Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Age of the City: How Our Future Will Be Won or Lost Together
By Ian Goldin and Tom Lee-Devlin

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Dec. 4, 2024 to discuss *Age of the City: How Our Future Will Be Won or Lost Together*. Ian Goldin is a professor at Oxford, and Tom Lee-Devlin is a journalist.

Their book is about the urban capacity for problem-solving. And while it is short on specifics about solutions to our current problems, it is long on history and economics. As a result, this book may be a great introduction for people who are new to urbanism about why cities are well positioned to do difficult things.

Age of the City's main message is this: We should be optimistic. Since the rise of the ancient city, urban areas have solved problems as difficult as the ones we face now. They have done so because cities have a superpower: "human cooperation at scale."

"Cities throughout history," they write, "have been the great incubators of human progress through their power to bring us closer together, something we need now more than ever." The key is finding new ways of connecting citizens, workers, organizations, systems and governments in pursuit of solutions. In other words, lean into urban strengths and "rethink cities," the authors say, "not abandon them."

In our discussion, we focused on the biggest issues facing Urban Atlanta today and how our own urban strengths could be marshaled in solving them.
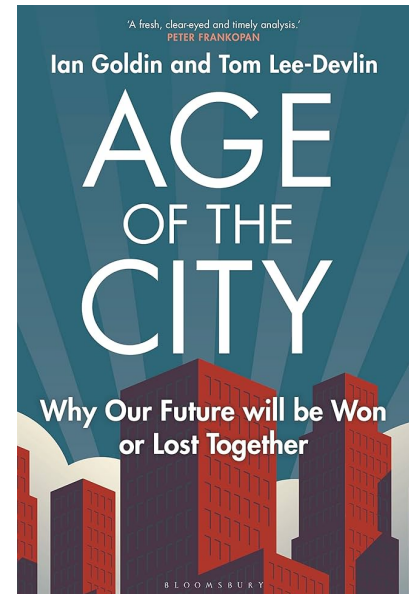
Four Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are four big ideas drawn from *Age of the City* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. Cities have many strengths, but the most important is their capacity for creative collaboration by putting many minds, resources and approaches to work in solving difficult problems.
2. Talented leaders solve complex problems by viewing them as potential opportunities. Example: In Urban Atlanta, hybrid work schedules are seen as a threat to cities. A talented leader would ask, what can we do to make hybrid work an asset for urban places?
3. One of Urban Atlanta's greatest problems today is inequality and segregation. As the book suggests, the answer lies in building mixed-income neighborhoods. Good news: We have examples in Atlanta of mixed-income communities that work.
4. Another difficult problem for Urban Atlanta is transit. We could create transit that works well for our region if we put many minds, resources and approaches to work in search of it.

Why Do These Things?

Cities are not easily mobilized to take on big problems. Doing so requires leadership and public support. Is facing up to our biggest problems worth the effort? We think so. Here's why:

- We have truly major problems: inequality and segregation, difficulty building transit systems that work well for the region, and climate change, among others. We cannot wish these problems away.
- To answer such problems we need "large scale" answers. The good news: Scale is something cities do well. As a result, we may see progress on our biggest problems first in the most urban parts of our region.
- As urbanists, we want Atlanta and its surrounding cities to become more walkable, transit oriented, mixed use and mixed income. We need new approaches and systems for this to happen.
- Our greatest challenge—and opportunity—may be creating greater income diversity through mixed-income communities.. Neighborhoods that have only affluent or only poor residents lack vitality. Schools that have only wealthy children or only poor children deprive their students of a true public education.
- The secret, though, is to know how successful reforms take place. This book and others we've read show citizens and leaders the road to reform.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile efforts create opposition. So our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Cities are complex. It is hard to change them without creating unintended consequences.
- No individual, institution or government "owns" problems like inequality and segregation, future forms of transit or climate change. And no one wants to own them.
- The more long-term the problem—and all of these are very long-term challenges—the less inclined leaders are to take them on. People naturally want issues they can solve in short order.
- Many people do not see the value of mixed-income communities or believe such places could work well.
- We have affordable-housing interests and market-rate housing interests. We do not have many mixed-income housing advocates.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming these barriers:
- Leaders with vision, especially those who can look at problems, see opportunities and bring interests together to work for solutions.
- Necessity will be an impetus. Climate change will require that cities and their residents change many of their ways of doing things. These changes will drive solutions.
- There's a role for advocacy, around mixed-income neighborhoods, transit that works better for Urban Atlanta and dealing with climate change.
- Given the fact that we have mixed-income communities in Atlanta, one of the most important things advocates can do is show people how these place work and why they are valuable for cities and their residents.

A Synopsis of *Age of the City*

Age of the City: How Our Future Will Be Won or Lost Together is 181 pages, not counting the preface, acknowledgements, notes, bibliography and index. There are 10 chapters including an introduction and conclusion.

