws in mainstream environmentalist thought.

A great book that breaks down the common beliefs "myths, really" of Priuses and environmental trends. Can solar power really save us? Well, maybe one day, but let's first discuss the realities of how it works today and how much (or little) it's really helping today...

Owen writes with a great sense of humor and with a tone of realism rather than scorn. He puts the facts out there and qualifies them with real life examples without sounding too argumentative. He uses the book to explain why there is no right or wrong answer to climate change and urban sprawl. Instead, he challenges the reader to think about what tools and processes are going to be most effective in combating this incredible challenge facing civilizations.

I am an architecture student and love urban density as opposed to suburbia (grew up in Kansas City). So I didn't need a whole lot of convincing, but I enjoyed his research and insight. Made me rethink a lot of things. Have already passed my copy on and recommended to half a dozen other people. Should be taken with a grain of salt, he has a huge anti-car bias and doesn't acknowledge the hurdle that it would be to get where he wants. But makes great argument, for the most part, on both sides of each debate.

After the first couple of chapters it's kind of like, "I get it... New York rules." but his writing style is quick and easy to read, as well as entertaining. Plus, I agree with his messages so I didn't even mind that it was repetitive at times.

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