

Intro

JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER has been called a lot of things. The world's most outspoken critic of suburban sprawl. A caustic hero of New Urbanism. A peak oil provocateur. Curmudgeon. Jeremiah. Doomer. Dystopian. Generalist. Social critic. Crank.

He usually just goes by Jim.

My first encounter with Jim was through *The Geography of Nowhere*, a highly acclaimed, landmark polemic about the failures of suburbia. I was nineteen when I discovered that book, just a few years after its 1993 publication. And I've been amusing, enlightening and pissing people off with what I found between its covers ever since.

Like so many of my Generation X, I was hatched on a cul-de-sac in the American suburbs. As an adolescent, I grew deeply dissatisfied with that mode of living. It was monotonous, ugly and isolating, and I was acting out along with my peers in strange and bad ways. But it wasn't until *Geography* that I acquired the tools to be able to articulate the things I found profoundly wrong about the non-place of suburbia. Kunstler's acid wit was a laxative to my constipated feelings about our everyday surroundings. He seemed to put across, in a wickedly funny manner, all of the complaints and disappointments and frustrations

that had been a lump in my throat for years. I knew suburbia sucked. What I lacked until I saw it in print was the vocabulary and framework that JHK used to back up the sentiment. I was never the same again.

Kunstler wrote other books addressing the subject, and I read them, too. In *Home From Nowhere* he introduced me to the New Urbanism, a reformist movement of architects and planners working to create spaces you could actually give a damn about. In *The City in Mind*, he dissected the urban organism with eight portraits of major world cities—some wonderful, some utterly unsustainable. These follow-up titles never garnered the same attention as the first, but they helped secure his place on the totem pole of urban thinkers. He was clearly doing for a new generation what Jane Jacobs had done for hers. People across the nation were taking notice.

By the time *City* hit the shelves in 2002, I was no longer a passive reader of Kunstler's work. I was actually following in his footsteps. I had landed a dreary gig as a reporter covering the municipal meetings and so-called quality of life issues in a suburb of Albany, New York. This happened to be in the same town where Jim himself had toiled as a reporter thirty years earlier, when his lens on suburbia had its first real grinding. He left the area after that for a stint at *Rolling Stone* and a few other bohemian adventures, but ultimately returned to settle in nearby Saratoga Springs, where he's lived ever since. Lucky for me, that made JHK a local source that I could call upon for an occasional quote about various sprawl-building efforts in my beat. And I took whatever chance I got to insert his voice into my reporting, planting little Kunstler bombs to

be delivered to the doorsteps of suburbia by way of a newsprint Trojan horse. (That's how I imagined it at the time.... I was twenty-three.)

I graduated to other papers, magazines and projects. But I kept returning to Kunstler. I felt compelled to bring his ideas to new audiences, whether they wanted to hear them or not. There were other contrarians out there challenging the suburban dogmas of the day, but in my mind JHK was the best in the genre. His rhetoric was meme-spreading, widely repeated and often imitated. Sure, he cussed and used hyperbole and had a malicious sense of humor. He was funny as hell. But he was not just arming the populace with zingers to hurl at defective planners, brain-dead architects and evil developers. He was shifting the public consensus by getting us regular folks to think about the places where we spend our lives. That's how you reclaim the public realm. And it's that empowering aspect of his thought-sharing that I still find most appealing.

In recent years, Kunstler's gaze has turned to a new chapter in the suburban saga: its future. He believes it will soon become self-evident that our zeal to suburbanize this nation—in a seemingly endless cycle of revolving debt—was “the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world.” The choices we made during the past half-century in how we would inhabit the landscape, conduct commerce and even feed ourselves will prove to be tragic. We made these tragic choices during a “fiesta” of cheap fossil fuel, which is now ending. A permanent energy crisis is upon us, and it is coinciding with a financial collapse that will leave our civilization functionally broke. Our

failures in leadership at all levels may bring about political instability. Throw in the unknown effects of climate change and we begin to see a picture of the converging catastrophes of the twenty-first century. Welcome to what Kunstler has dubbed “The Long Emergency,” which is also the title of his latest and most provocative nonfiction book.

