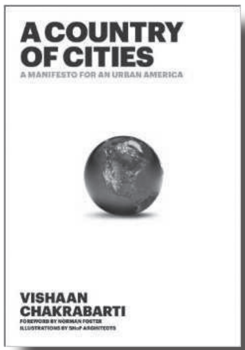
Book Reviews



A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for an Urban America
Vishaan Chakrabarti
Reviewed by Adam Levin

Vishaan Chakrabarti has an axe—or two—to grind. Federal subsidies for oceanfront homes, green technology trends such as fluorescent light bulbs, most people working in the planning profession today—all these and more are skewered in *A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for an Urban America.* Chakrabarti's purpose in taking these subjects to task is to show the peril that America threatens to unleash upon the world should its influence in planning, real estate and spatial trends continue to resonate globally. The unifying theme of Chakrabarti's book is a fight against what he considers to be America's most profligate and enduring export: suburbia.

Suburbia, as Chakrabarti tells it, is responsible for untold numbers of ills in modern America, and, as it continues to spread outside of the west, for many of the worldwide problems likely to metastasize unless we as a society return to our cities. Climate change, of course, but also loss of productivity, public health concerns such as hypertension, and more nebulous metrics such as decreased levels of happiness and familial unity are just some of the negative outcomes laid at the foot of American-style suburban living.

But Chakrabarti, an architect and professor at Columbia University, has an idea to combat the perniciousness of suburbia. Hyperdensity, which Chakrabarti defines as a place capable of supporting significant ridership for mass transit, or with a minimum of thirty housing units per acre, is the necessary antidote for suburbia's venom. The first half of A Country of Cities lays out why cities—specifically hyperdense cities—are the ideal to be copied. The reasons are threefold: hyperdense cities have greater economic success, less impact on the environment and lead to their residents experiencing more joy and better health. The second half of the book focuses on Chakrabarti's ideas on how these model cities might actually be built.

There are two main problems with *A Country of Cities.* The first is the fact that, unfortunately, Chakrabarti fails to tell the informed reader much information that he or she is likely not already aware of. The old, tried-and-true chestnuts of smart-growth and sustainable literature and thinking are all present and accounted for: in one breathless section Chakrabarti might be railing against overly restrictive zoning and historic preservation efforts which, in their zeal to keep everything as it is, actually deter community and economic progress. Next, he is going after NIMBY-ism and illustrating to the reader how the true cost of a gallon of gas is significantly more than what we pay at the pump. The federal mortgage interest deduction (along with other subsidies) is lambasted as favoring low-density growth at the expense of cities, which are the true drivers of economic growth and societal happiness. The issue is not that these topics are not troublesome or worthy of discussion, it is that Chakrabarti fails to add much to the conversation, consistently making observations and connections that have either been pointed out previously or which could probably be made by someone who has not spent years in the planning and real estate fields. A deeper analysis of these issues would have made for a more satisfying read.

Then there is the fact that Chakrabarti presents little proof that his theory of hyperdensity would actually engender the results that he envisions. If Chakrabarti did do his own original research in this respect, it is not presented to the reader. For example, Chakrabarti argues that density brings greater prosperity compared to sprawl, positing that clusters of industry and creative class human capital are necessary to jumpstart a region's economy, and that those things are most easily attained in a dense city. That certainly may be, but Chakrabarti does not provide the reader with any evidence that his threshold of thirty

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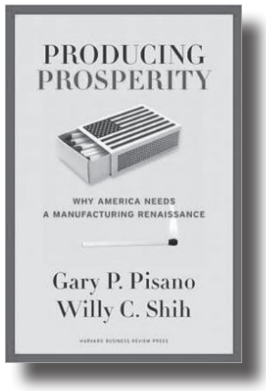
housing units per acre will bring all this to bear. Similarly, there is scant backup for his claim that hyperdensity will support parks, public spaces and cultural buildings and therefore will contribute to "our joyous experience of streets and sidewalks, gardens and parks." These things all sound nice and certainly make sense from a logical point of view, but, as a planner, is it too much to ask for some data to validate these assertions?

All of this is not to say *A Country of Cities* does not have some fine points. The book's best section perhaps comes when Chakrabarti discusses the wide range of interrelated factors in a city or neighborhood which are necessary for its residents to lead successful and happy lives. In the book's second half, where Chakrabarti lays out his precepts for building model cities, he writes that not only density, but also infrastructure and affordability must be considered when deciding whether or not a situation is to be emulated. He then takes a wide view of infrastructure, including in his definition not only the standard roads and utilities one would normally think of, but also institutional infrastructure like schools, health care facilities, cultural centers and parks. Chakrabarti has a firm handle on the fact that people today expect to have all kinds of services at their fingertips, and that areas which cannot provide a wide web of amenities are likely to be left comparatively behind. Chakrabarti dubs this scenario the "infrastructure of opportunity," and his argument that government investment is necessary to create this environment largely rings true.

