

Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Age of the City: How Our Future Will Be Won or Lost Together

By Ian Goldin and Tom Lee-Devlin

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.

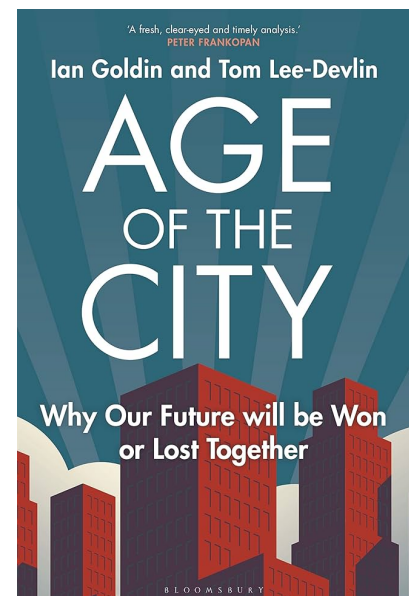
This is a book about the state of cities at a point in history when more than half the world's population (55 percent, to be exact) live in cities. At the start of the 18th century, only five percent did. Today's cities face accelerating climate change, rising inequality and virulent populist politics,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

Why such optimism? Because, they write, “cities throughout history 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 other words, lean into urban strengths and “rethink cities,” the authors say, “not abandon them.”

Before the rethinking, though, 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 Fortune 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: “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,” government-owned apartment buildings 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 for 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 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.

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we’ll discuss Ian Goldin and Tom Lee-Devlin’s book about the problems and opportunities of cities around the world. And we’ll look for ideas in this book that could make Urban Atlanta better.

Our meeting will be **Nov. 6, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at 1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307.**

There’s more information about this discussion at the [Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website](#).

Preparing for the discussion

Here are some questions we’ll consider in our discussion:

1. What are “big ideas” in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles?

How to get your copy of *Age of the City*:

- You can download an e-book edition from the Amazon, Barnes & Noble or Apple websites.
- You can buy a hardback edition at [Virginia Highland Books](#).
- You can borrow a copy from the [DeKalb County Public Library](#).