

Completely at Ease: An Interview with James Howard Kunstler
Conducted by Alan David Doane.

Introduction

On August 2nd, 2007 author James Howard Kunstler sat down with me in the studios of Adirondack Broadcasting in Queensbury, New York for what turned out to be a wide-ranging discussion about his career, the state of the nation and the world, and his upcoming novel, [World Made By Hand](#).



*I first interviewed Jim Kunstler on the radio back in the 1990s, when the issue of suburban sprawl first came to my attention. The [last time I interviewed him](#) before this session was in 2000, and one doesn't have to reflect long to realize how very much the world has changed since then. I believe Kunstler's non-fiction books *The Geography of Nowhere*, *Home From Nowhere*, *The City in Mind* and *The Long Emergency* are groundbreaking works of crucial importance; he explains how we got where we are and where we're likely headed in the very near future in eloquent, easy-to-understand and often very funny language. All the more tragic, then, that so many people from the highest levels of government to the man and woman on the (badly-designed) street are not getting the message.*

This is a long interview, but it's filled with important information that will directly affect your life and the life of everyone you know, and I hope you'll take the time to read it fully, and most importantly, accept nothing on faith. Research the issues of peak oil and the sustainability of the American way of life, and you'll very likely come to believe as I do, as Kunstler does, that things are about to change in profound and unavoidable ways. It's the manner in which mankind deals with these changes that will define us for the remainder of the 21st century and beyond, but as you'll read, it's not all necessarily as apocalyptic as one might first assume.

*The most rewarding moment in this interview, for me, came toward the end when Jim was describing the characters and setting of his forthcoming novel, *World Made By Hand* (Atlantic Monthly Press, coming in March of 2008). After all Kunstler has covered as a journalist and author, after all the bleak but credible scenarios he describes, I was delighted to see that he can still get excited about the act of writing. There was a positive twinkle in his eye as he told me how the new novel came together, and when he talked about how rewarding his overall writing career has been, I was very happy to hear that a writer whose work has meant so much to me, has felt himself so satisfied with the path of his career – “Completely at ease,” as he says. It was a privilege to talk to him for the hour we spent together, and I can't thank him enough for taking the time to share his opinions, memories and observations with me.*

Note: An [audio MP3 \(14MB\) of this interview is available for download](#).

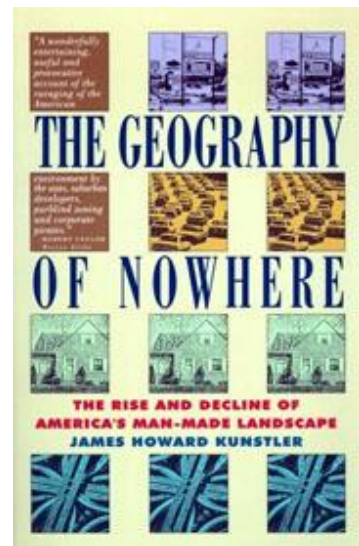
Alan David Doane: Could you tell us how you got into journalism?

James Howard Kunstler: I was a theatre major at a SUNY [State University of New York] four-

year college, Brockport, back in the 1960s in the Age of Aquarius. My first job out of college was directing a play in summer stock, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare. And that was my last job in the theatre [laughs]. After that, I started writing for the hippie newspapers in Boston in the early '70s. From there I had a series of jobs, eventually at the Capital Newspapers in Albany [New York], and then from there I got a job at *Rolling Stone* magazine, which was then in San Francisco. And I figured that was about as far as I was going to get in journalism, so I dropped out in the late '70s to write books.

For the next fifteen years or so, I wrote eight novels and they were all published by various mainstream publishers. I didn't get rich off of them, but I made enough money to pay the light bill. I would finish one on Friday and start another one on Monday, because that's really how it was. I get a lot of letters from wanna-be writers, young people who want to become writers, probably the main thing they don't understand is that perseverance counts for more than talent in this racket. If you can't hang in there through all the discouragement and disappointments – because you're writing in a vacuum, you're producing a product that no one's asked for, and there's a lot of disappointment and failure involved that you have to get through. So you have to slog your way through it.

Around 1988 or so, I was getting a little burned out writing novels that weren't making me rich, so I kind of segued back into journalism, and I started writing for *The New York Times Magazine*, a series of articles about development in America, particularly the northeast. And that led to a book proposal about the suburban predicament and why we had sort of destroyed the American landscape. And that book turned out to be *The Geography of Nowhere*. It led to several other books on the subject [*Home from Nowhere*, *The City in Mind* and *The Long Emergency*], and eventually to the next level for me, which was my previous book, *The Long Emergency*. Which is really more about the global energy predicament and its implications for American life than it is about suburbia *per se*.



One of the things that I was struck by in re-reading *The Geography of Nowhere*, and you kind of hinted at this, you sort of have had two major book-writing careers, as a fiction author and then these other – [you're] almost like two separate authors in a way.

It was an interesting thing that happened to me, and I guess I entered the biz at a strange time, when literature *per se* was becoming less important, especially “The Novel,” as conceived in the previous era of Norman Mailer, and Updike and Philip Roth and all those guys, that was the previous generation. My generation sort of became over-supplied with that at a time when there was also an over-supply of movies and videos and DVDs and things to distract people.

