

Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World

By Doug Saunders

Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World is 334 pages, including a preface, afterword and 10 chapters. There are also notes, acknowledgements and an index. It was published in the U.S. in 2011.

Doug Saunders is a journalist and international affairs columnist for Toronto's Globe and Mail newspaper.

This is a book about how migrants come to cities around the world, what they experience as they move from rural villages, and what they need in order to be successful in the transition. The places these newcomers settle in are neighborhoods Saunders calls "arrival cities."

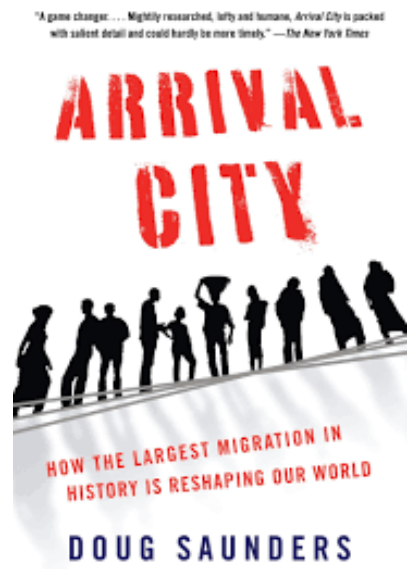
It turns out that some arrival cities are good at facilitating transitions, and some are not. Unfortunately, you cannot tell just by looking at them, Saunders says. All arrival cities are places of poverty, many are crowded and unsightly. The key isn't their appearance but how they work for their residents.

"Rather than dismissing these neighborhoods as changeless entities or mere locations, we need to start seeing them as a set of functions," he writes. The book explains what these functions are, and why they are important to migrants and cities.

Along the way, Saunders takes us on two tours.

First is a tour of arrival cities around the world, from cities in China, India, Brazil, Turkey and Kenya to Paris, Amsterdam and the Spanish city of Parla. Then we visit North American cities, including Los Angeles and the suburbs of Washington, D.C. He introduces us to the sights, sounds and smells of arrival cities and takes us inside residents' homes.

The second tour is of the history of immigration. This is not the first great movement of people from villages to cities, Saunders writes. It's the second. The first was in the second half of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th, when millions moved from farms in North America and Europe to cities,



drawn by factory work and the promise of better lives. This movement created America's big cities, including Atlanta.

Today's migration is larger even than the earlier one, he writes, and it will be the last. When complete in the second half of this century, we will have added 3.1 billion people to cities worldwide. At that point, population growth will slow and may even decline. Life in rural Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East will be transformed as farms mechanize and become more productive.

And what about the cities that add all these people? It depends on how they manage the process, Saunders believes, starting with how they respond to immigrant neighborhoods, the arrival cities.

The best responses begin with understanding who the migrants are, what they are seeking, and finding ways of responding to their needs.

So, who are the migrants? For the most part, the ones we see in the U.S. today are from villages in Latin America. (European cities tend to attract immigrants from Africa and the Middle East.) They arrive as poor, hard-working and determined people. Those who aren't as determined return home.

Immigrants face many challenges, from legal status and language barriers to learning how cities work and mastering job skills. Many send money to their home villages to support parents, siblings and even spouses and children.

For the most part, what they want, Saunders says, are jobs, a secure legal status, and the ability to accumulate wealth through home ownership, starting a small business or both. If they have children, they want a better life for their sons and daughters. The route to a better life, immigrants everywhere in the world believe, is through education. (This message has been received by the second generation. In most countries, the children of immigrants do as well as or better in school than the children of native-born families.)

To get all this, recent immigrants are willing to live in conditions that may seem shocking. In Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, arrival cities are often shantytowns, improvised housing with no running water or sanitation. In Europe or North America, they may be rundown and crowded houses and apartments. Increasingly in the U.S., arrival cities are in the suburbs, where the lower middle-class housing of 30 years ago has given way to "ethnoburbs."

