

It's Not Schools vs. Scones

*Reviving America's cities takes "back to basics," a bit of the cool, and more.
A response to Joel Kotkin's urban prescription.*

There is much to like in Joel Kotkin's well-written polemic against the latest fashion in urban revitalization circles ["Urban Legend," Issue #2]. Dismayed by what he pejoratively deems the "rise of the boutique city," Kotkin criticizes its promoters for focusing on art galleries, coffee-houses, museums, and other "yuppie accoutrements" as vehicles for urban salvation. Although he soft-pedals the origin of this advice, he is really taking aim at George Mason University professor and über-consultant Richard Florida and his best-selling book of four years ago, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Powered by an admirable belief in cities as places for "a broad spectrum of people to improve their lives and that of their families," rather than places increasingly populated by extreme haves and have-nots, Kotkin dismisses urban vogue and stresses a back-to-basics approach to city governance.

Like Kotkin, I would like contemporary U.S. cities to be places that accommo-

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date all people rather than only the very rich and the serving poor. A sandwich composed of bread and little else cannot nourish the body, let alone the soul. And like Kotkin, I seek policy prescriptions that would stimulate the appetite of his preferred demographic, middle- and working-class families, to stay in or return to central cities. However, the principal problem today is not a myopic addiction of certain mayors and governors to the seductive calls of “boutique” pushers. The distressing downward drift of mostly Northeast and Midwest Rust-Belt American cities has a decades-long and far more complicated pedigree than that. By introducing the proverbial straw city of the boutique, Kotkin misrepresents today’s urban policy environment and unnecessarily trivializes his legitimate back-to-basics reminder.

Kotkin conceptualizes American cities first and foremost as “engines of upward mobility,” where “newcomers in search of a better life” can find it. Yet many American cities are no longer places where that “remarkable social mobility” prevails. Kotkin reminds us that, by most measures, many central cities are truly troubled. He treads the well-worn data trail leading to Baltimore, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Detroit, and other cities beset by persistent poverty, economic malaise, and population decline. No amount of happy talk can disguise the facts. It is not a new story, but he tells it well. So far, so good.

It is when Kotkin identifies the cause of and solution to this problem that he veers somewhat into *terra infirma*. “The fault, dear Brutus, is . . . in ourselves,” he appears to say, speaking to those city and state officials allegedly preoccupied with the latest policy fad. As Kotkin states and restates, in different ways, “Sadly, in recent decades, this notion of cities as mechanisms for upward mobility has broken down. Many cities, rather than trying to uplift their working class and nurture a middle class, have chosen to concentrate on luring the affluent, the ‘hip,’ and the young as their primary development strategy.” Kotkin describes, with borderline inapt phrasing, “a kind of genteel version of ethnic cleansing where middle- and working-class families are being replaced by well-educated, affluent, and often childless households.” He first takes on the purportedly successful “boutique” cities of Boston, New York, and San Francisco. Even they haven’t done so well when you look at the real numbers, he reports. What’s worse is that they have spawned second-rate imitators of the cool model—the Baltimores, Clevelands, and Detroits—with decidedly uncool results. They are “Potemkin villages of coolness in their center” with distressed areas behind the façade.

So where does anti-hipster Kotkin turn for policy answers? Go west and south, he counsels. Cities seen as “chronically unhip,” especially the “sprawling new cities of the South and West,” are actually the “most dynamic in the creation

of middle-class residents.” Phoenix, Houston, Charlotte, and Las Vegas “traditionally have put their focus on their basic infrastructure and economic competitiveness, and, for the most part, enjoy relatively low costs of living, particularly for housing.” Former Houston Mayor Bob Lanier comes in for particular praise for filling potholes, streamlining regulations, reducing crime, and building new roads. These cities present a “model for how urban America can not only rejuvenate itself, but rejuvenate America’s central promise of upward mobility as well.” Now we know: If only Detroit would be more like Phoenix, everything would be just fine. Short of waiting until global warming renders Detroit more like Phoenix, should the former actively emulate the latter?

Kotkin’s “back to basics” shout is not wrong. His “blocking and tackling” playbook of better infrastructure, improved schools, more efficient urban governance, rebuilt housing, a hospitable climate for entrepreneurs and small businesses, and skills and vocational training for local residents is unassailable. But who is assailing it? Kotkin presents no evidence to show that troubled cities have ripped the “blocking and tackling” chapter from their urban playbook. Fairly evaluated, every mayor and governor who comes in for Kotkin’s criticism has plans and programs and budget outlays addressing each of these basic areas. Could they do more and better? Absolutely, and taken in that spirit, Kotkin is right on track. That their cities continue to do poorly in terms of jobs, population growth, and income diversity compared with mostly Sunbelt cities is not proof, however, that they have ignored these strategies, any more than the appearance of umbrellas on any given morning causes an afternoon downpour. That they try other strategies in addition to the “back to basics” approach is equally not proof that they have underplayed, let alone ignored, the basics. The most recent State of the City address by the mayor of Cleveland emphasizes such “hip” goals as “sound fiscal management,” “developing a regional economy,” and “safety.” Meanwhile, Baltimore has been one of the most aggressive cities nationally in reclaiming abandoned housing.

