



Joel Garreau, author and former Washington Post staff writer, is the mastermind behind the urban dictionary's edge city. The author of three books, *The Nine Nations of North America*, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* and *Radical Evolution: the Promise and Peril of Advancing our Minds and Bodies – and What It Means to Be Human*, Garreau's common thread concept is the consideration that our commercial real estate is shaped by whatever the state of the art transportation is at the time.

Q: Where does your keen interest in how society decides to set up shop and live originate?

A: "My abiding interest is culture and values and my method of operation has been to follow my confusions. Whenever something appears to make no sense there's really only two possibilities; *one* is that I'm an idiot (which is not to be dismissed lightly) and *two* is that if I don't get it, maybe others don't either. I have found that society's development is not chaotic; it does make sense and what unifies my work is discovering the underlying patterns that rationalize it all."

Q: What was the motivation behind *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*?

A: "Twenty years ago, what were considered a "cities" were the old downtown centers of the universe; everything beyond that was considered farm land or suburbia. But driving around anyone could see that wasn't true; over 90 percent of commercial construction was occurring outside of downtown. I live on a small farm in Fauquier County and could see the commercial real estate coming out at me; not just suburbia with accompanying strip malls, but new office buildings that would never have been built outside an old downtown before 1950. So my initial motivation was protecting my farm and finding out who was "doing this to me." However, when I started talking to developers, I discovered they carry around pictures of their buildings in their wallets like baby photos. The guys I was encountering did not support my devil theory at all. They believed they were giving us the society we wanted by that most reliable of measurements – our willingness to pay for it."

Q: So 20 years ago, what was desirable about what you define as an edge city?

A: "Cities are shaped by whatever the state of the art transportation is at the time. If the state of the art transportation is shoe leather and donkeys, what you get is Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. Sixteen hundred years later the state of the art is the horse-drawn wagon and ocean-going sail and the technical word to describe what happens to Jerusalem is *screwed*; you can't pull a wagon up those steep hills. The result of that problem is Amsterdam and Boston. Then it's the railroad and we get Chicago, marked by stock yards and factories that result in highly dense cities built to enable workers to walk to work. Then the automobile comes along and gives us more control of where we want to be. In the first phase of transformation we move our homes past the traditionally defined city; thus the rise of residential suburbia. Then we move our mercantile operations to where we've been living for a generation; thus the malling of America. Finally in the 70s we move our jobs to where we're living and shopping and thus we have the *edge city*. With the jet-passenger plane that became the standard form of urban place worldwide."

Q: In general terms, what defines an edge city?

A: "Edge cities have at least five million square feet of leasable office space; at least 600,000 square feet of leasable retail space, more jobs than bedrooms, more people headed towards rather than away from the area at 9 AM, the perception of being one place and finally, only 20 to 30 years ago they were just farm land or residential suburbia."

Q: Since *Edge City* was published, you believe we have had another transportation revolution. Talk to me about how you see the computer impacting our live, work and play places.

A: “The networked computer is transforming our built environment faster and more thoroughly than did the automobile. I think it has to be viewed as a transportation device considering overnight shipping of practically any product to anywhere via the Internet; plus the fact that people can be physically anywhere and still do their jobs. What I think I’m looking at is another profound shift in commercial real estate that I define as the *Santa Fe-ing* of the world. Santa Fe is a small, barely urban (but incredibly urbane) place that has an opera house, great restaurants and second-hand boot stores (yes boot, not book); and it’s attracting people who can operate anywhere. This is happening world-wide. While in the early days of the Internet, it was considered that the computer would make it possible to live on a mountaintop in Montana and only come down to the flat lands to breed, we must remember that solitary confinement is a great ultimate punishment for a reason. What the computer does is allow us to live, work, play, pray, socialize and die where we want and therefore I believe the future of cities will be based on whether or not they have good places to engage in face-to-face time. Face-to-face is extraordinarily difficult to digitize; it is the gold standard.”

Q: What types of development should commercial real estate professionals be focusing on?

A: Keeping in mind face-to-face interaction, I think successful cities in the future will be relatively compact *and* highly dispersed – many of them way beyond our current metros. In other words, not A or B, but A plus B. Places that encourage face-to-face interaction will thrive, those that don’t will die; I mean this for both downtowns and edge cities. For example, bookstores—with the rise of Amazon, most independent bookstores have closed. The ones that have survived have transformed from warehouses to gathering spots complete with cappuccino machines and couches. The same applies for supermarkets. At some point groceries will be widely delivered; however, it’s unlikely you’ll want someone else to pick out your tomatoes. So any store that resembles a farmer’s market will thrive; any store that does not will die. If you go into a Wegmans or Harris Teeter today there are all kinds of places to eat and interact with people while you shop for your tomatoes. In short, we will always need face-to-face time with people and tomatoes. The same concept will eventually apply to office space. If you only need to be in the office twice a week, then office space is transformed; and if you’re only driving in a few days a week then your location might change and residential transforms. The most dramatic change is our very sense of what the word urban means. We can create places that are *urbane* with the qualities of what we consider *urban*, in places not remotely thought of as urban.”

Q: Are edge cities on their way to extinction, replaced by the so-called Santa Fe’s of the world?

A: “Edge cities are by no means extinct. There are 187 edge cities around the country and 40 downtowns of comparable size; so that’s still where the main action is located. There is a lot of likely activity in Hampton Roads. Virginia Beach is the largest city in the state in terms of population and it’s still growing. And as I originally defined an edge city, considering big deal commercial office and retail space, you just need to count the tower cranes in Northern Virginia for your answer. The difference between now and 20 years ago with the addition of the networked computer is that people have choices. A cheap spec high-rise at the intersection of Route 50 and the Beltway no longer equates automatically to success.”

Q: What is the future for and legacy of the edge city?

A: “Edge cities have no history so who knows what they’ll look like when they grow up. Americans are pragmatic; we solve problems. With edge cities we moved our jobs as close to our homes as possible; then the problem became that our new cities were raw and new. While we are great at producing anything you can apply a dollar value such as jobs and economic growth, we’re less successful at producing the squishy stuff like community, identity and soul. The future of edge cities will involve answering that problem; that’s why we’re retrofitting Tysons Corner.”

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