

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Greg Lindsay, Author, *Aerotropolis: The Way We'll Live Next*

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Greg Lindsay

Aerotropolis: The Way We'll Live Next

The idea is that transportation has always played a key role in how cities are born, how they look, and how they compete against the others, for talent, for opportunity, for everything. If you go back to ancient eras you can really see that Athens was a walking city, Venice was a city of canals for the ships, and so forth, and we end up with New York and Chicago, cities that were built around the railroad, and Los Angeles, a city made for the car. And the idea of the book is, it sort of posits, that if we truly live in a global era, then you should see cities start to take shape or at least to increasingly rely on, the one form of transportation that has global scale, and that's air travel. So basically the book examines, how air travel has made possible so many of the things that we take for granted in our daily lives.

Infrastructure vital to US success: past, present, & future

You see all these urgent calls for new infrastructure. I'm always disappointed when you read or see it in the press, it's always sort of prefaced with, or the example is of the Minneapolis bridge collapse. You know that it takes human lives being lost before we realize that infrastructure is important, and when really infrastructure underlies everything. I think we're actually victims of our success here in the United States, where we made visionary investments in infrastructure a century ago, and we've really been living off the fruits of that ever since. And of course, became the wealthiest nation on earth, and so we've sort of reached this point, we're so wealthy we've lost sight of what made it possible in the first place. And that's so true of air travel, perhaps more than any other form of infrastructure, because I don't think Americans hate anything more, except maybe their cable companies, than flying, and hate the airlines. And yet, you know, this system, this industry, makes possible so much of our daily lives. It makes it possible for us to move away from our families, and live on the other side of the country and fly home on a moment's notice. Or fly our Apple iPhones, iPods, all these things that we take for granted, but, you know they're not made by magic, they're shipped from halfway around the world. I don't know how we go about educating infrastructure, whether or what it will take to do that. I hope that people will really start to engage in these sorts of discussions about what we need to basically renew our infrastructure and stay competitive.

Airports: Key to global competitiveness

I'm a very big advocate of denser, more walk-able cities, but in terms of shaping how the world will go; I do think it's the airport, because that's what makes it possible for integration overseas. Studies show that companies go where there are direct flights. And in Michigan right now, they're trying to lure Chinese automakers to come there and invest and be part of the renewal of the auto industry. And if you go to the Middle East and across South East Asia, you can really see that these new networks of people, and trade, and talent are being knit together by air travel. And these places have never been connected; I mean this is the sort of new Silk Road that people have talked about. And you know I think it's important for America to really sort of wake up and understand, that we need to be connected to this too, otherwise they're going to, they'll basically learn to rely on themselves. And I think this is partly why we're having difficulty creating jobs, why we're having difficulty now tracking investment, because the rest of the world is learning how to live without us. And that's you know, in the end, a consequence of the fact that we haven't invested in our infrastructure, and we haven't invested in the mechanisms that made it possible for us to connect to the other side of the world.

Developing around airports: Key to prosperity

We're never going to build a major airport from scratch in the United States, I'm convinced, let alone build a new city around it. But you know to make the case for how important airports are, you can see in places like Chicago or northern Virginia, entire new cities sprung up around them. I mean the northwest suburbs of Chicago didn't exist until O'Hare became a major hub. And Fairfax would be the 6th largest city in it's own right if it were an actual city...it didn't exist until Dulles was there. So you can see that there are these places, that are tremendous engines of wealth and jobs and opportunity that we've barely served. I mean Tysons Corner, Virginia, is a classic example of a sort of lack of planning that's really come back to haunt the place. And so I think in the US what the real challenge is, is that we know we do need better connections to our airports, we should be using the federal funding that's available thanks to airports and related issues to create new railings from the central cities, and then use those railing as spines in which we can redevelop some of the worse suburban sprawl that we have in America. I mean what's fascinating to me is the areas around airports in the United States are some the most God-awful landscapes that we've ever created. I mean you know, steel mills, and cement plants, and auto plants. Things that really have nothing to do with the connectivity that airports have to offer. So you know there are a few places like Atlanta, and elsewhere, where people are finally starting to rehabilitate those sort of dead zones and tearing it out and replacing it with mixed use walk-able, you know, information, economy-focused developments. And so really the challenge that we have here, is we need to basically build denser neighborhoods and denser areas around airports and try to rehabilitate these areas rather than writing the whole thing off and dumping some of the worst and most polluting industries that we have around them. It's just a waste.

The Public's Influence on Infrastructure in the Future

There's a whole lot of talk about urban planning and bottom up planning, it is something that we are going to have to as American citizens and as neighbors and members of our communities, to really sort of push for and do in intelligent ways. I mean in a big picture, non-airport sense, we sort of lost faith in planning and infrastructure, I think, in the 1960s. I think this is in many ways the legacy of Jane Jacobs vs. Robert Moses and a loss of faith in sort of top down planning. And the problem with infrastructure is, that in many ways it's sort of hard to soften infrastructure planning. But I have faith that we're going to make more intelligent decisions going forward. In the 1960s, we massively over-invested in highways, and we invested in infrastructure that made sense in pre-digital, still industrially focused era. I think the smart investments going forward is that really for the United States; we need to invest in ideas and the infrastructure that make ideas possible. I do think we need to invest more in, not only in broadband, but in cities, and making it possible for denser communities, where people have more opportunities to meet face to face, to share ideas, to collaborate, and create the ideas and innovations, which is what is going to create prosperity. And so we need to basically realize, what do we need to make that possible, and I think that is a combination of denser neighborhoods and a broadband air travel to make those exports possible on a global basis. And you know, I don't know how we argue that politically. It is a case where people need to realize this and we need to settle once and for all where those investments should go. I find it interesting that half the cities in America right now are thinking about tearing down their inner-city highways, and then the other half or other states, are looking at approving more highway bills. I think we need to decide once and for all where we're going to go with this. So, you know, it still remains to be seen, and the real problem with America is, that we're basically unable to do anything now until after the elections of 2012, and let's hope however that's settled we'll have the will as an electorate to make the tough decisions.

**www.InfrastructureUSA.org
212.414.9220
info@infrastructureusa.org**