THE ESSENTIAL READING LIST FOR THE STRONG TOWNS THINKER

Chuck Marohn

STRONG TOWNS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"

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– Chuck Marohn

STRONG TOWNS

INTRODUCTION

What can I read that will help me understand Strong Towns? It's a question I get a lot, which is kind of funny because my answer is, of course, read Strong Towns.

Still, I understand that people are asking something deeper: What are the books that have inspired you to look at things that way you do? That's a bigger question, but I'm going to give you the answer here.

I consistently get through a book a week, almost all non-fiction, about half from reading and the other half by audio book (on double/triple speed—try it, you'll get used to it quickly). I track these on Pinterest (@charlesmarohn) and put together an annual list of my favorites.

Even so, there are some books that are foundational for me. They each answered key questions along a path I'm still wandering. I've not only recommended each of these books multiple times, I read nearly all of them more than once. These are the books that inspired me.

That being said, this is my path. Yours will be different. I offer this list, and the commentary within, to share my love of great books. Hopefully, if you know something I need to read, you'll do likewise.

- Chuck Marohn, President and Founder of Strong Towns

STRONG TOWNS

The Black Swan
by Nassim Nicholas Taleb
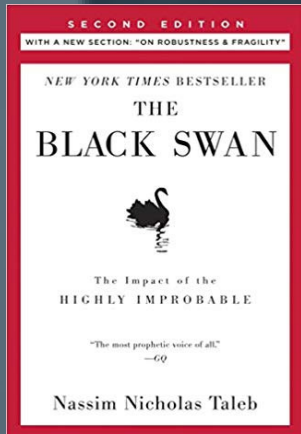
I'm listing this book first because it is the most important, by far. An essay on Taleb by Malcolm Gladwell titled *Blowing Up* introduced me to Taleb's way of thinking. It was a revelation, connecting many hazy thoughts I had swirling in my head. If you want to understand Strong Towns thinking, start with Black Swan.

Additional recommended books by Taleb include:

- *Antifragile*
- *Fooled by Randomness*
- *Skin in the Game*

Cities and Wealth of the Nations
## *by Jane Jacobs*
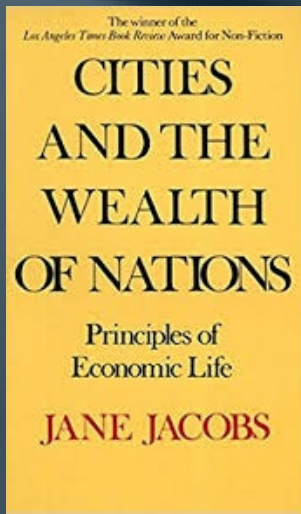
I was introduced to Jane Jacobs as required reading during graduate school. I'm convinced that most urban planners who claim to adore Jacobs have not actually read her, particularly *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, which is my favorite. It's thoroughly brutal logic stands in contrast to nearly everything we still do to manage our cities. Jacobs is a insightful genius.

If you want more Jane Jacobs, you can't go wrong with these:

- *The Economy of Cities*
- *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*
- *Dark Age Ahead*

STRONG TOWNS

Collapse
by Jared Diamond
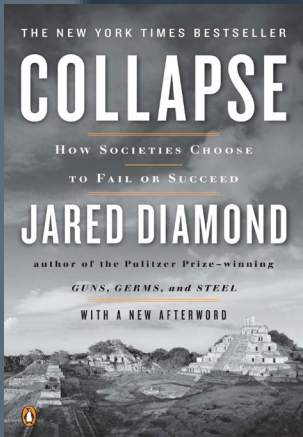
This book is a haunting crash course in humility. I picked *Collapse* as my favorite—and it probably impacted me more than the others—but all three of these are essential reading. My office is full of replica Easter Island statues, a reminder of the distance between society's potential highs and lows.

If you start with either of these Jared Diamond books, you won't go wrong:

- *Guns, Germs and Steel*
- *The World Until Yesterday*

# Economics of Good and Evil
by Tom Sedlacek
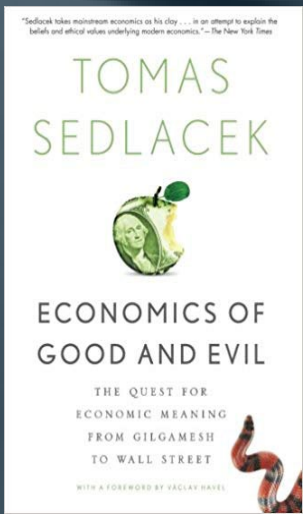
Sedlacek is an economist, but not of the utility-maximizing, number-crunching, modern orthodox variety. The book provides much-needed historic continuity for modern economic thought. It asks simple questions that lay bare the moral foundations of post-Depression economic thinking. After reading it, I wrote a five-part series called Understanding Growth just to stop my head from spinning from all the ideas. That's a good book.