The worst of car-dependent suburbia is “toast,” in Kunstler’s prognosis. We won’t have the will or the finances to retrofit it. And so it is destined to be “a living arrangement with no future,” he says. Fortunately, the New Urbanists accomplished something very important during the fiasco of suburban build-out that will prove invaluable in the times to come. They retrieved from cultural oblivion the important principles and practices of tradition-rooted architecture and urban design. Soon, Kunstler predicts, this body of pre-automobile place-making skills will be applied once again to our smaller cities and villages as we rediscover and reinhabit them. Agriculture, commerce, daily life will be conducted locally again in a more organic arrangement. There will be resistance and pushback to these inevitable changes. But eventually, JHK is serenely convinced, we will find ourselves a much happier people, living in a more rewarding setting.

There’s a lot more to Kunstler’s worldview, which is often misunderstood or digested only in bits and pieces through brief media appearances. Even his followers tend to compartmentalize him. Many of those who know him through his earlier critiques of suburbia are somewhat put off by his more recent preoccupation with peak oil, financial collapse and crystal ball-gazing. On the other hand, a lot of the “collapsniks” who found him through *The*

Long Emergency and his *Clusterfuck Nation* blog are somewhat bored by and dismissive of his urbanist thoughts. Neither camp seems to appreciate the full spectrum of “Kunstler’s Unified Field Theory of Modern Civilization,” as another reporter once described it to me. To be honest, I didn’t get the whole picture myself. Which is why I felt it was time to sit Jim in front of a microphone and start from the beginning.

By 2007 I had gotten into a new media form called podcasting, which is really just a means of delivering old-fashioned talk radio through the Internet. I was producing a monthly podcast for a think tank promoting the philosophy of humanism, which I took as another chance to speak with Kunstler about the need for a more credible “human habitat.” His appearance on that program was well received and we seemed to have a good “on-air” chemistry. So we decided to keep meeting—in his house in Saratoga, in my apartment in Troy, sometimes in the field—to record more conversations for an independent side project we called “The KunstlerCast,” for lack of a better name. It was a weekly discussion about “the tragic comedy of suburban sprawl,” an endless source of material for Kunstler’s dyspeptic commentary.

For many, it was an addictive little program. Jim had the gift of gab, which is not always the case with writers. He feared no topic, needed little to get him going, and everything he said was off the top of his head. My most important contribution was probably showing up to press “record,” though I did help to keep him on track. I assumed the role of host, and sometimes foil, to his magnificent rants. My intention was to be a proxy for the audience who could enjoy Jim’s snark from the safety of their earbuds. I was always more interested

in learning from Jim rather than interviewing him, and our listeners seemed to enjoy that dynamic. It's a very traditional thing to do, to sit with an "elder" and receive the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next. We just happened to have ten thousand iPods sitting alongside us.

Kunstler is a lightning rod, though, and if you stand close to a lightning rod you'll eventually get zapped. Over the years I received my share of criticism for my performance, in a way that only the Internet would allow. I was called "kind of a dork," "a dotting young host" and "a satirical, smirking sidekick." One fan of the show accused me of lobbing softball questions.

At times, even Jim could be a little imperious in his tone with me, especially early on. It is no secret among those who have interviewed him that Kunstler can be a challenging subject; the adjective I hear most often is "prickly." He has little patience for combative questioning or lines that attempt to lead him to a conclusion he hasn't drawn. He doesn't take kindly to being chastised for not being hopeful enough or for not proffering enough "solutions." But overall he was patient, kind and generous with me and I quickly found that he is more than willing to assess his own ideas and limitations. All I needed to do was simply nudge him toward those topics and get out of the way.

For four years, I talked with a very interesting man named James Howard Kunstler. This is a record of what he told me.