

Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Abundance

By Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson

Abundance is 222 pages in seven chapters, not including authors' notes, acknowledgments, notes and index. It was published in 2025.

Ezra Klein is an opinion columnist and podcaster for the *New York Times*. Derek Thompson is a staff writer for *The Atlantic*. Klein and Thompson have separately written other books about current events.

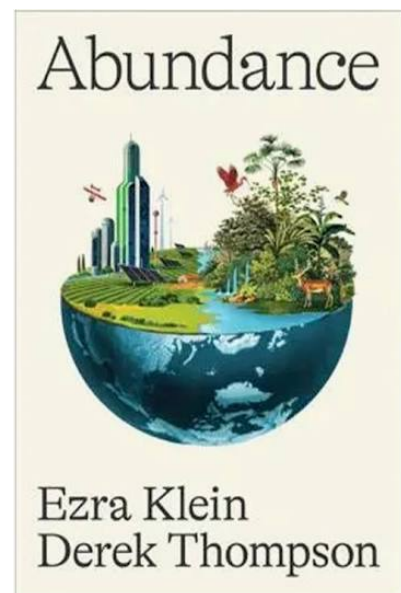
This is a book with a goal: to move political discussions from arguments over who gets what (apportioning scarcity) to what everyone could enjoy by working together (creating abundance).

It is not a book exclusively about cities. To be sure, there are chapters about urbanist issues, like housing production, zoning reform, homelessness, clean energy, transit construction and high-speed intercity rail—and what is holding back these things. But there are also chapters about how the federal government could advance scientific and medical research and retain high-tech industries.

In our discussion, the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group will focus on the urbanist issues but do so with the understanding that this is about something bigger. The bigger idea? “To have the future we want,” the authors say, “we need to build and invent more of what we need. That’s it. That’s the thesis.”

For this to happen, Klein and Thompson go on, we must begin by changing some patterns of thinking. Not by everyone, but by one group in particular: political liberals. That’s because, they say, liberals have the most to lose when governments do not deliver on promises and when people lose faith that things could be better.

“When we claim the world cannot improve,” they write, “we are stealing from the future something invaluable, which is the possibility of progress. Without that possibility, progressive politics is dead. Politics itself becomes a mere smash-and-grab war over scarce goods, where one man’s win implies another man’s loss.”



There is another big idea in this book, that there are times when political views shift suddenly. These shifts don't come from the back and forth of campaigns and elections, but rather when millions of people give up one way of thinking about government and adopt a new one. One shift was in the 1930s, when the New Deal convinced many people that governments could manage the economy and deliver financial security. Another was in the 1980s, when President Ronald Reagan convinced another generation that deregulating businesses could create progress.

Americans have lost faith in deregulation since the 2008 financial collapse, Klein and Thompson say, but no alternative philosophy of government has emerged to guide voters and politicians. Abundance, they say, could be that alternative.

What do they mean by abundance? More of the things most people need for a better life: affordable housing, good jobs, high-quality health care, affordable education, cures for diseases, better forms of transportation, clean energy, responsive government, the likelihood that their children will prosper and the promise that, if the local economy suffers, you can move to places where job prospects are brighter.

These were things that, 50 years ago, most Americans believed lay ahead for them. But no longer. Yes, we have seen consumer goods become cheaper, but not the things that actually improve our lives. "In the 1960s," Klein and Thompson write, "it was possible to attend a four-year college debt-free but impossible to purchase a flat-screen television. By the 2020s, the reality was close to the reverse."

What caused things like housing, education and health care to rise so greatly in cost? To an extent, liberalism itself, the authors say.

In the 1970s, Congress and state legislatures reacted to anger about big businesses and big governments harming communities through polluting industries and destructive road projects by passing laws mandating extensive citizen comments and environmental reviews. To this, local governments added their own regulations about land use and requirements that public projects use union labor and contract with minority- or women-owned businesses.

