

BOOK

Survival of the City: The Future of Urban Life in an Age of Isolation

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SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

“Cities can make us sick. They always have—diseases spread more easily when more people are close to one another. And disease is hardly the only ill that accompanies urban density. Cities have been demonized as breeding grounds for vice and crime from Sodom and Gomorrah on. But cities have flourished nonetheless because they are humanity’s greatest invention, indispensable engines for creativity, innovation, wealth, and connection, the loom on which the fabric of civilization is woven.

But cities now stand at a crossroads. During the global COVID crisis, cities grew silent as people worked from home—if they could work at all. The normal forms of socializing ground to a halt. How permanent are these changes? Advances in digital technology mean that many people can opt out of city life as never before. Will they? Are we on the brink of a post-urban world?”

“Cities can die. Earthquake and invasion doomed Knossos, the mighty Cretan city that housed the mythic minotaur. Cities often decline. Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Liverpool are all far smaller today than they were in the 1930s. Urban triumph is never guaranteed.”

“Uncontrolled pandemic is an even more existential threat to the urban world, because the human proximity that enables contagion is the defining characteristic of the city. If cities are the absence of physical space between people, then the social distancing that began in March 2020 is the rapid-fire deurbanization of our world.”

“The irony of our pre-2020 complacency toward pandemic risk is that the triumph of the city owes much to victories over prior plagues.”

“By 1940, vaccination, sewers, and antibiotics allowed life expectancy in urban areas to catch up to rural life expectancy. By 2020, urbanites lived longer than people in rural areas, and that mortality gap was growing—at least before the reappearance of mass contagion.”

“These seemingly disparate problems all stem from a common root: our cities protect insiders and leave outsiders to suffer.”

“Protesters want to defund the police, but wealthier urbanites will decamp for safer suburbs if crime rates start to rise, and the poor and vulnerable will suffer most. If people decide that cities are too unsafe, either because of disease or crime or declining public services, we will move to a world not of cities, but of enclaves.”

“There is a way to bring cities back stronger, but it is not simple. The path starts by recognizing that cities can only fund services that help the poor if they can also attract the jobs that pay taxes.”

“We see three elements that must be woven together to protect urban life. First, there must be a shared strength that serves the city, which means more accountable and capable governments and the balancing power of civil society. Second, cities must enable the freedom to flourish. Third, governments, entrepreneurs, and all of us must have the humility to learn.”

“There are no libertarians in cities.” Some public management is needed to mediate the problems that come from cramming millions together into a dense landmass. The pro- and anti-government divide that split rural and urban America during the 2020 election partially reflects the fact that urbanites need government more than the residents of lower-density America.”

“Cities will always be unequal places, but that inequality is only tolerable when cities are seen as engines of growth. Poorer people must see the gain from urban life. They must feel the possibility of finding a brighter future.”

“Gentrification is often seen as a problem, but it is really a symptom of other urban woes. Urban residents of all stripes are victims of policies that artificially constrain the growth of city space.”

“Our cities must become learning machines. We must recognize where we are ignorant and try to fill in the gaps of our knowledge.”

“Ultimately, cities will remain strong because they are places that allow us to exercise our deeply human love of personal connection.”

“Cities have been engendering miracles of collaborative creativity since Socrates and Plato bickered on an Athenian street corner.”

“A second pandemic came to Rome in 250 CE. That outbreak may have helped convert Rome to Christianity, because “one advantage that Christians had over their pagan contemporaries was that care of the sick, even in times of pestilence, was for them a required religious duty,” and “the teachings of their faith made life meaningful even amid sudden and surprising death.”

“The plague came and went for another two centuries. Estimates are that this first wave of the Black Death killed as many as fifty million people. It fatally weakened both the Roman and Persian Empires, which opened the way for the Arab conquests of Asia and North Africa during the seventh and eighth centuries. Waves of disease and warfare tore apart the urban world of the Roman Empire and led to centuries of largely rural poverty in Europe.”

“Thinking in terms of place and community is unnatural to people who have been taught they are autonomous human beings. We expect social policies and products that are catered toward our own idiosyncratic needs, not targeted toward the larger community. But with contagion, the community becomes crucial. Any disease that enters into a neighborhood can infect anyone, which means that good policy making must be much more communally focused.”

“The movement to tame the demons of density in nineteenth-century New York City took decades and the collective efforts of wealthier urbanites who understood the need to strengthen the entire city.”

“Clean water was responsible for nearly half of the total mortality reduction in major cities, three-quarters of the infant-mortality reduction, and nearly two-thirds of the child mortality reduction.” The ratio of

benefits to costs was 23 to 1, which makes clean water among the single best investments that any government has ever made.”

“The rise in American obesity since the 1960s appears to be almost entirely about eating and drinking more.”

“Why has food consumption increased since 1970? Perhaps in the distant past of nineteenth-century industrial Manchester, urban diets consisted mostly of basic starches and canned meat. Back then, we stayed thin because we were poor. Eating was difficult to afford and not that much fun. Yet by 1970, we were rich enough to afford copious calories and there were plenty of tasty things to eat.”

“It takes a lot of vanity, education, or self-control to convince oneself to forgo that second chocolate chip cookie.”

“The vulnerability of large, dense, interconnected cities requires an effective, proactive public sector: a shared strength that serves everyone.”

