

James Kunstler In Conversation



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Changes Coming to a City Near You?

with Tony Gill

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In the summer of 1996, I was sitting at my desk when I received a frantic call from my brother, an investment banker in New York. His tone suggested an urgency I hadn't heard since Black Monday in 1987- my senior year in college, when he barricaded himself in his cubicle and called to give me blow by blow accounts of how security guards were randomly hauling off his now ex-co-workers -sounded to me like he thought he was going to be next. "Listen to me" he started "I'm only going to tell you this once. You've got to drop what you're doing right now - ya hear me? Right now!" Was history repeating itself? "Ya gotta go to the nearest bookstore, and pick up a book called 'The Geography of Nowhere', by a guy named Kunstler - ya got it? Kunstler. K-U-N-S-T-L-E-R; it's completely explosive and it will change your life." At that moment I realized this wasn't an issue of urgency as much as it was one of psychosis. My brother's got issues, but being the obedient younger brother that I've always been, I saved changes to the excel spreadsheet I was working on and did exactly what he told me. Seems you can't fight genetics - I've got issues too.

I began reading that book on the subway ride home that evening, and within the span of 2 pages was hooked. Jim Kunstler described the world where we presently lived, and precisely how we arrived at that point. It wasn't an altogether pretty picture, as he described a culture that had largely been shaped by the proliferation of the car - and this culture was simply unsustainable, given the car's dependence on fossil fuel, a finite resource.

He vividly described how cities changed overnight to accommodate a network of roads that would decimate everything in their path, including thriving communities, and bemoaned an increasingly "cartoonish" landscape that

was left in the wake. Somewhere in all of this, he talked about smart planning, the future of cities as we know them today, and the factors required to bring them back to a manageable level. I began reading Kunstler books the way Mickey Spilane dime-store novels were being devoured in the 50's. My ultimate take on the guy? A controversial, "take no prisoners" approach, whose stylistic delivery made for great entertainment. Underneath the surface, however, opinions that were not only insightful, but very important and would have an impact on our society.

In the days immediately following September 11, when people began thinking of what the implications of the events on organizational structure would be, it was hardly a surprise that Kunstler's voice made its presence felt in the global media, with the release of a paper he co-wrote with Nikos Salingaros, titled The End of Tall Buildings. Today, Jim Kunstler, who has been described as a "thunderous proselytizer of new urbanism" has become an important voice in urban planning circles. Given the nature of Gill's central themes, I thought of no other person I would rather have kick off our Conversations with Gill feature than Jim Kunstler. He has graciously agreed, and we are very thankful. Although I may disagree with his position on some issues (such as the role of large organizations in the future), you will see he is as true to the Kunstler I have described above as ever, and quite frankly, I wouldn't want it any other way. I'm glad I acted on my brother's orders that day. Here's our conversation with Jim Kunstler:

Gill: Shortly after the terrorist attacks, you and Nikos Salingaros wrote a paper in which you stated that the age of skyscrapers is at an end, and the attacks exposed an underlying malaise with the built

environment - in the two years that have passed, has your thinking changed at all?

Kunstler: The design competition to replace the World Trade Center only reinforced my own sense of deep cultural malaise about the built environment. The finalists in the competition with one exception were teams of Fashionista SuperStar "cutting edge" architects whose professional mission is to confound all our expectations about city life. The result was a series of entries featuring tortured, tweaked, oversized buildings and forbidding voids that do not add up to meaningful public space between them. The winner was the worst of the lot, Daniel Liebeskind, whose buildings were the most torqued and tortured. The conclusion I draw is that collectively, as a culture, we are not ready to get serious about the meaning of city life. Rather, a catastrophe such as 9/11 simply becomes an opportunity to perform more stunts in the service of a Modernist cult-of-genius. Meanwhile, the places where most Americans actually live -- the un-Manhattans composed of strip malls and housing tracts -- just gets worse and worse.

Gill: Any additional thoughts about the redevelopment plans for the WTC site?