The thing that struck me with *The Geography of Nowhere*, it almost seems at this point, and I'll see if you agree, that it almost seems quaint in its optimism for the future. Even though it talks about, “We need to do this, we need to do that,” now that we've had a decade or

more of Peak Oil predictions and seeing where things are going with the housing market, it seems like *The Geography of Nowhere* is almost an optimistic book in comparison to where we are today.

Well, yeah. I wrote about the oil predicament in the final chapters of *The Geography of Nowhere*, which was published in '93. An interesting thing happened in the mid-'90s, a whole cohort of petroleum geologists started retiring out of the major oil companies. And as they did this, they started publishing their own personal views after they had secured their pensions and gotten their retirement in order. And these guys started publishing their views about where the oil industry was really headed, and that really resulted in a shock of recognition for people who were paying attention to these issues.

Now the unfortunate thing is that neither the public nor the mainstream media nor the political sector is paying much attention to the oil story. But it's a huge, huge problem that we face. It's going to change everything about how we live. When I wrote *The Geography of Nowhere*, even back then I regarded the suburban situation as being really tragic. I wasn't optimistic about it. The only thing I was optimistic about was, I had become associated with this group of people called [The New Urbanists](#). And they offered what I thought was a pretty good remedy for the suburban problem. Which would have been, or which has been a return to traditional principles of urban design, town planning, et cetera.

The trouble is that the energy predicament is now presenting itself so rapidly and implacably that I don't really think that we're going to have an easy transition. I think that the longer that we put off making the necessary adjustments, the more disorderly and harsh this transition is going to be.

That's something that I wanted to ask you about; you write in *The Geography of Nowhere* about the "[City Beautiful](#)" movement which was, correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems like, in terms of the overall national mindset of how things should work, in a town, in a city, that that was probably the last time the country was headed in a sustainable direction.

Well, we were a very different country. And for the benefit of the people who don't know what the City Beautiful movement was, it occurred at the turn of the previous century, in about a 25-year period from about 1890 to 1915, '20. And it really was an extraordinary period in which we came to the recognition that we were becoming a world power and that we needed to have cities that were worthy of our greatness. And so you had this tremendous coalition of business leaders, municipal leaders, architects, planners, really all working together on the same page to produce the greatest things that we ever built in our cities. The great civic centers, the great museums and libraries, the great public buildings, all that stuff, the best of it, dates from that period.



We're a very different country now, particularly in the post World War II period, where all kinds of things have changed, and most particularly we've had about 90 years of imposing the automobile over the terrain of North America with really disastrous results. And it can be stated

pretty succinctly, that we have produced a living arrangement that has no future. And that's a really big problem.

You have been a strong critic of the over-reliance on automobiles in the U.S., basically a lot of the problems that you see coming in the near future are a result of the over-reliance on the automobile. Can you tell me when you first started to see the signs were not pointing to, as you call it, a permanent "happy motoring era," that this was the problem. What tipped you off?

It wasn't really hard to understand; I was a young newspaper reporter during the first OPEC oil embargo in 1973, and interestingly enough in a newspaper office building that had just been relocated from downtown Albany [New York], to the suburban wasteland of Wolf Road [in Colonie, a suburb of Albany]. You could see what happened when the U.S. got into trouble with oil for a relatively short period of time. And unfortunately it was a short crisis, and people got over it. Moreover, there were things that happened afterwards that prompted us to think that it was an aberration. Namely, the last really great oil discoveries of the world, in the north slope of Alaska and the North Sea between England and Norway. These two great oil areas came into production in the late '70s, early '80s, and they sort of took the pressure off of the Western world and removed the leverage from OPEC for a while.



Is it fair to say that gave a kind of false hope to the idea that [cheap oil] would never end?

Absolutely correct; yeah, that's quite true. It really saved the West's rear-end for about 15 years. And oil prices went down steadily from the mid-'80s into the 21st century, until they were roughly ten dollars a barrel before 2001. So, the American people in particular developed the false reality that we didn't have an oil problem, that we didn't have an energy problem, and that we could just continue behaving the way we did. And ironically, or paradoxically, the worst part, the most emphatic part of the suburban build-out happened in those years, since the mid-'80s when we built so much car-dependent stuff. It's going to be such a liability for us, we have no idea.

We saw the price of a barrel of crude oil go up to record highs just this week...

Well, just yesterday it actually crossed into a frontier that it hasn't been in, above \$78.50. It retreated about a dollar late in trading, but the trend upward into the upper 70s towards \$80.00 a barrel is now pretty firm.

And there really is no immediate hope that this situation is ever going to get better.

This is an implacable problem. There's a new kind of wrinkle on the oil situation, and maybe a new interpretation that will help people understand it. And it has to do with this idea: That we're discovering now that the exporting rates from the countries that sell us oil and sell oil to the rest

of the developed world, the U.S., Europe, Japan, China and increasingly India, that the countries that export oil, their exports are declining at an even steeper rate than their production is declining. So, if Saudi Arabia's production is down four percent this year, whatever it is, their export levels are going down at a steeper level. And the same is true for all the other major exporting nations.

So what you're seeing here is a trend in which we're going to get into trouble much sooner than people thought, and not sheerly over depletion but over simply the market availability. Now the poster child for this, and this is very important, the poster boy for this is Mexico. Mexico's oil production, 60 percent of it is composed of one single oil field, the second largest field ever discovered in the history of the oil industry, called the Cantarell Oil Field in the Gulf of Mexico. It was discovered in the last 25 years and produced with the latest and greatest technology, which had the effect of only draining it more efficiently. So when people say "Don't worry, we have new technology coming along," this is one of the problems with it.