Another interesting section revolves around Chakrabarti's treatment of how much cities, states and regions put into the national economy and subsequently receive back out in the form of government spending. Chakrabarti claims that while America's cities comprise just three percent of the country, they generate 90 percent of the nation's gross domestic product and receive a fraction of that back in government funding. If all the balances of payment between cities and government were evened out, Chakrabarti writes, cities across the country would go from debt to surplus. In reality, such a situation is almost too fantastical to conceive, and it points to perhaps the greatest weakness of *A Country of Cities.* While a book with the word "manifesto" in its title can perhaps be forgiven for not taking practical and political considerations into account, most of the ideas Chakrabarti puts forth stand essentially no chance of enactment in today's ultra-politicized environment.

In this regard, Chakrabarti's work is unlikely to motivate any action. Rather, it will probably only serve to rile up the segment of the population which opposes its ideas, not finally persuade them to change their thinking. If Chakrabarti had wanted to truly advance the conversation, he would have written a book which focused on the psychological factors that go into denying the existence of the problems in *A Country of Cities.* Still, his passionate pleas for change make interesting reading for planners.



Producing Prosperity: Why America Needs a Manufacturing Renaissance
Gary P. Pisano and Willy C. Shih
Reviewed by Peter Cvelich

In *Producing Prosperity,* Pisano and Shih elaborate on the basic argument from their award-winning 2009 article "Restoring American Competitiveness," namely that the prosperity of U.S. businesses and workers is contingent on a resurrection of U.S. manufacturing, and inject a new concept for discussion: the "industrial commons."

In their view, the industrial commons is the technical know-how, operations capabilities, and specialized skills embodied in the workforce, competitors, suppliers, and universities that flow across multiple companies in multiple industries and allow for discovering and bringing new process and product innovations to market. Pisano and Shih do not discuss the mechanisms by which this knowledge transfer takes place, leaving the industrial commons in a bit of a theoretical construct. However, they offer examples of where it has broken down with negative results for U.S. dominance in high-technology sectors.

They build their case by first pointing to the numerous ways in which U.S. firms and workers are losing ground—declining high-tech exports, rising educational attainment of foreign workers, and, most disturbing, the disappearance of whole manufacturing functions from U.S. plants. Then, they pull back the curtain and reveal that underpinning some of the products for which U.S. firms outsourced manufacturing is a complex and dynamic web of linked "capabilities."

For instance, behind the production of personal electronics and flat-screen televisions, solar panels, and energy-saving light bulbs—all products for which manufacturing now predominantly takes place in Taiwan and China—are platform technologies such as semiconductors, flat-panel displays, and solid-state lighting that rely on capabilities in lithography and etching, chemical vapor disposition, and coatings. With each of the products that U.S. firms choose to outsource—like televisions—they relinquish their connection to a core capability—like etching—that will spawn new innovations in a platform technology—like semiconductor chips used in smartphones.

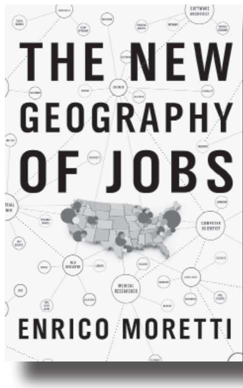
The choice to outsource—specifically, geographically separating manufacturing from design—erodes a piece of the know-how that was circulating through the industrial commons in the U.S., making it more difficult for other firms to innovate, but easier to take the short-cut of reducing costs through more outsourcing. The accumulation of such seemingly positive "net present value" decisions by individual U.S. businesses to focus on R&D and pass off "low value-added" production to foreign suppliers hurts their long-term innovation potential. It also accelerates learning opportunities for suppliers that can one day become competitors.

Pisano and Shih also point out the U.S. government's failure to support the retention of manufacturing. Focusing on the tapering of federal government funding for applied research—translating basic science discoveries into practical applications with commercial potential— the authors suggest that the U.S. has taken its foot off the accelerator while its trading partners have made focused investments to catch up. They also critique the ways in which the federal government subsidizes parts of the economy—homebuilding, agriculture, healthcare, and private equity—but allows U.S. manufacturers to pursue more favorable tax regimes and public investment climates in other countries.

