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The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution Is Reshaping the American Landscape

By Joel Kotkin

242 pages, Random House, \$23

NEAR THE END of Saul Bellow's novel *The Adventures of Augie March*, an aged aristocrat down on her luck cries, "But I am not other people. This is happening to me!"

As I think about San Francisco today, that old lady comes to mind. Forty-something yuppies are bitterly fleeing the city, unable to handle soaring real estate values created by their presumptive heirs, the dot commers. Younger whites, who'd flocked from throughout America to live bohemian lifestyles in the erstwhile Beat and hippie capital, are now plain out of luck. Recently, a free weekly newspaper deplored how hundreds of local rock bands were being expelled from their warehouse rehearsal spaces. One interviewee, a trust-fund kid who was losing the space where, in the mid-'90s, he'd spent his inheritance installing a recording studio, told the reporter: "This is a real-life story." In other words, this is happening to me—and never mind that the yuppies and the trust-fund kid's generation are being expelled by the dot commers exactly as, in previous decades, they drove out the Italian American, Irish American, and African American families who once inhabited San Francisco.

Simultaneously, San Jose, California's government has rubber-stamped Cisco Systems' plan for a giant new campus in Coyote Valley, south of the city's sprawl. Today, flocks of birds wheel above the valley's open fields and a few scruffy lumber yards. But later this year, earthmovers and construction crews will be preparing the ground for office towers. Uneasily eyeing what's happened in San Francisco and in San Jose—where people earning \$40,000 annually sleep on buses and a man earning \$60,000 lives in a trailer park—cities in Monterey County have launched legal suits to block Cisco's new site, trying to prevent the arrival of knowledge-economy real estate values in their backyard. They would probably have as good a chance trying to stop the tide from coming in.

So Joel Kotkin should have lots to write about in his new book, *The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution Is Reshaping the American Landscape*. Moving beyond those digital pundits who say the Internet is making where we live unimportant, Mr. Kotkin points out that, *au contraire*, it is precisely because people now can set up businesses where ever they want that the specific

attractions of any given place become more significant.

Three types of places, he claims, will attract the technologically skilled and upwardly mobile: urban centers like New York and Los Angeles, where media-related activities will flourish; "nerdistans," which is the name Mr. Kotkin gives to high-end suburbs that don't suffer the heavy commuter traffic and commercial blight now plaguing older suburban regions like the San Fernando and Silicon Valleys; and "Valhallas," which are scenic, rural locales like Vail, Colorado, where the rich can have ranch estates.

Three other types of places, Mr. Kotkin continues, will be losers in the digital economy: old-style urban manufacturing centers like Detroit; those suburbs of the East and Midwest that, having witnessed the flight of businesses and the middle class, are basically suburban slums; and rural communities throughout the South, the West, the Great Plains, and Appalachia, which rely on agriculture or lumber.

This isn't exactly news. At one point, Mr. Kotkin does write that one solution for a community is to support those institutions unique to itself, hailing Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as salutary attempts in that direction. Indeed, along such lines one can envision that in 20 years, New York might remove the antiseptic Disneyfied mall presently in Times Square and recreate the uniqueness of the area that existed pre-Rudolph Giuliani. Wouldn't both the commercial and cultural

life of the city receive an immense boost from the effort required by a detailed reconstruction of the old porn theaters and the West 42nd Street sex shops, peep shows, and massage parlors? Admittedly, trained city workers may initially be required to perform all those now-obscure historical functions, but the hookers could be outsourced easily from the civil sector.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kotkin has offered us nothing new in *The New Geography*. Yet it's not as though anybody traveling this country can't see vast shifts occurring in our landscape. There are all sorts of large questions. As Americans become either knowledge workers or service workers, will we also live in geographic segregation? If not, why not? Mr. Kotkin flies past such questions. This is a disorganized book with no clear ideas or intent, seemingly written at this length only to fulfill a contract. 🍷

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