

Reviews

**A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for an Urban
America**

By Vashaan Chakrabarti

Review by Carol Coletta

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Manifest Density

Review by Carol Coletta

A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for an Urban America
Vishaan Chakrabarti
252 pages
Metropolis Books, 2013

In his book *A Country of Cities*, Vishaan Chakrabarti wastes no time in letting his readers know where he stands on the subject of suburbanization. On the first page of the first chapter, he writes: “[O]ur reckless subsidization of suburban sprawl is arguably the leading cause of our most pressing challenges, from foreclosures, to unemployment, to unfunded schools, to spiraling health-care costs, to climate change, to oil wars.” Suburbs are, he contends, a synthetic creation of big government whose time has come and gone.

Chakrabarti’s answer to suburbanization? “Hyperdensification.” Ouch! The first time he uses that term, it grates on the ear as surely as the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard.

But in the book, which focuses on the United States, he makes a powerful case that cities are the economic engine of the nation. After all, US cities are more productive than the vast majority of states. The \$548.6 billion economy of Chicago, for instance, is bigger than that of 42 states, including New Jersey, North Carolina, and Ohio. Evidence is mounting that urbanization results in greater prosperity and innovation. The most successful American cities make up 3 percent of the country’s landmass, yet they generate 85 percent of its gross domestic product.

Despite the clear benefits that cities bring, a strain of anti-urbanism runs deep in American culture. From Thomas Jefferson to Henry David Thoreau to the film *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), Americans have reliably shown a reverence for rural landscapes. (That movie, Chakrabarti notes, features

“a young heroine pining for a suburban home, a wish that, of course, the Macy’s department store Santa ultimately grants.”) The ideal of a bucolic America—an America of small towns filled with homes surrounded by white picket fences—seems hard-wired into the national self-image.

It’s hard to understand, therefore, why Chakrabarti chose to label his desired state “hyperdensity.” But perhaps there’s no other term for what, in his view, we truly need. By his definition, that state exists wherever density is great enough to support subways. Building to the point of hyperdensity in already developed areas, Chakrabarti explains,

will increase land values, throw off additional tax dollars, and provide the resources that we need to renew our communities.

Chakrabarti is clear on one point: Hyperdensity requires a robust infrastructure to support it. He urges Americans to invest in an “Infrastructure of Opportunity”—a term that covers not just transportation,

water, sewage, and electricity, but also access to employment, education, recreation, and health. Given strained budgets and popular resistance to increased taxes, where will the money for this kind of investment come from? Hyperdensity, Chakrabarti suggests, makes new infrastructure affordable because it lowers the per capita cost of construction and yields extra tax revenue.

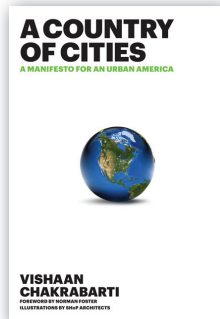
Chakrabarti doesn’t go easy on many parties that would appear to be natural allies of hyperdensity. He attacks those who build light rail projects in areas where density is insufficient to support ridership. Not only are such projects inefficient, but they also prompt an outcry against government waste that aids the cause of transit opponents. Nor is Chakrabarti an apologist for property developers. “Private real estate development has much to answer for in terms of its inability to deliver even adequate, much less great, design,” he writes.

Just as Chakrabarti wastes no time in attacking the problems caused by suburbanization, he pulls no punches in blaming

those problems on elected officials. Because of official neglect, he notes, a wide variety of urban issues almost never surface in the national discourse. If and when those issues do surface, the author is ready with a list of ambitious policy recommendations: phasing out the federal home mortgage interest deduction, removing oil-industry subsidies, allocating federal transportation dollars by population and distributing those dollars fairly across all transit modes, and pricing fuel to reflect the social costs of pollution and congestion.

Chakrabarti also calls for passage of a measure that he labels the American Smart Infrastructure Act. It’s a bold plan that will, he argues, enable Americans to create good jobs, build an innovation-driven economy, rein in health care costs, lower the country’s dependence on nondomestic sources of oil, and lead the planet toward greater sustainability. Enacting that policy and others like it, he writes, will depend on rallying an urban coalition “that binds the need for economic prosperity, environmental stewardship, and social mobility with the one-stop shopping of transit-rich hyperdensity.”

