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Introduction

I'VE BEEN drawn to cities my whole life. Growing up in central Connecticut, I fell in love with New York City first; two hours from my hometown, it seemed New York was where everyone was and where everything was happening. But I loved San Francisco too; my mom had grown up there, and we would visit once or twice a year. It was more alien to me, more mysterious. I was enraptured by the fog, the squat palm trees in the road medians, the precipitous urban hillsides with stairs winding up them. And as I grew older and visited more cities, I felt drawn to most of them as well. Boston, D.C., New Orleans, Minneapolis, Albuquerque, Denver, Portland—they all fascinated me.

I moved to New York in 2007 for college and spent most of the rest of my twenties there. In 2009, a friend and I found a railroad apartment on Jefferson Street in Bushwick, close to what was then the border between the partially gentrified and wholly ungentrified sections of the neighborhood. The city was expensive, but it was still possible to find deals if you were willing to live six or seven subway stops from Manhattan. As it turned out, this place was a deal because it was falling apart. Our oven was home to a permanent roach colony and the windows to my bedroom didn't shut all the way, which became a big problem in the winter. But I was in New York, and I was close to transit, which made so many things possible.

I left that apartment to live in D.C. for a year, and on my return to New York I landed in a three-bedroom apartment in the same part of

town, in a newer building. I was paying a few hundred dollars more per month to live in a room the size of a walk-in closet, the only window a high, narrow transom on the wall I shared with my roommate's bedroom. But there were no roaches, and the apartment stayed warm in the cooler months.

By 2013, I was making a little more money and living in an apartment of my own. The big theme of that year's mayoral election was inequality. The man who would eventually win in November, Bill de Blasio, frequently referred to the city's recent trajectory as a "tale of two cities." Meanwhile, a local eccentric named Jimmy McMillan was running on the ticket of his own political party, the Rent Is Too Damn High Party. He scarcely netted any votes, but everyone around me was suddenly saying "the rent is too damn high" in a tone that was half ironic and half sincere—the prevailing register of downwardly mobile millennial Brooklyn at that time.

In 2016, I got laid off by two failing news organizations in rapid succession and decided to go back to school. I enrolled as a graduate student at UC Berkeley. With five other grad students, I found a recently renovated house in Hoover Foster, a working-class Black neighborhood of Oakland. We were the only white people on the block. Before I had arrived, I was already developing something of an interest in housing and city government; as a reporter, I had always been drawn to stories that concerned the basic needs of poor and working-class households, and I knew that housing costs were an even bigger concern in the Bay Area than in New York at the time. What I didn't know was just how bleak things were getting.

The night I arrived in Oakland, my new roommates and I decided to go out for a drink on Telegraph Avenue. The spot we wanted to check out was a fifteen-minute walk and half a world away. The construction of Interstate 980 had severed West Oakland from the rest of the city; we needed to cross underneath. The underbelly of I-980 is where we saw the encampment. Tents lined the sidewalk on either side of the street, along with a couple of broken-down RVs. It was a community unto itself, populated entirely by people who had been displaced from other, more settled communities. A gaunt Black man

came up alongside us as we waded through the encampment and introduced himself as the unofficial mayor; we should let him know if we had any problems.

I had seen plenty of homelessness in New York and D.C., but I had never seen anything like this: a tent village on the periphery of a historically redlined neighborhood, in the shadow of a freeway that had cleaved the city into two. This was unsheltered homelessness on a scale that felt unfamiliar to me, at least in the United States. But more than that, it felt like a microcosm of everything afflicting America's major metropolitan areas: out-of-control housing costs, broken transportation systems, yawning inequality, and racist structures of governance that had survived the civil rights era.

Of course, things back in New York were worse than I had realized at the time. But New York's homeless population was predominantly warehoused in a sprawling system of shelters; out of sight, out of mind. It was only on return visits to New York, when I started paying closer attention, and when I saw the shelter system start to buckle under the weight of rising homelessness, that I began to wrap my head around the national scale of the problem. At the same time, I watched as chronic mismanagement, aging infrastructure, and budget crises made the circulatory system of New York City—its subway system—increasingly dysfunctional and unreliable. Something was profoundly wrong with our great cities.