Kunstler: The only decent proposal for the WTC site in the recent competition was the entry by Steven Peterson and Barbara Littenberg, which was essentially a traditional urban square enfronned by traditional comprehensible buildings. Ultimately I doubt that buildings

Kunstler's Tomorrow...

larger than seven stories will be of any value in that setting. The current scheme is an exorbitant exercise in hubris.

Gill: In the paper referenced above, you quoted Leon Krier who defined the overloading of infrastructure and the public realm of the streets that contain them "urban hypertrophy"; have the terrorist attacks in any way acted as a catalyst for local municipalities to constructively address the problems associated with "urban hypertrophy"?

Kunstler: I don't think the 9/11 attacks have stimulated municipal authorities anywhere to rethink contemporary urban form. Every week another atrocious deconstructed museum is announced. But among real people who have to work in real buildings, I suspect there is much greater anxiety about working above the 20th floor anywhere, whether it is Los Angeles, St Louis, or New York. Anyway, my complaints about skyscrapers now extend to a consideration of whether we can even run them technically in the post cheap fossil fuel age which we are fast approaching. Office towers and the like are huge energy hogs -- between the HVAC and elevators -- and they may simply be unaffordable. The issues of urban hypertrophy are important but may end up being secondary.

Gill: Can those energy issues be neutralized by the development of "smart" buildings?

Kunstler: My sense of things is that we will be relying less on jazzy high tech to solve the problems of the future and more on traditional practices -- orienting buildings properly to the sun, taking advantage of natural light with windows, respecting human scale (buildings under seven stories), rediscovering true urbanism. In fact, contrary to the fantasies of many current architects and their servelings, I think we are entering a tech-poor future. The "smart" building is more of a trope to convince ourselves that we are fashionably

ahead of all the curves. But fashion and "cool" and all related posturings are going to mean nothing in the decades ahead. In fact, these things will all be seen for what they are: foolish pretense.

Gill: What are the factors required for success in designing and carrying out public/private partnerships?

Kunstler: Public / private partnerships are strictly a symptom of an age when the increment of development is titanic. I believe we are moving into a different age when the increment of development will be the single building lot, not the megaproject. The increment of investment in a much less affluent world will also necessarily be much smaller. I would not take the methods and practices of the late 20th / early 21st century to be normative. They were the products of a very special point in history: mature fossil-fuel based industrialism. We are about to leave that era behind.

Gill: Are there any large metropolitan areas in North America or Europe that have done particularly well in creating meaningful connections/partnerships between primary and secondary communities, where incentives are created for large organizations to spread operations between these locations?

Kunstler: See above. Otherwise, as far as I can see virtually all private / public partnerships inevitably produce mediocre or worse urban form and buildings.

Gill: From your own experiences, what have you seen as the major stumbling blocks in reinvigorating small communities?

Kunstler: The major stumbling blocks are a.) the collective belief that the suburban development pattern is fine and dandy and we ought to keep building more of it -- which way back originates in the hatred of the industrial city, and b.) the centrifugal economic tendencies of mega-scale enterprise, everything from Wal-Mart to factory farming which has

tended to destroy local networks of economic interdependence and hence true communities.

Those mega-scale enterprises are not going to survive the resource wars of this new century and the question will be whether we can rebuild local economic infrastructure. I believe personally it will be very very difficult and there will not be an orderly transition from the Wal-Mart world to the coming rearrangement of things. In fact, I believe it will spectacularly bloody and chaotic.

Gill: We have spoken with large institutions, who fundamentally agree with the notion that decentralization is positive; but one of the main problems in execution is creating incentives for knowledge workers to move away from the lifestyle amenities associated with large cities. How does an organization create incentives for its top knowledge capital employees to potentially relocate out of vibrant urban cores to smaller centers?

