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## What Makes A Great City?

A Business Journal Q&A With Urbanist Joel Kotkin

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In his new book, “The City: A Global History,” author Joel Kotkin chronicles the evolution of cities and urban life over the last several thousand years. And despite the disparate qualities of the various conurbations around the world that he examines, Kotkin contends that all successful cities “perform three separate critical functions – the creation of sacred space, the provision of basic security, and the host for a commercial market . . . Generally speaking, a glaring weakness in these three aspects of urbanity has undermined life and led to their eventual decline.”

In his concise 160-page narrative, Kotkin recounts the foundational urban elements exhibited by ancient civilizations in Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and China – as well as other early metropolises such as Byzantium, Venice and Rome – that led to renowned contemporary cities like Paris, London and New York.

Later in his narrative, Kotkin ventures into more controversial urban theorization when he asserts the merits of decentralizing trends brought about by the emergence of what he defines as post-industrial suburban metropolises. He cites Los Angeles as a driving force behind that trend.

“The rise of the suburban model in Los Angeles suggested a radical break with the evolution of cities. Throughout history, cities have gloried in their towering landscapes and the liveliness of their public spaces,” he writes, noting later in the book that Los Angeles County set a new standard in urbanization with multi-polar urban regions rather than the more conventional structure with one primary downtown hub.

While some urbanists would be quick to characterize Los Angeles County or the greater Phoenix area as regions plagued by sprawl, Kotkin contends they are instead examples of future urbanizing trends.

The author of several books, Joel Kotkin is an Irvine Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation and serves as senior advisor to the Planning Center, a major planning, design and environmental consulting firm based in Costa Mesa. He also serves as a visiting lecturer in history, theory and humanities at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) in Los Angeles and is currently a contributing editor to the Los Angeles Times Sunday opinion section. His work also appears in many other national publications. Earlier this month, this reporter met with Kotkin to discuss his new book, the qualities that make for a successful city, as well as some of his more controversial urban theories.

### Q&A

**LBBJ:** I get the sense that the driving emphasis behind your newest book, “The City,” is to characterize, within a historic context, what makes a great city. Was that your intent?

**Kotkin:** I think one of the greatest services I can give is not necessarily impose or develop a particular interpretation of urban history, but to give a framework for people to go into. In other words, I find

many times even my own students at SCI-Arc may have had classes on theory but they don't even know the history. They don't even know what happened. At least this will give – whether you're a developer or a student, a layman or a journalist . . . [a basic] history of cities in a fairly concise form. Obviously, there's interpretation, particularly toward the end to some extent, but I really tried to make it something that was accessible. Because, unfortunately, [the] history [of cities] has been very badly taught, and often not taught at all. I have students who are even graduate students who literally know almost nothing about urban history except a post-modernist Marxist point of view or a feminist point of view. But the actual 'what happened' and how it was viewed by the people of the time has not existed. So I tried to do that in a relatively comprehensive way.

**LBBJ:** Are there timeless ingredients that define a good city?

**Kotkin:** Well, I define them as three: sacred, safe and busy. But the first thing is there has to be a sense of identity – the place means something to people. Because, usually, particularly today, living in the city often means paying more money, paying more taxes, dealing with hassles of one sort or another – you're making a choice to be someplace because it's worth it: New Yorkers living in New York after 9/11, Angelenos staying in L.A. after the '92 riots, San Franciscans staying in San Francisco in 1906 and then again in 1989 [after earthquakes].

### **'Meaning'**

Whatever you have, you have to have that sense that the city means something and I think that goes along with [why] strong religious institutions and families are important.

### **'Safety'**

Secondly, you have to be safe. You have to have security. The biggest problems I think that have occurred for American cities in their great decline – from let's say 1950 to 1990, '95 – was public safety. They were unsafe places to be. Even today, when I give talks – particularly here in L.A. – I get people who say to me, "Well, the schools aren't safe." The biggest problem with the schools is, not only are they crummy, but they are unsafe. And so, young kids get beaten up all the time and live in this environment of fear. That is a huge issue. And then, of course, you have the security issue that is being more emphasized with terrorism. And this is one of the biggest threats to urban life in our time.

### **'Commerce'**

Then you have the last part, which is commerce, what I call 'busy.' A city has to have a thriving economy. Unfortunately, many people today think that what you do is you [build] a convention center and an art museum and you have a bunch of hip, cool people living in lofts and that will save your city. Well that's really not the case – it's nonsensical. You have to have a thriving economy. Great cultural life is a result of great commercial life. And I can go through history from Athens to 21st Century Los Angeles to prove that one. So what you need to do is . . . have all three. And some cities have done better in some [aspects] . . . than others, but to be a great city, an effective city, you need to have all three.