The arc of history bends toward urbanization. For about three thousand years, cities have been accumulating a greater and greater share of the world's population. This process started slowly: Over the first two millennia, the percentage of humans living in urban areas crept up from less than 1 percent to roughly 5 percent. But with the Industrial Revolution, urbanization went asymptotic.¹

The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm described the period from 1789, the beginning of the French Revolution, to the uprisings of 1848 as “the age of revolution.” In this period, the city itself underwent an

astonishing revolution. Between 9 and 10 percent of the Earth's population lived in urban areas in 1800; a little over two centuries later, more than half did, and the percentage is still climbing.² The number of cities with more than 10 million residents is also growing. If you are an American and you don't reside in a city proper, it is likely that you live in the orbit of one of our great cities; Chicago has 2.7 million residents but a metropolitan area whose population is nearly 10 million.

A city is more than just a large concentration of people. Without something to bind all those people together, you would never get a durable, settled population center. Some strange alchemy needs to happen in order to make a city out of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or millions of people living in proximity to each other. The underlying logic of that alchemy is economic.

In *Order Without Design: How Markets Shape Cities*, Alain Bertaud—a former urban planner for the World Bank who has studied cities across the developing world—argues that cities “are primarily labor markets.” He writes: “A city nucleus might have been created originally as a commercial port, a trading post, an administrative center, a military stronghold, or a center of religious pilgrimage, but over the years, the growth of a diversified labor force would be the only possible cause for the expansion of the original urban nucleus.”³ New York City grew during the eighteenth century in no small part due to its importance as a trading port; the film industry helped fuel the growth of Los Angeles; Chicago's population exploded in the nineteenth century as it became an important hub for the packaging and distribution of agricultural commodities.

Large labor markets are greater than the sum of their parts. The World Bank estimates that cities generate more than 80 percent of global gross domestic product, because of what economists call urban agglomeration: When a lot of people and businesses in the same or overlapping industries cluster together, they become more productive.⁴ Professional acquaintances learn from one another, identify opportunities to collaborate or compete, and spur each other to new heights of inventiveness. Others find specialized market niches that would not exist in a less crowded region. And people from all over the world are drawn into the action, seeing an opportunity to raise their own incomes.

Urban agglomeration can make some people very rich; it can also generate a lot of tax revenue, allowing city governments to offer amenities and social benefits that are beyond the means of smaller towns. States and the federal government, too, can capture some of that surplus wealth and use it as the foundation for broad-based prosperity. And the innovation that cities foster can lead to technological advances that benefit the whole world.

But if cities are labor markets and engines of economic growth, they are also far more than that. The same forces of agglomeration that fuel urban wealth creation have also produced many of humanity's great artistic achievements. Consider music: In the United States, jazz emerged from the chaotic stew of turn-of-the-century New Orleans; the Bronx gave birth to hip-hop; Nashville remains the official capital of American country music. While each of these genres has produced individual geniuses, those geniuses could only practice their art within the context of an artistic community. Cities are what made these communities possible. And diverse, growing cities are where the many tributaries that feed artistic creation merge together, creating something new.

The value of artistic creation cannot be assigned a dollar value. But the city as labor market is what nurtures the cauldron of artistic ferment. Bertaud writes, "A well-functioning labor market makes possible every other urban attraction—symphonic orchestra, museums, art galleries, public libraries, well-designed public spaces, and great restaurants, among many others. In turn, these typically urban amenities require additional specialized jobs and attract an even more diverse population, which becomes the source of future innovations and a more interesting urban life."⁵

Artists are not the only people who can find their voice in the city. "City air makes you free after a year and a day," went the saying in medieval German. During the European Middle Ages, rural serfs could gain their freedom by absconding to the city, where they would officially shed their prior bondage if not reclaimed by their masters within the designated period. Centuries later, during the first and second Great Migration, millions of African Americans emigrated from the Jim Crow South to Northern cities, seeking opportunity and relative freedom

from racist violence. The city remains a beacon of liberty up to the present day; each year, misfits and outcasts relocate to urban areas in search of the freedom and recognition they could not find in the smaller, more cloistered worlds of their childhood.

