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It is always a bit unnerving to read someone else’s love letters, but even more so, when you have the same object of desire. Edward Glaeser’s TRIUMPH OF THE CITY is a love letter to cities and to New York City in particular. Being Glaeser’s contemporary and having grown up in New York City at the same time, I nodded knowingly when he writes that “every urban childhood is shaped by an onrush of extraordinary people and experiences – some delicious, like the sense of power that comes from a preteen’s first subway trip alone; some less so, like a first exposure to urban gunfire (an unforgettable part of my childhood education in New York City thirty-five years ago.)” He had me from page 2.

Glaeser is one of our leading urban economists and the author of many a compelling and provocative study. His RETHINKING FEDERAL HOUSING POLICY (2008) (with Joseph Gyourko), for instance, summarizes much of his research on cities and housing policy and questions many of our nostrums about federal housing policy and local land use regulation. While typically categorized as being conservative, Glaeser could also be a categorized as an economist who seeks to challenge the conventional wisdom.

TRIUMPH OF THE CITY is not an academic work, although it is clearly informed by Glaeser’s extensive body of scholarship. This does not undercut its value in an academic context. And indeed I have assigned portions of this book to students in a land use colloquium. The introduction alone is full of many insights, some new and some just well expressed. For instance, Glaeser writes that “Cities are the absence of physical space between people and companies. They are proximity, density, closeness.” He sets forth some controversial yet ultimately convincing claims, such as “Cities thrive when they have many small firms and skilled citizens.”

From the start, it is clear that Glaeser is not afraid to take on his opponents, no matter their stature. He notes that “Mahatma Gandhi said that ‘the true India is to be found not in its few cities, but in its 700,000 villages’ and ‘the growth of the nation depends not on cities, but [on] its villages.’ The great man was wrong.” After taking Gandhi down a notch, he moves on to another hallowed sage, at least for planners: Jane Jacobs. He acknowledges that she understood that the people who make a city creative need affordable real estate. But she also made mistakes that came from relying too much on her ground-level view and not using conceptual tools that help one think through an entire system. Because she saw that older, shorter buildings were cheaper, she incorrectly believed that restricting heights and preserving old neighborhoods would ensure affordability. That’s not how supply and demand work. When the demand for a city rises, prices will rise unless more homes are built. When cities restrict new construction, they become more expensive. The remainder of the book provides strong arguments to support these assertions.

Glaeser’s views are clearly those of an economist. He writes dispassionately about the rise of sprawl, noting that “[e]xcoriating the exurbs is a popular intellectual pastime but the people who
moved to the suburbs weren’t fools. . . . Speed and space are the two big advantages of car-based living.” (13) At the same time, he argues convincingly that “Manhattan and downtown London and Shanghai, not suburbia, are the real friends of the environment” because such human environments have a substantially smaller carbon footprint than the tree-lined suburbs that depend so heavily on the car. (14)

As with many of us, when Glaeser moves from critique to prescription, his argument falters. He prescribes three simple rules to protect the vitality of the urban environment. I found these three rules to be heart of the book. They most clearly reveal Glaeser’s argument and most clearly reveal its limitations. The three rules are:

- First, cities should replace the current lengthy and uncertain permitting process with a simple system of fees.
- Second, historic preservation should be limited and well defined.
- Finally, individual neighborhoods should have some clearly delineated power to protect their special character. (161-162)

The first rule derives from the economist’s commandments to reduce unnecessary transaction costs and to make actors internalize the costs of their negative externalities. But it is striking in its rejection of any sense of democratic process that should be inherent in the permitting and land use review process. The second two rules, however, retreat from the principles informing his first rule. The second acknowledges that at least to some small extent, historically and aesthetically important buildings should be protected for some unstated, but non-quantifiable reason. The third acknowledges that democracy should play some limited role in land use decision-making.

The problem with the last two rules, at least in terms of this book’s argument, is that Glaeser has provided no theoretical framework that would justify them. He has made his case too strongly for the first rule and one wonders where the second two come from. And indeed, if the first rule is one that an economist could love, one wonders if the second two can only be explained as a result of Glaeser being an economist in love. He loves cities and New York City in that deep way that is so familiar to many of us. He can’t bear to think that Grand Central Station could be wiped away and replaced with a Penn Station – but he has not set forth a theoretical framework that justifies these last two rules. And to maintain the integrity of his overall argument, he must.

If you were to take nothing else from TRIUMPH OF THE CITY, you should attend to its cri de coeur: “the real city is made of flesh, not concrete.” (15) But, notwithstanding its limitations, the book offers much, much more than that. It challenges broadly held beliefs and presents a theory of the city that helps to evaluate policy proposals with a clear eye. What I take most from this book is that we all should seek to protect the souls of cities first and foremost because we love them, whether it is with the longing heart of the now-suburban-dwelling Glaeser or with the longing heart of the city-dweller that loves, but wants more, more, more.
References