**LBBJ:** I've read several accounts where you have described a post-industrial suburban metropolis. You've used this term to characterize Los Angeles and other cities. How do you define that term?

**Kotkin:** If you come to Los Angeles and you're looking for New York or Boston, you're going to be very frustrated . . . Downtown Los Angeles is never going to be the center of this region in a real way – it's barely a symbolic center even. Cities like Long Beach and Pasadena, Fullerton and Riverside have histories of their own and gestations of their own and were evolved, in a sense, somewhat separately, and are very conscious of how they're different. Even parts of Los Angeles, like the valley, are very separate. L.A. has almost since the beginning of the 20th Century been a decentralized . . . [urban area] with multiple poles of population, of culture, of restaurants, of political culture, of economic specializations and, in that way, it's in many ways a prototype of the 21st Century city, which is precisely like that. It's multi-polar, it's a city that has a diversity of ways that people live and places that they [reside in]. And, of course, you have different economic environments in different cities – Santa Monica is a particular kind of place, so is Beverly Hills, so is Pasadena and so is Long Beach. I think people in Long Beach should understand this. What's workable and charming and the basis for Long

Beach's future is that it is a place unto itself and has the advantage of being of a workable size.

**LBBJ:** Do you see a trend increasingly in the future where there are urban centers that serve as hubs within much larger metropolitan areas with many sub poles – such as in Los Angeles County, the Washington, D.C., metro area, the Bay Area and the New York-New Jersey metro area?

**Kotkin:** Yeah, some places are further along than others. Phoenix is probably even further along than Los Angeles is in this way . . . The urban core in different metropolitan areas have different evolutions. Every city has its own history, its own way that it came into being. For instance, Houston has a more vital [downtown], in many ways, than Downtown Los Angeles does because of the historical presence of the major oil companies down there that have been the linchpin for that city . . . Yet Houston is evolving into many centers. So, this is the overall pattern, some places have evolved that way more than others.

**LBBJ:** Some would describe what is taking place in Phoenix and other parts of L.A. and the suburbs around Houston as 'sprawl.' How do you identify sprawl and what's the difference between a vital area, where there is a sense of place and a community fabric versus just tract housing and a couple big-box commercial retailers?

**Kotkin:** Probably the biggest factor is time. You have to understand that much of suburbia is at best 40 or 50 years old and, over time, in many cases the successful parts will become more urbanized. I'll give you an example: I live in a place called Valley Village near Studio City. When I first moved to Los Angeles it was just part of the San Fernando Valley sprawl – it was kind of a place . . . So what I've seen in the San Fernando Valley is we've moved from the deadwood phase of development . . . [After the houses have been built, residents] start saying, 'Well, now I'm no longer on the fringe of the city, I'm really in the middle of the city and, I really want access to shopping, to a neighborhood, to cultural institutions, synagogues, churches,' whatever it is that you want. And so what you find happens is that the suburb begins to evolve and take over many of the historically urban characteristics. This is a trend that's been going on for 30 or 40 years. In the 1930s and '40s most people in the valley very often worshiped in a church on the other side of the hill. They certainly shopped maybe downtown or in Hollywood [and the same held true] if they went out to eat and they wanted to go to a good restaurant. All you had in the valley were hamburger joints and that was it. Today, you go to a Studio City or a Sherman Oaks or a Burbank or a Toluca Lake and they have very, very nice shops, and some interesting restaurants, they've become ethnically diverse – so this is an evolution from the deadwood phase into something more urban. At the same time, one of the biggest drivers is traffic. As a friend of mine, David Fleming, puts it . . . in L.A. we have secession – its called traffic. If it takes so long to get from 'A' to 'B,' you're going to try to substitute. Whether it's your job, a restaurant, a cultural event, you're going to try to find as good a substitute as you can locally. So what's happening is that the various parts of the 'sprawl' of Los Angeles are themselves evolving their own characteristics.

When I first moved to Los Angeles, the Westside was kind of a quasi-beachy place and parts of it were working class and parts of it were wealthy. Today, the Westside is incredibly dense and people who live in Santa Monica don't go downtown for much of anything. Maybe they go five times a year, if that. Except for those who, for political reasons, go more often. So what you have is a sort of secular trend toward greater and greater self sufficiency accelerated by two major things: one, the Internet, which makes it possible to access information anywhere and, oddly enough, cable television because now much of what we have culturally in this country in many ways on cable is better than what we have in the movies . . . So you've got the organic growth of these multi-polar centers having more amenities and becoming more self sufficient, and with that I think a greater sense of neighbor and community involvement

**LBBJ:** Would you categorize Long Beach as a post-industrial, suburban city?

**Kotkin:** Long Beach has a much longer history, has industry – a lot of industry at one time – and has a port. So Long Beach is more of a traditional city in many ways. But it is one of those poles of Los Angeles. And I always got the sense that Long Beach people really were Long Beach people. They were not L.A. people. And I think that's a great thing about Long Beach.