The Cantarell Oil Field of Mexico is now depleting at a minimum rate of about 15 percent a year. Meaning within about five or six years, it's out. And long before that, they're going to stop sending oil to the United States. Now, Mexico is America's third leading source of oil imports. And what this means is we're going to lose our third leading import supplier of oil within the next two or three years. This is going to have not only a tremendous effect on our ability to get around and go through our daily activities, but it is also going to create a tremendous amount of turmoil and hardship in Mexico; because the Mexican national government depends for nearly half of its revenue from the Mexican national oil industry, which is now entering a state of collapse. So as that occurs, we're going to see probably a great deal of disorder down in Mexico. And if you think we have problems now with immigration, and with managing the border, I think the probability is that they're only going to get worse.

When that comes to pass, they're going to be looking to get the hell out of Dodge.

The last time there was a big problem in Mexico was thing long, drawn-out revolution that occurred between about 1913 and 1940, and that was the era of Zapata, and all that tremendous amount of revolutionary activity. And back then, one-quarter of the Mexican population left the country. But back then the population of Mexico was 20 million. Now it's over 100 million.

That's a scary thought.

It is a scary thought, and it's among a whole menu of thoughts that we're not willing to even think about in the public discussion of these things.

If this is happening on a two- to three-year time scale as you say, wouldn't you think that the people that are running for president now would be talking about it and trying to



present some sort of solution, or at least a band-aid, and yet that's the last thing that they're talking about.

Well, I'm fond of saying that I'm allergic to conspiracy theories. And I am. People send me these 9/11 conspiracy emails and I pretty much disregard all that stuff. And I don't think there's a conspiracy among our leadership to keep us in the dark or anything, I think it's simply can be explained truly as cognitive dissonance, which is a fancy way of saying "static in our collective imagination," an inability to form a consensus about what's important, and about what needs to be addressed. And I think that the more trouble that we face and get into and the scarier that these problems are, actually, the more likelihood there is that the cognitive dissonance will increase. And that's one of the dangers that I think we face.

Let me give you an example. There is one particular project that is just absolutely imperative right now in this country. And that is rebuilding the American passenger railroad system; because we're going to face enormous problems with transportation between our cities, of both people and of goods. And the trucking industry is going to get in enormous trouble, the commercial airline industries are going to be in big, big trouble, if they survive at all. You know, people are going to need a way to get around.

Now, look. We had a railroad system that was once the envy of the world. We now have a railroad system that the Bulgarians would be ashamed of. The infrastructure for rebuilding it is lying out there rusting in the rain, it doesn't require the reinvention of anything, we know how to do this kind of technology. It could run on all different kinds of energy, but would do best if it ran on electricity, because it's the most efficient and you can get electricity from a lot of different things. It would put scores of thousands of people to work at jobs at every level, from labor to management.

There's another thing about it that's terribly important. This country needs a project that can help build our – that can encourage us, that can give us some sense of accomplishment. That can build our confidence. It's terribly important, because we're going to be facing a larger set of problems that are going to be very discouraging. We need a big national project that will boost our confidence, and also do something for us. And so rebuilding the American railroad system couldn't be more important.

Now the thing is, are any of the candidates even talking about this, in either party at any level of the political spectrum? And the answer is "no." So you have to ask yourself, why is that? Again, I don't think it's a conspiracy, I think it's sheer, obdurate cluelessness.

And there is a history in this country, it's not hard to look back and see previous precedents of great, nationwide projects, from the WPA...

Well, the City Beautiful movement, which you mentioned, which was not a government sponsored project, it was a consensus among the private world, the government world, everybody agreed that it was necessary to make American cities great. And now it's necessary to retrofit the United States for an energy-scarcer world, and we're not even beginning to think about it. And I think there's an explanation for that, too.

Let me ask you, because my next question involves the psychology – you’ve talked a lot [in your writing] about “the psychology of previous investment,” of the fact that as a nation we’re so wrapped up in our current status quo – as Vice President Cheney has said, “The American way of life is non-negotiable.” And yet, there’s no easily obvious replacement for cheap oil.



Yeah, there isn't. And much of the thinking and talking that is now going on about alternative fuels, is delusional; for example, the ethanol situation. As a Pennsylvania farmer put it to me last winter, “We’re going to take the last six inches of Midwestern topsoil and burn it in our gas tanks.” We may even starve if we pursue this thing far enough. It’ll definitely be a contest between people eating and automobiles, filling their gas tanks. But to get back to your point, you mention “the psychology of previous investment,” and I think this is a very important point. One of the reasons we’re having such a poor discussion about these problems is because we’ve put so much of our national wealth – and even our spirit – into this American Dream living arrangement of car dependency and national chain retail and all of the accessories and furnishings of it, that we can’t imagine letting go of it, or reforming it, or changing it.

It’s almost like the problem is too big for the average person to wrap their brain around, so they just pretend it isn’t there.

