



THE FUTURES OF DENSITY

EDWARD GLAESER, *THE TRIUMPH OF THE CITY* (NEW YORK: PENGUIN, 2011)

DOUG SAUNDERS, *ARRIVAL CITY* (NEW YORK: PANTHEON, 2010)

ALAN EHRENHALT, *THE GREAT INVERSION* (NEW YORK: KNOFF, 2012)

By Terrence Doody

In *The Triumph of the City*, Edward Glaeser argues that the city has triumphed because it has made all of us richer, smarter, greener, healthier, and happier. Glaeser is a Harvard economist who writes the “dull science” with unusual enthusiasm, and he surveys the city’s success and the historical reasons that produced it. If there is a single urban quality essential to this progress, he suggests that it is density, a complex condition with many possible effects, both good and bad.

Density is at the core of Doug Saunders’ *Arrival City*, his account of “How the Largest Migration in Human History Is Shaping Our World.” Saunders is a British journalist, and his argument is that the world’s rural poor are leaving the countryside in such numbers that population growth will soon end and, in the near future, we will be able to create “a permanently sustainable world.” This is a very large claim, one that trumps the advantages of being merely richer, smarter, and happier.

What’s happening in the American cities that the

political writer Alan Ehrenhalt studies in *The Great Inversion* is that people are moving back into city centers on a scale that is much more than mere gentrification. He claims that this shift will make our older cities more like the great capitals of the nineteenth century—Paris, London, Vienna—than the cities they were before manufacturing shrunk, the suburbs grew, and Americans began to marry later and live in better health for a much longer time.

All three books are optimistic toward the future, but the most difficult avenue into that future comes through Saunders’ *Arrival City*. “Arrival cities” are the great slums that metastasize at the edge of big cities, especially in the Third World, and pack the migrant population into unimaginable squalor. But for Saunders these places are actually dynamic mechanisms of transformation that connect villages and cities to the advantage of both. The money the migrants send home makes a great difference in the quality of village life, and they can make

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the money they do because the social networks and small-scale manufacturers of the arrival cities do not depend on the established cities’ economic orders. These places can be lawless and chaotic, but they have a freedom and mobility that reward the immigrants’ adaptability, discipline, and great courage.

Arrival cities fail not when more poor arrive, but when governments impose policies to regulate them. In China, for example, there are millions in a “floating population” whose papers identify them with their original villages and not the cities they live in “illegally,” places where they are denied rights and services. In South America, on the other hand, the arrival cities have been better managed. The Santa Marta district of Rio de Janeiro, for instance, has flourished because the government has upgraded the infrastructure without feeling the need to change it, granting its occupants birth certificates and street addresses. It is no coincidence that Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the former President of Brazil, grew up in a São Paulo slum himself, and no surprise that the citizens of Santa Marta aren’t too happy now about paying taxes.

Glaeser also writes about the great slums as steps to the city’s triumph, but he is less detailed and more provocative: some of his chapter titles are “Why Riot?” “What’s Good about Slums?” “Is There Anything Greener than Blacktop?” and “How Policy Magnifies Poverty.” Saunders has done the kind of research Glaeser has and knows the statistics, but he works best through individual portraits and cases, playing similarities and differences off each other in a way that inhibits most generalizations. This kind of patience also characterizes Ehrenhalt’s method, and there is no more effective part of his argument than his opening studies of three very different neighborhoods that all exemplify the shift he calls “The

Great Inversion.”

The first of these is the Sheffield neighborhood of Chicago, the second is Wall Street, and the third the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. Sheffield is an established neighborhood of undistinguished middle-class houses a mile from Lake Michigan and close to Wrigley Field. Small-scale retail supports the street life it needs; the neighborhood has an established music scene; and the EI means easy transportation into downtown. Sheffield had significant trouble with gangs in the 1970s, when the median value of its houses was \$23,800. But its median family income in 2009 was \$201,125, and the median home price was over a million. “It is easier to demonstrate that Sheffield is rich than to explain why,” Ehrenhalt writes; and it is impossible to see its wealth as you drive through.

Whether Sheffield’s story is more unlikely than the recent settling of Wall Street is hard to decide. On 9/11, about 15,000 people lived south of the World Trade Center. By 2008, over 50,000 lived there in what had not been a neighborhood for a very long time. The average Wall Street household is larger than that of the rest of Manhattan, but despite the unusual number of baby strollers on the street, there is not much retail to stroll to.

The Bushwick section of Brooklyn couldn’t be more unlike either Wall Street or Sheffield. It has been settled by hipster artists because Williamsburg has become as chic and expensive as downtown Manhattan. Bushwick borders on Bedford-Stuyvesant, and it is still poor, dirty, and filled with crime. But one of its activist citizens says it is “CHEAP.” Its new density is not gentrification.

Ehrenhalt studies suburbs that want to urbanize themselves with fake downtowns—Sugar Land, The Woodlands—and cities like Phoenix that want to create a core they never quite had. He also pays close attention to Houston’s Third Ward and the efforts of State Representative Gar-

net Coleman, who buys up land with money from a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone and “banks” it to keep developers from doing what they did in the Fourth Ward. Coleman has three goals: to keep people in place, provide affordable housing, and prevent gentrification even by affluent blacks. Ehrenhalt says, “There is no one quite like him in any inner-city neighborhood in America.”

“One thing we have learned about the modern city,” Ehrenhalt also says, “is that even the smartest of observers, trying to predict the possibilities for revival and change in almost any urban neighborhood, are likely to be wrong.” The triumph of Glaeser’s established city, the world-transforming dynamics of Saunders’ arrival city, and the pleasing Darwinian mysteries of Ehrenhalt’s evolving neighborhoods have two aspects. They tell a similar story of the city’s steady success, and they differ so greatly that it is very difficult to plot with any clarity the course from Santa Marta, to Sheffield, and then back to the ideal of nineteenth-century Paris, which was an arrival city itself and still is.

Density has not alleviated Paris’ current immigration problems, and density itself does not simply cure poverty or prevent suffering and exploitation. Saunders argues that the French Revolution had more to do with Paris’ impoverished workers than with the ideas of Enlightenment philosophers, and that the Iranian revolution became a religious movement only after the Ayatollah had galvanized the poor of Tehran. There are countless arrival cities whose futures are still uncertain. And in light of them, Glaeser’s triumph looks shallow and Saunders’ hope for a “permanently sustainable world” seems premature.

Ehrenhalt thinks about cities on a much smaller scale, and he thinks modestly. His chances of being right about the future seem better. Still, I don’t expect Houston to seem like Paris real soon. ●