Of course, cities are not always sites of human flourishing and achievement. Like the people who call them home, cities can grow sick. Cities can waste away, and they can die.

Many diseases can attack a city, including literal disease. Prior to the development of germ theory and modern public health techniques, cities were often breeding grounds for pestilence. It took the work of public health pioneers like John Snow, who traced an 1854 cholera outbreak in London to its source in a contaminated pump, to check the spread of disease through urban areas. Another critical turning point came around the turn of the century when horses—which polluted streets with both manure and, on occasion, their own rotting carcasses—ceased to be a primary mode of urban transportation.

Later, in the last few decades of the twentieth century, a new set of ailments sent American cities into crisis. As white residents fled to the suburbs, municipal tax receipts collapsed. At the same time, violent crime in urban areas spiked; New York City recorded three times as many murders in 1973 as it did in 1963.⁶ In 1975 the city nearly went bankrupt. Meanwhile, over the course of the 1960s and the 1970s, the San Francisco Bay Area went through a tumultuous period that saw, alongside the efflorescence of hippie culture and gay pride, the Zodiac killings, the zebra murders, the rise of Jim Jones, and the assassination of Harvey Milk and George Moscone; Los Angeles was rocked by first the Watts Riot and then, almost exactly twenty-five years later, the Rodney King riots. New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles all eventually recovered from these disasters and today remain cultural and economic centers of the United States, but onetime industrial powerhouses like Detroit and St. Louis never bounced all the way back from the era of urban crisis and the overlapping era of deindustrialization. Detroit has

undergone something of a resurgence in recent years, but its population is still below its 1970 peak.

While the urban crises of the sixties, seventies, and eighties might have slowed America's long-term trajectory toward urbanization, when viewed from the longer sweep of history, they turned out to be only a temporary setback. Between 1970 and 1980, New York City lost approximately eight hundred thousand residents but managed to add the same number over the next twenty years. As of 2020, the city had added more than 1.5 million residents since the nadir of the urban crisis around 1980.⁷ Many of these new residents are relatively affluent, white, young professionals whose parents and grandparents had originally fled to the suburbs.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented another setback. Unlike medieval pandemics such as the bubonic plague, COVID-19 did not hit cities harder than rural areas; large, international metropolises got struck first, but they ultimately did not fare any worse than the remote areas that saw outbreaks later into the pandemic.⁸ The bigger structural threat to cities, at least according to some pundits, was what COVID-19 did to white-collar labor markets: As remote work became ubiquitous, these critics argued, the urban agglomeration advantage dissipated. City-dwelling desk jockeys would move out to the suburb or the country, once again taking their tax dollars and local business patronage with them. As public revenues and commercial property values declined, cities would enter an "urban doom loop."⁹

That urban doom loop largely failed to materialize. While some major U.S. cities saw population declines in the early years of the pandemic, they have subsequently rebounded.¹⁰ Urban violent crime, which also spiked in the early 2020s, has returned to homeostasis.¹¹ The inexorable draw of the city has not dissipated—far from it.

As in the years prior to the pandemic, America's big cities are largely rich, safe, and growing. But that does not mean all is well in urban America. In fact, our cities are gravely ill; it just so happens that the sickness is largely self-inflicted. We are now reaping the consequences from decades of bad policy choices at the local, state, and federal levels. The hostility and the brutality of the second Trump administration certainly

hasn't helped matters, but the contemporary American urban crisis has roots that go far deeper than that.

The clearest manifestation of this crisis is the urban housing shortage. Once contained to a handful of major metropolitan areas—the Bay Area and greater New York chief among them—this crisis has now spread to nearly every region of the country. In 2020, Boise saw the fastest housing cost growth of any city in the country as Californians fled inland to escape their own state's dizzying home prices.¹² In Maryland, the share of households that are severely cost burdened—meaning they spend more than half of their income on housing—grew 72 percent from 2015 to 2021.¹³

As housing costs around the country climbed, so did homelessness. In the Southwest, Phoenix hosted one of the country's largest homeless encampments.¹⁴ In the upper Midwest, Minneapolis, wrestling with an uptick in unsheltered homelessness, moved to declare it a public health emergency.¹⁵ Nationwide, homelessness, which had been on the decline for years, began inching upward around 2016. As of 2024, it has continued to steadily rise each year, with the bulk of the increase coming from major metropolitan areas. Once largely confined to California, encampments have come to dot the landscapes of most of America's big cities.