Ian Goldin is a professor of globalization and development at Oxford University in England; Tom Lee-Devlin is a writer for The Economist, the British business magazine.

This is a book about the state of cities at a point in history when more than half the world's population (55 percent, to be exact) live in cities. At the start of the 18th century, only five percent did. Today's cities face accelerating climate change, rising inequality and virulent populist politics, the authors write—but also many opportunities.

And it is within cities that we could find ways of using urban strengths to solve our greatest problems, they add. Hence, the subtitle of the book.

This, then, is an optimistic book. But before the optimism, Goldin and Lee-Devlin take us through the problems.

First, there are dire climate changes facing cities around the world. The most obvious are rising sea levels that threaten coastal cities, but a warmer planet will affect every city, including Atlanta. One way is through migration, which will almost surely increase. "Accepting one million Syrian refugees (fleeing a civil war in 2016-17) destabilized European politics in a way few expected," they write. "Migration as a result of climate crises will be orders of magnitude greater."

Second, there are economic changes that make social mobility more difficult. The most important is the decline of manufacturing as a route to the middle class, along with a less noticed decline in clerical jobs. These job losses are a result of technology and globalization, and even if factory work returns to the U.S., factories will be so automated that they will require few workers. And those few will be engineers and programmers, not shift workers.

Third is the loss of another route to the middle class, inexpensive higher education. "In the U.S.," they write, "the cost of a four-year college degree adjusted for inflation has nearly tripled since 1980." For children of working-class or even middle-class families, higher education is far less affordable now than in the 1970s.

Fourth is plight of "left-behind" cities, many of which are in the Midwest but also include some of Georgia's smaller cities. These are places that depended heavily on manufacturing and, as a result, were hit hard by the decline of factory work. What has replaced manufacturing—high-paying knowledge work

staffed by the college educated—does not tend to locate in former factory towns. These jobs and their workers tend to migrate to "superstar" cities like Seattle, New York and San Francisco. This helps explain why St. Louis was home to 23 Fortunate 500 companies in 1980 but only eight today.

Fifth is the rise of inequality and segregation within cities. In the 1980s, something unexpected happened as adventurous young professionals moved into old urban neighborhoods. This was the beginning of "the Great Inversion" that in the next four decades turned urban geography on its head. No longer did the affluent move only to wealthy suburbs. Now, some moved to neighborhoods like SoHo in New York, the South End in Boston and Inman Park and Virginia Highland in Atlanta.

The movement of wealth back to the city had good effects—crime declined starting in the 1990s and some inner-city neighborhoods blossomed—but it also had bad effects. One is that poverty became more concentrated as rents rose, isolating the poor even more than in the past. Sometimes this isolation is in urban neighborhoods but increasingly the poor are isolated in suburban communities.

Finally, there's a much more recent threat: work from home and its cousin, hybrid work. Its sudden rise during the pandemic has threatened downtowns and robbed transit systems of riders and their revenue.

Collectively, these challenges are a mountain of problems. How can cities deal with them?

By marshaling their strengths, the authors argue. Throughout history, cities have succeeded by bringing together diverse people in large numbers, employing them in increasingly specialized trades, creating markets that connected people and companies, and encouraging innovation and knowledge while dealing effectively with systemic problems like public health, sanitation and clean water. In all these endeavors, Goldin and Lee-Devlin say, cities drew on the urban superpower we mentioned earlier: "human cooperation at scale."

What's needed today, they argue, is more of this superpower. For prosperous but inequitable cities like Atlanta, they urge local and state leaders to focus on three areas that could improve social mobility and reduce segregation: schools, housing and transportation.

For schools, they suggest increasing the state's share of K-12 finance and creating teacher assignment systems that result in the best and most experienced teachers serving in schools with the greatest challenges. These two changes would help equalize opportunity for poorer districts and schools. They also suggest more and better training for principals.

For housing, they endorse many of the things urbanists have urged in recent years, including greater density and faster permitting of industrial and office conversions. They also suggest that more cities experiment with "social housing," a form of mixed-income housing where government-owned apartment buildings are open to middle-class as well as working-class families and the poor. Vienna, Austria has been a pioneer in social housing, which, the authors say, reduces inequality and segregation.

Finally, they suggest much greater support of public transit as a way of reducing climate change and inequality. In making this recommendation, they single out Atlanta as a place "where a distinctive lack of public transit acts as a poverty trap for any resident unable to afford a car." Reduce the need to buy and maintain cars and you lift a burden from the poor and working class.

Some of these recommendations will seem familiar to urbanists in Atlanta. There are others that are new —the role that social housing (or mixed-income housing in general) might play. The book's greatest value, though, may be the history of cities it presents and its global perspective. Also, its optimism. We have big problems, Goldin and Lee-Devlin tell us, but not of an unprecedented scale. Cities have faced threats of similar scale in the past and found good answers.

We could again today.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define "urbanism" broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at <u>atlantaurbanist.com</u>.