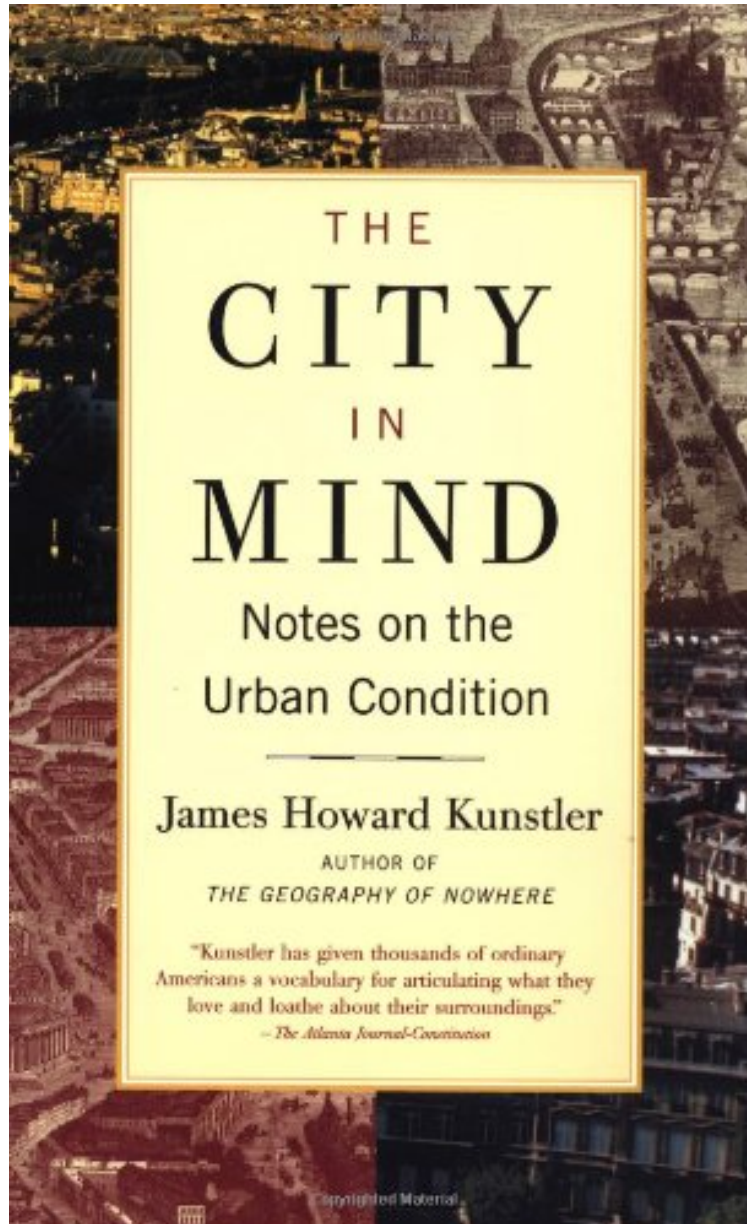


The City in Mind: Notes on the Urban Condition

James Howard Kunstler

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James Howard Kunstler : The City in Mind: Notes on the Urban Condition before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The City in Mind: Notes on the Urban Condition:

18 of 21 people found the following review helpful. Kunstler Strikes Again By Goodsalt Any review of a James Howard Kunstler book must nearly by necessity begin with a tip of the hat to his "Nowhere" books, to acknowledge