Urban transportation systems in the United States are also in a state of rapid decay. The most severe manifestation of this decay is traffic violence: Each year, tens of thousands of people die in car collisions.¹⁶ Fatal crashes were already climbing before COVID-19, but the stress of the pandemic—along with the fact that many police departments almost completely stopped enforcing traffic laws—appears to have made reckless driving even more prevalent. Car-oriented urban planning and poor road-design practices have only encouraged this trend. And the resulting collisions between drivers and nondrivers have gotten deadlier as American cars have gotten bigger and heavier over the past several decades. The average new car sold in 2022 was rough half a ton heavier than the average new car sold in 1980.¹⁷ The less immediate dangers associated with car dependency—including toxic air pollution and the existential threat posed by climate change—have proven no less insidious.

At the same time, public transit in many cities is in danger. Transit ridership collapsed during the early COVID-19 lockdown; for most transit systems, it never fully recovered. The consequence has been a wave of fiscal crises affecting urban bus and rail systems. To manage costs, many systems have been forced to eliminate lines or reduce stop frequency, which has driven ridership down further and drawn them into a death spiral. And as ridership has fallen, city dwellers have become more dependent on cars, leading to more traffic violence and more climate pollution.

These problems would be manageable if state and local governments were up to the task of managing them. But urban governance in much of the United States is sclerotic, misguided, and wildly inefficient. Many cities lack the staff capacity to do basic city planning; many others have outsourced the management of vital social services to a panoply of unaccountable contractors. When a city does manage to complete a basic task, such as adding shade to previously unsheltered bus stops, the cost to taxpayers is often absurdly high. When it comes to fulfilling core functions, American city governments have fallen far behind virtually all their counterparts in the rest of the developed world.

The crisis in urban governance parallels and is continuous with the crisis of democracy we face at the federal level. Big cities are mostly governed by Democrats—that is to say, they are governed by members of the main anti-MAGA wing in American politics. This is the party that we depend on to make the case in favor of multiracial representative democracy. But most large Democratic cities are not presenting a good argument for big-D Democratic governance. Their inability to address crises like homelessness and crumbling public infrastructure are a gift to any would-be strongman of the Far Right. If we can't make our cities work, we may end up as unwitting accessories in the Far Right's campaign to destroy liberal democracy.

The Urbanist Revolt

There are reasons to be hopeful. The biggest reason is that people are already organizing to save our cities. When I arrived in the Bay Area in 2017, I stumbled into the middle of a growing movement. For a few

years at that point, a handful of local agitators had been sneaking out of their day jobs to attend city council and local planning commission meetings. They were there to testify in favor of building more homes, because they were convinced that building more homes was the only way to alleviate the region's chronic housing crisis and improve the quality of city life.

Up until the mid-2010s, pro-housing voices had been all but entirely absent in public meetings; when residents got a chance to comment, the only people to stand up were usually older homeowners opposing the creation of multifamily homes in their neighborhoods. The pro-housing people who started showing up to these meetings tended to be younger, and they tended to be renters; they also tended to be more colorful and combative than the NIMBY ("not in my backyard") regulars at these meetings.

The name that stuck for this burgeoning group of pro-housing urbanists was YIMBY, or "yes in my backyard," a direct rejoinder to the NIMBYs they were battling in city council sessions and planning commission hearings. In May 2016, the first national conference of YIMBY organizations met in Boulder, Colorado, at YIMBYtown. Among the YIMBYtown attendees were emissaries from groups that had already been doing pro-housing work for years, such as Greater Greater Washington, a Washington, D.C., area nonprofit that got its start in 2008. But others were brand new, or struggling to be born.