Yes, that’s true, and as a practical matter, most Americans are so deeply invested in the furnishings of the suburban living arrangement, you know, most Americans who own their own homes, that’s where most of their wealth is located, in the ownership of a suburban house. And if you’re living 28 miles outside of Denver, or Minneapolis, or if you’re living 17 miles outside of Glens Falls, it’s going to be very hard for you to imagine living differently.

The mall is going to be very far away when gas is either ten dollars a gallon, or unavailable altogether.

Everything’s going to be far away. We’re simply not going to be able to get around. And other things are going to be happening at the same time. It’s not as though just one thing will be changing. A lot of people write to me and say “Oh, won’t we just be telecommuting from our houses?” Well, one of the things that will be happening is that the American economy will be hemorrhaging jobs. A lot of positions and vocations and professions are going to be decimated. And so you’ll have people sitting in their McHouses 28 miles outside of Dallas, twiddling their thumbs, wondering how they’re going to feed their families. And wondering when the repo man is going to knock on their door, because that’s a whole other issue, which is something that’s happening simultaneously with the ramping up of the permanent energy crisis, is that the housing bubble is crashing, or deflating.

A lot of what’s going on in the United States right now is based



on wishing. Not on thinking, but on wishing. And there's a tremendous wish out there that the housing collapse wouldn't be so. That it's not happening. That maybe it'll turn around. And the builders are certainly sitting out there, hoping that it'll turn around and that they'll get their production back up again, but I think what you're going to see is this: This is truly the end of the cycle. The production home builders are not coming back. They're going to go down, for good. Indeed, the entire suburban development pattern is over. And we're going to have to occupy the terrain of North America much differently than we have in the last 70 years. And it's going to be an enormous trauma for us to even process the need to do this, and the resistance will be huge. In fact, I'll go as far as to say that we'll see an enormous political campaign to prop up the entitlements of the suburban living arrangement long after it is self-evident that it can't be sustained. And that in itself will be an exercise in futility that may waste many of our remaining national resources, including our national capital.

Whatever capital remains in our economic system, that is money, to be invested, when the housing crash bubbles out and all of the things associated with it implode, we're going to need money to rebuild the railroad system, we're going to need money to help people move from parts of the country that are no longer going to be very useful to live in, to other parts. I worry very much that this process is not going to be very orderly.

You talk about the problem of people counting on wishes rather than solid realities, and something that you talk about is the idea that technology will somehow rescue us from a lack of energy, that energy somehow equals technology.

Yeah, this is one of the reigning delusions of the moment, that technology and energy are the same, that they're interchangeable, and that if you run out of one, you just substitute the other. And nothing could be further from the truth. And we're going to get into tremendous trouble in believing this. You can see the origin of this, it comes from a century of having one really snazzy technological achievement after another, and there have been, obviously, a whole lot of them, and things that really have given us a lot of pleasure and a lot of convenience; everything from cell phones to DVDs to cars that are really reliable, et cetera. So these things have been very magical, and it's given the public the idea that there's an endless supply of magic, and that it's called technology. And that if you run into a problem with anything else, you just plug in the magic technology.

I actually had this experience when I gave a talk at the [Google](#) Corporation in Silicon Valley, and I began to understand where this comes from, too, by the way, part of this delusional thinking. Because when I finished my talk, the Google people in the audience by the way were all executives and higher-up engineers and stuff, and a lot of these people were young people under 30 who had become millionaires working for Google because they got in on the ground floor four or five years ago, and they grew with the company and got stock options, so, here they are millionaires at 28. Anyway, I gave my talk, and we had comments and questions. And there were no questions, just comments. And the comment was all the same. One after another these people, in one way or another, got up and said "Like, dude, we've got technology." Meaning, "you're a jerk."

And what I began to realize was that this is a form of grandiose thinking, delusional grandiose

thinking coming from people who have been so personally successful for moving little pixels around the screen with a mouse, that they think that this is the sovereign remedy for all the problems of the world. And the scary thing about it is that these are among the most intelligent, well-educated people in America, working at the highest level of American technological enterprise. And they don't know the difference, how do you expect Joe Sixpack to know the difference? So, this is a matter of leadership. We're getting poor leadership not just from the political sector but from the business sector, which is giving people the mistaken idea that if you run out of energy, you just plug in technology, and it's a very tragic belief.

What's the place, if any, that you see for alternative fuels? You talked a little bit about ethanol, a lot of people are buying hybrid cars, what do you see as the role of [alternative fuel sources]?

Well, this is actually an interesting point, because it's the essence of the problem. And there are two parts of it. Part one is this: No combination of alternative fuels or systems for using them is going to allow us to keep on running America the way we've been running it. We are not going to run Wal-Mart, Walt Disney World and the Interstate Highway System on any combination of wind, solar, biodiesel, ethanol, used french fry potato oil, tar sand byproducts, or anything that we know of right now. Including nuclear. We're going to have to make other arrangements for all the major activities of life. All the complex systems that we depend on, including agriculture, the way we produce our food, the way we inhabit the terrain, the way we do commerce and trade, the way we do education. All these major systems are going to have to change pretty severely.

