

Interview With Jamais Cascio

Interviewed by Jason Louv

Jamais Cascio is a writer, ethical futurist and co-founder of WorldChanging. He also blogs at Open the Future. He is a Global Futures Strategist for the Center for Responsible Nanotechnology, a Fellow at the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, and a Research Affiliate at the Institute for the Future. Jamais was a natural person to ask about the Future of Green.

gThink: How do you see cities and suburban sprawl changing to meet the incoming wave of green technology?

Jamais Cascio: I expect three big categories of change, each at different speeds:

- * Cross-migration, meaning the re-emergence of the city as the residential center for the middle class and the simultaneous move of lower-income families from the cities to the hollowed-out suburbs. Think gentrification on a massive scale, along with the shift in income and tax base that it provides. This is already happening, and will likely accelerate.
- * The rise of the green refit industry—companies and contractors who specialize in taking a pre-*Inconvenient Truth* home and making it much more energy-efficient. Especially because of the slow-down/slump/collapse in the housing market, the demand for remaking what you already have should outpace the demand for something new. This isn't happening much, yet, but green building contractors are starting to pay closer attention.
- * Redesign of urban/suburban spaces, including housing density and transportation networks. Because of the first category, this won't happen in the suburbs as fast as it needs to. The cities, conversely, could see a renaissance.

GT: How are new car and energy technologies going to change the way we live?

JC: There's a reason why cars are so popular, and it's not just the machinations of the auto industry. Cars provide a set of services not readily replaced by our current models of public and non-auto personal transit.

As for energy, I think the big change will come from the proliferation of solar-power polymer materials. Once we can make nearly any product a source of energy—whether or not it becomes entirely self-charging—it changes how we think of both our built environment and our energy usage.

GT: Is the recession going to make this a moot point?

JC: For a while. One under-appreciated benefit of a recession is that, because of the reduced manufacturing and work travel, carbon emissions tend to decline.

GT: What's the next step for the green movement? As consumers tire of false claims and attention drifts elsewhere, how do we evolve the movement to make sure that it stays, well, sustainable?

JC: I think the next step for the green movement is to get away from the hard-to-define concept of sustainability and focus more on resilience—the capacity to withstand unexpected shocks. Sustainability depends on knowing where your demands and costs are in order to meet or reduce them; resilience is better for uncertain futures, because the concept is predicated on flexibility.

GT: What do you think the next ten years hold for green? What are the changes that we need to anticipate?

JC: In the best scenario, the next ten years for green is the story of its disappearance. Not that it goes away, mind you, but that it becomes nearly invisible in its ubiquity. How often do we take note that our building has electricity, or lighting? We rightly assume that any modern building is going to include such obvious and necessary components. I'd like to see green take that same path, becoming so critical that we start to assume its presence, and only notice when it's absent.

The most likely scenario doesn't go quite that far. It's something of a cycle between "green is a fad" and "green is fundamental," with public attention triggered by events such as legislation passing, cool new technologies, and major climate/weather events.

I don't want to see this, but it should be noted that there's also a scenario where the combination of industry counter-pressure, weak policymakers, and mass media only able to focus on one thing at a time results in the decline of green awareness... at least until the next big disaster wakes us up again, by which time it may well be too late.