
Joel Kotkin argues that what matters most in cities is people. He offers an alternate perspective to the increasingly prevalent view that urban density is desirable, by highlighting the inequality, low fertility and even unhappiness in dense cities. Described as America's 'uber-geographer' by the New York Times, Mr Kotkin is the author of critically acclaimed books, of which the latest is *THE NEXT HUNDRED MILLION: America in 2050*. He is a Distinguished Presidential Fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University in California, and a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Civil Service College in Singapore. He is also a respected speaker and consultant, and the executive editor of www.newgeography.com.

In this urban age, rarely do we ask the question: what is a city for? Among the vast majority of urban pundits – Richard Florida, Ed Glaeser, Andrés Duany, etc. – the city is promoted primarily as an engine of productivity, a device to reduce the dreaded 'human footprint', a Lego set for architects, a source of windfall profits for connected developers or simply 'an entertainment machine' for the aspiring masses.

What we forget is the human aspect of the city. Even a well-run city like Singapore can work productively and yet engender among the highest levels of pessimism of any advanced country on earth. A city is not a clock, or a machine, but a place for biological organisms called humans, who need to reproduce to survive.

What we need to focus on, is building a *Human City*. This is different than simply being a 'World City' that battles incessantly for bragging rights. A city like Singapore is global by its very location, history and the composition of its population. Its primary means to maintaining its edge will not depend ultimately on following a script laid down by global mega-corporations.

Corporate pundits suggest the island needs another five million people. It's hard to see how a swelling population will improve life for the Republic's citizens. Singapore can only be successful, long-term, if it works for Singaporeans.

COUNTERPOINT

The HUMAN CITY

by Joel Kotkin



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In this respect, we need to place people and families, not buildings, profit maximisation and the often bloated notions of ‘sustainability’ at the centre of conventional urbanism. This can take many forms, in American urban neighbourhoods and suburbs, as well the heartlands of Singapore. Our focus should be not on the grandiose, but on human scale, placing family life in the centre of the urban landscape, providing greater opportunity for small and home based businesses.

Ultimately cities should be about creating opportunities, what Descartes called “an inventory of the possible”, for a broad range of the population. The kind of luxury city promoted by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg propels the middle class out of cities and in the case of Singapore, perhaps out of the Republic as well.

High-income individuals, some singles and childless couples may yearn for terraces in Corbusian towers, but this is preferred by and affordable for only a relative few. People need more human scale development, with lots of open space for people to breathe and reconnect with nature. Singapore may not be able to



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build North American-style suburbs, but it can design communities that work for families.

Dense urbanisation has economic, environmental and demographic implications that need to be acknowledged and mitigated. By its nature, density is expensive. Where densities are high, real estate prices tend to follow. The more a region is concentrated, the greater the tendency to bifurcate by class and income. Manhattan, for example, has an income inequality level twice that of the United States, and one that approaches developing countries like Namibia.

Contrary to claims by urbanists, the environmental benefits of ‘cramming’ are not necessarily correct. Studies in Australia and Spain reveal that energy expenditures per capita are higher in dense city households than in the suburbs.

In addition, a significant portion of warming around the planet can be traced to what is known as ‘the heat island effect’. In essence, as you raise density and spread concrete, you create higher temperatures, which is one reason why urban cores such as Manhattan, or even downtown Phoenix, are so much

warmer than surrounding areas. Density has its environmental benefits, but they are far less universal than commonly asserted.

In a recent paper we produced with Singapore's Civil Service College, and Chapman University in California, we showed that the biggest impact flaw with densities lies with demography. Studies in the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Canada and East Asia show a strong correlation between high densities and low fertility rates. In Manhattan the majority of households are single. In Washington, DC, 70% of all households have never had children. High-density, high-cost environments in East Asia such as Taipei, Tokyo, Singapore and Hong Kong have the lowest fertility rates on the planet.

The implications of growing childlessness – particularly in Asia and Europe, but now even the United States – are profound. Without a sufficient new generation, all these countries will become economically unsustainable as an aging population is supported by ever fewer workers. Innovation, social cohesion and economic growth all necessarily suffer in a geriatric, post-familial environment.

Japan represents the cutting edge of this new reality. Its slow birth rate and high degree of singleness – where roughly one in three Japanese women of the current generation will never marry – has already created a financial disaster. Pensioners continue to exact more revenues while the workforce shrinks. In Japan even sex is going out of fashion; a growing number of young Japanese men and women express little interest in the opposite sex. Japan, arguably the world's densest major nation, will shrink to half its size by 2070 at current fertility rate. Tokyo, home to 40 million today, will be the abode for a very old population almost half that size.

Building the Human City provides an alternative to this largely childless, and perhaps somewhat joyless, future. We need to imagine a future that retains the magic of cities without sacrificing all the comforts of the village. A successful urbanism needs to be productive, and also a congenial home to families and children. Without one, the other is ultimately impossible.



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