

Up, Up, Up

NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
2/13/11

A Harvard economist acclaims the environmental virtues of cities.

BY DIANA SILVER

EDWARD GLAESER, a Harvard professor of economics, has spent several decades investigating the role cities play in fostering human achievement. In "Triumph of the City," he has embedded his findings in a book that is at once polymathic and vibrant.

TRIUMPH OF THE CITY

How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier.
By Edward Glaeser.
Illustrated. 338 pp.
The Penguin Press. \$29.95.

Glaeser's essential contention is that "cities magnify humanity's strengths." They spur innovation by facilitating face-to-face interaction, they attract talent and sharpen it through competition, they encourage entrepreneurship, and they allow for social and economic mobility. Glaeser

Diana Silver is an assistant professor of public health at the Steinhardt School of New York University.

takes us on a world tour of urban economics, collecting passport stamps in Athens, London, Tokyo, Bangalore, Kinshasa, Houston, Boston, Singapore and Vancouver. Along the way, he explains how urban density contributed to the birth of restaurants, why supermarket check-out clerks demonstrate the competitive advantage such density confers and how the birth of Def Jam Records illustrates the way cities spur artistic innovation. Here, his enthusiasm for cities is refreshing.

Glaeser's got some tough words for poorly reasoned public policies that feed suburban living: federal highway programs, the mortgage tax deduction, low gas prices. While he understands the lure of big houses and lush lawns, he's against subsidizing them. And he chastises city planners in Paris and Mumbai, making a passionate argument for building up — and up and up.

Though he admires Jane Jacobs's insights into the virtues of mixing residential and retail together, he thinks her prescription for small-scale neighborhoods is wrongheaded. He'd much rather see neighborhoods of skyscrapers than acres of suburban developments. Greater density is the goal:

more people means more possibility. Even when writing about the developing world, Glaeser is urfazed by threats of overwhelming sanitation systems, unsafe housing or impossible congestion. These, he suggests, are problems more readily solved than the environmental consequences of sprawling suburban life.

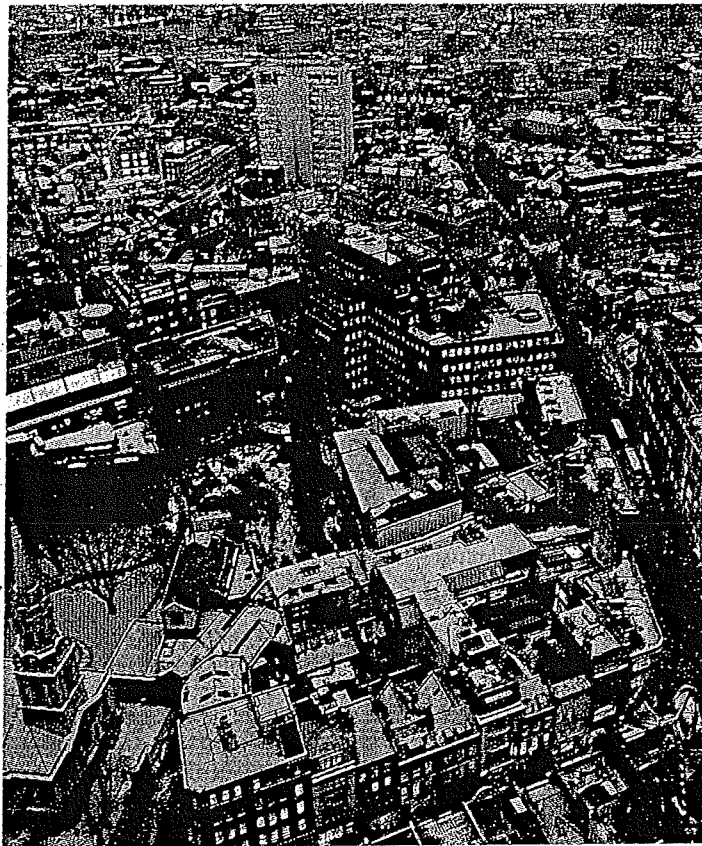
Glaeser is scathing in denouncing local conservationists for their devotion to "leafy suburbs," which he sees as being at odds with true environmentalism. Reminding us that even Thoreau benefited

Glaeser would prefer to see neighborhoods of skyscrapers than acres of suburbs.

from association with a circle of urban intellectuals, he insists that suburbanization is producing an ecological disaster. Growth that's restricted in temperate areas like coastal California is pushed into temperate ones like Las Vegas where air-conditioning is leading to a carbon emissions nightmare. What will happen, he asks if China and India emulate us? Paradoxically, fighting for local green space in the Bay Area undermines our ability to be global environmental activists.

Clearly, Glaeser loves an argument, and he's a wonderful guide into one. "Triumph of the City" is bursting with insights and policy proposals to debate. Sometimes that's a bit of a problem: there's a lot of policy in this book, but not a lot of politics. It's about ideas, not implementation. Some of those ideas may strike you as problematic: the increasing density he credits Atlanta with has been accompanied by an explosion of suburban sprawl. Others, like tilting the benefits of the tax system away from suburbanites and toward city residents, may sound absolutely unrealizable. And still others, like his advice to cities in decline to "shrink to greatness," seem a little tone deaf, especially since those cities are steadily losing the skills and talent to find that greatness.

No matter though. If separating ideas from implementation can leave you a little lightheaded, you'll still walk away dazzled by the greatness of cities and fas-



I just finished this book and it is relevant in many areas as to the potential of LA. Jack.

Chamblin's Book Store on N. Laura has ordered in several copies, due in today 2/18