These were noble efforts to make things fairer, Klein and Thompson say, but over the long haul, they had serious unintended consequences and, in some cases, made things worse. How? The new requirements made compliance lengthy, difficult and expensive, and that raised the cost of necessities like housing, health care, energy and education. Over time, rising costs moved these things beyond the reach of many families. At the same time, the new regulations raised the cost of public services. And that meant governments could not build as many schools, colleges, parks and transit lines as they once did.

The clearest example of the rising cost of necessities—the things that lead to a better way of life—was in housing.

In 1950, Census Bureau reported that American had added 8.5 million units in the 1940s, even with a world war underway. But in the late 1970s, the authors say, housing construction began falling behind population growth. The decline continued in the 1980s and 1990s. Then the Great Recession of 2008 "obliterated" construction. The result was, in a word, scarcity. Other nations like France and Italy have 600 housing units per 1,000 people. Japan and Germany have 500. The U.S. has 425.

Housing costs did not rise everywhere, of course. West Virginia remained—and remains—an affordable place to live. But rents and home prices escalated dramatically in our most prosperous cities, like New York and San Francisco, which are also centers of American innovation.

To see how this happened, the authors point to New York. In the 1970s New York was a relatively expensive place to live but people made enough in wages there that the average person who moved to New York came out ahead. In a two-decade period, that changed. "By the year 2000, moving to New York meant, for most people, taking an effective pay cut" Klein and Thompson write, because of rapidly

escalating rents. “New York was once where you went to make your fortune; it is now where you go to spend it.”

This is bad for the economy, they continue, citing economist Edward Glaser’s work on cities and productivity. Glaser wrote: “Americans who live in metropolitan areas with more than a million residents are, on average, more than 50 percent more productive than Americans who live in smaller metropolitan areas. These relationships are the same even when we take into account the education, experience and industry of workers. They’re even the same if we take individual workers’ IQs into account.”

What it means is that it is in America’s national interest if people move to big cities where they can become more productive and help create new industries. Problem is, they can’t, because there isn’t enough housing in these places. No place illustrates the impact of housing scarcity as well as California. In the late 1960s, California’s population grew at twice the rate of the other 49 states combined. Today, for the first time in its history, California is shrinking. This is due almost entirely, the authors say, to the price of housing.

The impact is felt in more ways than lost economic mobility, dwindling productivity and slow growth. Urban homelessness is a result of less housing and fewer types of housing, the authors say. Cities once provided inexpensive housing for poor people through tenements and boarding houses. Starting in the 1970s, these affordable forms of housing were made “functionally illegal” in most cities. Result: an explosion of homelessness in places that restricted housing construction and allowed rents to rise.

Why did this happen, and why did it begin in the 1970s? As Klein and Thompson explain, it began when homeowners realized their houses weren’t just nice places to live in. With long-term, fixed-rate mortgages, they were also financial hedges in a time of high inflation. Later, as inflation cooled, the idea remained that owning a home could be a financial asset—but only if its value rose. If inflation wasn’t the way, then regulations and processes that resulted in scarcity could do the trick.

Thus began the NIMBY movement, which became a political force everywhere, but especially in California, where NIMBYs weaponized the state’s environmental quality laws to prevent more housing being built in neighborhoods.

Housing scarcity is a cause of many urban problems today. But it is not our only concern. So is climate change. What is needed, Klein and Thompson say, is a rapid transition by electric utilities from fossil fuels, which still account for about 60 percent of generation, to clean energy—along with a second transition by cars and trucks from gasoline to electric.

This will involve a huge reengineering and expansion of our electric infrastructure. Good news: The cost of solar energy fell by about 90 percent from 2010 to 2020 and is now cheaper than fossil fuels; wind energy fell by nearly 70 percent. Even experts have been stunned by clean energy’s advances. A few years ago, Klein and Thompson say, the consensus was that solar would fall by 2.6 percent a year. It has fallen by 15 percent a year, year after year.