I didn't know much about the nascent YIMBY movement when I first arrived in the Bay Area. But I knew that I wanted to learn more about the housing crisis and what policymakers could do to fix it, so I took a couple of classes at Berkeley's urban planning school in addition to my public policy school courseload. I also went to a couple of YIMBY happy hours and asked questions of the other attendees. It was an odd crowd: a bunch of people who were passionately interested in zoning and local permitting rules. Some of them had day jobs that justified their interest—civil service positions in the state planning bureaucracy, or junior roles at local architecture firms—but most of them did not. I came to agree with their basic diagnosis, that the Bay Area's high housing costs were the result of a housing shortage—and that we could only

fix the shortage by reforming land use rules to permit a lot more homebuilding. And so I decided to join the cause.

I became policy director for California YIMBY, an advocacy group that works to end California's housing crisis through reforms to state land use law. That same organization has successfully lobbied for the passage of dozens of state bills in California, all with the intention of unleashing a new wave of homebuilding across the state. Thanks in part to California YIMBY's efforts, California's legislature spurred the creation of tens of thousands of accessory dwelling units—small housing units added to an existing home, often literally in someone's backyard—across the state. California tightened up the rules to penalize cities that weren't building their fair share of housing and preempted local parking requirements that drive up the cost of construction. The legislature legalized the creation of affordable apartments in commercial corridors and, in 2025, finally achieved the yearslong goal of legalizing denser homebuilding around major transit stops.

California's progress helped inspire other statewide organizations across the country, many of which have gone on to win major legislative victories of their own. Montana passed a series of bold zoning reforms in 2023; Washington State effectively abolished single-family zoning in most of its cities. Advocates and policy researchers did incredible work to make all of that happen, including my brilliant colleagues at California YIMBY. But none of it would have been possible without the thousands of YIMBY volunteers who have supported our efforts. They've called their legislators, provided vital intelligence from their communities, knocked on doors, and even shown up in state capitals to speak with their representatives in person. Working with them has been one of the great privileges of my career. YIMBY volunteers have taught me a lot, both about the nuances of housing policy and the issues confronting their home cities. But perhaps more importantly, they've taught me a lot about what drives them. The longer I've worked with the YIMBY movement, the more I've come to understand that most YIMBYs are in it to do more than just solve the housing crisis. They want to raise their cities—our cities—up to their full potential. Most YIMBYs are passionately invested in the fight to rebuild America's urban transportation

infrastructure; they don't think car ownership should be a precondition for full citizenship, and so they want safer streets and extensive transit networks. Similarly, YIMBYs tend to care a lot about good governance. They want nimble and effective regional governments, led by officials who truly represent their constituents and staffed by a high-quality civil service. To YIMBYs, a functioning housing market and a muscular public sector are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing.

In the early 2020s, a group of intellectuals and journalists began to articulate a more capacious policy program that applied YIMBYism's conceptual tool kit to other fields—not just transportation and government reform but also health care, technological innovation, green energy, education, and more. Some used the term “supply-side progressivism” as an umbrella term to describe these ideas, but the name that ultimately stuck was “abundance.” The central text of the abundance thought is Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's *Abundance*, which presents the following mission statement at the very beginning: “This book is dedicated to a simple idea: to have the future we want, we need to build and invent more of what we need. That's it. That's the thesis.”¹⁸

Abundance is a bit of a fuzzy category that includes a range of mutually exclusive political tendencies; another leading abundance intellectual, the political scientist Steven Teles, has identified no fewer than six “abundances,” from “Red Plenty” democratic socialism, to the liberal abundance of Klein and Thompson, to the “Dark Abundance” associated with some fellows at the right-wing Manhattan Institute.¹⁹ It is doubtful whether all these abundances could pull themselves into anything like a sustainable political coalition—much less whether that would even be desirable. There is little common ground to be found between people who, for example, want to welcome millions more immigrants to the United States and those who support a mass-deportation program that can only be described as ethnic cleansing.

