Vishaan Chakrabarti has an axe—or two—to grind. Federal subsidies for oceanfront homes, green technology trends such as fluorescent light bulbs, most people working in the planning profession today—all these and more are skewered in *A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for an Urban America*. Chakrabarti’s purpose in taking these subjects to task is to show the peril that America threatens to unleash upon the world should its influence in planning, real estate and spatial trends continue to resonate globally. The unifying theme of Chakrabarti’s book is a fight against what he considers to be America’s most profligate and enduring export: suburbia.

Suburbia, as Chakrabarti tells it, is responsible for untold numbers of ills in modern America, and, as it continues to spread outside of the west, for many of the worldwide problems likely to metastasize unless we as a society return to our cities. Climate change, of course, but also loss of productivity, public health concerns such as hypertension, and more nebulous metrics such as decreased levels of happiness and familial unity are just some of the negative outcomes laid at the foot of American-style suburban living.

But Chakrabarti, an architect and professor at Columbia University, has an idea to combat the perniciousness of suburbia. Hyperdensity, which Chakrabarti defines as a place capable of supporting significant ridership for mass transit, or with a minimum of thirty housing units per acre, is the necessary antidote for suburbia’s venom. The first half of *A Country of Cities* lays out why cities—specifically hyperdense cities—are the ideal to be copied. The reasons are threefold: hyperdense cities have greater economic success, less impact on the environment and lead to their residents experiencing more joy and better health. The second half of the book focuses on Chakrabarti’s ideas on how these model cities might actually be built.

There are two main problems with *A Country of Cities*. The first is the fact that, unfortunately, Chakrabarti fails to tell the informed reader much information that he or she is likely not already aware of. The old, tried-and-true chestnuts of smart-growth and sustainable literature and thinking are all present and accounted for: in one breathless section Chakrabarti might be railing against overly restrictive zoning and historic preservation efforts which, in their zeal to keep everything as it is, actually deter community and economic progress. Next, he is going after NIMBY-ism and illustrating to the reader how the true cost of a gallon of gas is significantly more than what we pay at the pump. The federal mortgage interest deduction (along with other subsidies) is lambasted as favoring low-density growth at the expense of cities, which are the true drivers of economic growth and societal happiness. The issue is not that these topics are not troublesome or worthy of discussion, it is that Chakrabarti fails to add much to the conversation, consistently making observations and connections that have either been pointed out previously or which could probably be made by someone who has not spent years in the planning and real estate fields. A deeper analysis of these issues would have made for a more satisfying read.

Then there is the fact that Chakrabarti presents little proof that his theory of hyperdensity would actually engender the results that he envisions. If Chakrabarti did do his own original research in this respect, it is not presented to the reader. For example, Chakrabarti argues that density brings greater prosperity compared to sprawl, positing that clusters of industry and creative class human capital are necessary to jumpstart a region’s economy, and that those things are most easily attained in a dense city. That certainly may be, but Chakrabarti does not provide the reader with any evidence that his threshold of thirty

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Adam Levin is a first-year Master’s student specializing in economic development. Prior to enrolling in DCRP, Adam worked as a political journalist in Washington, D.C.
housing units per acre will bring all this to bear. Similarly, there is scant backup for his claim that hyperdensity will support parks, public spaces and cultural buildings and therefore will contribute to “our joyous experience of streets and sidewalks, gardens and parks.” These things all sound nice and certainly make sense from a logical point of view, but, as a planner, is it too much to ask for some data to validate these assertions?

All of this is not to say *A Country of Cities* does not have some fine points. The book’s best section perhaps comes when Chakrabarti discusses the wide range of interrelated factors in a city or neighborhood which are necessary for its residents to lead successful and happy lives. In the book’s second half, where Chakrabarti lays out his precepts for building model cities, he writes that not only density, but also infrastructure and affordability must be considered when deciding whether or not a situation is to be emulated. He then takes a wide view of infrastructure, including in his definition not only the standard roads and utilities one would normally think of, but also institutional infrastructure like schools, health care facilities, cultural centers and parks. Chakrabarti has a firm handle on the fact that people today expect to have all kinds of services at their fingertips, and that areas which cannot provide a wide web of amenities are likely to be left comparatively behind. Chakrabarti dubs this scenario the “infrastructure of opportunity,” and his argument that government investment is necessary to create this environment largely rings true.

Another interesting section revolves around Chakrabarti’s treatment of how much cities, states and regions put into the national economy and subsequently receive back out in the form of government spending. Chakrabarti claims that while America’s cities comprise just three percent of the country, they generate 90 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product and receive a fraction of that back in government funding. If all the balances of payment between cities and government were evened out, Chakrabarti writes, cities across the country would go from debt to surplus. In reality, such a situation is almost too fantastical to conceive, and it points to perhaps the greatest weakness of *A Country of Cities*. While a book with the word “manifesto” in its title can perhaps be forgiven for not taking practical and political considerations into account, most of the ideas Chakrabarti puts forth stand essentially no chance of enactment in today’s ultra-politicized environment.

In this regard, Chakrabarti’s work is unlikely to motivate any action. Rather, it will probably only serve to rile up the segment of the population which opposes its ideas, not finally persuade them to change their thinking. If Chakrabarti had wanted to truly advance the conversation, he would have written a book which focused on the psychological factors that go into denying the existence of the problems in *A Country of Cities*. Still, his passionate pleas for change make interesting reading for planners.