

# GBN BOOK CLUB



Continuing a 25-year tradition, the GBN Book Club, edited by cofounder Stewart Brand, is a monthly review of books that shed new light on our past, present, and future.

GBN, a member of The Monitor Group, helps organizations adapt and grow in an increasingly uncertain and volatile world. Using our leading-edge tools and expertise—scenario planning, experiential learning, networks of experts and visionaries—we enable our clients to address their most critical challenges and gain the insight, confidence, and capabilities they need to shape the future. Learn more at [www.gbn.com](http://www.gbn.com).

STEWART BRAND is a cofounder of GBN, the Long Now Foundation, The WELL, the *Whole Earth Catalogue* and many other creative ventures that engage diverse perspectives and tools to promote long-term thinking and responsibility. He is the author of four books including *How Buildings Learn* and *Whole Earth Discipline*.

## Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier by Edward Glaeser

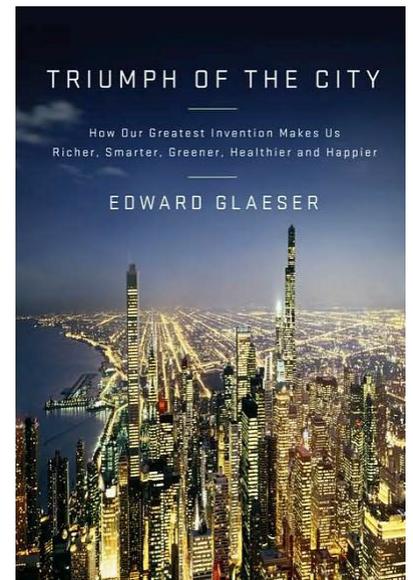
Penguin Press (2011)

*Because I have been writing about urbanization for several years, I own 119 well-thumbed books about cities.* The most dog-eared of all contains most of the best of what is in the 119, plus much that is unique. That is Ed Glaeser's book.

An economics professor at Harvard, Glaeser looks at what cities do. What they do for their occupants, the nations around them, and civilization. What the best ones do well and the worst ones do poorly. (The best ones are the densest and take education the most seriously.) The book is rich in insightful comparative analysis. (Cities whose Januaries are exceptionally cold or hot must overcome the drawbacks of discomfort and high energy costs for heating or cooling.... Cities designed around elevators rather than cars—Manhattan or Hong Kong versus Phoenix, say—rejoice in low transportation costs and high human interactivity.)

Glaeser is no prude. He currently lives in a suburb, noting that he was driven there by poor public schools in the big city and the financial attraction of his mortgage tax credit. (He has fixes for both of those—more charter schools in town, and a scaling back of the tax credit.) The book, never dry, abounds in specific recommendations based on global research. Curb excessive preservationism. Welcome the poor. Build high.

Glaeser clearly adores cities. He makes it obvious why the world is moving there. —STEWART BRAND



---

## Inside The Book

The hallmark of declining cities is that they have too much housing and infrastructure relative to the strength of their economies. With all that supply of structure and so little demand, it makes no sense to use public money to build more supply. The folly of building-centric urban renewal reminds us that cities aren't structures; cities are people.

---

A wealth of research confirms the importance of face-to-face contact. One experiment performed by two researchers at the University of Michigan challenged groups of six students to play a game in which everyone could earn money by cooperating. One set of groups met for ten minutes face-to-face to discuss strategy before playing. Another set of groups had thirty minutes for electronic interaction. The groups that met in person cooperated well and earned more money. The groups that had only connected electronically fell apart, as members put their personal gains ahead of the group's needs. This finding resonates well with many other experiments, which have shown that face-to-face contact leads to more trust, generosity, and cooperation than any other sort of interaction.... In most of the world, rich people surround themselves with big offices and decorated walls, but on trading floors, some of the world's wealthiest people work right on top of each other. Rich traders are forgoing privacy for the knowledge that comes from proximity to other people. In a sense, trading floors are just the city writ small. When Bloomberg switched careers yet again in 2002 to become mayor of New York, he took the open plan with him to City Hall.

---

As of 2008, 36 percent of New Yorkers are foreign-born, and 48 percent speak a language other than English at home. The comparable numbers for the United States as a whole are 13 percent and 20 percent. Just as cities are good for immigrants, immigrants are good for cities.

---

Comparing seventy cities worldwide, Matthew Kahn and I found that when countries move from having low gas taxes to high gas taxes, the density of development increases by more than 40 percent.

---

The traffic problem essentially reflects the impossibility of satiating the demand for anything that's free. Roads are expensive to build and valuable to use, yet American motorists seem to think that a right to drive for free was promised them by the Bill of Rights.... Building more roads almost never eliminates traffic delays, but congestion pricing does. In 1975, Singapore adopted a simple form of congestion pricing, charging motorists more for driving in the central city. Now the system is electronic and sophisticated and keeps that city traffic-jam free.

---

Being pro-home-ownership means being anticity.

---

The curse of NIMBYism.... Not all change is good, but much change is necessary if the world is to become more productive, affordable, exciting, innovative, and environmentally friendly.... In older cities, preservationists can be the great enemies of change. They couch their arguments in terms of beauty and history. I respect their values enormously, but also believe their power must be checked.

---

The most straightforward way to address climate change is a simple carbon tax. If energy users are taxed for the social costs of their actions, then they'll use more fuel-efficient cars and live in more energy-efficient houses. They'll also find energy-conserving big-city life more appealing. By not taxing energy use properly, we are implicitly subsidizing energy-intensive suburban lifestyles and pushing people out of cities.