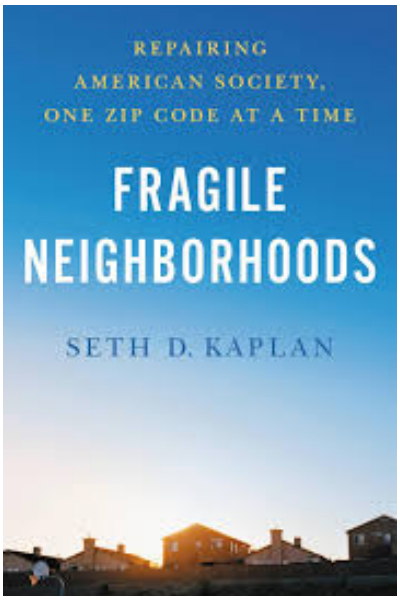
Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Fragile Neighborhoods: Repairing American Society One Zip Code at a Time

By Seth D. Kaplan

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Jan. 7, 2026 to discuss *Fragile Neighborhoods: Repairing American Society One Zip Code at a Time*. Seth D. Kaplan is a university lecturer and consultant.



Fragile Neighborhoods has a warning: American society is headed toward social disaster from isolation, alienation, extremism, school failure, gun violence and family disintegration. The only way out, it says, is with "real community" that connects people and builds cooperation.

And the best setting for real community, Kaplan says, is in neighborhoods.

Problem is, many neighborhoods we have today do not build connection and cooperation, either in affluent suburbs or places of concentrated poverty in cities and suburbs. These neighborhoods make it hard for people to know their neighbors. So, when something bad happens, from a natural disaster to a surge in crime, people flee rather than come together to face problems. This, Kaplan adds, is what makes these places "fragile."

Can we turn "fragile neighborhoods" into connected, resilient places? The book gives a number of examples of how communities were revived and resilience gained. None is more convincing than the one Kaplan profiles in Atlanta: the turnaround of the East Lake neighborhood.

The secret there, as the book makes clear, wasn't one thing but a number of things working together: neighborhood leadership with outside assistance, a large tract of land owned by a public agency that could be used for new kinds of housing and retail, a set of businesses and institutions willing to invest in

East Lake, and strong public support. The result: a model for neighborhood revival pioneered in our backyard.

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 *Fragile Neighborhoods* that we believe Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. We *can* make fragile neighborhoods more connected and resilient, and we need to do so.
2. East Lake gives us the model for turning vicious cycles that feed crime, fear, flight, school failure and despair into virtuous cycles that create safety, pride, school success and hope. It is not easy but it can be done.
3. Many things must work together to reverse vicious cycles, from new forms of housing and business investment to the collaboration of nonprofit institutions and schools. The payoff, as we saw in East Lake, is ethnically and economically diverse neighborhoods that take pride in their progress and attract new residents.
4. You must have neighborhood leadership as well as outside help. As success grows, neighborhood leadership will multiply.
5. It helps if you can begin with a large tract of land under public or private ownership. It is hard to reverse a vicious cycle one house at a time. It is much easier if you can start with an area large enough to create the assets that make neighborhoods strong.

Why Do These Things?

Fragile Neighborhoods shows us how neighborhoods can reverse vicious cycles. But, the book makes clear, it will not happen without effort. We believe Urban Atlanta should make the effort. Here is why:

- It builds social capital, which is the connections between people. In difficult times, these connections can help citizens work together to find answers and arrive at solutions. In brief, this is resiliency.
- Even if you live in a connected, resilient neighborhood, you should support an effort to revive troubled neighborhoods. As places recover, they attract growth and investment, and that means a stronger tax base for your city, which benefits everyone.
- Neighborhoods in decline threaten nearby areas. Neighborhoods that are rising in population and investment strengthen nearby areas. However it manifests—in public safety problems, the environment, public health, school performance or social problems—dysfunction harms everyone.
- We can close equity gaps as we turn around neighborhoods. It need not be a choice. Mixed-income neighborhoods work, and East Lake is the proof.
- We have the ability to grow without displacing longtime residents. We have enough vacant or underutilized land that we can build mixed-use, mixed-income developments that will not affect existing houses.

What Are the Obstacles? What Are Our Strengths?

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

- While most neighborhoods have vacant or underutilized land suitable for large new developments, not all do. For those that don't, turnarounds will be much harder.
- A key is engaging neighborhood leadership, and that is also lacking in some places. A surprising number of neighborhoods in the city of Atlanta, for instance, have no neighborhood association at all. And some that have them do so in name only. That is, few participate in them.
- You cannot ignore macroeconomic factors that make neighborhood turnarounds difficult. Low wages for working-class jobs is one. Without steady jobs paying a living wage, families cannot afford to buy homes, which would give them a stake in a neighborhood's revival.

