



10-2014

# Seize the Hamptons: We Should All Get the Chance to Escape the City and Enjoy Leisure - Without the Hefty Ecological Footprint

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## Recommended Citation

Cohen, Daniel. 2014. "Seize the Hamptons: We Should All Get the Chance to Escape the City and Enjoy Leisure - Without the Hefty Ecological Footprint." *Jacobin* (15-16):

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# Seize the Hamptons: We Should All Get the Chance to Escape the City and Enjoy Leisure - Without the Hefty Ecological Footprint

## **Abstract**

Central park was once the greenest piece of Manhattan. Now environmentalists and politicians trumpet the city's towers and subway tunnels, emblems of energy-efficient density, as the island's greatest assets. With global warming threatening to kill millions a year, and inter-state negotiations stalled, pro-density planning is an increasingly vogue strategy for cutting carbon emissions.

The basic idea is sound. Cluster home, work, and services and you reduce car traffic and improve daily life. Assemble people in large buildings and they'll use energy more efficiently. Everyone is jumping on board — from big think tanks and international institutes to progressive planners and politicians. Make the suburbs more like Manhattan — or at least Brooklyn — they shout, and we'll get more livable cities that also mitigate global warming.

## **Disciplines**

Sociology | Urban Studies and Planning

## **Comments**

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# Seize the Hamptons

DANIEL ALDANA COHEN

We should all get the chance to escape the city and enjoy leisure — without the hefty ecological footprint.

**C**entral Park was once the greenest piece of Manhattan. Now environmentalists and politicians trumpet the city's towers and subway tunnels, emblems of an energy-efficient density, as the island's greenest assets. With global warming threatening to kill millions a year, and inter-state negotiations stalled, pro-density planning is an increasingly vogue strategy for cutting carbon emissions.

The basic idea is sound. Cluster home, work, and services and you reduce car traffic and improve daily life. Assemble people in large buildings and they'll use energy more efficiently. Everyone is jumping on board — from big think tanks and international institutes to progressive planners and politicians. Make the suburbs more like Manhattan — or at least Brooklyn — they shout, and we'll get more livable cities that also mitigate global warming.

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## The Density Fetish

If the story seems a touch too neat, and a touch too easy on rich New Yorkers, that's because it is. Density as such really is associated with lower carbon emissions. But as a recent round of peer-reviewed studies shows, including consumption's global carbon footprint and controlling for class and lifestyle make all the difference. When the people clustered are prosperous professionals, the carbon benefits of density can be cancelled out by the emissions their consumption causes. The smokestacks, of course, are elsewhere.

When the poor and working class live densely, meanwhile, the carbon savings are compounded. As geographer [Roger Keil](#) writes, "Density as a site-specific quality is almost meaningless if one doesn't look at the broader societal context and patterns of use as well." There is more to the story than a jurisdiction's ratio of people to square foot.

Living in a dense city doesn't guarantee a carbon-free lunch. If you're working class and live in a public-housing tower in Manhattan's Lower East Side, your carbon footprint is pretty low.

But if you're a prosperous professional living in a modestly sized apartment in Manhattan's Upper East Side, you're part of the problem. You likely don't drive much and you might live a little lighter on the earth than your McMansion-dwelling in-laws, but you probably spend utility and gas savings on a second home, extra imports produced elsewhere, carbon-rich vacations to Aspen and Aruba, or all of the above.

Money gets spent, and spending in a fossil-fuel-powered economy exacerbates climate change. The richer you are, the worse you probably are for the atmosphere. Meanwhile, with the growing movement to make cities' peripheries denser, the distinction between core and suburb is softening. The starker tension is between individual and collective consumption. It's by expanding collective consumption — in housing, transit, services, and leisure — that we can democratize and decarbonize urban life.

The point here isn't to demonize pathological consumer behavior, or to simply suggest alternative architectural best practices. Increasing collective consumption is about transforming, together, our built environment and social relations.

Planner Arthur Nelson's projections indicate the scale of what's possible. By 2030, he [reports](#), \$20 trillion in new money will be spent on expanding and repurposing US metropolitan built environments, with over thirty million residential units at stake. The whole urban fabric is changing. But we're off to a bad start. The density fetish is being used to greenwash the return of mostly white professionals to inner cities. They aren't just gentrifying and displacing one block at a time; they are transforming social logics.

Forget displacement within cities. From 2000 to 2010, Chicago lost a net total of 180,000 blacks, most to suburbs and outlying towns. New York City lost 110,000 black residents. And as inner-city rents climb, immigrants are for the first time settling directly in suburbs. Journalist Alan Ehrenhalt calls this a “demographic inversion.” He predicts that prosperous North American cities will soon resemble late-nineteenth-century European capitals: stylish professionals will dominate the core, while the poor and working class mass in denser suburbs.