their quality, to (perhaps) lend an air of authority to the reviewer, but most of all to place in context his current offering. *The City in Mind* enlarges and deepens the concern he voiced in those previous books for the human condition, as it is affected by our man-made environment, specifically living arrangements such as cities and, even more particularly in those prior works - suburbs. While continuing to skewer our domestic "National Automobile Slum" which made his "Nowhere" books famous (look out Atlanta), Mr. Kunstler presents a broad and rich discussion of eight cities both domestic and foreign, in chapters devoted to, and named after, each city in question. Kunstler describes the historical evolution of each metropolis as it developed through the geography, culture, personalities, and psychology particular to it. In so doing he provides an explanation for the current condition of each, and attempts a prognosis. In earlier days, Kunstler wrote novels (*Embarrassment of Riches*, etc.), so he knows how to tell a story. And the story of each of these cities is vivid - so vivid in fact that Kunstler could easily bring his ample literary skills to bear on writing history and do it in a way that would enthrall people who otherwise find it lifeless. For example, the first chapter on Paris describes the massive renovation undertaken by Louis Napoleon and his able administrator Haussmann. Those for whom this era in the life of one of the world's most beloved cities is unknown (like me) will find the fascinating details provided (funding projects via convoluted financial schemes, providing water to the City of Light via Roman-like aqueducts) a revelation. Or read about the institutionalized Aztec cult of human sacrifice and cannibalism for a real eye-opener. From a broad description of the history of each city, Kunstler increases the resolution, focusing on aspects of urban and architectural design. He provides insight into why and how design principles, primarily the classical rules as developed by the Greeks and Romans, can enhance our surroundings where they are employed, or damage them where they are not. These aesthetic considerations are complemented by Kunstler's appreciation for tougher realities, such as the threats imposed by the peaking of global oil production on places like Las Vegas, or the scarcity of fresh water to places like Mexico City. In any case, his message is clear - we must change our man-made environment or risk those things we value most. No review would be complete without a mention of the mode of Kunstler's writing style used in the service of exposing the dreadful effects of malconfigured urban and suburban landscapes, a style termed "wickedly mordant" elsewhere. This description is too restrictive: one that I prefer is savagely eloquent, a phrase that captures the uplifting, positive aspects of his writing, while acknowledging his masterful sarcasm. Here's an eloquent example as he stands on a hill in Rome, surveying its ruins: "On the Palatine Hill, time's remorseless power is revealed in the silence that shrouds the enormity of a civilization's destruction and the palpable shock waves that still emanate from its physical residue". Beyond all this, I find his prose simultaneously funny, entertaining, touching, instructive, brutal - astonishingly expressive regardless of the subject - and it makes for marvelous reading. I made mention earlier of Kunstler's humor, which doesn't do his comedic skills justice; at times his stuff can be hilarious. These laugh-out-loud sections I have taken to reading to my family at their request. Read the description of tourists crossing 150-foot wide thoroughfares in Las Vegas in a sort of modern day "Bataan death march", and you'll know what I mean. Otherwise get the book and read it for all the reasons I've described. It's a special book, one that can evoke and recognize the tragic, and yet be comedic at the same time - classical in a way. In his Roman chapter, Kunstler asks if the classical can rescue us - his book will certainly help.

2 of 4 people found the following review helpful. 19th century classicism revived By D. Bowen *The City In Mind* is cast as an expansion on Jane Jacobs' ideas and on the New Urbanism movement. In fact Kunstler is an unreconstructed Classicist in antediluvian splendor, rather than a New Urbanist, and seems to be linked to the movement more by a (substantially aesthetic) enmity toward modern architecture (for this dinosaur gothic is modern) and urban planning, rather than by an interest in defanging the unfriendly and anti-humanistic elements of recent urban design. For Kunstler, Classicism is light, and all else darkness. This has unfortunate implications for the reader as Kunstler appears incapable of throwing any light on non-Classical architecture, city construction or urban planning, with the possible exception of historic water and sewerage. Since Kunstler's Classicism is of a type driven by building codes mandating building height, style, decoration, materials etc., and is influenced more by the centrally planned city planning fantasies of the Renaissance than by either the architecture or planning of the Renaissance or by the architecture and planning of antiquity, he is unable to say much of anything even about Rome, and is instead forced to launch into an essay on Classicism itself. Paris by contrast, held on a tight leash by the Classicist regulations Kunstler loves, comes in for much better treatment, and Kunstler's mix of history and commentary yields insights, although he fawns over Napoleon the Third and he fails to treat as significant the poor neighborhoods of Paris. The rest of the book however (Paris is the starting chapter), is opinionated, but completely untethered in its criticism. Opinionated criticism, even exceedingly biased criticism, can be amusing to read if it is humorous, or even well written, but Kunstler simply piles on scarcely related anecdotes against the (many) cities he does not like, along with swearing and other crude invective. To sum up, this book presents an apologism for a fairly rigid classicism, and unswerving harsh and unbalanced criticism, or at best historical trivia for the rest.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. I would take this class again By Jocelynn Y. Cooper Amazingly candid and readable. I had to buy this book for a class and it was a really great class because we discussed the cities in the book.