- Most elected officials, foundations and nonprofits prefer to focus their programs on people rather than places. That is, they prefer spending money directly on families, not on efforts to improve the places these families live. But without better communities, aid to families is like rain on parched earth. It will not bring lasting economic or social change.
- Today, low rates of homeownership tend to make neighborhood turnarounds difficult. It is not clear what corporate ownership of single-family houses will mean, but it could make home buying even more difficult for working families. That would make turnarounds more difficult.
- Poorly performing schools are a barrier.
- It is hard to convince local governments, nonprofits and foundations to concentrate their efforts on specific neighborhoods. But given the nature of these turnarounds, focus is important. You must have sustainable success in one neighborhood before moving to the next.

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

- We have a model in East Lake. And we have the expertise. Atlanta is home for the largest nonprofit doing these neighborhood turnaround projects anywhere in the country, Purpose Built Communities.
- As mentioned earlier, we have plenty of vacant or underutilized land. Some of it is publicly owned; some is privately owned.
- Some prominent elected officials, like Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens, understands the importance of neighborhood revival and is fully supportive.
- The general demographic trends support this work. In the last 30 years, many urban neighborhoods have seen population growth, after a long period of decline. This indicates that, if troubled neighborhoods can be made stronger, investments and people will follow.
- The Atlanta area is growing. And we have a strong civic infrastructure, including many grant-making foundations.

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:

- We can start with the right neighborhoods, those with large tracts of land and neighborhood leadership eager for improvement and growth.
- We can invest in civic infrastructure. Neighborhoods will not change without strong local leadership. We need to find ways of bolstering neighborhood associations and other grassroots groups.
- Public schools can contribute to neighborhood revival. As neighborhoods revive, schools can persuade parents to keep their children in neighborhood schools, rather than send them to charter schools or private schools. If they do, both the neighborhood and its schools will benefit.
- We will need zoning reforms that would encourage business investment in reviving neighborhoods, ease parking mandates and allow new forms of development, including mixed-use, mixed-income communities.
- We need programs that build homeownership in reviving neighborhoods. These efforts could range from educating potential owners about how to find good houses and finance their purchases to programs that offer financial assistance.

A Synopsis of *Fragile Neighborhoods*

Fragile Neighborhoods: Repairing American Society One Zip Code at a Time is 198 pages with 10 chapters in three sections. It also has an introduction, acknowledgements, two appendices, end notes and an index. It was published in 2023.

Seth D. Kaplan is a university lecturer and consultant who has worked overseas with politically and socially troubled nations that he calls “fragile states.” This is his first book about fragile places in the U.S.

As mentioned above, the book has a dire warning about American society: We are headed toward social disaster from gun violence, family disintegration, drug and alcohol abuse, suicides, school failure and isolation. The book’s solution is “real community,” the kind that “produces an ecosystem in which every member is deeply embedded.”

Real community will not come, Kaplan writes, from political parties, affinity groups or social networks but from actual neighborhoods where people live and, more importantly, know their neighbors, work with one another and help each other in times of need. These are resilient places, he adds, that resist violence and despair as they build healthy families and children.

The problem is, Kaplan goes on, we do not have enough places like this today. Rather we suffer from too many “fragile neighborhoods,” some in impoverished urban areas, but many in affluent suburbs. Rather than helping with our social problems, he adds, these places may actually contribute to them.

Why look to neighborhoods? Because, Kaplan explains, a neighborhood “is arguably the most significant unit by which we organize our society. It determines how safe we are, the quality of the schools our kids go to, what resources we have access to daily, the kinds of job opportunities we have, our psychological well-being and even . . . how long we live.” Improve neighborhoods, he argues, and you can fix many of the social ills in America today.

And what a list of ills there is. By nearly every measure, Americans are losing “social capital,” the human connections that make places resilient. Here are a few that Kaplan lists:

- In 1970, 30 percent of Americans interacted with their neighbors frequently. Today just 20 percent do. The percentages are worse among young adults.
- The portion of Americans who say they have “no close friends” has quadrupled since 1990.
- In 2018 less than half (49.6 percent) of U.S. households made charitable contributions of any sort, down about 17 percent since 2000.
- Even something as common as family meals has declined dramatically. Today only 30 percent of families share a meal together on a regular basis, a practice long associated with family cohesion, reduced stress and healthier children and teens.

The result of this isolation and despair? A mental-health crisis of enormous and growing proportions. One example: Suicide rates in the U.S. have risen by 35 percent in the last two decades and are the highest of any rich country in the world.

These are not problems that money can solve, Kaplan continues: “If money was all it took to make these problems go away, the U.S. wouldn’t have a higher suicide rate (and lower life expectancy) than other developed countries, despite spending substantially more per capita on health care.”

The answer, he says, is to restore the connections Americans once had with one another. One agency for that restoration, he believes, is religion in the form of churches, synagogues and mosques that bring people together, help them find purpose in life and show them ways of achieving it. Schools, too, can play a role, if they make greater investments in counseling.