Kunstler: This problem will take care of itself. Our really big metropoli will probably shrink a lot in the years ahead. They were products of mature fossil fuel industrialism. Places like Detroit and St Louis have already contracted by more than half -- the next phase will be the decommissioning of their outer suburbs as suburbia becomes increasingly dysfunctional and devalued in a post fossil fuel future. These places occupy important sites and there will be something there, but not the Detroit or St Louis of 1950. I wouldn't even make the assumption that work will be organized as it is now -- "knowledge workers" etc. Rather, I believe our economy will be extremely austere and that Americans are going to have to find ways to be useful to their fellow citizens in their own communities. The electric grid may not be dependable twenty years from now. My guess is that we will experience something like third world conditions here in the USA. Local

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agriculture will become hugely important as industrial-style farming based on petroleum "inputs" comes to an end. We will see the rebirth of that erstwhile class, the homegrown agricultural laborers, because farming will be much more labor-intensive in the future. In short, I think your premise that the foundations of daily life will remain as we know them today is erroneous.

Gill: I understand the factors leading to the contraction of places like Detroit or St. Louis whose respective economies are arguably less diversified than larger centers, but do you think that argument is applicable to huge, metropolitan areas, such as New York or San Francisco whose economies are much more dynamic?

Kunstler: Yes, I do think that the biggest cities will shrink. The 2nd-tier cities like St. Louis and Cleveland have already gone down because they were strictly products of industrialism. The biggies such as NYC have retained their size essentially because "globalism" replaced industrialism for a while. But "globalism" in NY amounts basically to the absorption of immigrants. It may be hard to believe, but a time will come when that stops. For one thing, we are entering the age of Globalism-in-reverse when many of the economic relations -- such as outsourcing labor 12,000 miles away -- will no longer be possible,

especially as we enter the resource wars and fossil fuel shortages of the coming decades. I also suspect that the transmission of disease may become a huge issue in the years ahead and that we will have to take seriously the job of guarding our borders and points-of-entry. When New York ceases to be a magnet for immigrants, it too will commence shrinking just like Detroit and Milwaukee did.

Gill: In *The Geography of Nowhere*, you express concern in the rise of suburban "office parks" where access to them is dependant on car travel. We have seen many organizations in the past two years decentralize their operations and choose these very sites as secondary locations. Are there alternatives these organizations can consider?

Kunstler: I doubt that office work as it has been known in the age of the large corporation will remain a feature of everyday life. I think the nature of work will be transformed along much smaller-scaled and local lines. The future will be much more about remaining in place than the blurr of constant motion that has characterized recent decades.

Gill: Re-building "community" seems to be a recurring theme in your writings. What role do large organizations play in contributing to the development of community? Can you think of any examples of particular organizations that serve as shining examples of working in partner-

ship with their communities to create rich working and living environments?

Kunstler: I don't think large organizations will play much of a role, since they will struggle for their own existence (and ultimately succumb to irrelevance). Neither Wal-Mart or Microsoft or the Pew Charitable Trust will have a role in our lives by mid-21st century. But the mayor may be a much more potent authority everywhere. Or his equivalent. He may be a Duke.

Gill: Do you have any thoughts you could share with us, discussing how an organization might undo all the effort that has gone into building a centralized work culture by decentralizing it to other locations?

Kunstler: Large organizations are products of the age now passing. I wouldn't make any assumptions about the future based on them functioning as they do now.

Gill: Is large scale decentralization attainable? How?

Kunstler: Massive decentralization -- even autarky -- is coming whether we like it or not. All the mega-scaled entities, forms, and artifacts of recent decades will soon be utterly obsolete. We'll be returning to the small, local, human scale to survive the end of the fossil fuel fiesta. By the way, there ain't gonna be any hydrogen economy.

About James Howard Kunstler

James Howard Kunstler graduated from the State University of New York at Brockport, and worked as a reporter and feature writer for a number of newspapers and *Rolling Stone* magazine. He is the author of eight novels, including *The Halloween Ball*, and *An Embarrassment of*

Riches, and is a regular contributor to the *New York Times Magazine* and op-ed page, and a lecturer at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Dartmouth, Cornell, MIT, the University of Virginia, and many other colleges and professional organizations.