Clean energy is so cheap, they go on, that there are “negative energy prices” at times in California and Texas, the states with the most solar and wind power. These are periods when meters run in reverse and consumers are paid to consume electricity because there is so much of it. These periods will become common in most of the world by 2030, they add.

But this assumes that the infrastructure can be updated and expanded fast enough to make this happen—and stave off the worst of climate change’s effects. And that depends on American governments, from the federal and state levels to local governments, removing barriers to moving fast toward these goals. The people who will determine this, Klein and Thompson say, are liberals, who must decide if the climate is worth the effort to change regulations and facilitate progress. The climate crisis, they write, “demands a liberalism that builds.”

The book ticks off examples of progress being thwarted by procedural liberal policies. One is the dismal failure of California's high-speed rail project that was meant to connect Los Angeles to San Francisco. Another is the scandalous cost of routine urban infrastructure, like transit expansions. The U.S., the authors write, "is notable for how much we spend and how little we get" from transit. It costs \$609 million to build a kilometer (about 0.6 miles) of rail transit in U.S. cities. Germany spends \$384 million per kilometer, Canada \$295 million, and Portugal \$96 million.

This would be hopeless except for the times when American governments have responded rapidly and appropriately and with world-class results. The book offers two examples. First is how Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro reacted in 2023 when a tanker truck fire resulted to the collapse of an Interstate 75 bridge in Philadelphia.

If Shapiro had followed the usual rules, the earliest this bridge along one of the nation's busiest highways could have been repaired would have been months later. Instead, Shapiro signed a "declaration of emergency" that awarded a contract and started around-the-clock repair work the minute the fire department released the site. Result: I-95 reopened 12 days later.

An even greater example came in 2020 with the development of vaccines that ended the Covid-19 pandemic. The earliest any vaccine had been developed, tested and approved for use was four years. Operation Warp Speed produced three vaccines in less than a year for less than \$40 billion, which the authors note was "one of the best bang-for-buck policies in U.S. history." It saved 20 million more deaths and tens of millions from hospital stays. Estimates are that the U.S. saved \$6.5 trillion in lives saved and hospitalizations averted.

How was the bridge rebuilt and vaccines developed with such remarkable speed and at such low cost, when routine transit improvements and much-needed housing take forever and cost so much? Gov. Shapiro and the federal agencies working on Operation Warp Speed broke the usual rules of government because the situation demanded it.

And this is what Klein and Thompson suggest mayors, governors and presidents do: Identify the things that make life better for Americans (again, affordable housing, education, economic mobility, better health care and the ability to move to innovative, productive cities), remove barriers to these things that governments themselves have erected, and do so because the situation demands it.

The right questions political leaders should ask, they say, are: "What is scarce that should be abundant? What is difficult to build that should be easy? What inventions do we need that we do not yet have?" That is, decide what is truly needed and ask how we could help make these things abundant.

The book does not offer a list of ways for doing this. But it offers one. Governments should create "bottleneck detectives" who reduce barriers to innovation and offer incentives to companies and universities to develop things like new forms of clean energy or different kinds of transit.

Developing such breakthroughs is usually the work of the federal government, not states or local governments. But bottleneck detectives could work at the local level by making it easier to build housing and expand transit through smarter regulation and greater collaboration.

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets on Dec. 2 to discuss *Abundance*, we will look for other ways local and state governments could facilitate the creation of things that make people's lives better.

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we will discuss Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's book about creating abundance in cities and elsewhere. We will look for lessons for Urban Atlanta.

Our meeting will be **Dec. 2, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at **1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307.**

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? Are there assets that would help with their adoption?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles, using our assets?

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

How to get your copy of *Abundance*:

- You can purchase a hardcover copy from a local bookstore, such as [Virginia-Highland Books](#).
- You can download an e-book edition from the Barnes & Noble, Apple or Amazon websites.
- You can borrow a copy from the [DeKalb County Public Library](#).