For Ehrenhalt and others making similar arguments, that’s not so bad. If yuppies are modeling a low-carbon future for all, we should probably get out of the way, deregulating en route so as to make urban cores even denser. Most housing activists disagree. But many ignore the climate piece altogether, focusing narrowly on strategies to increase or preserve affordable housing in downtown cores, where people already live close to their jobs and to crucial services.

It’s an important fight — but the urban future won’t be made there. As arguments about the fate of city centers rage, we ignore other huge questions: how should suburban life change as it gets denser? What form should this density take? How might Americans live with levels of density most now find appalling?

We could learn from the experts. From Roman senators to nineteenth-century European bourgeois to today’s hedge-fund managers, the rich have swung as they pleased from the crowd’s exhilarating crush to open space’s swallowing grace. For them, dense cities are defined by culture, the sublime countryside by serenity or adventure. The trick is to get some of each.

Slashing greenhouse-gas emissions doesn’t have to doom the great majority to a joyless clumping into buses and threadbare parks, contemplating a dull horizon clotted by gray towers. Quite the opposite. We should fight shamelessly for an expansive, leisurely urban good life for everyone, lived mostly in and about crowds, but sometimes in gloriously wild, open spaces.

Many have argued persuasively — including in these pages — that a just low-carbon future means that some will earn less, we’ll all work less, and we’ll all live better. This is a vision that can be urbanized. Done right, expanding leisure runs not against, but with, the low-carbon current.

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## Performance Urbanism

Pro-density developers have already begun retooling cities’ edges. To see some of this transformation up close, I spent eight hours in May cruising the suburbs of Toronto, from Mississauga to Markham. Unlike much of the US, where the Tea Party is waging a paranoid war against regional governance schemes that it attributes to United Nations conspiracies, Ontario is ruled by a government of progressive-neoliberal hybrids.

The province has tightened Toronto’s greenbelt, limiting sprawl, and passed a “Places to Grow” plan to press densification. It’s more or less working. Bus rapid transit is expanding, with the showpiece VIVA system building sleek right-of-way stations along Highway 7 and promoting onboard comfort with the peppy hashtag #thenewmetime.

Meanwhile, densification projects span the spectrum, from New Urbanist neighborhoods with too-perfect back alleys, to multistory shopping strips surrounding the Pacific Mall, to clusters of high-rises anchored by big-box mega-malls anchored by Walmarts.

More often than not, high-speed developer-driven densification employs crude instruments. Toronto planner [Andrea Friedman](#) deadpans, “It’s not clear that we’re building better places.” In part, this is because the projects are instigated by big developers. No one is building public space, and retail earnings are used to finance development.

As a result, this kind of densification encourages residents to spend free time in malls, shopping for fast fashion and replacement end tables, the manufacture of which is spewing carbon into the atmosphere. According to a study of Seattle’s consumption-driven carbon footprint, clothing purchases cause some of the highest greenhouse gas emissions per dollar spent. North Americans buy more every year.

We’ll always need to get things in stores. But we can still do better than anchoring our newly dense neighborhoods with traditional malls. We can organize our lives less around the exchange of objects, and more around the exchange of meanings. It’s the flip side of working less and using less stuff.

When we congregate, our leisure needs to be low-carbon. Besides watching Netflix, this means socializing in public space, using our time to do interesting things in energetic ways. That includes sports, picnics, and lounging in parks, learning in schools and libraries. It could also mean a massive expansion of the performing arts everywhere.

Some Broadway-type shows are opulent. But most plays, concerts — even operas — aren’t that materially intensive. Shoestring postmodern dance and stand-up comedy are even better. Moreover, the performing arts are vital to a mobilized democracy.

In California, San Quentin's inmates escaped (or at least critiqued) alienation in their infamous reproductions of Samuel Beckett plays. Harlem's political culture developed in part on the Apollo Theater's stage. Brecht reminded us that we need to experiment to properly democratize the performing arts. And so we should, on and off the formal stage — think not Shakespeare in the Park, but Theatre of the Oppressed.

An older Toronto suburb called Brampton suggests another kind of suburban concentration along these lines. Brampton's central streets are a less white version of Toronto's hipper neighborhoods. The area's centerpiece, near rail and express bus stops, is the Rose Theatre. Even with endemic mismanagement, a strike leading to a public battle over a baby grand piano, and electricity problems, the theater has thrived in its first decade, putting on big shows to big crowds and offering space for community arts activities.

Of course, in the age of "creative cities," critics have good reasons to mock the idea that expanding the performing arts would reset Rust Belt urban economies. Even Richard Florida has admitted that "creative city" policies mainly benefit the already affluent. But all this is beside the point. David Koch doesn't donate to the Lincoln Center to create jobs in Midtown, but because he enjoys the performances. What's good enough for the elite is good enough for everyone.

