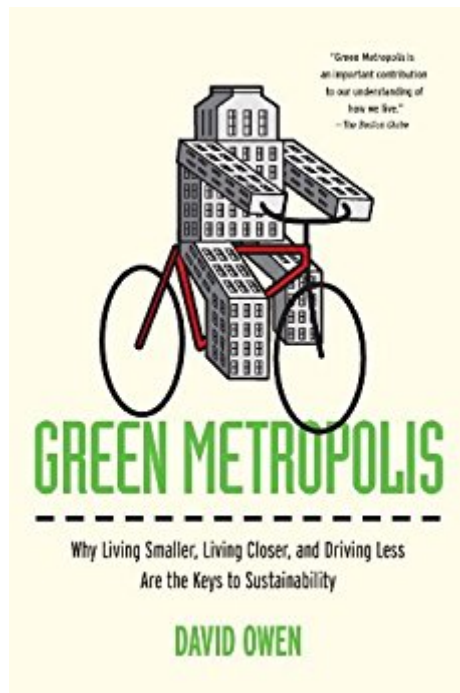


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Green Metropolis: Why Living Smaller, Living Closer, And Driving Less Are The Keys To Sustainability



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. From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

You have to read this book carefully, since at first glance it reads like a gigantic love letter to New York City, with the heart in "I (heart) NY" recolored green. And if you do read it that way, you're going to miss the point of what the author is saying. The problem with green thinking is that there's a whole heck of a lot of self-delusion going on, and when it comes to urban planning, David Owen has done a lot of looking into it, pointing out that at the end of the day, a lot of "green" purchases and behaviors are attempts to rationalize consumption without actually reducing it. Along the way, he steps on the toes of the great pastoral myth of environmentalism by showing how anti-city bias in conservation thinking has often served to promote the very urban sprawl it's supposed to be fighting. And Owen is hardly a global warming denialist or ecology "skeptic" either -- in fact, the primary focus of the book is on managing carbon footprints and just how poorly that's done. Owen's dirty little secret is something urban planners and ecological experts have been promoting for years with little heed from the general public -- that the density of cities like New York is key to creating a low-consumption environment, since distances between home, work, and other activities are relatively small and therefore cars are generally unnecessary. Owen looks at carbon footprint in per capita terms, showing how the average New Yorker uses something like one third of the total oil consumption of a rural Vermonter, and points out the absurdity of building a "green" corporate campus (his prime example being Sprint/Nextel's in Kansas) so far away from a city that virtually all employees have to drive to work.

This was a pleasant surprise. When I read the first chapter of Green Metropolis, I was worried that my fears about this book might be confirmed. After all, the blurb says that the author is going to reveal how New York City is more sustainable than Snowmass, Colorado or Burlington, Vermont. Hmm, I thought, there's not much to that. People in NYC don't drive cars, they live on top and side-by-side of each other (so they share heating costs), and they have great transit. Why should any readers find it surprising that NYC is so sustainable? I was kind of impatient, I suppose. I

remember sitting in a hotel near the campus of Sprint, on about 110th St and Metcalf in Kansas City, Missouri (a national epicenter of sprawl!) and telling my sister that its not enough to say NYC is the ideal for sustainability. You can't turn this into Greenwich Village, right? In other words, that kind of insight is lacking because it offers no value for what policy should do about the problem of sprawl. Moreover, I thought, why is David Owen singing the praises of NYC, when he moved from there to rural Northwestern Connecticut? Owen must have known that, because this book seems to understand that its not enough to laud NYC. What this book does it go step-by-step through many of planning's existing antidotes to sprawl and reveal their limitations. This is a book about challenging the assumptions that govern current sustainability policy. The problem, he says, is that New York was built not by policy makers with the right vision, but by lucky timing. It was good timing because most of the city was laid out before the car.

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 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 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.

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