



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

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

By Doug Saunders

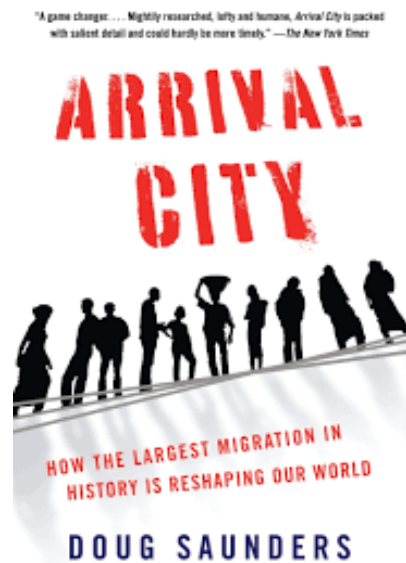
The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on June 4, 2025 to discuss *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World*. Doug Saunders is a journalist at Toronto's Globe and Mail newspaper.

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 are in neighborhoods Saunders calls "arrival cities."

These places vary greatly. In some countries, like Turkey or Brazil, they often start as shantytowns on the edges of cities, with homemade houses built on abandoned land. In Europe and North America, arrival cities today tend to be in close-in suburbs, places that were white or black working-class neighborhoods a few decades ago and are now filled with migrant families.

In Atlanta, there are arrival cities in DeKalb County, near Chamblee and along Buford Highway, in western Gwinnett County, in Marietta and Gainesville. Because Atlanta's arrival cities aren't as sprawling as the *favelas* of Brazil or as dense as the *banlieues* of suburban Paris, we may not recognize them or see their needs. But as the book makes clear, their residents do have distinctive needs, and cities would be wise to understand and answer them.

Before beginning our discussion, we addressed an obvious question. Does a book about immigration, written in 2011, still have relevance today, given changes in federal policy and public opinion? The group's opinion was that it did because, as *Arrival City* makes clear, there are massive economic and social forces behind the worldwide migration of people. This migration may be slowed in the U.S. for a while, but the movement of people



from rural areas to urban ones seems likely continue, including across borders. In a number of ways, this movement will benefit American cities like Atlanta.

In our discussion, we focused on the lessons urbanists should take from Saunders' book and how Urban Atlanta's cities and suburbs can assist arrival cities and their residents and benefit from them.

Five Big Ideas

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

1. We have arrival cities in the Atlanta area. We don't need them to be failed places.
2. The key to helping these places is to look at their functions, not their appearance. Successful arrival cities help newcomers find their footing in a new culture. They help them find work and start businesses. They connect residents with the larger city and open the door for those who want to buy houses and build wealth.
3. One of the things local governments can do is show restraint and forbearance. In arrival cities, home-based businesses are common, and many people may live in small houses. Wise officials will consider whether enforcing building codes and business regulations not essential to safety does more harm than good to these places.
4. Arrival cities have some unique human-service needs around connections, transportation and education. With small adjustments, local governments could respond to these needs. Example: Adult language classes could be offered in public schools in the evenings.
5. If cities respond well to the needs of immigrants, everyone in Urban Atlanta will benefit. This is because, as the book makes clear, immigrants and their children create livelier, more interesting, more economically successful cities.

Why Do These Things?

We think Urban Atlanta would benefit if our arrival cities were more successful. Here is why:

- We have much to gain from migrants quickly finding their way to economic success in the Atlanta area and much to lose if they do not.
- Immigrants make cities more interesting and culturally alive, and they supply an important part of our labor force.
- The children of immigrants often do better in school than native-born children, partly because immigrant families are so invested in their children's success. Having neighborhoods that support families aids educational achievement.
- Small investments in arrival cities may be one of our most effective anti-poverty programs, since these investments can help families move quickly out of poverty to the working class and eventually the middle class.
- There are examples in history of what happens when arrival cities are ignored. Social and political unrest plagued cities in North America and Europe during the first great migration of people in the late 19th and early 20th century. We should not repeat those mistakes.

What Are the Obstacles? What Are Our Strengths?

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:

- This is a difficult time to do anything that assists immigrants, given national politics and public opinion.
- Some things tried in the past to help immigrants were failures and may cause some to think there is nothing cities can do. In the mid-20th century, for example, some cities tore down ethnic

neighborhoods and replaced their houses and apartment buildings with massive public housing projects. Not only did these things not help, they hurt these communities.

- And when the housing wasn't torn down, efforts to improve neighborhoods through code enforcement and zoning robbed arrival cities of some of their most important functions, including the ability to live close to work.
- It asks a lot of public officials that they judge neighborhoods not by what they see but by how neighborhoods work. To do that, they will need new tools for measuring success in striving communities. Right now, there are no commonly used tools for measure neighborhood functions.
- Atlanta's arrival cities are not in the city of Atlanta but in the suburbs, and suburban governments do not have the resources that the city has. How will small governments with limited resources help these neighborhoods?

Urban Atlanta does have strengths that could help us with some of the obstacles. We discussed Urban Atlanta's strengths. Here are a few:

- Perhaps because arrival cities are new to the Atlanta area, local governments have not yet made many mistakes in dealing with them.
- If and when they do try to help, local governments and nonprofits may learn that money is not the most important determinant of success. It's a change in attitude and approach.
- We have some infrastructure in place that could help arrival cities. For instance, schools in immigrant neighborhoods could become more like community centers after school hours.
- The fact that our arrival cities are in the suburbs may actually turn out to be an advantage. We could find that smaller cities are more open to new approaches than larger ones.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles and impressive strengths. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers, using our strengths:

- One of Atlanta's colleges could help the region understand our arrival cities, the functions they provide residents, these neighborhoods' needs and the best ways of assisting their residents.
- Atlanta's philanthropic institutions could underwrite this research and invest in job training efforts aimed at arrival city residents.
- There are immigrant advocacy groups in Atlanta. We need them to help create a plan or set of strategies that local governments could follow in assisting immigrant neighborhoods.
- As mentioned above, suburbs might be open to new ideas. We need one suburban government to be a pioneer in assisting its arrival city, working with colleges and immigrant advocacy groups. Then invite other governments to see the results.
- There is an abundance of failed retail and industrial sites in our suburbs. Connecting a dying shopping mall or strip shopping center with an arrival city filled with small businesses might provide a boost for immigrant businesses and troubled real estate sites.

A Synopsis of *Arrival City*

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.

As described above, 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 a new, urban environment.

The places that migrants settle are called “arrival cities.” It turns out that some of these neighborhoods are effective 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 cease to grow 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 or from Asia. (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 school) 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 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 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, arrival cities can seem 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 facilitate wealth building through home ownership and entrepreneurship. They show families that the path to success for their children is through education. They facilitate community networks and offer access to the larger city. These are things that any neighborhood could provide, with a large immigrant presence or not.

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 atlantaurbanist.com.