Developers may not appreciate this agenda. The key is to stop trying to convince them on their own terms, and instead to package the arts in a broader movement for a just, democratic urbanism. It was thus that the São Paulo Workers' Party mayor between 2000 and 2004 both reorganized and consolidated the bus system to help the residents of the periphery get around the city, and established a popular network of multi-dimensional cultural centers in the peripheries themselves.

There's also a country-sized precedent. In the spring and summer of 1936 in France, over two million workers went on strike. The freshly elected Popular Front government, led by socialist leader Léon Blum, was under pressure from workers and its coalition's left flank. In early June of that year, it negotiated substantial pay raises with labor and business leaders, then passed laws mandating a forty-hour workweek and two weeks paid vacation. These and other measures revolutionized a popular culture that was feeding the growing labor movements.

The Popular Front funded the construction of mass theaters and financed popular productions — often in partnership with unions, which subsidized access for members. Historian Jessica Wardhaugh has shown how the performing arts were at the core of Popular Front efforts to represent and mobilize a unified people, channelling the arts' increasingly populist currents.

Before Blum's election, the socialist playwright Jean-Richard Bloch had dreamed that "Drama will increase from a few thousand spectators to a few million, from a national public to a universal public." To achieve this in our urban future would require a massive multiplication of performing arts spaces, always used to anchor dense communities geared toward collective consumption.

We might also remember that the most articulate case for clustering homes, work, care, and public culture was made in the last century by left feminists focused on working women's needs: urban historian Dolores Hayden argues that homeownership and consumerism are flip sides of a unified capitalist and patriarchal coin and advocates models of cooperative living that both abolish the sexual division of care and "maximize real choices for households concerning recreation and sociability."

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## Into the Wild

Still, even the spindliest flâneur needs a break from the crowd. In June of this year, a New York subway advertisement showed a grimacing brunette squished under a man's armpit in crowded train. Headline: "Stranger's armpit. Just. Too. Close." Advertised: a website to book flights, hotels, and cruises.

Global tourism is already one of the world's biggest industries. But cheap flights aren't the solution to cramped cities in the age of climate change. Besides the massive carbon footprint of air travel, there's a deeper question of urban justice.

Imagine a mixed-income building in Queens with poor and prosperous families in small apartments side by side. For the family able to travel to the Hamptons in summer, Aspen in winter, and Caribbean beaches in between, the experience of density differs by degree from the family stuck in the same spot 360 days a year. One New Yorker's occasional armpit is the other's existential condition. Parks and swimming pools are glorious — but are they enough?

There are good reasons why working-class New Yorkers have sprung for beachfront property on Staten Island's flood-prone South Shore. And no wonder Americans like suburbs with yards, even while aspiring for something more Manhattanesque.

In *The Great Inversion*, Ehrenhalt marvels that while 45 percent of twenty-to-thirty-five-year-old Americans wish they could live in New York, almost every densification project proposed in a suburb faces instant resistance. For many suburbanites, an increase in area armpits is the last thing they want.

A fuller vision of urbanizing low-carbon leisure should indulge yearnings to escape, but without burning fossil fuels. That means comfy coach and rail access to open spaces well outside city limits. There must be affordable, well-designed leisure options in the wild, from day-trip getaways to overnight lodges.

Unions and other working-class organizations once tried hard to establish this kind of option for their members. Now we must treat this “rural” imperative as the reverse of the (sub)urban design coin. It doesn’t have to mean nationalizing the Hamptons — but why not?

You might object that elites have no intention of facilitating a massive program to democratize regional leisure for the masses. But they once did, in Europe at various points during the twentieth century. Again, France’s Popular Front provides a stirring precedent.

The summer it legislated two paid weeks off work, the sub-minister of leisure and sport mandated 40 percent discounts on train fares for once-a-year trips. Hundreds of thousands took advantage right away, nearly two million the following year. Many visited the beach for the first time, while others traveled to see relatives or camp in the countryside.

Photographs from the period show workers cramming into train stations, piling dozens of bicycles on rail cars, clustering in the sun amidst small square pavilions at seaside. Blum’s office filled with postcards, most bearing thank-you messages of fraternal simplicity. One read, “Dear President and comrade, some comrades on paid holiday in beautiful Roussillon have charged me with expressing their respectful recognition.”

Blum retained fond memories of that first summer. His biographer writes that he thought his mission was to help “develop the idea that man could find in society a specific place beyond simply that of a peon in the production process, instead developing his body and soul.”

When Blum took the stand during his trial by the Vichy regime in 1942 for his government’s ostensible betrayal of France, he reminisced about the summer of ’36. He recalled workers riding tandem bicycles down Paris’s boulevards in colorful sweaters. He remembered feeling that “the idea of leisure awoke a sort of natural and simple coquettishness” among ordinary people.