**LBBJ:** Over the last 12-15 years, Long Beach has worked very hard to diversify its economy after it lost a lot of its aerospace manufacturing jobs and the navy departed. What do you think some of the keys are for modern cities to follow in order to transition from an industrial-oriented city to a more diversified economy?

**Kotkin:** Well, first of all, Long Beach made the correct decision to invest in its port, which continues to be a producer of high-wage jobs – for everything from the Longshoremen themselves to the people in the assembly and import and export processing to the people who work in the accounting firms in Long Beach that service the trade industry. So, all those things are positives. And then they have a great thing going for them, which is a downtown that's on the ocean. And they've taken advantage of that and created a very attractive central core. And the great tragedy of Los Angeles historically is that they put the downtown in the wrong place. If they had put downtown where Santa Monica is, it would be a very different story. Now, the downtown is located in not such an attractive place – it gets pretty hot and pretty dusty and pretty smoggy – it [does have] mountains around it, but not particularly close to it. It's not as attractive, physically, as Hollywood let's say. And Long Beach has that advantage. And they've played on that advantage and they've done a pretty good job with it.

**LBBJ:** Over the last four years, Long Beach's poverty ranking, according to U.S. Census figures, has gone from 27th to 6th with 26.4 percent of the city's residents living below the poverty line. Why do you think Long Beach is experiencing that trend?

**Kotkin:** Well, there seems to be in America two different types of poverty. Neither of them are good, but they are different, and they have to be understood as different. One is what you had in New Orleans, which was multigenerational . . . people born in the United States, in many cases families that have been in the United States for hundreds of years, predominately, in this case, African American. You have that kind of poverty with the Native Americans in the reservations [along] with [a] low rate of labor participation [and] very weak family structures. Long Beach I assume has some of that, but most of the increase would probably be from immigration. Now, the immigrant poverty is a different thing. It's people working, very often intact families, and, of course, a lot of their income isn't being reported. So [that's] one of the reasons why, if you go to a Hispanic neighborhood that's poor, all the stores are occupied and the rents are quite high. You go to an African American neighborhood in St. Louis and the rents are low and there are very few stores. Now that should tell you that there is more disposable income in the Hispanic areas, although it's not reported. Think about it . . . you have immigrants who are being paid to do construction for cash, drywall for cash, nannies for cash, gardeners for cash . . . Swap Meets for cash . . . and a lot of that money is not being reported. So there's much more money there. If you talk to someone like Jose Legaspi, one of the great experts on Latino markets, . . . [he'll tell you] they're not reporting their income . . . How many of the cleaning ladies and nannies report their income? How many of them insist on being paid in cash?

**LBBJ:** If their incomes were reported, do you think that would have a significant impact on the poverty rating?

**Kotkin:** Yes, it would have a huge impact.

**LBBJ:** Even though what they are doing is basically menial labor?

**Kotkin:** A cleaning lady's standard price in L.A. today is about \$10 an hour. And you figure \$10 per hour with no tax is like \$15 an hour – that's a good industrial job. Yes, it may be considered menial but it's actually quite good if a woman, theoretically, is working 30 hours a week as a nanny, housekeeper – whatever you want to call her – and is making \$300 without paying taxes. She's really making \$450, so that's actually not a bad income. Now you're talking about somebody who is making \$1,800 a month [instead of \$1,200 a month]. And it's not being reported. And we know that is the case because of the retail sales per capita, which means that there's disposable income.

**LBBJ:** With some of that coming from unreported sources?

**Kotkin:** With a lot of it coming from unreported sources. And it should be added that many Latinos live together, they cook together, they know how to [stretch their dollars further] . . . What would be considered, for you or me, to be a life of poverty – because we couldn't handle money in the same way –

is not necessarily a life of poverty, both relatively and even, in some ways, in actuality for them. So if you look at Home Depot, Costco or Pep Boys and you put them in Latino areas, which have low per capita incomes, they will do great – because people are working on their cars, they’re working on their homes [and buying food]. And so, they are able to live much, much, better on lower wages and then, of course . . . usually the income of at least one member of the family is not being reported.

**LBBJ:** Could this lead to generational poverty?

**Kotkin:** The evidence so far seems to be that most are making it into the middle class by the second generation or the third, usually the second . . . The most important issue in the history of cities or the history of anything else is the issue of a family, morality, value structure. If the value structure of hard work and commitment to family is there – which is often religiously inspired, but not always – then the prospects are very good. If those things are lost, the prospects are miserable.