Other books deliver persuasive arguments for the benefits of urban living. But *A Country of Cities* stands out among such books in offering a clear call for a city-based solution to the nation’s most pressing challenges and in presenting a comprehensive policy agenda to meet those challenges. ■



Divided Minds, Divided Cultures

Review by Joan Miller

Clash! 8 Cultural Conflicts That Make Us Who We Are

Hazel Rose Markus and
Alana Conner
320 pages
Hudson Street Press, 2013

The assumption that higher-order mental processes are universal—that they develop in fundamentally the same way for everyone—has long

dominated the field of psychology. In recent years, though, scholars who write from the perspective of cultural psychology have challenged that premise by providing evidence that those processes

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emerge within a specific cultural context. This perspective informs the book *Clash!* Both of its authors, Hazel Rose Markus and Alana Conner, are cultural psychologists, and in the book they use insights and research drawn from cultural psychology to analyze a wide range of social conflicts.

Markus and Conner base their analysis on the contrast between individualism and collectivism. They outline two opposing views of self: *Independent* selves are “individual, unique, influencing others and their environments, free from constraints, and equal (yet great),” they write, whereas *interdependent* selves are “relational, similar to others, adjusting to their situations, rooted in traditions and obligations, and ranked in pecking orders.” They argue that everyone, in varying degrees, harbors both of these views of self. The clashes that

occur when those views come into conflict, they suggest, lie at the root of many contemporary social problems.

The central message of the book is prescriptive. Markus and Conner hold out the promise that social progress and individual self-development will result from efforts to integrate the two cultural perspectives that they describe. “To build a more prosperous and peaceful world, everyone must be both independent and interdependent,” they contend. “This means that people who tend to be more independent will have to hone their interdependence, while people who tend to be more interdependent will need to polish their independence.”

In separate chapters, the authors argue that the tension between independence and interdependence underlies a series of high-profile social conflicts: West versus East, men versus women, business groups versus nonprofit groups, and so on. A final chapter covers the way that individuals experience

that tension in their everyday lives. Markus and Conner provide examples of how, in each of these contexts, the effort to strike a balance between the independent self and the interdependent self can lead to positive social and individual change.

Impressively broad in scope, *Clash!* provides a sophisticated overview of the challenges that arise in addressing major social problems. It’s written in an engaging style that will appeal to a general audience, yet it’s also well documented with empirical evidence. Markus and Conner offer a highly readable overview of recent findings in cultural psychology, and they offer valuable insight into the trade-offs and complexities of social life. They urge readers to consider, for instance, how a cultural practice such as nepotism may form the underside of an interdependent sense of role-related duty. Elsewhere, they explore how the innovative business practices of Silicon Valley technology firms reflect individualistic values; by contrast, they suggest, the strong communal ties that many people associate with the US Midwest reflect an interdependent outlook.



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Despite its many strong points, however, the book does not fully address certain key issues. Markus and Conner repeatedly assert that diversity exists within any cultural group, and that both the independent sense of self and the interdependent sense of self can assume various forms. “Japan is not China or Korea or Vietnam or India. The United States is not France or England or Australia,” they write. Yet they show little recognition of the nuances that help to define different cultural outlooks. Nor do they acknowledge the distortions that can result from emphasizing a pan-cultural distinction between independence and interdependence.

Markus and Conner also pay limited attention to how people reconcile the different views of self that they hold in different social contexts. Rather, the authors leave the impression that self-integration is merely a matter of arithmetic: They encourage the reader to tally those cases in which he or she holds an independent sense of self and then to subtract that number from the tally of cases in which he or she holds an interdependent sense of self. The resulting score, they suggest, will reflect which sense of self is dominant.

Although the authors acknowledge the importance of institutional practices that affect cultural perspectives, they treat those perspectives as viewpoints that individuals choose to adopt in the service of strategic goals. In doing so, they downplay the degree to which cultural outlooks include nonconscious aspects that are not freely chosen—outlooks that entail deep affective commitments that people do not readily relinquish.