Crisis Economics
by Nouriel Roubini
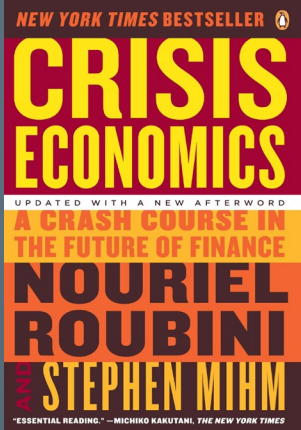
This book simply taught me what people working in finance intuitively understand, but the rest of us do not. Things such as why falling interest rates increase bond prices, or why a strong dollar helps some companies and hinders others. It's not a quick read, but if you want to be one of the smarter people in the room regarding modern finance, take the time to go through it.

The Long Emergency
## *by James Howard Kuntsler*
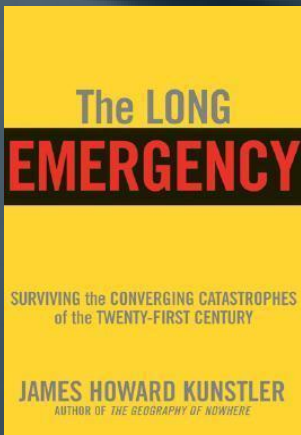
This is the most coherent narrative explanation I've read of the converging crises our society is living through, particularly when it comes to the triple threats of energy, economy and environment. Jim is the first person to write about climate change that I didn't find pandering or gratuitous, and I've always appreciated that.

It's hard to recommend TLE before his true classic, but if you want more Jim, you can't go wrong with *The Geography of Nowhere*.

STRONG TOWNS

Risk
by John Adams
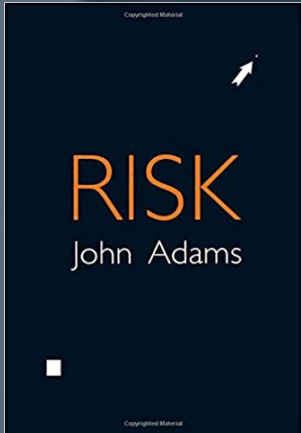
If you're struggling to explain why most safety interventions on our roadways don't ultimately improve safety—or if you're confused in thinking that they actually do—then this book will expand your frame of reference. Adams finally moved me fully beyond the rote engineering mindset of providing more armor and padding and into a more holistic—and human—way of understanding safety.

Suburban Nation
## *by Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck*
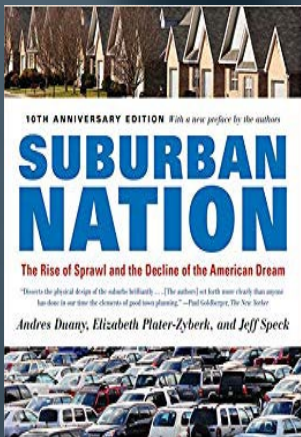
This book pushed my disillusionment with use-based zoning codes over the tipping point, and in that sense it was an incredibly liberating book. I had tried so hard to make zoning function in cities I was working in, to great frustration. This book explained why I failed, and why I would never succeed. If the world around you doesn't seem right but you can't quite explain why, you need to read this book.

The Essential Reading List for the Strong Towns Thinker

STRONG TOWNS

Walkable City
by Jeff Speck
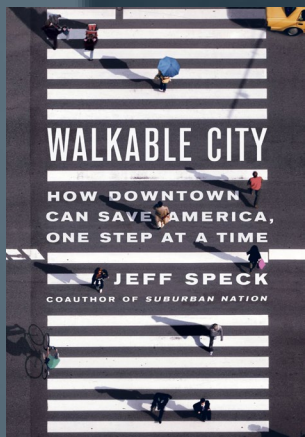
I like to walk. It makes me feel good, both because of the exercise and also the fact that it saves me money. I've long understood the financial benefits of making our neighborhoods more walkable, but Speck's book gave me a new language to talk about it with others

If you enjoy this one, then you have to buy his follow-up, which is essentially the how-to guide: *Walkable City Rules*.

Tactical Urbanism
*by Mike Lydon and Anthony Garcia*
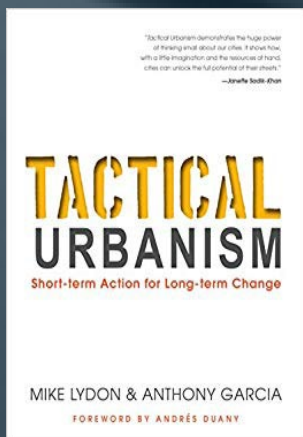
I remember talking to a prominent urban activist about tactical urbanism and being met with derision. You can't be serious. Absolutely, small projects as a way to demonstrate ideas and keep things moving ahead is a time-tested approach. I've seen millions in feasible studies wasted equivocating on the obvious. We should be spending that money as Lydon and Garcia suggest: testing to see if something works.