But the most effective facilitators of connection could be neighborhoods—if they are bolstered by grassroots institutions like neighborhood schools, parks, YMCAs, Scout troops, small commercial areas . . . and perhaps even book clubs.

Among other things, this would require a change in thinking about how nonprofits can make a difference in people’s lives. “We have more national nonprofit organizations than ever,” Kaplan explains, “but fewer ways to bring people together across various divides or to effect change in our own neighborhoods and

communities. And while those of us who have accumulated some wealth willingly give to the causes we deem worthy, we behave as though taking small but significant actions to strengthen our local communities is beneath us."

And if you think this is just a problem limited to impoverished neighborhoods, Kaplan has bad news: The estrangement of people and lack of connection affects middle-class and affluent places, as well. In fact, one of his chapters is entitled "The Rich Are Not All Right," which spells out how bleak and lonely life can be in suburban subdivisions.

". . . America has moved," he writes, "from a 'townshipped' society, in which neighbors regularly communicated and collaborated with each other, to a 'networked' one where we communicate with each other impersonally and often transactionally—that is, usually when we need something—via group texts and social media posts." And this transactional way of life is making us miserable.

In the first third of the book, Kaplan lays out these bleak problems. In the second third, he goes looking for solutions, which he finds in five places, the most impressive of which is in Atlanta, with the turnaround of the East Lake neighborhood. The book's final third is a series of lessons for turning fragile neighborhoods into resilient ones.

The East Lake story has been told often, but rarely as well as in *Fragile Neighborhoods*. It begins in the 1990s when a prominent Atlanta developer, Tom Cousins, became interested in a deeply troubled neighborhood next to a historic golf course. In the middle of the neighborhood was a public housing complex called East Lake Meadows.

Opened in 1971, East Lake Meadows had quickly descended into dysfunction and crime, a place of extreme poverty, trash-strewn sidewalks and open drug dealing. The area's crime rate was the highest in the city. Three-fifths of adults were on public assistance, and only one in eight held a formal job. Worse, the problems (blight, gun violence, drugs, lack of social mobility) fed on themselves—and into neighborhood children and teens, whose transiency created a huge problem. Three-fifths of East Lake students changed schools each year.

Cousins wanted to help, but how? He understood real estate and had connections with influential people. But East Lake needed a vision and a plan that people there would embrace. For that Cousins needed a partner. He found one in Eva Davis, who had been one of the first residents of East Lake Meadows, was a talented organizer and was a leader among the tenants.

The pairing of these two was neither easy nor quick, but it became essential to the turnaround. As former Mayor Shirley Franklin explained, "I don't know that Tom had ever known anyone quite like Eva. But the same was true in reverse. And once they understood that they really wanted the same dreams for this community, it was just a matter of time that they would work together successfully."

The plan they and others came up with involved much more than real estate. It began with tearing down the dysfunctional housing project and replacing it with housing that was half subsidized and half market-rate units. (Tenants from the former housing project were invited to return as residents of the new units.)

But it then seeded the area with functioning institutions, including a charter school, two early-learning centers, a health and fitness complex and a retail area that eventually attracted a bank, a grocery store and several restaurants. In a nutshell, East Lake went from an isolated, fearful place of concentrated poverty to a mixed-income neighborhood with opportunities for residents both poor and affluent to meet one another and work together.

What a difference these changes have made: By 2009, violent crime was down by 90 percent in East Lake, seven out of 10 adults were employed, and the neighborhood's population had increased by 50 percent. The charter school ranked fourth in student performance among all Atlanta elementary schools.

The one it replaced had ranked dead last. Among high school students there, 99 percent now graduated on time.

What can we make of this? Three things. Even the most fragile neighborhoods can be strengthened. It can't be done entirely from the outside or entirely from the inside, but from a partnership in which current residents offer direction. Finally, effective change won't come from one thing, it will come from a combination of improvements working together.

Fragile Neighborhoods closes with a set of 10 lessons for making places more connected and resilient. Here are a few:

- Focus on children, particularly on boys and young men, using clubs, activities and mentorship.
- Focus on the bottom two quartiles. There are big rewards for keeping these children in school and on a path to family and work.
- Begin in places where change can succeed and then keep building outward. Kaplan gives the turnaround of East Lake credit for making possible similar revivals in neighborhoods across Atlanta's east side.
- "Pull as many levers as possible." Some changes, Kaplan writes, should be to institutions (schools, businesses and faith communities), and some must be structural (transportation, housing and cultural forces). All are important and they can reinforce each other, so change all of them in ways that create and reinforce virtuous cycles.
- Build from the bottom up. He quotes writer Charles Marohn Jr.: "America's leaders seemingly believed that, if we strengthen the top, it would strengthen the bottom. This is an incorrect understanding. . . Successful blocks beget successful neighborhoods. Prosperous neighborhoods make up a prosperous city. A strong and stable state is an assembly of strong and stable cities."

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.