After diagnosing the problem and laying blame, Pisano and Shih offer a simple framework to guide business leaders and policymakers in choosing when and where to invest in manufacturing capabilities. They admit that not all manufacturing is worth saving. Some of it makes sense to outsource without a dramatic loss of know-how. But they argue that the erosion of the industrial commons by divorcing manufacturing from R&D is particularly damaging in industries, such as biotechnology, where the design of the product is actually married to the design of the manufacturing process (low modularity). The authors' recommendation: Identify such low modularity industries (or processes within industries) and try to enhance and protect them.

Pisano and Shih quickly give up on "labor-intensive" and "low-skill" manufacturing as a lost cause—in one blanket statement without identifying which sectors they mean—and do not acknowledge the transferrable skills from these industries to high-technology. Whole segments of the U.S. population are (or were) employed in such sectors and attention needs to be given to how those workers are repurposed and valued in the emerging manufacturing industries. Ignoring the employment prospects of these individuals will only lead to greater inequality with dire consequences for future generations of workers seeking to produce prosperity.

Pisano and Shih write from the U.S. perspective and their recommendations are geared toward American business leaders and policymakers. However, they note the universality of their message: any company or country striving for an innovation-based economy must recognize the importance of cultivating a healthy industrial commons. Those places that see manufacturing moving off shore need to find opportunities for retention. Those places that are building new plants need to invest in the basic and applied research and human capital initiatives that will round out a burgeoning commons if they hope to transform their companies into technology leaders.



The New Geography of Jobs
Enrico Morretti
Reviewed by Jill Mead

In *The New Geography of Jobs,* Enrico Morretti presents his view of 21st century production in the United States. According to the author, the United States no longer produces heavy machinery like automobiles, nor should it seek to recapture its former manufacturing dominance. Instead, the U.S. should continue to exploit its new competitive advantage: its enormous share of the worldwide market for innovative ideas and technologies. Going forward, innovation is the export sector that will be the key to the nation's prosperity.

The emergence of this new innovation focus led to a shift in the economic geography of the country. Moretti opens with a description of the ways in which the "two Americas" are pulling apart, entitled "The Great Divergence." On one side are the stagnating cities in the Rust Belt and elsewhere, epitomized by Flint, Michigan, which are struggling to reinvent themselves following the demise of the manufacturing sector. Residents of these cities face higher unemployment, lower wages, and worse health, educational, and mortality indicators than the country as a whole.

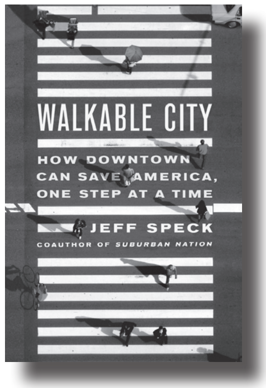
On the other side of the divergence are cities or regions, such as Silicon Valley and the Research Triangle, which have invented or reinvented themselves in ways that take advantage of the growing importance of the "innovation sector." Residents of these regions are directly and indirectly benefitting from the prosperity generated by the new model of production. One of Moretti's key points is that gains in the innovation sector lead to higher employment and wages for the service sector employees that serve the tech workers and engineers, from hairdressers and waitstaff to patent lawyers. Moretti states that five service sector jobs are created by every innovation sector job, compared to only one job per manufacturing job. However, it is unclear whether this difference derives from a quality inherent in the "innovation sector" that differentiates this effect from that of other geographically-clustered, highly-remunerated groups such as doctors working at the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, or bankers in New York City.

One puzzle of the innovation economy is that participants choose to set up businesses in or outside of expensive cities such as New York, Boston, and San Francisco rather than in cheaper spaces elsewhere. The explanation lies in the forces of agglomeration that offer three priceless boosts to productivity and innovation: the presence of a "thick labor market" (offering a range of skills and number of potential employees not found elsewhere), a network of staff in supporting industries (such as lawyers and venture capitalists), and the potential for knowledge spillover. Some cities initially achieved this critical mass through happy accident (e.g. Bill Gates' decision to move Microsoft to Seattle), while others, like Research Triangle Park, achieved this result more deliberately. However, Moretti cautions, cities without an innovation cluster will find it very hard to create one by design, and those that try will have to subsidize the process until the forces of agglomeration kick in—a very expensive proposition.