Now, the real key to this is something that you said, which was, you asked me about the hybrid cars, and this is the big problem. We've got to talk about something besides how we're going to run the cars. We're going to have to get over this. We're going to have to overcome this obsession with the cars. Because, any way you cut it, we're going to be driving fewer miles, in fewer vehicles, fewer times, every day. The car is going to be a diminished presence in our life. And the important thing to focus on is not just how we're going to run the cars, it's how we're going to get the other things in our life together. How we're going to get a railroad system together, so people don't have to drive from Plattsburgh to Syracuse. How we're going to fix the agriculture system so we're not dependent on the 3,000-mile Caesar salad, or the fruits and vegetables that are coming from New Zealand and South America. We're going to have to grow more of our food closer to home. How are we going to do that?

For the entirety of the 20th century, mankind found a way to harness fossil fuel; that was like an enormous *gift from the world*, but it never occurred to anybody that there would come a day when it would just run out. And we don't even need to worry about when it runs out, because it's going to get to the point where it's going to cost more than a barrel of oil to take a barrel of oil out of the earth.

To get the remaining oil, yeah. Whatever that is.

So it's not running completely out of oil [that's the issue]...

Exactly. People misunderstand this. It's not about running out of oil, it's how the complex systems that we depend on start to wobble and falter and fail, once you get over the peak production point and start sliding down the slippery slope of depletion.

And it's important to note, from all apparent evidence, we are either at that point now or will be in – a year or two?

You know, I would accept the argument that we're at that point, because the only place in the world right now where there's really any question of whether they are at peak production has been Saudi Arabia.

And do we have any reason to believe that we would be getting accurate forecasts from the Saudi Arabians?

No, the answer is implicit in your question, because the Saudi Arabian oil company Aramco is a nationalized oil company, and they basically treat their production information as state secrets. Much of their production and reserve information, meaning how much oil they have left in the ground, they lie a lot about what their reserves are. We do know how much oil has been coming out of there. Because once it's loaded onto the tankers, and it gets to its destinations, we know we can add up the number of barrels that have come out of Saudi Arabia. And one thing we know, is that they seem to have peaked in 2006 at about 9.6 million barrels a day in production. They are now at about 8.4 million barrels a day, so their production is down pretty steeply.



Earlier I said four percent, it's more like ten percent, year over year, from 2006. With the price of oil ramping up remorselessly, you'd think that they would have every incentive for producing more, and yet they're not. Now, there are technical reasons for us to believe that they're having problems with production, and they have to do with several things. One is that 60 percent of their oil production is dependent on the largest ever found, the Gwar Oil Field; the Cantarell field in Mexico is number two, Gwar is number one. It's fifty years old, meaning it's a very old oil field. It's been in production for a long time. Fifty years of production is generally way over the point where oil fields tend to peak. They tend to peak at about 30 to 40 years. So there's that. There's the fact that they're using increasingly tremendous amounts of salt water injection to push the oil out of the ground, and more and more, what they're getting is sort of oil-tinted seawater. Increasingly they're getting more water and less oil.

And so, we have a lot of reasons to believe that the Saudis are actually pooping out, and if they're out, then there's no question that the world has peaked. What happens next is, what happens on the slippery slope of depletion? And what we're beginning to see is, the oil markets themselves are among the complex systems that start to wobble. And we're seeing that in the export picture. Because there will still be a lot of oil produced, but, it may not get to the people who want it, some of the people who want it, like us, perhaps the people in Europe. There'll certainly be a tug-of-war between the people in Asia and the people in Europe and North America. And we don't know how that's going to resolve or play out.

It's not likely to be a civil dispute, I would think.

Well, no, I'm not saying we're going to go to war with China, India and Japan...

But saying something like "The American way of life is non-negotiable," that doesn't really indicate that diplomacy is the first tack.

Well, Dick Cheney, yeah, it was kind of an obtuse statement, although, and I didn't vote for Dick Cheney, but in the defense of that utterance, we have to remember it was made in the face of 9/11, and a political leader has to get up and say something that will boost the confidence of people who are discouraged about something, and so he made that remark. It was an unfortunate remark that kind of resounded over the following six years.

It's a somewhat dire picture that can be painted, as I mentioned at the start.

Let me give you an example of how these things are intertwined. We were talking a few moments ago about the exporting and importing nations, you know, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Mexico, Venezuela, et cetera, they all send oil to the U.S., Europe, China, Japan. And there is likely to be a pretty stiff contest for the remaining oil in the world. Now, one of the implications of that – not necessarily that we're going to go to war with other countries – but for one thing our trade relations are certainly going to change.

The whole American retail system has been dependent on this 12,000 mile manufacturing supply line to the slave-labor factories of Asia, for all those \$19.00 plastic salad shooters that they send over here to Wal-Mart. And one of the things we'll see is that those 12,000 mile supply lines of cheap merchandise will change. And then we'll be stuck in America having destroyed our local retail infrastructure over the last 40 years, with nothing but chain stores that don't function very well. Moreover, the chain stores like the Wal-Marts and the Targets, *et cetera*, and even to a significant extent the big supermarket chains, they're going to get into tremendous trouble with trucking, with just moving this stuff around.