In the highly acclaimed *The Geography of Nowhere*, James Howard Kunstler declared suburbia "a tragic landscape"

and fueled a fierce debate over how we will live in twenty-first-century America. Here, Kunstler turns his discerning eye to urban life in America and beyond in dazzling excursions to classical Rome, the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, Louis-Napoleon's Paris, the "gigantic hairball" that is contemporary Atlanta, the ludicrous spectacle of Las Vegas, and more. Seeking to discover what is constant and enduring in cities at their greatest, Kunstler explores how America got lost in suburban wilderness and locates pathways that might lead to civic revival. His authoritative tour is both a concise history of cities and a stunning critique of how they can aid or hinder social and civil progress. By turns dramatic and comic, *The City in Mind* is an exceptional glimpse into the urban condition.

From Publishers Weekly Author and urban gadfly Kunstler (*Home from Nowhere*; *Geography of Nowhere*) has graduated from the nowhere-ville of previous titles to a punchy new study of eight cities in as many chapters: Paris, Atlanta, Mexico City, Berlin, Las Vegas, Rome, Boston, and London. Outspoken and straining for an aphoristic style, Kunstler lacks the overt humanistic impulses of urban studies writers like Jane Jacobs or Lewis Mumford. Instead, he favors snappy observations such as "If Las Vegas truly is our city of the future, then we might as well all cut our throats tomorrow." Kunstler tosses off insults to icons like the distinguished architect I.M. Pei: "Few architects have done as much wholesome damage to any city as the partners I.M. Pei and Harry Cobb did in Boston." He also dips into the unconsciously funny during a stroll through London's Hampstead Heath in which he turns out to be possibly the only urban scholar unaware of its gay cruising grounds, or what Kunstler calls "this somewhat sordid destination." While there are more serious reflections here, the book's generally ill temper is most likely to please readers who want a Don Ricklesian poke-and-prod version of urban affairs. And one is also left wondering what the "urban condition" might be in more easterly world cities. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal Cities are good. Suburbs are bad. Paris is good. Las Vegas is bad. Boston? Stay tuned. Kunstler, a vociferous, highly opinionated critic of the urban landscape, takes an uncompromisingly hard look at how eight cities (Paris, Atlanta, Mexico City, Berlin, Las Vegas, Rome, Boston, and London), either through inspired ideas or chaotic greed, became sublime expressions of the human spirit or of gigantic monstrosities and perversion. The subtitle is appropriate, for the author makes little attempt to be systematic or comprehensive in his discussions. Although he never raises the analysis above the level of a popular magazine article, his writing is admittedly bold and thought-provoking throughout. One can learn a great deal about Louis Napoleon's renovation of Paris, Hitler's and Albert Speer's megalomaniac architectural plans for Berlin, Bugsy Segal's "setting the tone" for Las Vegas, and more. The real charm of the book, however, is not Kunstler's rambles through each city's historical and geographical spaces but his plea for a more human-focused urban landscape. For public libraries. Glenn Masuchika, Rockwell Collins Information Ctr., Cedar Rapids, IA Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. From The New Yorker In "The Geography of Nowhere," Kunstler lamented the degradation of the American landscape. In this excitable, funny, sometimes high-handed disquisition on the future of metropolitan life, he alternately praises and damns eight of the world's most interesting cities. He hits hardest at Atlanta: more atrocity than metropolis, he says, the city is crippled by its excessive dependency on cars and developers, enslaved to its nonsensical suburbs, and incapable of functioning properly. Kunstler is equally dyspeptic in his portrait of Las Vegas ("If Las Vegas truly is our city of the future, then we might as well all cut our own throats tomorrow"), but elsewhere he is more balanced, as in his analyses of architectural and socioeconomic complexity in Rome, Berlin, and Mexico City. The fact that the author stays away from overanalyzed New York City is a blessing, but his pins-on-the-map approach gives this book a somewhat cursory feel, and his praise (especially for Boston, which he commends for its organic neighborhoods and its foot traffic) is ultimately less effective than his criticism. Copyright 2005 The New Yorker