

GREEN METROPOLIS

Why Living Smaller, Living Closer, and Driving Less are the Keys to Sustainability

by

DAVID OWEN

“David Owen always delights with his elegant insights and his challenges to conventional thinking. In this book, he does so again by puncturing the myth of ecological Arcadia and reminding us why living in cities is the best way to be green. It’s a triumph of clear thinking and writing.”

—Walter Isaacson, author of

Einstein: His Life and Universe and *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*

“*Green Metropolis* is a bracing, important work of contrarian truth-telling. Old-fashioned cities aren’t just more interesting, more exciting, more fun—they’re also by far the most sensible and efficient way to organize modern life. We city-dwellers live in the places we are waiting for.”

—Kurt Andersen, author of *Heyday* and *Turn of the Century*

“David Owen advances the provocative argument that the asphalt jungle is greener than the places where most Americans live. A hard-hitting book that punctures many eco-balloons.”

—Witold Rybczynski,

author of *City Life* and Meyerson Professor of Urbanism at University of Pennsylvania

New York City is widely considered an ecological nightmare, a wasteland of concrete and high-rises, diesel fumes and traffic jams, garbage and pollution. But in the groundbreaking work of contrarian environmental thinking that is **GREEN METROPOLIS (Riverhead Books; Publication Date: September 17, 2009; ISBN: 978-1-59448-882-5; Price: \$25.95)**, David Owen declares New York City as the greenest community in America.

It’s intuitive to view urban centers like New York as environmental crisis zones—they concentrate such high levels of human activity, they manifest nearly every disturbing symptom of civilization’s unharnessed growth: the smoke, the trash, the crowds, the gridlock. But this kind of assumption obscures an important environmental truth. Per capita, New Yorkers actually consume less oil, water, and electricity, generate a lower rate of greenhouse gases and have a smaller carbon footprint than other Americans—including residents of supposed environmental hubs such as Portland, Oregon or Snowmass, Colorado. The most damaging effects that humans have had on the environment has involved the burning of fossil fuels, and by this measure New Yorkers are practically prehistoric compared with other Americans, and they consume gasoline at a rate that the country as a whole hasn’t matched since the 1920’s, when the most widely owned car was the Ford Model T.

The key to New York's relative environmental innocuousness is its density. With one and a half million people on a twenty-three-square-mile island, Manhattanites are forced to live in small quarters, which means fewer rooms to light, heat, cool, and power, no lawns to water, and less space for superfluous possessions and unwieldy appliances. Because of the city's extreme compactness, everything and every amenity in the city is reachable by foot, bicycle, or public transit, and this, combined with prohibitively scarce parking and impossible traffic, means that most residents live without a car. Coerced by the infrastructure of the city itself, New Yorkers are forced to be green. The city's efficiencies, as in other dense cities in and outside of the U.S., are built-in.

Environmentalists have long hailed leafy suburbs and seemingly natural exurban areas as places of ecological virtue, while in truth residents of such areas consume more energy and water and produce more waste per capita than residents of densely populated cities like New York. Conventional environmental thinking has led to backwards initiatives that attempt to make dense cities more like the country rather than the other way around. Often these initiatives, which focus on easing the intensity of development, creating spaces around buildings, and reducing traffic congestion—undermine the very things that make the city so efficient. Slowing development and creating more space between businesses would only make New York less walkable; reducing traffic would make driving more desirable and encourage more residents to buy cars. Similarly, the advent of supposedly green technology can do more harm than good if it encourages dispersion or undermines the efficiencies of city life—the development of small, fuel efficient cars aren't green if they compel people in urban areas to drive who would otherwise walk, bike, or take public transportation.

But more to the point, these kinds of initiatives reveal an essential error in environmental thought. The most pressing environmental problem we face isn't how to make the teeming city more like the pristine countryside. Instead, the problem is how to make other communities more like the city, where residents come closer to meeting environmental goals than anywhere else in the country. And perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that the solutions aren't in the energy-related scientific breakthroughs always just on the horizon, but that the means to sustainability have been here all along, and are already at work in dense metropolises around the world where people are living smaller, living closer, and driving less.

In **GREEN METROPOLIS**, David Owen conceives a new environmentalism, turning what we think we know about the environment on its head and re-envisioning a sustainable future that looks less like Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond and more like the populous megacities of Hong Kong or New York. Endlessly illuminating and defiantly brilliant, **GREEN METROPOLIS** is a vital new classic of environmental literature, and one that should be required reading for every American at a time when our assault on the world's nonrenewable resources has become more treacherous than ever.

About the Author:

David Owen has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 1991. Before joining *The New Yorker*, he was a contributing editor at *The Atlantic Monthly*, and prior to that, a senior writer at *Harper's* and a frequent contributor to *Esquire*. He is also a contributing editor at *Golf Digest*, and the author of a dozen books. He lives in northwest Connecticut with his wife, writer Ann Hodgman, and their two children.

About the Book

GREEN METROPOLIS: What the City Can Teach the Country About True Sustainability

By David Owen

Riverhead Books

Publication Date: September 17, 2009

Price: \$25.95

ISBN: 978-1-59448-882-5

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