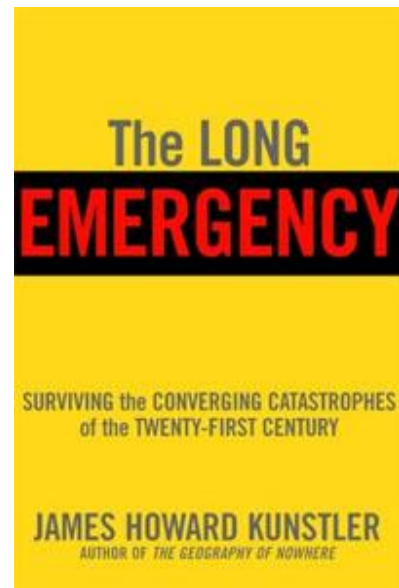
Wal-Mart's whole system relies on what they call "the warehouse on wheels," which is the incessant circulation of thousands upon thousands of 18-wheel tractor-trailer trucks carrying the merchandise from the loading docks of San Pedro, California to the Wal-Marts in Philadelphia, Minneapolis, and Orlando, and we're going to have a lot of trouble keeping those diesel trucks going. At least at a cost that will make it possible for the chain stores to operate profitable. And that will make all the difference, because if Wal-Mart can't make a profit on its activities, it's not going to be in business that long. They're not in the charity business; they're not giving stuff away to people, although it may have seemed that way over the last ten years.

So, you can see how the oil import-export problem is directly connected to our everyday lives and how we *get stuff*.

Let me say this bluntly, because, and I know you know this, and I think it's true – you scare some people. So let me ask you – I think we've painted a worst-case scenario. If, as a nation, we're able to turn things around, to wrap our brains around the situation that we face, what could be the best-case scenario as of where we are at, right now, today?

That's a tough question. I have to say this: All of our wishes about alternative fuels and things like that, I think are going to leave us pretty disappointed. They're not going to do what we wish them to do. If we do wind power, my guess is it will be on the household level or the neighborhood level at best. We're not going to put up a whole lot of 400-unit wind farms all around the country. That's not going to happen.

I think that at this point we've gone so far that it's really a question of what kind of disorder we're going to enter. And I think it will be different regionally. I wrote in my book *The Long Emergency* that the different parts of the United States present a kind of a different picture. I've maintained for quite a few years that the Sunbelt is going to get into a lot of trouble. Its difficulties will be in exact proportion to the prosperity that it enjoyed in the last 30 years. Places like Phoenix and Las Vegas are going to dry up and blow away. Because on top of sheer power/energy problems, they're going to have water problems, they're going to have problems with a contest between different ethnic groups over the territory. What will happen in Phoenix and the southwest generally is that there will be a contest between Anglos and Hispanics over who owns the territory. And eventually they'll discover that the region will support no large population of any ethnic group. That's what will be the outcome of that. So, the Sunbelt is in trouble, the eastern or "wet Sunbelt" has additional problems. I'm more optimistic about the Northeast and upper Midwest.



Let me stop you there, because you have talked in your books very specifically about how you think when *The Long Emergency* really settles in, people in our area of the country, the Hudson Valley and the Northeastern United States, may have a better shot than Las Vegas, the Sunbelt areas, at adjusting to the changes that are coming. What do you think are the particular strengths here in the Hudson Valley and the Northeast?

We have a lot of water, both for drinking and doing other activities. We have some pretty good potential for generating electricity locally. I know in my area, you go by the old, very small-scale electric power stations from the early 20th century on the Battenkill and other streams, and the dams have been breached. The power stations are all decommissioned and the generators have been taken out for salvage.

There's a certain charm, though, to seeing those remnants of the previous power systems. And we need to wise up about that.

Yeah, we do. There's charm in a lot of ways just from knowing that a locality could depend on

itself for power; that you didn't have to be at the mercy of a gigantic grid that depended on hydro-electric from 1,500 miles away in Quebec or something. The idea of living locally, itself, is something that has been lost to the extent that few people in America have any sense of real community or allegiance to where they are. And that has been damaged in so many ways and so many dimensions that it would take a whole other show to talk about that.

But getting back to the Northeast, we can generate some electricity here. Not as much as we're used to, but some. And they can do that in the Southwest, too, but I think with solar, perhaps, theoretically, but I think they'll be overwhelmed with other problems.

The recurring theme, I think, is that things are going to have to be at a smaller scale.

Absolutely; also, we have good agricultural land here. Good farmland. It is deeply underutilized. We're coming out of this era where dairy farming has really come to an end, and a lot of the farmland that is still out there is either derelict, being overgrown with the sumacs and the poplars, or it's being used for suburban development or chain stores or parking lots. That's going to come to an end, by the way. We don't need anymore commercial infrastructure. That's over with.

We're beginning to see the birth of a new, local, smaller-scaled agriculture as people, for example, move into Washington County [New York], and the places that used to be dairy farms, now they're producing lambs on a small scale, they're producing market vegetables on a small scale. They're not all making it, some of these people have better skills than others and they're doing better, but we're going to see a different kind of agriculture. Something that people forget in this area is that dairy farming is not what has always happened here. Dairy farming itself is a product of 20th century technology; because without electric milking machines and bulk refrigeration, and transport by truck, you didn't really have the same kind of dairy industry. People couldn't run herds of cows larger than 50 head before the electrification of the farm.

The cultural memory of what farming was in this part of the country is very short. And we're going to discover that we're capable of doing a much more mixed kind of farming, and we're going to have to, whether we like it or not.

You know, it's going to be a tough time to get through, and I know from reading your books that the population numbers may change globally over 25- to 50-year period, if this is the worst-case scenario. But you kind of see, on the other end of things – I don't know if you read [Bill McKibben](#)'s recent book *Deep Economy* --

I haven't gotten to it yet, but I know McKibben and I talk to him.

