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Lean Times

Say good-bye to mega-malls, mega-builders, and mega-profits, says social critic James Howard Kunstler. The age of small and local has arrived. By Matthew Power

GB: The economy is a mess. Are we entering into the crisis scenario you talk about in your books?

JHC: Yes, we've entered into what I call *The Long Emergency*, which will have a huge bearing on our living arrangements. What people don't understand is that the current financial fiasco represents trillions of dollars leaving the system—never to be seen again. That was money assumed to be available for maintaining infrastructure—roads and buildings, for example.

GB: A lot of people believe technology will save us from the escalating costs of fossil fuel.

JHC: I go to these elite environmental conferences, and all they want to talk about are nifty new ways to run cars. I call this technograndiosity. These people are caught in a psychological trap, unable to imagine a world that isn't car dependent.

GB: The home building industry seems limited to that frame as well.

JHC: My friend is a builder in upstate New York who decided to build a green subdivision, with all the latest and greatest advances. The trouble is, it's still a cul-de-sac community 15 minutes from anything. He's emblematic of the problem. He's only connecting 52% of the dots—not seeing the big picture of where we need to go.

GB: Your books speak approvingly of new urbanism but is that development model viable for our downsized future?

JHC: The new urbanists made an error in making themselves hostage to production home builders. They also bent over backwards to accommodate the automobile in their designs.

Now they face a huge challenge. They won't be able to get the financing for that kind of large-scale work any more.

GB: If production builders are doomed, can small builders make it in post-fossil fuel America?

JHC: I don't think people will leave the suburbs and move to cities. Instead, they'll return to smaller towns and cities, where construction is local.

GB: What will become of today's urban suburbs and golf communities?

JHC: One possibility is that people who still have money will have live-in servants who do things for them. A lot of my friends already can't clean their big houses, so they live in chaos.

GB: Servants? Sounds like the seeds of revolution.

JHC: Of course. The former middle class is not going to like that kind of arrangement—not for long.

GB: Is anyone designing communities that can survive the end of oil?

JHC: I would look at the work of Leon Krier (<http://zakuski.utsa.edu/krier>). We're facing a return to traditionalism much more extreme than anyone imagines. Driving will be seen as an elite activity.

GB: But Wall Street pundits keep telling us we're just in an economic cycle—that things will eventually return to normal.

JHC: This happens in every society every time there's a major paradigm shift. You always have a massive effort to sustain the unsustainable. There's a way through this crisis but not around it. We'll emerge diminished economically but maybe wiser socially. GB

An internationally known author and social critic, James Howard Kunstler (www.jhk.com) lives in upstate New York and has written several books including *World Made By Hand* (a novel), and non-fiction including *The Long Emergency*, and *The Geography of Nowhere*.