The responses of local governments around the world? Fear and anger followed by a range of actions, from housing code enforcement to bulldozing these places and replacing them with some form of public housing. Places that don't yet have arrival cities try to forestall them. "Because arrival cities are so widely misunderstood and distrusted," Saunders writes, "dismissed as static 'slums' rather than places of dynamic change—governments have devoted much of the past 60 years to attempting to prevent their formation."

There is a better way, Saunders says. The first step is accepting our need for migrants, including unskilled laborers. We need these workers today for service and trades jobs, and we will need their children (who, again, tend to do well in schools) in years to come to replace the dwindling numbers of native-born skilled workers.

The second step is to know what cities can do to help migrants climb the first economic rungs, from poverty to a working-class or even perhaps even middle-class life.

What can cities—and national governments—do? We've mentioned three things: allow migrants to buy their homes, start businesses and enroll their children in public schools and colleges. This would involve some form of legal status. There's more: Migrants need a connection to the larger city and that involves transportation, including public transit.

There are some needs that are different from other groups, and for those needs they need institutions like school systems and police departments to do things differently in arrival cities. Example: allowing evening classes to meet in school buildings so adults can learn English and other skills.

Finally, there are building and zoning regulations that may need a different approach in arrival cities. Migrant families need networks of support and neighborhoods that facilitate connections. Here's how Saunders describes the design of successful arrival cities: "The neighborhoods that work best as urban neighborhoods and arrival cities—two- to five-story structures with direct access to the road and small businesses below—tend to be very high density."

Higher density, mixed uses, walkable streets and a few institutions like community centers and health centers could help residents find those who can offer advice or a job.

Mixed uses are important for another reason: Immigrant businesses are usually started on a shoestring, sometimes with family members lending a hand. These tiny businesses work best if they're close to home—or sometimes even started inside the home.

One of Saunders' examples is a Salvadoran migrant named Mario Martinez who came to Los Angeles in 1991, starting as a day laborer. After a few years, he was hired by a Korean-owned shop that made neon signs. In time, Martinez started his own sign shop in the South Central neighborhood. "He had no bank loan or business plan," Saunders writes, "only credit extended to him by vendors and materials suppliers, most of them Central American arrivals themselves."

If the name South Central rings a bell, it's because it was the center of the 1992 Rodney King riots. It remains a very poor neighborhood, but with a changed ethnic composition, from about 25 percent Hispanic in 1990 to majority Latino today.

And it has become a successful arrival city. South Central families often own their homes today and the neighborhood is "packed with small factories and shops, its sidewalks alive with constant activity," Saunders reports. Martinez says he located in South Central because it was what he could afford—"which was hardly anything," he added. "But now," he goes on, "I can't contemplate leaving this location. It's the middle of everything."

These things speak to function, which Saunders says are the keys to understanding successful arrival cities. As for appearances, they can be rundown and even chaotic. And they're almost always poor.

Another feature of successful arrival cities: They can create a middle class over time. When they do, some of these neighborhoods transition from arrival cities to ethnic neighborhoods (and a few to fashionable districts a few decades down the road). But other arrival cities, while accumulating a few middle-class families, remain places mostly for the poor. Residents who prosper move elsewhere; new immigrants take their place.

This isn't failure, Saunders says. The neighborhood did its work and continues to do so. But, he adds, having a few middle-class families is important. "Research has shown that the presence of a middle class raises living standards for those neighbors who remain poor." It could be that the middle-class families serve as examples and mentors. Or perhaps they've learned to ask for public services—and get them. Those things benefit all.

Final note: *Arrival City* does not tell us if an arrival-cities approach would work in poor neighborhoods without a large immigrant presence. But, as Saunders says, "this is fundamentally a book about social mobility," so it's worth considering.

He does offer clues. Successful arrival cities generate wealth building through home ownership and entrepreneurship; make known the connections between education and a second generation's success;

facilitate community networks and offer access to the larger city. Then there are the social-service providers who could play a role in any poor neighborhood's success by understanding the needs of its residents and responding to them. This should work whether it's an arrival city or legacy neighborhood.

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we'll discuss Doug Saunders' book about immigrant neighborhoods. And we'll look for ideas in this book that could make Urban Atlanta better.

Our meeting will be **June 4, 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 *Arrival City*:

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