It's a good book, and he talks a lot about re-engaging with your own community, being a part of your own culture, not being off in, as you call it, "the little house in the woods," away from everything and everybody that really should be a part of your life. You wonder if, after all is said and done, when you return to small cities and towns where people are walking to work and walking to get their groceries and going to farmer's markets – you wonder if it wouldn't be a better world.

I have wondered that in many ways. I think that just the frantic scope of life in America today has taken a tremendous toll on our individual spirits. I travel around the country a lot, I do a lot of university lectures all over, and I see how people live in Dallas and Orlando, and the Bay Area of California and Los Angeles and even Las Vegas. I've been all over this country, and you know, I go to these places and I can't believe how depressing it would be to have to live in them. And to have to spend two hours and 15 minutes a day going to and coming back from work on some Texas freeway. It would just be soul-killing. So, yeah, I agree with you. I think that there're going to be a lot of trade-offs. I think there'll be less canned entertainment, but there will be more people making their own culture in their own community. There will be fewer kiwi fruits from Chile, but perhaps we'll have better localized cheese production.

I try to imagine this, actually, in my next book. I wrote a novel that is set in the post-oil future, in Washington County, New York. And why? Because I've lived in this area for 30 years, and I know the area pretty well, so I wanted to depict it there. So, this novel is set in that period. The electricity is not working too well...

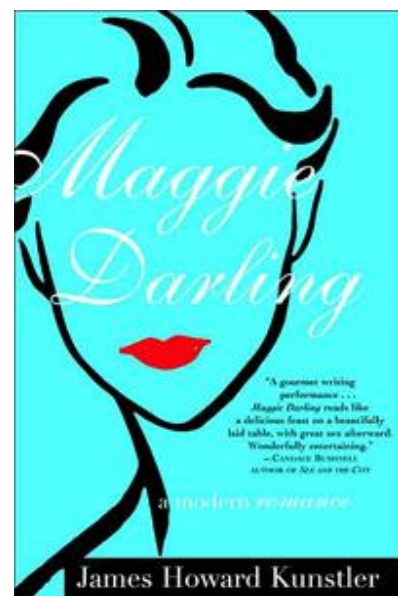
The thing that interests me about the novel, and it's going to be called *World Made By Hand*, it's coming out from Atlantic Monthly Press in March of 2008; when you announced the book a few weeks ago, it hit me that this is really is the coming together of those two writing careers that you've had that I talked about [earlier], writing fiction and writing about the state of our nation. It seems obvious in retrospect, but it's not a career path that I would have personally seen for your writing. Where did the idea come from?

Well, I never gave up the idea of writing fiction. In fact, I published a novel in 2004 which kind of went under the whole radar screen of America, not too many people got it, although I thought it was a pretty good performance...

Maggie Darling.

Yeah, it was my Martha Stewart novel, about a woman like Martha, it's wasn't about Martha, but it was about a character like her, going through a life meltdown. It was a funny book, but nobody really "got it." Anyway, I've never given up on the idea of writing fiction, but I did think it was important to try to imagine what this world would be. In part, because this public discussion we're having about these problems is so lame. And I think people need to be prompted to have some frame of reference for how we might think about what's happening to us. You know, I was discouraged from doing it by the people who I'm in business with. My literary agent didn't want me to write fiction, because he thought "you're better known as a non-fiction writer," so...

They're looking for *The Long Emergency II*.



Right. And my publisher was looking for the same thing, and so they didn't really greet this idea with a lot of enthusiasm at first, but I think once I got the manuscript in, they really liked it. And they saw what it was about and I think it may grab the public's imagination. There have been several other instances of novels, fiction works, that have come out in the last couple years trying to depict a dystopian future. And they've been pretty bleak. You know, Cormac McCarthy's book *The Road*, for example, about this father and son stumbling around this post-nuclear wasteland. My book is not bleak. It's actually a rather lyrical, pastoral kind of setting; the world has become a much more tranquil place in a lot of ways, although there's a lot of action. The United States is still recognizable, though an awful lot of things have changed.

Is there a lot of real-life research involved in looking at the trends and how [they] would inform the coming future?

Well, I wouldn't say that, other than in the sense that I had already done so much research for these other books that I was able to form, for me, a pretty coherent sense of what this world would be like. And as in any work of fiction, the setting or the fictional world you're creating is a kind of self-organizing system. Once you start introducing things into it, that establishes what that world is like. For example, very early in the book, I realized that these people were not riding bicycles. Why? Well, for two reasons. There are an awful lot of materials and components that they couldn't get to keep the bikes going. Especially the rubber. And, the pavements were so badly broken up. We assume that the pavements would be just as smooth as they are now, but in fact, it's rough.

It is now in some places.

Right. And it's just not easy. In fact, going back into history, the road improvement project in America really started in the late 19th century with the bicyclists, who campaigned tirelessly – no pun intended – for better roads. In fact, they were at it long before the car people came along around 1915. So, trying to imagine this world, I was surprised by a lot of things that happened. Another thing that happens in the book is that they don't have any wheat. They can't get wheat. And they're just eating cornbread all the time, and they have other things, they have buckwheat, they have barley, oats and stuff, but they can't get wheat. Trade has been severely curtailed, and you can't grow wheat in a lot of parts of the Northeast, because there's a persistent disease in the ground called rust, which has been here for 300, 400 years, ever since the early colonists came over, and it tends to hide out in a lot of common weeds that have a symbiotic relationship with this wheat disease. So the people in my book are not eating – they don't have regular bread. And they're always complaining about the fact that there's nothing but cornbread.