In light of this sobering fact, Moretti suggests that the solution lies in individual mobility. If cities cannot bring the forces of agglomeration to themselves, let people move to where the jobs and higher wages are. Towards this end, he suggests two policies to enhance mobility: allow people to collect unemployment in a new state, and build more housing to accommodate new workers in cities where a low supply of housing drives rent prices to unaffordability. Two more of Moretti's suggestions encourage strategies to enhance the U.S.'s human capital in the long run through the improvement of the quality of lower education and access to higher education and by increasing the number of visas for skilled technicians and PhDs from other countries. In the end, adding more people who can generate and realize ideas to the centers of innovation will increase production capacity and the competitiveness of the U.S. as a whole.

While the tone of the book is optimistic, this new geography of jobs has several implications that are less than cheerful for those outside of the winner's circle. Even though the innovation sector benefits the U.S. economy, its positive spillover effects are largely local. The ability of cities to create their own innovation centers is constrained by their ability to subsidize growth and the limited amount of public and private funding available for research and development. Residents of the numerous cities that cannot jump start their own innovation centers are faced with the need to move in order to participate in the new geography of prosperity. These realities have profound equity implications which are only touched upon in the book.

Moretti's focus on cities and regions as generators of economic growth makes this book of interest to planners. Although we are in the midst of a "great divergence," Moretti identifies a middle ground—cities which are poised to go in either direction depending on their embrace of the new knowledge-based economy. Whether planners choose to work in San Jose, Flint, or somewhere in between, Moretti's ideas are worth consideration.



Walkable City: How Downtown can Save America, One Step at a Time
Jeff Speck
Reviewed by Ryan Boivin

City planner, author, and TED Talk presenter Jeff Speck makes a compelling call for citizens and local officials to align their convictions and reflect on their built environment to focus on walkability. It is a motivating message justified by a thorough examination of design, social capital, health, and safety on the streets of America.

Is this a call to stop traffic? Not at all. Speck knows better than to make fanciful pleas for abrupt societal change; instead he shrewdly employs healthy doses of reality and practicality in his missive. In this easily digestible, engaging, and concise piece of work, he takes a hardnosed stance by starkly illustrating the consequences of building our society around the automobile. He calls on over 25 years of professional experience and research, including his collaborative efforts on the highly influential *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* and *The Smart Growth Manual*, to challenge traditional urban planning theory. He manages to do so through a witty and balanced approach, capable of resonating with a range of readers, from metropolitan Planning Directors to small-town Mayors to the average suburban resident. He delivers his message effectively through the use of objective, exhaustively researched, and intimately germane facts.

Speck puts forth eye-opening statistics on widely shared areas of concern: personal finance and health, commute times, and national security, to name a few. While some readers will already be aware of these general trends, their dramatic scale and what can be done to correct them may be less well understood. Portland is Speck's flagship example of a city that identified the ills associated with automobile use, their scale, and the feasibility of mitigating their effects. He cites urban growth boundaries, large-scale investments in public transit and bicycle infrastructure, and creative urban design initiatives like the Skinny Streets program as instruments in Portland's urban public policy portfolio intended to produce "Walkability Dividends." He skillfully deploys this term – which refers to the social and economic benefits Portlanders enjoy thanks to the implementation of policies that defied the urban planning zeitgeist of the late 20th century – to make the reader cognizant of why we must endeavor to make our towns and cities more walkable.

Speck also uses Portland to show the advantages associated with forecasting generational preferences and applying them to the built environment. College graduates moved to Portland at a rate five times the national average during the nineties. He contends this demographic trend occurred because Portland met the desires of millenials, 64 percent of whom move to a city before finding a job and 77 percent of whom want to live in a walkable urban core. He argues that these trends are only increasing with younger generations, and a growing percentage of the older population who seek walkability as they ditch the car and "retire in place" or move to Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs).

At the end of the day, the brilliance of Speck's labor is in the effective organization of the book. It sets the stage with his own expertly defined General Theory of Walkability, which mandates four critical conditions a walk must satisfy: useful, safe, comfortable, and interesting. These conditions are then used as a way of thinking about a sequence of specific rules organized into the Ten Steps of Walkability. This is a tailored list of progressive planning initiatives, from "Mixing the Uses" to "Getting the Parking Right" to "Welcoming Bikes," which Speck uses as a roadmap for the last three-quarters of the book. With the General Theory of Walkability as the foundation for implementing the Ten Steps of Walkability, Speck believes he has provided a comprehensive prescription for making cities more walkable. He never promotes his ideas as a panacea for correcting all of the ills created by an auto-favored built environment; *Walkable City* is simply a vehicle for us all to see the need to make the places we live more pedestrian-friendly and less auto-centric.