STRONG TOWNS

The Original Green
by Steve Mouzon
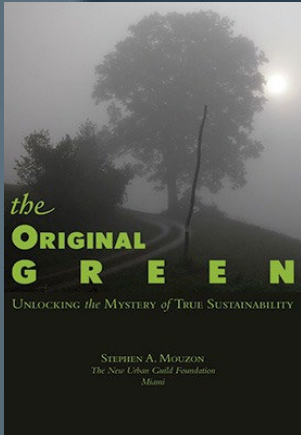
I had someone laugh at this book for its quirkiness and whimsy. That person is a fool. What Mouzon has produced here is a brilliant compilation of why our ancestors (in the broadest sense of the term) were genius in ways we struggle to even comprehend, let alone appreciate. Steve taught me why it's not just okay to love a place, but why more places need to become lovable.

Outliers
by Malcolm Gladwell
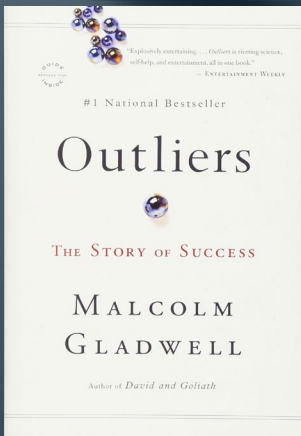
I'm a huge fan of Gladwell, but this book was so exquisitely good it has a category all its own. While some structural literalists have criticized isolated parts of his analysis (does it really take 10,000 hours to master something or would 9,800 do?), the narrative arc of the book is powerful and applicable to our cities; why one succeeds and one fails is part hard work and part genius, but it's also part good fortune. Once you realize that, it changes your approach, as well as your views on both success and failure.

STRONG TOWNS

Thinking Fast and Slow
by Daniel Kahneman
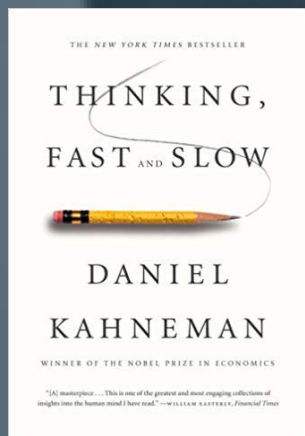
I've explained this book to people as follows: Humans are slightly evolved chimps, not much more, and this book will explain why you don't know what you think you know. Anyone full of themselves and their own abilities (I raise my hand, at times), anyone who believes they are rational while those around them are not, will be humbled to learn the truth about how their brain actually works.

The Righteous Mind
by Jonathan Haidt
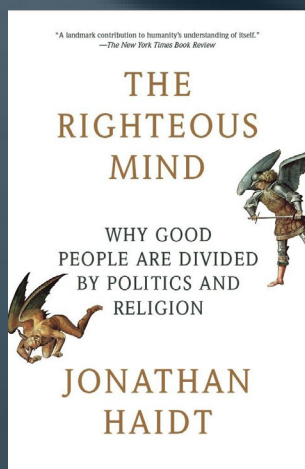
If one book on this list made me truly a happier person, it is this one. Understanding why I mentally process things in one way, and people I love and care about -- let alone those I struggle to find common cause with -- another, helped me see my neighbors, and the broader American culture, in a whole new way. It's also helped me become better at working to find consensus, an essential skill for those who want to build a Strong Town.

Haidt has other works, and I strongly recommend this one for the same reasons: *The Happiness Hypothesis*.

STRONG TOWNS

A Paradise Built in Hell
by Rebecca Solnit
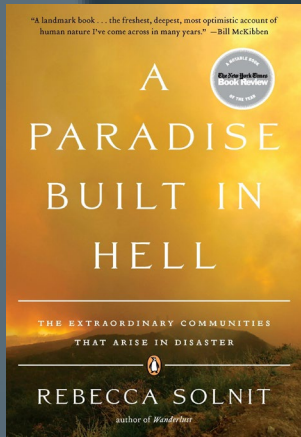
I've found myself coming back to this book again and again, the narrative is so powerful. At its essence, this book is a rebuke to all of those who suggest that humans are naturally greedy, selfish, exploitative. By focusing on the worst of times, Solnit highlights the best of us. It bolstered my trust in the decency of humankind.

STRONG TOWNS