It is a kind of ripping yarn of a book, it turns out to only secondarily be about the future. It's mostly what's happening to the characters and events in the book. And there are things that are happening that are kind of fascinating; one of the things that happens in the book, one of the characters is a rich plantation owner, who's absorbed the farms of the other people around him who have failed, and sort of taken them on as vassals and serfs. He's developing a kind of neo-feudal relationship with the people in that part of his community. And he's been operating trade boats between Albany and that part of the Hudson River in Washington County, and one of his trade boats has disappeared, along with its crew. It hasn't returned. So my protagonist is sent

down to Albany with a bunch of other guys to find it, and rescue the crew. And we begin to see what's happened to the rest of the world, because he hasn't been out of his town for quite a few years.

This was originally one of the questions I was going to ask you in the beginning, and we kind of made our way past it, but I think it's a good way to wrap things up. Obviously, you've been a writer and a journalist for decades, and four of your last five books, and your next book, are about the decaying state of affairs because of the over-reliance on oil and what you call "the fiasco of suburbia." The subject – and this has to be something that you think about – this subject has altered the trajectory of your career as a writer, from where it could have gone 25, 30 years ago. If you could talk to yourself when you were just starting out as a writer and say "this is where you're going," how do you think as a young man you would have felt about the way circumstance sort of took your career?

Oh, I think I would have been perfectly okay with it. In fact, I have very, very vivid memories of working for Capital Newspapers in Albany in 1973, and driving around The Northway [Interstate I-87, which runs from Albany to the Canadian border], driving up to Saratoga and Glens Falls sometimes, and on a Friday night seeing all these headlights coming at me. And this was around the time of the OPEC embargo incident, and just thinking, "This is going to come to an end. We're not going to be able to live like this forever. And it's a huge problem, and we're not paying any attention to it." And if I had known back then that I was going to devote a substantial amount of my career to writing about it, I think that it is legitimately, really the largest issue of our time. How we are going to live. And how we are going to make a transition from the magic of the 20th century to the reality of the 21st century. So I'm completely at ease with it. I hope I don't drop dead tomorrow, but I think I've accomplished enough in my life.

I'm glad to hear that. I read *The Geography of Nowhere*, I think when it came out, 1993; that, and your subsequent books have totally changed the way that I see the world around me. It's been a wild ride so far, reading the books that you've published.

How old are you, Alan?

41.

So you're a generation ahead of me, or behind me, which way is it? One of the things that I always marveled about with my parents, my father was born in 1917, my mother born in 1920. And they passed away within 26 hours of each other in 2001, before 9/11. But I always marveled at the fact that they saw the entire 20th century extravaganza in all of its glory. And for them, that was so normative, that they could never conceive of it coming to an end, or us having to live differently, or of things that were present in their lives not being around anymore. You know, my mom grew up through the entire communications revolution, from there being no radio, really, when she was a little baby, to the DVD generation and everything in-between. And that was the whole climbing up the great hill of magic of the 20th century.

"The American Dream" is an interesting phrase, if you think about it redefined as the oil century.

It also changed a lot. You know, the American Dream as I understand it, in perhaps its original form, was really about the idea of being able to start with pretty much nothing and make a life for yourself. And not necessarily become a billionaire, but to be able to prosper. But now the American Dream has become a strange, particular entitlement to a particular set of trophies. A certain kind of house, a certain kind of car, a certain set of entertainment appliances. And you know, that's a pretty limited way to think of yourself. The spiritual side of this country has suffered an awful lot in the last 60 years.

Reading your books on the subject and Bill McKibben's book recently, again, thinking that it could be a better world when all is said and done, if people re-scale their lives, if society re-scales itself to a more sustainable level, it doesn't seem like it's as bad as it might first appear.

No, in fact, I've been sort of reflecting lately; [I've been doing a lot of bike rides around Greenfield Center \[New York\]](#), in what was once pretty much a farm district outside of Saratoga. It's become somewhat suburbanized, but there's still a residue of farms there. One of the things that I think about often is that we're going to be inhabiting the rural land differently. Because it's going to take more human attention to do farming. There's going to be fewer machines, and more people out there. And more people living in proximity to each other, and in cooperation with each other.



And more people, by the way, perhaps feeling that they're actually contributing something.

Absolutely. Working shoulder to shoulder with people they know, at things that are important for their survival. But you know, what's impressed me also is the loneliness of the contemporary landscape; the loneliness of the rural landscape today, which is deeply uninhabited by people participating in doing rural things. One of the weird things about suburbia was it allowed people to live an urban lifestyle in the rural setting. And that's not going to be possible in the future. People who decide to live in the country are going to have to be working at country things, from now on. And there's whole other discussion about what will happen to our cities and what will happen to our towns. I think that our towns here in this area are going to be coming back. I think Glens Falls, Hudson Falls, Fort Edward, Greenwich, Cambridge, those places, I think, have reached their low point and will be coming back up, again, as local living becomes more important.

So all is not bleak.

No, *not at all*.

Visit James Howard Kunstler's website at www.kunstler.com.