There are plenty of YIMBYs who embrace the “abundance” label and plenty who reject it. Then there are critics like the political philosopher Danielle Allen, who has contrasted “abundance progressivism” with her preferred “power-sharing liberalism”: a tendency that embraces supply-side progressivism but focuses more than some of Allen's pro-abundance

interlocutors on the distribution of political power in society.²⁰ Though some might classify this book as an entry in the abundance manifesto genre, I have little interest in litigating the definition of “abundance” or the extent to which I can be identified with one of Teles’s varieties of abundance. I was once an enthusiastic participant in the fight over what abundance should mean and who it should be for, but I’ve come to consider that fight both unproductive and fundamentally irresolvable. “YIMBY” is a term with a relatively settled meaning, and it refers to an organic, coherent political coalition. So while I won’t argue with anyone who calls this an abundance book, I think calling it a YIMBY (or urbanist) text is more precise. In any case, our focus for the duration of this book will be squarely on cities; national politics and policy will only intrude on our narrative to the extent that they specifically affect how cities are governed and how urban planning is conducted in the United States.

Our starting point, reflecting my roots in the YIMBY movement, will be America’s urban housing shortage. But to fully understand the causes and consequences of this shortage, as well as the necessary remedies, we can’t just look at housing policy in isolation; we also need to think about urban transportation networks and the structure of metropolitan governance in the United States. Several chapters of this book will be dedicated to exploring how both urban transportation and urban governance became so dysfunctional in the United States, and what we can do about it.

That’s a pretty broad scope for a single volume. In the interest of keeping things relatively cohesive and manageable, this book focuses on a particular category of American city: midsize or larger cities with growing regional economies and expanding populations. Economically struggling cities, particularly Rust Belt towns with hollowed-out manufacturing sectors, face their own challenges that are beyond this book’s scope. Similarly, there are other elements of city management I might have considered in this book, such as policing, public education, and utilities infrastructure. It’s likely that some readers will think I erred by omitting them. But while all of those subjects are obviously very important, I had to draw the line somewhere. I did not want to

stray too far from the subjects where I more or less know what I'm talking about. That said, the subjects covered in this book are so foundational to how American cities work—or fail to work—that they have wide-reaching implications for the other functions of city government that I've glossed over.

Ultimately, urban policy—like all public policy—is a means to an end. Sometimes that end is explicit, and sometimes it is hidden behind pretense, as when public officials depict themselves as nonideological technicians. The end I am aiming for is cosmopolitan social democracy.

Social democracy, according to the scholar Sheri Berman, was “built on a belief in the primacy of politics and communitarianism.” Put another way, it believed in “using democratically acquired power to direct economic forces in the service of the collective good.”²¹ In the United States, the spirit of social democracy is most visible in the legacy of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Roosevelt delivered perhaps the single most comprehensive account of his governing philosophy in his 1941 State of the Union, commonly known as the “Four Freedoms Speech.” The “four essential human freedoms,” in Roosevelt's words, are freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from fear, and, critically, freedom from want, which Roosevelt defined as “economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants.”²² Roosevelt understood that some baseline standard of material and economic security was an essential precondition for full participation in a democratic society; he knew that a democracy owes dignity and recognition to all its inhabitants, and that anyone who is not adequately housed, clothed, and fed is being denied this recognition.

The United States has never been a full social democracy. But, over the course of the twentieth century, social democracy transformed the countries of Scandinavia into some of the most prosperous, egalitarian, free, and happy societies on earth. In 1928, the leader of Sweden's Social Democratic Party, Per Albin Hansson, delivered a speech in which he offered a mission statement for his movement. His was just

one word: *folkhemmet*, or “the people’s home.” This word—with its implication that the state exists to provide shelter and the comforts of home to all citizens—“would eventually become the great unifying metaphor of Swedish Social Democracy,” writes the historian Francis Sejersted.²³ Much as Sweden’s social democratic movement built the people’s home, this book aims to serve as a guide to building cities for the people of the United States. That means building cities where housing is plentiful and rent is cheap; where virtually no one is homeless; where government is agile and responsive to people’s needs; and where everyone has a right to the street, whether they own a car or not.

The threats confronting American cities—out-of-control housing costs, wealth inequality, traffic violence, worsening climate change, mass homelessness, and government paralysis among them—are dire. But the story I will tell in this book is fundamentally a hopeful one. If we face these threats head-on, we can overcome them. In fact, concerned citizens all over the country are doing just that. This book is for them, and for anyone else who might want to join the fight.

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