**LBBJ:** Long Beach is known for having the most diverse population in the country of any large city. Is there a way that city leaders in Long Beach could use that diversity to help define the identity of the city more, to create a stronger sense of place, to use it as some sort of economic engine? Are there opportunities to looking at diversity in that way?

**Kotkin:** Well, there are some, but I . . . would really think of something that brings people in Long Beach together, which is the ocean, the port, the Aquarium, the diversity of the kinds of neighborhoods that you have . . . A lot of cities, particularly in Southern California, have diverse populations. But the competitive advantage of Long Beach, if I was to say, is that you have a relatively affordable place by the beach, and you have a basically pretty damn good urban backbone that was built in the ’30s, some very nice buildings [built] during the real estate speculations of the ’80s . . . some nice streetscapes, got some really nice neighborhoods. Long Beach has really good bone structure. If I was to say, looking from the outside, where your problems are, some of them are problems [related to] just being in California – having to deal with the lunatics in the legislature – [and locally] some of it is the problem of education and the problems with the public schools, that’s probably a huge issue. But Long Beach has a lot going for it. I’ve always thought that Long Beach would be one of those [where it] would be interesting to see what a really inspired administration could do [with it].

**LBBJ:** One concept that I’m hearing discussed a lot more in Californian circles is this notion of workforce housing and, in tandem with that, taking on commercial corridors that are underutilized and creating some kind of mixed-use development. When I drive through North Long Beach and other parts of town struggling with blight, the neighborhoods seem fairly strong, but what really pulls them down are these run-down commercial corridors. How much of an opportunity do you think ideas like workforce housing hold?

**Kotkin:** I think there’s a huge opportunity but you’ve got to deal with the fundamentals: ‘A,’ you’ve got to deal with the public safety issue; and ‘B’ you’ve got to deal with the education issue. If you dealt with those issues, then Long Beach would be very exciting to [young professionals and working families]. Why do people not stay in Long Beach? I assume those are the two key issues.

**LBBJ:** The current demand for housing throughout all of Long Beach is extremely high. If the housing units are constructed, people will buy them. But it appears to be more difficult to improve the education than it is to improve the built environment. Yet it does seem plausible that through building the right kind of housing in some of Long Beach’s struggling neighborhoods, the right kind of resident would be attracted, who would, in turn, demand better education and public safety. But what comes first when you turn around a rough area? Do you turn around the education and public safety to attract residents or do the new residents turn things around?

**Kotkin:** Well, you’ve got to certainly provide options for education if middle class people are going to live there. And you’ve got to deal with the crime issue.

**LBBJ:** There’s this issue throughout L.A. County of people working in one area and living elsewhere. And sometimes people, for whatever reason, are not able to swap out their job and live closer to their homes. It seems that the most vital communities have large percentages of people who live and work in the same city, or nearby. In looking at cities in the wide angle that you have recently, do you feel that

there are keys for contemporary cities to anchor their residents to live and work in the same place?

**Kotkin:** Well, I think there are basic cultural institutions, religious institutions [and] educational institutions [that] are absolutely fundamental. And then the idea of having an environment where if someone wants to live there they can find a job in their field would probably be attractive. If there's an opportunity to work in a community most people would prefer to live close to work. And what we're seeing is that there's still this trend of people trying to move closer and closer to where they work. Or the jobs are moving out to where people live and that's why we're getting this very high growth rate out in the Inland Empire.

**LBBJ:** What are cities in the United States that are bringing in these high-paying jobs, that attract productive new residents, doing right?

**Kotkin:** In many cases, it's the basics: they're safe, they have good education systems and they're building amenities. And we have very good examples close by – Thousand Oaks in the area of Conejo Valley has certainly done that. Large parts of Orange County have done that. So there are communities that have done that. Even within L.A. County [the City of] Burbank has done a pretty good job, Culver City has done a pretty good job. So it's being done in lot's of communities. Very few big cities are doing it, but big cities have huge structural problems . . . and also they have problems with pension obligations to their employees, they have . . . in some cases, a rigged political system – there's all sorts of things that make it very difficult for an older big city to reform itself.

**LBBJ:** But it can still be done.

**Kotkin:** It can be done. Look, Rudy Giuliani took New York City from the brink of bankruptcy and an almost state-of-nature crime environment to, for New York, a remarkably civilized and functional city... Dick Riordan took Los Angeles after the 1992 riots and turned it into a relatively functioning political economy for the period he was there. It can be done and good mayors and enlightened business leadership can make it happen. In other words, [city leaders need to create] places that people care about, they need to be places that are safe and they need to be places where people want to do business. If you have those three going for you, you can turn around any place. ■