Diagnosing the problems and coming up with remedies for American cities is a complicated business. Much of the problem stems from circumstances out of the hands of governors, let alone mayors. Even were we to accept Kotkin’s slam of Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm for her “cool cities” strategy, would better schools and roads have prevented General Motors, Ford, and DaimlerChrysler from reporting some of the worst numbers ever in the history of the U.S. automobile industry this year? A fairer argument would recognize that certain cities for years have faced problems whose solutions exceed their own remedial capacities. They have watched helplessly as changes in manufacturing technologies and transportation costs have maximized the

need for land-consuming horizontal floor plates and minimized the need for once-central locations. Along with the rest of the country, they have suffered from global redefinitions of who manufactures what. When a traditional working-class job pays a non-working-class wage in a country thousands of miles away, then American cities are going to have a problem. Cities that attempt to compete the old-fashioned way will not necessarily get old-fashioned results.

Moreover, since World War II and continuing to this day, most middle- and working-class Americans have demonstrated a decided preference for a built environment not easily found or producible in old Rust-Belt cities. This preference has been fostered in part by federal policies that subsidized newly built houses and easy auto commutes. Kotkin himself gives up the game when he acknowledges that “[l]ate-twentieth-century cities like Houston, Phoenix, Charlotte, and Dallas were essentially built to meet the tastes of the mass of Americans for a detached house, a yard, and an automobile commute.” And, through expansion and annexation, they can continue to meet these tastes. If he is right that the mass of Americans, particularly his middle- and working-class families, yearns for the American dream of a house, yard, and car, then what are Rust-Belt cities supposed to do about it? Should they raze their existing built environment and replace it with suburban density and roadways? Should they try to recreate the suburbs?

Kotkin appears to think so. He especially compliments former Houston Mayor Lanier for building lots of new roads so that Houstonians could drive more easily throughout the city. But is this the solution to Northeast and Midwest cities’ problems? It’s true that, thanks to the generosity of American taxpayers’ nearly \$15 billion contribution to Boston’s Big Dig project, I enjoy a much faster commute from Cambridge to Logan Airport. But I’m not sure that is the model prescription for improving urban life. If all cities become wannabes of the suburban experience, then they truly will not offer a differentiated place for residents and workers that takes advantage of their comparative advantages of higher density, knowledge institutions, and resulting spin-off economic and social activity.

To a hammer, everything is a nail. In Kotkin’s eyes, at least as expressed in his article, economically challenged cities are in trouble because city officials think Starbucks coffee is better for economic development than that available at Dunkin’ Donuts. But Dunkin’ Donuts announced recently that it is upscaling some of its coffee offerings because it realizes that working- and middle-class families also enjoy premium coffee. Kotkin’s protean cities, whether they be Atlanta, Phoenix, Orlando, Dallas, or Charlotte, are building the same

museums, art centers, and other amenities that he poo-poops as yuppie accoutrements. It just turns out the meat-and-potatoes middle- and working-class Americans also have a taste for cultural nourishment. Anti-elitist Kotkin comes across as a bit patronizing, even if unintended.

The real point is that no single policy prescription is a magic bullet. All Americans want a good education, a good job, reasonably priced housing, safe neighborhoods, open space, less traffic, and good weather. They also like culture, entertainment, restaurants, and nightlife. They like these things in different packages and are often willing to trade off some of one for more of another. Older, colder, denser cities cannot offer everything that newer, warmer, more dispersed cities have, and vice versa. It is not surprising that some demographic cohorts will be more drawn to certain places than others, and that location diversification across the country may be a condition of the latest urban landscape. Kotkin's goal of a working- and middle-class cohort in every city pot may be not only unattainable, but not even essential.

Kotkin could have chosen to hammer away at other fashionable urban policy favorites: development of new stadiums or the reliance on tourism. He could have given us a history lesson on the failures of urban renewal. Instead, he chose to hammer away at those who think coffee bars and young professionals they retain or attract will enhance a city's economic position. If someone thinks that coffee bars are "the" answer, then Kotkin properly throws a monkey wrench. Kotkin's wrench-throwing should not, however, drown out attempts to encourage other things that make urban life worth living, cities worth having, and urban employment and residence more stimulating. Kotkin's portrayal of city policy as a *de facto* zero-sum game distorts the reality of day-to-day city practice. After all, you need Joe Montanas and Jerry Rices—as much as nameless left tackles—to win the Super Bowl. ■