In *Clash!*, social activists will find information to make the case for social policies (affirmative action, for example) that have merit precisely because they honor both self dimensions. In the end, though, the model presented here offers a more complete rationale for a Western liberal policy agenda than it does for any competing agenda. For that reason, it provides only limited insight into the enduring appeal—and, in some cases, the growing influence—of political and social movements that reject Western liberal priorities. ■

Note: Alana Conner, coauthor of Clash!, is a former senior editor of Stanford Social Innovation Review. Earlier in her career, she served as an undergraduate research assistant to reviewer Joan Miller at Yale University.

Designing the Digital City

Review by Lucy Bernholz

Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection

Ethan Zuckerman
288 pages
W. W. Norton, 2013

But in the closing pages of *Rewire*, Ethan Zuckerman quotes Rabbi Tarfon: “It’s not incumbent on us to finish the work, but neither are we free to refrain from beginning it.”

Zuckerman, director of the Civic Media Lab at MIT and founder of the widely read

website Global Voices, clearly recognizes the rhythm of history. In that way, *Rewire* marks a refreshing shift in tone from most other books in the futurist genre, which tend to read as if time had only just started and as if the issues that we face today had never before confronted humankind.

Zuckerman’s argument is simple: Now that we can all connect via low-cost global communications tools, we must use those tools to achieve positive change. That’s what Zuckerman has aimed to do with Global Voices, an online service that provides news and opinion about more than 100 countries around the globe. The site, which offers content produced by in-country volunteers, grew out of his concern about the parochial nature of most print and broadcast news.

Since launching Global Voices in 2004, Zuckerman has learned a humbling lesson: Just because we can gather information from every corner of the earth faster and more easily than ever before doesn’t mean that anyone will pay attention to that information. Internet technologies won’t make people care about world events if they aren’t already prone to do so. “I had hoped Global Voices would influence agenda setting. ... I believed that by providing coverage of events that other media outlets had missed, we would help challenge the imbalance in attention,” Zuckerman writes. In fact, he notes, journalists today use the site for purposes that don’t always reflect his lofty goal: “It means that Global Voices offers report-

ers a way to get quotes from countries experiencing sudden turmoil, rather than using us to find important unreported stories before they break.”

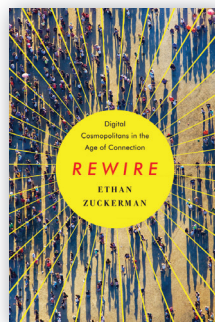
Rewire is at its best when it focuses on the dynamic interaction between digital tools and those who use them. Zuckerman observes how the choices that engineers make can facilitate serendipity or ease the process of making new connections. One important contribution that the book makes is to help nontechnical readers truly see the way that sites do (or do not) respect their wisdom and their needs. Zuckerman cites Jane Jacobs’s views on city planning, and his book resembles her work in its focus on helping ordinary residents of the “digital city,” as he calls it, better understand how their surroundings—digital surroundings, in this case—shape their behavior.

But in paying homage to Jacobs, Zuckerman doesn’t go far enough. He stops short of directly challenging the wisdom of the new digital-city planners. Jacobs didn’t play nice with Robert Moses, the legendary

New York City “master builder” who became her nemesis. She organized take-to-the-street confrontations to stop him. In her books, she didn’t mince words. When she thought that the big shots were wrong, she said so—and offered strong arguments to counter their top-down approaches.

Zuckerman, by contrast, seems more intent on persuading Web designers and online managers to do the right thing—to “curate,” “translate,” and “contextualize,” as he puts it. He doesn’t ask the reader to consider the structural impediments, the competing motivations, or the basic power struggles that might stand in the way of individuals’ use of Internet tools to foster greater engagement or activism.

Such faith in the goodwill of engineers and designers doesn’t seem adequate. Zuckerman nods to the power of manifestos (including the one that launched Global Voices), but in the end his message is not one of revolution. Instead, he merely calls



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for a more deliberate application of the lessons that we've learned over the past two decades. That's a good idea, to be sure: All of us who shop on, get news from, seek a job through, or connect with friends via the Web should have a better understanding of how design choices shape our behavior. Yet we'll need more than mere understanding if we are going to rewire our own behavior, and not just have it rewired for us. ■

Breakthrough Leadership

Review by Rajasvini Bhansali

However Long the Night: Molly Melching's Journey to Help Millions of African Women and Girls Triumph

Aimee Molloy
272 pages Harper One, 2013

At first glance, given its title and given some of the language on its cover, *However Long the Night* seems as though it might be yet another story about a person of privilege who leaves behind her dull life in Middle America and moves to Africa, where she hopes to help impoverished people and

(not incidentally) to begin a journey of self-discovery. So it comes as a pleasant surprise to find that the author, Aimee Molloy, has written a story not just about one woman, but about one organization—an organization that has worked diligently over many years to promote lasting social justice. The story of Molly Melching, in short, serves as a lens through which readers can observe the dynamics of community-activated change.