His earnestness might read as sentimental now that leisure and flirtation have become the domain of ironic publicists. But he — or at least, his coalition — earned the right to reminisce.

Two million workers in interwar France forced the state to enable leisure in a way it never has in North America. Today French labor law guarantees thirty-one days of paid vacation. The infrastructures that sprung up around the first mass vacations laid the foundation for one of the world’s most successful tourism sectors.

Mixed in with now-conventional consumption, there remain elements of the original spirit of solidarity. Many public-sector unionists still holiday together with colleagues in well-serviced camps. Teachers and arts workers get into museums for free.

Novelist [Michel Houellebecq](#) mocks the middlebrow quality of French leisure culture, but in New York, it’s taken years of bitter campaigning just to safeguard every worker’s right to [five sick days](#) a year. And anyway, what people do in their low-carbon free time is their own damn business. Who cares if vacationers, like Houellebecq’s autobiographical protagonist in *Platform*, amuse themselves on the beach by masturbating into the pages of the latest John Grisham?

There’s something to be said for left critiques of mass leisure undertakings. When sincere postwar German planners aimed to relieve workplace discontent with magnificent parks fostering social harmony, critics savaged the plans as liberal palliatives for simmering class conflict.

The aughts’ fantastically profitable explosion of Northern European tourism on Southern European shores seemed like an economic and cultural win-win. It turned out to be an environmental and financial disaster, ruining coastal ecologies while inflating a massive property bubble.

And note: British studies found that while the absolute number of low-income air travelers increased very modestly with the rise of ultra-cheap flights, their share of total air trips actually declined, while the upper middle class reaped the rewards. Ryanair is no Robespierre.

But remember, most elites weren’t impressed by mass leisure either. In 1938, British pop intellectual CEM Joad grew horrified that the suburbs relieving London’s congestion also spilled poor people into the countryside, moaning that he found them “wherever there is water, upon sea shores or upon river banks, lying in every attitude of undressed and inelegant squalor, grilling themselves, for all the world as if they were steaks, in the sun.”

A French worker who took his first vacation in 1936 remembers that the rich, on their erstwhile exclusive beach, withdrew in the face of workers’ arrival to an isolated corner of the sand, warning their children to avoid the invading “congés payés” (paid vacations) — as if the law and a living worker were equivalently abstract.

All this still leaves us room to experiment with new options for democratized, open leisure space. We can’t steal everything from the French. Our principles should be fairness (to other people, to non-humans) and fearlessness. Obviously, massive sculpture gardens are great, as are campgrounds, beaches, hiking trails, and so on. If we can’t

see the stars every now and then, it's not our revolution. But we can be even more imaginative. There's no necessary contradiction between the wilderness and a bold modernity.

British journalist [George Monbiot](#) has made a compelling case for re-wilding tracts of land — not restoring, but unleashing them — to relieve us of suffocating ecological boredom. Among the suggestions: restore giant animals where they have been wiped out, and their analogues where the original is extinct; for example, elephants in the Americas where mastodons once roamed.

When I canoed in Northern Ontario as a teenager, I was given the horrifying impression that a mislaid square of toilet paper could spoil acres of pristine boreal forest. This was conservative conservationism at its unscientific, puritanical extreme. If we really commit to buttressing our ecosystems, they'll be able to withstand leisurely intrusions. The more we restrict sprawl and densify suburbs, the more space we'll have to play with.

None of this could go forward without leadership from indigenous nations, who have suffered over and over at the hands of settlers' dreams of an empty wilderness. Some may prefer other kinds of economic activity. But we can hope that others will embrace and help direct more profound and affecting experiences of the outdoors.

Specific proposals aside, for ordinary people in the twenty-first century to escape urban pits of despair, the most important lesson to learn from France's interwar working class is that organizing and building coalitions works — and not just to raise wages. Their banner read: "Life belongs to us." Ours could too.

Too often on the Left, we let the pessimism of our intellect corrode ... well, our intellects. The point isn't to be willfully optimistic, but intelligently so. Climate change is on the verge of shaking things up: fast, profound shifts to the economy's material basis are coming.

We should chase what we want, using what we know and already have. It's good that solar panels are improving. And we need to point out that the wealthy are the chief ecological culprits, even if they live in Manhattan townhouses and applaud Bloomberg's climate advocacy.

But cursing the rich and cheering cheap renewables won't be enough to spare the atmosphere — or to get us out of bed in the morning. The shameless, confrontational pursuit of low-carbon leisure, building on the victories of poor and working-class movements around the world, and mixing in the most useful expertise around, could produce democratic, decarbonized cities — not cramped, dull warehouses, but diverse, stimulating metropolises with plentiful access to the wild beyond.

Yes, there will still be tedium and struggle. But we'll also prowl boulevards in bright sweaters woven by robots powered by windmills.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Aldana Cohen is a doctoral candidate in sociology at New York University.

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