



Movie review: Escape from Suburbia-Beyond the American Dream

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This review is by Mick Winter (www.DryDipstick.com), the author of Peak Oil Prep: Prepare for Peak Oil, Climate Change and Economic Collapse (www.peakoilprep.com). This is a review of [Escape from Suburbia-Beyond the American Dream \(95 minute DVD\)](#).

*"Sit, be still, and listen
for you are drunk and we are at the edge of the roof."
- Rumi, Sufi mystic*

Thus begins "Escape from Suburbia", a film that suggests ways to start sobering up and moving back from the roof's edge.

"Escape" comes from Gregory Greene, the director who in 2004 brought us "The End of Suburbia", which has likely been seen at least once by every card-carrying Peak Oilist. Instead of focusing on the dire situation, as did "End", "Escape" focuses on possible courses of action. Whether or not any of those actions fit your needs is up to you.

(much more under the fold.)

While the film discusses (and pretty much shoots down) alternative fuel sources, it mainly focuses on people responding to Peak Oil in various ways. One way is demonstrated by an Oregon couple that decides to move to an intentional community in Canada. For us city folks this seems a little puzzling, since it looks like their Oregon home is already off in the wilderness and quite sustainable and self-sufficient. We're assured, however, that they're actually in the Portland suburbs and subject to the future problems of a large metropolitan area. That's particularly interesting since there are many people in the United States who are considering moving to Portland because they think *it* is one of the places best able to deal with Peak Oil.

Another response comes from a couple in New York City. They recognize that Manhattan is hardly the "green" community (everybody uses public transit and walks to all services) it's cracked up to be but rather a dense urban area incapable of sustaining itself without food, energy, transportation and other aid from the outside. And they know it's time for them to leave the city. But where? (And leave Manhattan?!)

A third response is demonstrated by a single mother in Toronto who believes that rather than escape, we have to change where we are. ("Stay where you are, dig in, and make it better.") She works to do what she can to make her city more Peak Oil-aware and prepared to deal with energy shortage.

The film intersperses the stories of these people with the usual talking heads (Kunstler, Heinberg, Simmons, Ruppert, [et.al.](#)) and with others trying to change their lives to deal with Peak Oil. Two historical items are worth comment. Television footage from 1973 shows U.S. President Richard Nixon (Yes, him. And, yes, he was a Republican) calling for the U.S. to be energy-independent by 1980. The other is when one of the film's commentators mentions that among U.S. President Ronald Reagan's first executive actions after taking office in January 1981 was removing the hot water solar panels from the White House West Wing roof that had been installed in 1979 by his predecessor, Jimmy Carter. It's a great story. Alas, the reality is that the panels were not removed until 1986 when they were taken down to fix a leak in the roof and never re-installed. Such is the credibility of historical myth.

The theme of the movie is of course escape, and it shows some of those escape possibilities quite clearly. Escape can be an excellent decision for some individuals and families. However, it is, as Vice-President Dick Cheney said about energy conservation, an admirable personal choice but not a policy. The United States has a huge percentage of its population currently living in suburbs and cities that are not likely to do well with Peak Oil. Escape is not an option for all, or even most, of its people.

To the movie's credit, it captures this dilemma. At Peak Oil discussion groups and conferences in Canada and the United States, participants recognize that changes have to be made at all levels, from changes in our personal day-to-day living up to dramatic changes in our national and international economic policies. And commentators like Canada's Guy Dauncey point out that the key is to transform suburbia itself.

The latter part of the film shows two possible scenarios for the future. In Southern California, an exciting grassroots project has changed the lives of hundreds of people in South Central Los Angeles. Ever since 1992, a community garden has grown and thrived—the South Central Community Farm. More than 350 families tend their vegetables and herbs and enjoy the socializing environment of this 14-acre garden set in one of Los Angeles' lowest-income areas. The garden brings together people of all ages, mostly Latino, to a safe, healthful and bountiful green oasis in the middle of asphalt and warehouses. It is what sustainability advocates throughout the country have been espousing for years, and it has thrived in L.A. for more than 12 years. It gives one hope.

Then, with the blessing of its City Council, the City of the Angels sells out its people as it sells the property back to the original owner at a price no higher than he had sold it for 12 years previously. Despite protests, legal challenges and star-studded demonstrations, the community gardeners are evicted, the farm is torn down, and the land is bulldozed. It sits there still. Barren and unused. At a time when cities all over the country—and the world—are encouraging community gardens, one of the most successful is destroyed. That is one direction for the country.

Up the coast in Northern California, something different is happening. In the small town of Willits, a little more than two hours north of San Francisco, a grassroots effort has brought together all segments of the community into a cooperative effort to transform their town and deal with Peak Oil.

Environmentalists, city hall, the chamber of commerce, the local bank and newspaper, school board, law enforcement, and the general citizenry have come together with the goal of making their town energy and food self-sufficient. It's a remarkable example of an entire community working together to cope with the future.

Willits gives a taste of what might happen if community, business, and local government work together. South Central Community Farm gives an example of what happens if government not only doesn't support, but stomps on, community efforts.

Escape from Suburbia shows the dilemma facing many people (in effect, flight or fight) and the anxiety and depression they feel about Peak Oil. It also shows the need and value of taking action. As Guy Dauncey says, "Action encourages optimism". "Escape" shows everyday people who are optimistic because they are taking action. We all need that optimism but we will experience it as a society only when we are acting as a society. Let's hope that the final film in this trilogy is titled "Transforming Suburbia" because transforming society is now our most important goal.

"Come to the edge"
"We can't, we will fall!"
"Come to the edge"
'We can't, we're afraid!'
"Come to the edge"
And they came
And he pushed them
And they flew

Guillaume Appollinaire, French poet
(from the end of the film)

Mick Winter (www.DryDipstick.com) is the author of Peak Oil Prep: Prepare for Peak Oil, Climate Change and Economic Collapse (www.peakoilprep.com)



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