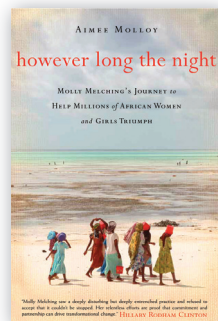
In 1991, after contributing to various social change efforts in Africa, Melching founded Tostan, an organization that has become well known for significantly reducing the practice of female genital cutting in Senegal. In the West African language of Wolof, “tostan” means “to hatch out of an egg”; the term evokes that *breakthrough* moment when a chick emerges from its shell. It's a

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metaphor that conveys Tostan's approach to community development, which focuses on collective consciousness raising: As ordinary people acquire knowledge in a way that empowers them, they eagerly share that knowledge with others in their community. Change thus happens from the ground up, through mutual respect and shared learning.

At the center of Tostan's method is the Community Empowerment Program, a popular education initiative that covers topics of immediate relevance to people in Senegalese villages—preventing child mortality, for example, or managing local projects. The goal is not only to promote literacy and numeracy skills, but also to empower villagers to run their own development efforts. Tostan's workers understand that the failure of a development project often involves distrust and disempowerment at a personal level, especially among women.

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lages, working together with 108 Tostan employees, have taken part in Tostan-led efforts to improve access to education, health care, and economic opportunity—and, equally important, to improve the conditions of women and young girls. Success of this kind, we learn, is almost never predicated on the charisma of a single leader. For leaders like Melching, humility is essential. “[T]he greater Tostan’s success, the more uncomfortable Molly became with taking the credit herself; she was adamant that the achievements were due only to the efforts of villagers,” Molloy writes.

Unlike the self-promoting social entrepreneurs and instant-gratification-oriented saviors who populate much of the literature on American social change efforts in Africa, Melching takes care to build credibility within the communities where she works. Using her position of relative privilege, yet drawing on the guidance of local mentors, she develops support for women’s groups by building trust among religious leaders and village chiefs. One of her rural mentors offers an insight that captures her style of

leadership: “[A] leader is like a Fulani cow herder ... [S]ometimes he will lead the herd from the front, sometimes he will remain in the middle and be part of the herd. And sometimes he will remain behind, allowing them to move forward on their own, following their lead.”

Another ally of Melching’s, a village chief named Demba Diabara, helped Tostan to develop a method that later came to be known as “organized diffusion.” He would walk from village to village, engaging in dialogue with community members and mobilizing local social networks to support an end to female genital cutting. “[E]ven if you know what the answer is, and you know what is right, you must let people discover it themselves,” Diabara says to Melching. He and other local leaders—people like Oureye Sall, a former traditional “cutter” who now works with Tostan to promote women’s health—know best how to root out the problems faced by their communities.

However Long the Night suffers from some of the flaws that often mark books about do-gooders from the developed world

who venture into the developing world. Molloy uses clichés (“stifling,” “crowded,” “bustling,” “primitive,” “exotic”) to describe Melching’s initial experience of Senegal. “[W]ith no electricity or running water, Molly felt as if she had traveled back in time, arriving in a world without history,” Molloy writes. At one point, in an especially condescending turn of phrase, she describes Senegal as a combination of “refined French culture and third world need.” Such language oversimplifies Melching’s experience and detracts from her story. Fortunately, however, Molloy generally keeps her focus on the work that Melching and Tostan have done in Africa.

In their efforts to improve people’s lives at a grassroots level, Melching and her colleagues at Tostan have prevailed amid many obstacles—including discomfort, derision, loss of funding, and even death threats. The painstaking work of true social change requires just that kind of resilience. ■

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- An interview with Molly Melching
- Another review of *However Long the Night*

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