“Past pandemics didn’t make work disappear. The medieval serfs who survived the Black Death were better off economically because the plague produced labor shortages and higher wages. Neither cholera nor yellow fever disrupted nascent nineteenth-century manufacturing industries. The economic chaos of 2020 reflects a global economy that has become dependent on human contact, where person-to-person contagion can put all of our prosperity, and especially the employment of the less educated, at risk.”

“The effects of the Black Death go even further. Economists Nico Voigtländer of UCLA and Hans-Joachim Voth of the University of Zurich have written that by increasing employment opportunities for women, “the Black Death set into motion a virtuous circle of higher wages and fertility decline that enabled Europe to maintain unusually high per capita incomes” for centuries.”

“In 1918, people weren’t that rich, relative to today, and they spent a larger share of their earnings on essentials. Spending on basic needs stays steady during a pandemic, even if there is some risk in grocery shopping. Spending on discretionary luxuries that involve human interactions falls far more dramatically with widespread disease. Discretionary high-end activities had become more important in the far wealthier world of 2020.”

“In the century since the influenza pandemic, the wealthy world has changed dramatically. We now spend much of our incomes on products and experiences that are optional, luxuries rather than necessities. We now work in services rather than manufacturing. Many of these services are delivered face-to-face. An economy with a large share of employment providing luxury services in face-to-face interactions is almost destined to collapse when confronted by an airborne pandemic.”

“Creative jobs are safe from machines and they are probably safe from illness as well, at least if they don’t require too much face-to-face interaction. Random, in-person meetings have long been a part of our creative processes, but genius survives, even if subdued, in a virtual world.”

“Cities will certainly change with COVID-19. But we suspect that there will be less of a transformation than many predict. While some cities are in danger, the downtown in most places is far from dying. A greater share of routine and easily evaluated work will be done at home, probably saving one or two commutes per week, but the most important moments on the job will still happen around coworkers.”

“The office will not be vanquished, because in-person interaction is so much richer than working remotely.”

“The midair observer of New York quickly notices the twin peaks of skyscrapers. There is a southern cluster perched at the bottom of the island and a central hulk of buildings anchored around Forty-Second Street. City guides sometimes perpetuate what economist Jason Barr of Rutgers University calls the Bedrock Myth, that “skyscrapers are constructed in Downtown and Midtown because bedrock is easily accessible there.” But you don’t need bedrock to build up. Chicago – the city that gave us the skyscraper – is built on mud.”

“Manhattan’s architectural shape owes more to water than stone. The older Downtown cluster grew up around the ships that once docked at the south of the city. New York’s stock exchange began with an agreement signed under a buttonwood tree on Wall Street.”

“The Midtown cluster is anchored by the city’s two major rail stations: Grand Central Terminal and Pennsylvania Station. Penn Station’s location is linked to the Hudson River, which was far harder to cross than the modest waterways that separate Manhattan from Long Island and the Bronx.”

“Ten years later, they moved the no-steam zone ten blocks north, which determined the location of Grand Central Terminal, also known as Grand Central Station. Tall buildings would eventually cluster around that station, but it would take another eighty years before demand for space near that station was strong enough for rents to be high enough to cover the cost of skyscrapers. The link between real estate and transportation was there from the beginning.”

“The interstate highway system made living space within commuting distances of city centers abundant, and that land became even more attractive with other technological breakthroughs. Radio became ubiquitous in the 1930s; televisions blanketed America in the 1950s. Living on a farm in 1900 was practically synonymous with dreariness. Living in a suburban ranch home in 1960 meant an abundant array of television programming, classical music on the radio, and the joys of TV dinners.”

“In 1970, Toffler struck publishing gold with *Future Shock*, a two-word phrase defined as the “dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future,” which Toffler argued “may well be the most important disease of tomorrow.” Writing in the 1960s, Toffler perceived “a greatly accelerated rate of change in society,” which he thought responsible for “malaise, mass neurosis, irrationality, and free-floating violence.” Toffler coupled this diagnosis with a prescription that “the only remedy for the phenomenon of future shock” is to form a “clearer, better, stronger conception of what lies ahead.” The world needed what Toffler himself became: a futurist.”

“Toffler also underestimated the sticking power of cities. He saw his third wave as a giant centrifugal event: “The Third Wave alters our spatial experience by dispersing rather than concentrating population.”

“More complicated tasks often make output harder to measure, which makes proximity between manager and subordinate more valuable, both to watch for overlong coffee breaks and to create some team spirit.”

“Cities will need to strike a tricky balance between helping less-advantaged outsiders and driving away the rich. America’s polarization means that its cities, which have long tilted left, are more progressive than ever.”

“Defunding the police may seem like a natural response to the lawless behavior displayed by Derek Chauvin. But an underfunded police department will not improve the safety of minority neighborhoods. If fewer police lead to more crime, then the poor will suffer disproportionately. Moreover, a more stressed police force could easily become a more brutal police force.”

“It took Moderna and the National Institutes of Health exactly two days to design a vaccine after Chinese scientists shared the genetic sequence to COVID on January 11, 2020. The bad news is that it took another eleven months for the vaccine to be tested and approved.”

“Reforms must be calibrated so they do not take us back to the crime waves of the 1970s and 1980s. Policing is not a discretionary public service. Effective law enforcement is vital for our cities. When order breaks down, it is the poor and vulnerable who suffer most. In 1991, homicides killed 5.5 out of every 100,000 whites but 39.3 out of every 100,000 African Americans.”