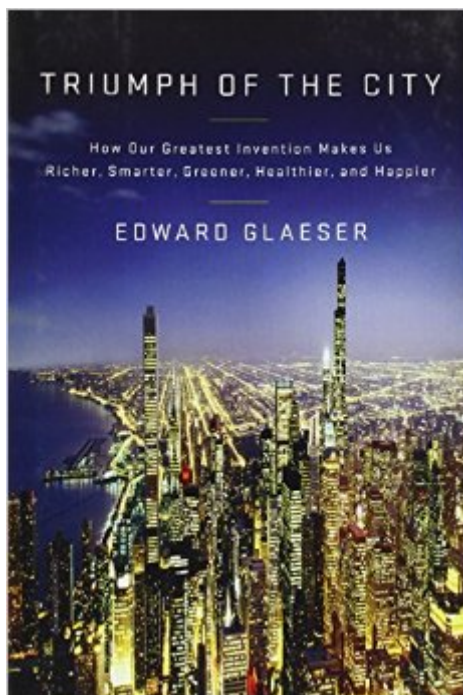


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Triumph Of The City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, And Happier



Synopsis

A pioneering urban economist offers fascinating, even inspiring proof that the city is humanity's greatest invention and our best hope for the future. America is an urban nation. More than two thirds of us live on the 3 percent of land that contains our cities. Yet cities get a bad rap: they're dirty, poor, unhealthy, crime ridden, expensive, environmentally unfriendly... Or are they? As Edward Glaeser proves in this myth-shattering book, cities are actually the healthiest, greenest, and richest (in cultural and economic terms) places to live. New Yorkers, for instance, live longer than other Americans; heart disease and cancer rates are lower in Gotham than in the nation as a whole. More than half of America's income is earned in twenty-two metropolitan areas. And city dwellers use, on average, 40 percent less energy than suburbanites. Glaeser travels through history and around the globe to reveal the hidden workings of cities and how they bring out the best in humankind. Even the worst cities-Kinshasa, Kolkata, Lagos- confer surprising benefits on the people who flock to them, including better health and more jobs than the rural areas that surround them. Glaeser visits Bangalore and Silicon Valley, whose strangely similar histories prove how essential education is to urban success and how new technology actually encourages people to gather together physically. He discovers why Detroit is dying while other old industrial cities-Chicago, Boston, New York-thrive. He investigates why a new house costs 350 percent more in Los Angeles than in Houston, even though building costs are only 25 percent higher in L.A. He pinpoints the single factor that most influences urban growth-January temperatures-and explains how certain chilly cities manage to defy that link. He explains how West Coast environmentalists have harmed the environment, and how struggling cities from Youngstown to New Orleans can "shrink to greatness." And he exposes the dangerous anti-urban political bias that is harming both cities and the entire country. Using intrepid reportage, keen analysis, and eloquent argument, Glaeser makes an impassioned case for the city's import and splendor. He reminds us forcefully why we should nurture our cities or suffer consequences that will hurt us all, no matter where we live.

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Customer Reviews

This is a book I thought I would love, but as I read it I began wishing there was another, tighter, more focused book I could be reading. The book is packed with factoids, most of the post hoc ergo propter hoc type, but, for me at least, it doesn't really gel as a convincing, connected argument. There are points made that make sense - some cities have a lot of poverty because they attract poor people seeking opportunity, cities with diverse economic bases are less susceptible to an economic shock linked to the decline of single industry, it's good for cities to have strong educational institutions, that London is a fun place helps make it attractive as a place to live for skilled professionals, skyscrapers are an efficient way to house businesses and people, there are still advantages to be had in close physical proximity. Some of these points are old hat; some are relatively fresh and even against the received wisdom. For an awful lot of these points, though, the ultimate response is: So What? The whole seemed like a lot less than the sum of the parts. The experience was less like reading a focused essay than browsing through Google news or an RSS feed on cities - a lot of information, somewhat organized, but nothing like an actionable vision. At times the data triumphantly trotted out was inconsistent (Silicon Valley succeeds as a kind of city, dispersed into office parks thought it be; Route 128 failed because being dispersed into office parks as it is it lacked the physical connections of a true city). At times, it fails to grapple with the implications of the obvious (yes, the theater in London or New York is great, but the seats are often filled with tourists because the locals are too busy working to make it).

Producing a comprehensive and entertaining book on cities' value to society requires a scholar with a lifelong urban devotion whose background and skills cut across traditional social science disciplines. Fortunately, the world has Ed Glaeser. Each of Glaeser's chapters seamlessly blends historical narrative, present day travelogue, history of urban thought, rigorous empirical research, and policy prescription. By presenting each of these well, he produces a convincing polemic. As

more academic economists begin to popularize their research, Glaeser is distinguished in both the quality of his scholarship and the importance of his subject to society. Much of Glaeser's work is refuting conventional wisdom against cities: we learn urban life can be green, skyscrapers need not destroy local character, congestion ills can be solved, and inner-city education need not be dreadful. Glaeser does not have all the answers to the problems he addresses, and occasionally his arguments are weak. But what fun is reading about a subject with nothing left to debate? Glaeser is most convincing on one central policy theme: inept government makes urban living less accessible than it should be. These policies include overzealous historical preservation and height limits, subsidization of home ownership and auto travel, oversupply of public infrastructure, various forms of NIMBYism, and the more complex failures surrounding urban education. These issues touched Glaeser deeply as the tilted landscape led him to pick suburban life for his own children. The book's subtitle could use clarification. Glaeser is not arguing that everyone will be happier in cities.

This is two really wonderful books and one less wonderful book all wrapped into one. The first book, which is terrific, is a brisk and accessible tour through a series of real-life experiments deeply grounded in data: "A study of corruption in Indonesia found that the stock prices of companies whose leaders stood closest to that country's dictator in photographs suffered most when the leader fell ill." More: "When American cities have built new rapid-transit stops over the last thirty years, poverty rates have generally increased near those stops." It's not that transit stops cause poverty, he explains; rather, poor people value being able to get to work without the expense of owning a car. That insight, like many of those mentioned by Professor Glaeser, bears on the main topic of his book, the economics of cities. The author proves useful as a guide to the research of others as well as in conveying his own thoughts. "Nathaniel Baum-Snow, a Brown University economist, has calculated that each new highway passing through a central city reduces its population by about 18 percent." And, "Dartmouth economist Bruce Sacerdote found that children displaced from New Orleans by Katrina had a significant improvement in their test scores. He found the biggest beneficiaries of the exodus were children from poorly performing schools who left the New Orleans area altogether." It's the counterintuitive nature of these insights that makes them particularly delicious -- that expensive highway project that the local congressman fought to get funded turns out to be bad for his city, and Hurricane Katrina turns out to have been a good thing for the education of its "victims."

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